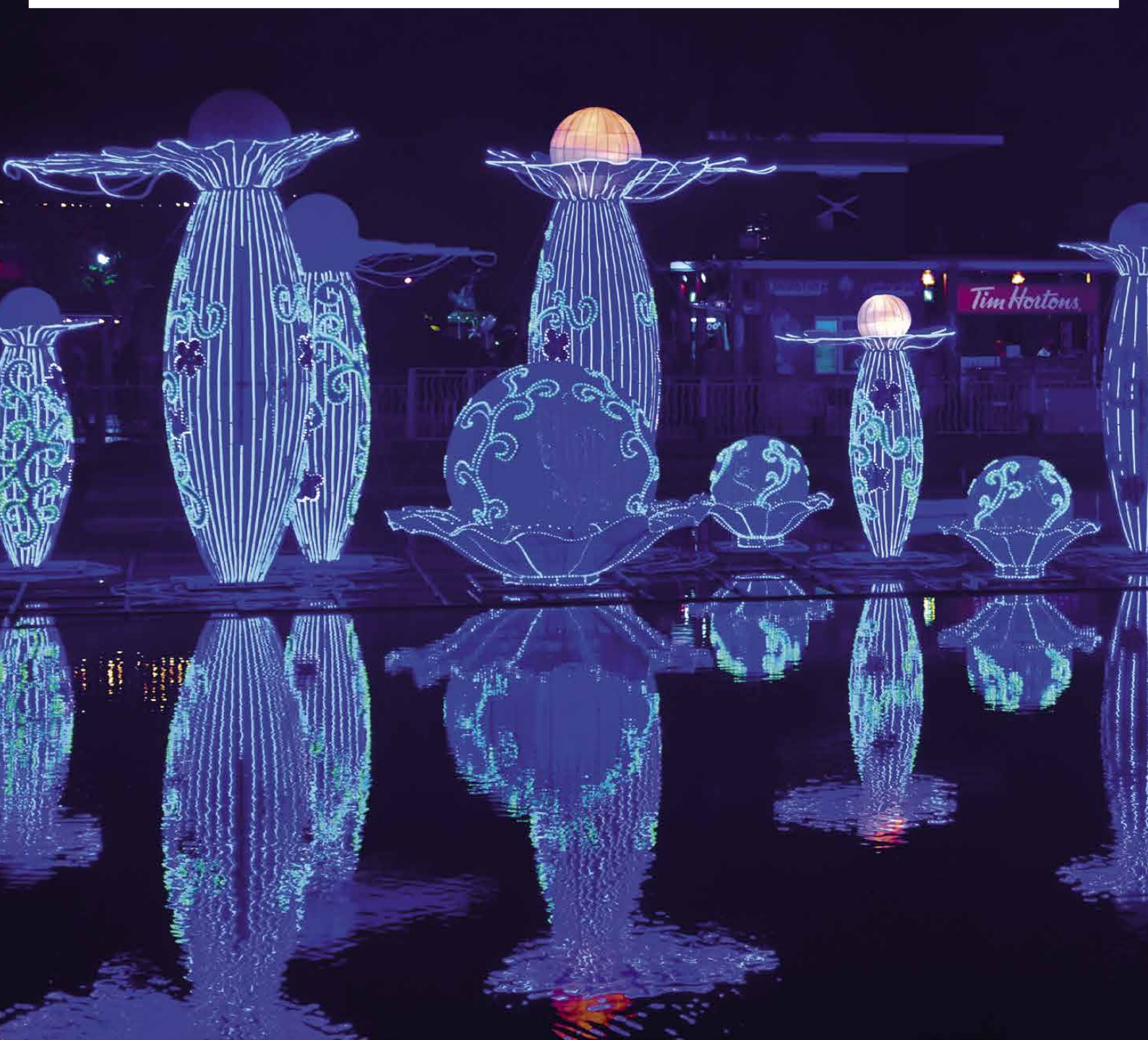


# ART IN THE PUBLIC REALM IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

## SUMMARY REPORT

Heba ElCheikh and Eckhard Thiemann | April 2018



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This is a qualitative report commissioned by the British Council to map the art in the public realm field in the Gulf countries, specifically the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

This is a partnership project between Shubbak and Mahatat for contemporary art.

Cover: Dubai Garden Glow in Dubai, UAE.  
Image © Ritu Manoj Jethani/shutterstock.com.

This page: sculpture at Doha airport, Qatar  
by Tom Otterness. Image © Guilhem Vellut.



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# INTRODUCTION



The main entrance to Umm Al Emarat Park, Abu Dhabi. Image © Umm Al Emarat Park.



The City of Play maze at Dahl Al Hamam Park. Designed by Alex Scott-Whitby, Chong-Min Teong, Can Aksoy, Gizem Kahraman, Deena Munther. Image © Salman Saleem.



Umm Al Emarat Park children's area. Image © Umm Al Emarat Park.

## SCOPE OF THE CONSULTANCY

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The arts scene in the Gulf countries is vibrant and growing. This report aims to help the British Council's partners to understand the context, discourses and experiences that relate to exhibiting art in the public realm in the Gulf. It was developed as part of the British Council's research into cultural skills, which aims to set the foundations for new partnerships between the UK and Gulf arts sector, as well as offering opportunities for knowledge and skills sharing.

The focus of the research was on three countries – UAE, Saudi and Qatar as there are major events planned in these countries in the next few years such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the Dubai Expo 2020.

The consultancy gathered evidence of opportunities and provided recommendations for readers about the best ways to provide art in the public realm and reach the target audience. The scope of the consultancy included:

- identifying potential partners, who can support the delivery of public art
- recommendations on potential locations, content and type of artwork
- evidence from the target audience – gathered through focus groups and surveys – of the potential to reach large audiences.

## METHODOLOGY

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The consultancy took place from January to April 2018, including desk research, field trips to the three countries, report writing and submission.

The two consultants used a number of empirical and field-based research methods including desk research, 39 in-depth semi-structured interviews, one focus group with 12 university students and 24 questionnaires circulated through local partners, to collect data and the needed evidence to complete the report.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

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### Time and data collection limitations

As with much research, this report had a short timeline for delivery, which limited the extent of the possible research. For logistical and permissions reasons, planned focus groups were sometimes re-designed as consultations via questionnaires instead. This led to a smaller research sample than originally anticipated.

As such, the data sources used were predominantly country visits and interviews, with additional data collection from questionnaires.

Country visits ranged between five and ten days. Visits to KSA were limited to the cities of Jeddah and Riyadh, and in the UAE to Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

### Terminology limitations

The term 'art in the public realm' means different things to different sectors and people. In the UK the term is mainly associated with commissions,

interventions and outdoor events, mainly in urban locations, which offer an accessible and direct engagement with cultural activities. Its theory and practice is guided by concepts of democratisation of spaces, removing barriers to experiencing the arts for audiences.

Over the course of our research there was a lack of common understanding of the term 'art in the public realm' by a number of partners and those consulted. A common question was 'what is art in the public realm?' In the Gulf States most arts institutions are relatively young and one of the main aims in audience development is to build up loyal audiences for a growing number of building-based institutions.

Parallel to this there is a growing provision of large-scale outdoor events. During the winter months the evenings and nights become the key locations to experience cultural events. These range from themed festivals, which combine theme-park like activities with music stages, to street-art displays to light shows and national day celebrations. All these – and in some cases also tradeshow and sporting events – were referred to as 'art in the public realm' by interviewees.

The consultants provided a short presentation of types of public realm interventions, including architectural mappings, light shows, spectacle performances, audio walks, parades, participatory activities and temporary sculptural installations.

The lack of a common framework of terminology meant that a number of discussions were limited in scope, and also limited the focus group engagement with the topic.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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As part of a Gulf-wide initiative, the British Council commissioned Eckhard Thiemann (Shubbak), and Heba ElCheikh (Mahatat for contemporary art) to scope opportunities for major public art presentations in the Gulf region. They also discussed the potential for development of art in the public realm in the Gulf region. The consultancy was designed to identify opportunities for the development of art in the public realm in the region.

The research focused on UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar as these countries are planning major international events (Dubai Expo 2020, FIFA World Cup 2022), or are creating public spaces for entertainment which will provide enhanced opportunities for Arts in the Public Realm activities in the future.

The two consultants used a number of empirical and field-based research methods including desk research, 39 in-depth semi-structured interviews in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, one focus group with 12 university students and 24 questionnaires circulated through local partners, in order to collect data and evidence to complete the report.

In the course of this research it was found that the term 'art in the public realm' was generally equated with any outdoor event which gathers people, including outdoor concerts, national day celebrations, theme parks, fun fairs and shopping mall activities, as well as more conventional sculptural installations. Some art-specialist organisations applied stricter definitions, which included community engagement, social engagement and documentary practices.

The Gulf is facing a period of rapid expansion in its cultural provision. Governed by national policies like Vision 2030 (KSA), Qatar National Vision 2030 and Vision 2021 (UAE), the region is proactively developing new events, festivals, creative spaces and critical discourse. Some events like national days are producing events of entertainment and civic pride at a monumental scale using the latest technology in lighting, mapping and drones. Outdoor festivals resemble a mixture of theme park, fun fair, music and stage programmes and family entertainment. These events attract huge audiences, with one festival alone attracting one million people across five days.

The outdoor event sector is primarily commissioned by government entities or developers, working in close partnership with event management companies.

Sometimes selected through a tendering process, sometimes directly appointed, event management companies play a crucial role in researching and programming content, as well as managing logistics and marketing. The background of these organisations is often marketing and PR and important drivers include commercial, branding or

media coverage targets. Many interviewees were expecting direct pitches from the consultants for content.

Parallel to the large-scale outdoor sector there is a growing network of specialist arts institutions, who develop curator-led and artist-focused programmes, often with a strong emphasis on talent development. Many acknowledged a desire to work more closely within neighbourhoods, engage local communities, re-interpret localities and chart changes to the urban fabric or demographic changes. Some felt that local artists would benefit strongly from greater exposure to critically engaged art in the public realm. Many favoured an approach which would lead to ephemeral and subtle works including elements of live performance.

## OPPORTUNITIES

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The Gulf States offer many points for collaboration with the UK cultural sector. The Gulf is very successful at large-scale spectacular events.

When presented with different examples of public realm interventions, our research revealed that many respondents expressed an interest in work which championed direct human interaction and playful ideas.

There are two distinct sectors for engagement:

### Outdoor events sector

If the definition of art in the public realm is applied widely and encompasses the outdoor event economy, there are many potential partners who are looking for content for a fast-expanding festival scene. Government entities, developers and event management

companies are all open to proposals, pitches and suggestions for projects. Event management companies are a key player and organisations interested in making art in the public realm for Gulf audiences will need to start making direct contact with this growing sector. They will require concrete proposals for outdoor performances, music, parades, light features and engaging content.

### Specialist arts institutions

There is also an interest within specialist arts organisations to develop more artist-centred residency-based initiatives, which critically engage with the fast changes to urban or demographic conditions, and use archival, participatory and socially engaged practices. This process should be accompanied by a programme of theoretical and academic discourse.



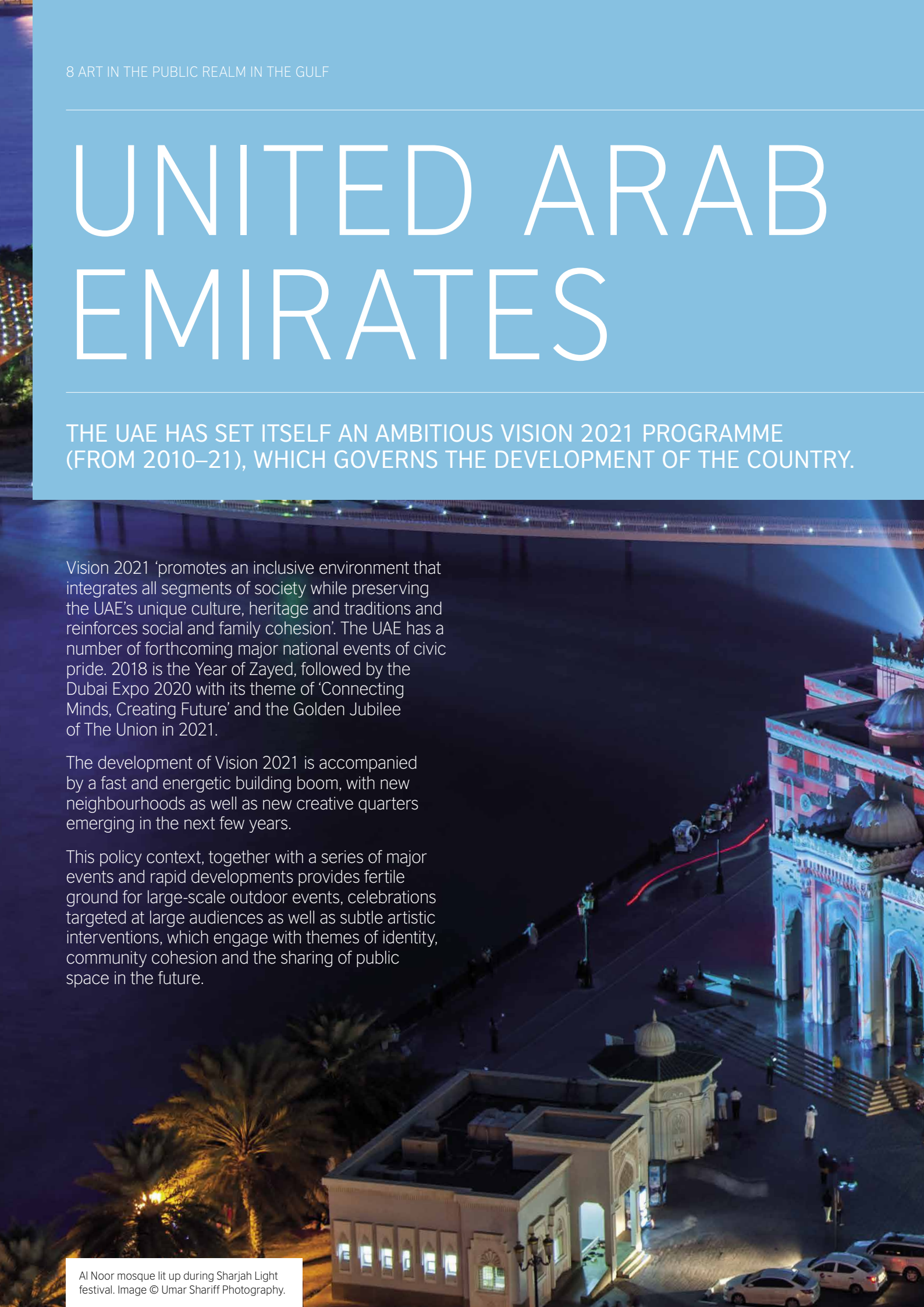
# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

THE UAE HAS SET ITSELF AN AMBITIOUS VISION 2021 PROGRAMME (FROM 2010–21), WHICH GOVERNS THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY.

Vision 2021 'promotes an inclusive environment that integrates all segments of society while preserving the UAE's unique culture, heritage and traditions and reinforces social and family cohesion'. The UAE has a number of forthcoming major national events of civic pride. 2018 is the Year of Zayed, followed by the Dubai Expo 2020 with its theme of 'Connecting Minds, Creating Future' and the Golden Jubilee of The Union in 2021.

The development of Vision 2021 is accompanied by a fast and energetic building boom, with new neighbourhoods as well as new creative quarters emerging in the next few years.

This policy context, together with a series of major events and rapid developments provides fertile ground for large-scale outdoor events, celebrations targeted at large audiences as well as subtle artistic interventions, which engage with themes of identity, community cohesion and the sharing of public space in the future.







## OUTDOOR SECTOR

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The UAE has a significant history and practice of placing cultural experiences in the public realm. There is a busy programme of festivals, often created by developers and government agencies working in partnership and delivered by event management companies. Locations include beach areas, and whole new city quarters.

Locations like La Mer, Downtown Dubai and Umm Emirates Park aim to attract audiences through the provision of festivals, concerts and events, ranging from temporary art installations, to concerts and street art. Sharjah's Light Festival commissions new works on a spectacular scale. Other examples include the Mother of The Nation Festival or outdoor concerts at Umm Emirates Park as well as local platforms for young artists, such as Sikka in the historic district of Dubai.

These commissions and events are often delivered by event management companies including international companies like Studio Römer and UAP, who have offices in the UAE. A number of interviewees pointed to the close relationship between event management companies and producers to source content and manage logistics.

Shopping malls also increasingly work to create experiences for customers, which occasionally include artistic activities. These can range from design installations to more community-themed festivals like Burjuman's Indian Festival.

A number of respondents commented on UAE's move towards a streamlined online application system of licences and permissions for events. This will require local expertise and experience and require precisely articulated proposals.

## ARTS SPECIALIST SECTOR

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The UAE enjoys a growing network of specialist arts organisations. The major cities of Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi all have a range of arts organisations that have commissioned interventions in the public realm. With few exceptions like the Durub Al Thawiya programme at Abu Dhabi Art, these tend to be focused on the visual arts. Many organisations spoke about an interest in developing more performative or ephemeral initiatives. This was regarded as a welcome balance to existing spectacle-led provision or large events.

## ART IN THE PUBLIC REALM DISCOURSE

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Pioneering artists like Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, Hassan Sharif and Mohamed Kazem have worked in the landscape and developed a discourse of artistic practice beyond studio settings. A younger generation is continuing this tradition and art-specific organisations, including commercial galleries, occasionally commission interventions that engage critically with the public realm.

The general discourse is more focused on concepts of 'activation and animation' of spaces. Arts organisations and focus groups commented on the inability of distinguishing between public and private spaces, a lack of a walking culture and a challenge to develop spontaneous and accidental audiences.

Many organisations commented on the fast transformation of urban fabric and demographic changes in the UAE and the need to artistically engage with local realities 'before they disappear'. Many were interested in projects which would combine archival, socially engaged and documentary practices in an innovative way and would also use the skills of locally-based artists.

While there is interest in the public realm, the main priority of most visual art organisations is to develop regular and loyal audiences for their own institutions and locations.





Umm Al Emarat Park amphitheatre, Abu Dhabi. Image © Umm Al Emarat Park.

## FOCUS GROUP AND SURVEY RESULTS

A focus group was held at Sharjah University with 12 students and survey questionnaires were distributed to 16 participants. The term art in the public realm was applied to a wide range of events, with respondents often not making a distinction between sports activities and artistic interventions. But there was also a clear recognition of the important role of art to enhance self-expression and community participation and cohesion.

Most of the audience for art in public realm initiatives is made up of young teenagers, along with women and families. Young people usually learn of public events through online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, or from university staff and mailing lists.

## OPPORTUNITIES

The UAE offers many points for collaborations for the UK cultural sector. If the term art in the public realm is applied to the wider sector of outdoor event economy, there are many potential partners who are looking for content for a fast-expanding festival scene.

Government entities, developers and event management companies are all open and responsive to proposals, pitches and suggestions for content. They require concrete proposals for outdoor performances, music, parades, light features and interventions with playful engagement. There is strong interest in work which champions direct human interaction rather than spectacles reliant on high technology.

Parallel to this, there is an interest within specialist arts organisations to develop more artist-centred residency-based initiatives which critically engage with fast changes to urban or demographic conditions, and use archival, participatory and socially engaged practices. This process should ideally be accompanied by a programme of theoretical and academic discourse around art in the public realm.



Mahatat is a Cairo-based social and cultural enterprise founded in 2011. Through contemporary art practices, Mahatat seeks to transform public spaces, create opportunities for exposure to the arts and offer needs-based learning experiences to artists, practitioners and entrepreneurs.

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The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.