

Rethinking Gulf Museology  
Identity and Museums in Doha and Abu Dhabi  
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New museums in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have stimulated scholarly interest in the development of museological practices in the Gulf. Established through state-orchestrated partnerships with Western institutions and architects, Gulf museums have exposed a tension that exists between the region's self-professed traditionalism and institutional rhetoric that affirms a mission of modernity and universalism. Scholarship on these projects—with few exceptions—adopts an Orientalist approach that conflates the approaches of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and questions the authenticity of oil-supported urban growth. The formulaic approach to analyzing these museums places a heavy emphasis on the confluence of petrodollars and contemporary architecture, neglecting the distinct character of each project in its cultural and urban setting. This essay challenges the positioning of Qatari and Emirati museums as interchangeable products of similar pressures and opportunities.

A Brief History

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, specifically the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, followed comparable economic and political trajectories before becoming independent states in 1971. Prior to the nineteenth century, Abu Dhabi, an independent sheikhdom, and Doha, a city within the Ottoman province of Qatar, were Bedouin backwaters with meager pearling towns.<sup>1</sup> Subject to British imperialist ambitions, Abu Dhabi and Qatar emerged in the twentieth century as protectorates.<sup>2</sup> British interest in the region lay in both latent petroleum reserves and the strategic positioning of Arabian ports between Western Europe and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>3</sup> Acquiescing to the United Kingdom's expanded presence in the Gulf, the ruling Al Nahyan and Al Thani families received political legitimacy and ensured long-term stability. Since 1971, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have nationalized Western-owned petroleum companies, investing revenue from this nascent industry in large-scale infrastructural projects.<sup>4</sup> The royal families of Qatar and the UAE have financed initiatives of an unprecedented scale, diverse in nature, that have had a profound impact on the economic, social, and political frameworks of both nations. Contemporary Qatari and Emirati society exhibit marked social stratification, where rigid social hierarchies favor heavily minority native populations. The expatriate populations of both Doha and Abu Dhabi are composed of two demographics: impoverished, predominantly South East Asian, migrants seeking employment in low-wage, labor-heavy sectors and educated foreigners, from both the West and the Middle East, assuming high-paying roles in corporate and investment sectors.<sup>5</sup> Following the financial crises of the early 2000s and contemporary fluctuations

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<sup>1</sup> David Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern*, 80.

<sup>3</sup> Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern*, 203.

<sup>5</sup> Rem Koolhaas, *The Gulf* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2007), IV—V.

in oil prices, royal/national wealth and expatriate populations have been utilized to stimulate continued urban growth and support projects encouraging economic diversification. Today, these investments of oil revenues into urban growth have been widely criticized in both Western and Arab media outlets.<sup>6</sup> This hesitance to take seriously oil-supported growth is further reflected in scholarly approaches to museological developments, which exhibit a similarly contemptuous tone. In an effort to correct these polarized approaches to Gulf initiatives, it is necessary to address the museums in Doha and Abu Dhabi as earnest cultural endeavors, abstaining from the simplifying language readily adopted by cultural critics.<sup>7</sup>

### Doha | Topography

Doha possesses many government-run and independent museums and galleries. Those that fall under the jurisdiction of Qatar Museums, the primary governmental body tasked with developing and overseeing national collections, are of primary interest. These institutions include: (1) The Museum of Islamic Art, (2) The Qatar National Museum, (3) Mathaf: Museum of Modern Arab Art, (4) Fire Station Artist in Residence, (5) Gallery Al Riwaq, and (6) Gallery Katara. The exact location of these museums and galleries, as well as visuals and information on architects and founding dates (when available), can be found in *Map | Doha* (Figure One) and the associated icons.

A topographical analysis of these Qatari museums unearths obscured ambitions tied to relationships, both structural and personal, forged within urban spaces. Of key significance is the Qatari practice of interspersion, through which cultural centers are woven into and throughout the city's existing urban fabric. An examination of the distribution of Qatar Museums' primary institutions, along with an additional focus on

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<sup>6</sup> Rory Hyde's "Dubai Bashing Article Generator" in *Al Manakh: Gulf Cont'd* (2010) provides a humorous insight into the language, statistics, and imagery used by foreign media outlets to portray Gulf cities as false constructs—distractingly opulent yet abandoned products of Arab superficiality and oil funds. On the museological developments in the Gulf, Western media outlets exhibit a shallow, pseudo-Orientalist fascination with Gulf wealth and Islamic censorship, desert tropes, and baseless declarations regarding the absence of audience and demand (see: "Qatari Riches are Buying Art World Influence" (*The New York Times*, 2013); "Art and Hypocrisy in the Gulf" (*The New York Times*, 2015); "Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi: Artistic Oasis Takes Shape Amid the Dunes" (*The Telegraph*, 2009), and "An Oasis in the Desert" (*ARTnews*, 2009)). Alia Massoud's "An Oasis of High Culture in the Arabian Desert: The Louvre Abu Dhabi – A Contemporary Spatial Embodiment of a Classic Colonial Discourse" in *Kalimat* III no. 08 (2013) demonstrates how cultural initiatives in the Gulf are similarly criticized by Arab sources. Here, however, the dialogue changes from a critique of the West's commodification of their material histories and the scale of Gulf construction to a criticism of Middle Eastern nations complying with new forms of post-colonialism masked as modes of multicultural exchange.

<sup>7</sup> While scholarship on Gulf museums is largely dismissive, it is important to note essays that challenge these suspicions. Emily Doherty's "The Ecstasy of Property: Collecting in the United Arab Emirates" in *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (2012), Robert Kluijver's *Contemporary Art in the Gulf: Context and Perspectives* (2015), Nicolai Ouroussoff's "Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity" (*The New York Times*, 2010), and Negar Azimi's "A Cultural Island: Abu Dhabi Imports Cultural Institutions to Build Upon Tradition" in *Al-Manakh 2: Gulf Cont'd* (2010) present new ways of looking at these cultural strategies. These works question the post-colonial language that positions these museological endeavors as examples of Western puppeteering and, instead, approach Abu Dhabi and Doha as unique case studies driven by distinct negotiations.

the positioning of secondary galleries, exhibits an intentioned planning program that fuses dispersive and concentrative agendas. Positioned along Doha's Corniche—the central promenade that traces Doha Bay—the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), Al Riwaq, and the National Museum form a cultural nucleus situated adjacent to the city center. Here, the architectural works of Pei and Nouvel function similarly to a triumphal archway, where the MIA and the National Museum form the pillared supports, framing the expressway connecting the city and the airport. The placement of these three institutions at the beginning of the Corniche echoes recent investments in the urban walkway, which, through the addition of public art and its proximity to architectural landmarks, has emerged as a prominent tourist attraction. The placement of the city's two premier institutions along the Corniche exhibits two-fold ambitions. First, the concentration of architecture and artifacts designates the area as a significant cultural, and thus tourist, attraction. Second, the proximity of the two museums—one of national histories, the other of Islamic narratives—suggests that Qatar possesses the tools and resources to not only present a story of domestic development, but also to craft a narrative on regional origins and growth. To explore further, Qatar is not simply using the museum to present a local history. Rather, the narratives of Qatar and the Islamic World are juxtaposed, each given prominence through their unique positioning while simultaneously alluding to the distinction of the other through their proximity. Qatar's material history does not appear secondary to the development of Islamic Art. Instead, Qatar proposes a correlation between Qatari and Islamic development, where the growth of the Gulf State allows the previously marginal history of Islamic Art, long regulated by Western institutions, to benefit from an Islamic re-telling and presentation. Here, topographic centrality puts forth a museological thesis of national preeminence and cultural reclamation and authority.

In contrast to the MIA and the National Museum, Mathaf, the Fire Station, and the Katara Gallery exist outside of Doha's central tourism corridor. These institutions inhabit newly developed spaces, where royal investment in cultural and educational sectors has engendered the emergence of purpose-specific zones. While the area of the Corniche has emerged largely as a zone for cultural tourism and a platform for state-sanctioned narratives of identity, these centers, namely Education City and Katara Cultural Village, are tied less to conceptions of Qatari selfhood. Mathaf, located within Education City<sup>8</sup>, is encircled by educational centers and civic spaces. The Katara Gallery exists in a similar space, Katara Cultural Village.<sup>9</sup> The Fire Station assumes an intermediary position,

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<sup>8</sup> Nick Anderson's "In Qatar's Education City, U.S. Colleges are Building an Academic Oasis" in *The Washington Post* (2015) provides an in-depth investigation into the development, finances, controversies, and advantages that characterize the immigration of Western intuitions of higher education to Doha's Education City. Conceived in the late 1990s, Education City today comprises of prestigious American and European universities, multi-national science and technology firms, and Qatari and international research centers. Colleges and Universities with campuses in Education City include Virginia Commonwealth University, Weill Cornell Medical College, Texas A&M, Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, and Northwestern.

<sup>9</sup> Katara Cultural Village, opened in 2010, is a large-scale cultural center. The village possesses many galleries and venues, including an opera house, a theatre, an amphitheater, mosques, and numerous exhibition spaces. While the development of Katara can not be wholly separated from governmental initiatives to preserve and display Qatari heritage and artistic traditions, many galleries within Katara operate outside the authority of Qatar Museums and must be considered independent from such institutions.

located between the West Bay—Doha’s architectural center—and the MIA and the National Museum. These institutions reflect a place-making strategy that marries cultural and economic ambitions. Through the relative proximity of the MIA and the National Museum with the three aforementioned institutions, Qatar has designed a cultural fabric whose relative density allows visitors—both global and local—to navigate between and within neighboring museums and galleries. And yet, the development of museums outside of the context of the Corniche prompts a localized cultural response, in which art and the city coalesce, generating new spheres of interest and production. For example, Qatar Museums distributes such resources throughout the city. This distributive approach activates underdeveloped spaces, employing museums as visual symbols of ensuing development and institutions with which to attract new audiences and propagate new ideas. Both central and dispersed, the museums within Doha exhibit a clear interest in both the tourists and the local residents, positioning the Corniche museums as centers of global interest and the non-central institutions as incubators of growth in Qatari artistry and urban identity.

### Abu Dhabi | Topography

Of interest in this essay are the museums developed by the Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC), a governmental management and development body. These museums, all located on Saadiyat Island, are comprised of (1) The Louvre Abu Dhabi, (2) The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, (3) The Sheikh Zayed National Museum, (4) The Abu Dhabi Performing Arts Center, (5) Manarat Al Saadiyat, (6) The UAE Pavilion, and (7) The Maritime Museum. The exact location of these museums and cultural centers, as well as visuals and information on architects and both actual and proposed opening dates (when available), can be found in *Map | Abu Dhabi* (Figure Two), *Map | Saadiyat Island* (Figure Three), and the associated icons.

The Emirati approach to urban cultural development distinguishes itself from Qatari practices through their concentration in one location, Saadiyat Island, a relatively undeveloped expanse adjacent to the city’s main island. Reflective of Abu Dhabi’s vigorous calls for economic and social sustainability, the multipurpose districts that comprise Saadiyat Island suggest an interest in new sources of economic growth and diversification. The selection of Saadiyat Island as the location for a new cultural sector positions these museological endeavors alongside efforts to form new channels promoting cohesive notions of Emirati identity.<sup>10</sup> Here, cultural identity is spatially linked to economically driven impulses to develop centers of commercial activity through upscale residential and retail environments. Presently, Saadiyat Island remains largely undeveloped—a desert-like, sparse expanse that weakly hints at forthcoming construction. While Nouvel’s Louvre is nearing completion—the latticed dome barely visible from the highway linking Abu Dhabi’s financial center to Saadiyat Island—the remaining cultural projects have yet to break ground. Saadiyat Island exists today as a dead-zone situated in a nebulous interval between planning and realization. Manarat al

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<sup>10</sup> Abu Dhabi Council For Economic Development and Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Council, *Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030: Abu Dhabi Urban Planning Vision 2030*, 23—27, accessed July 14, 2015, <http://www.upc.gov.ae/abu-dhabi-2030.aspx?lang=en-US>.

Saadiyat and the UAE Pavilion function as cultural buoys amidst the island's scant zones of construction. Manarat al Saadiyat currently hosts an exhibition, entitled *Saadiyat Experience*, which provides visitors with a narrative, both contemporary and forward-looking, situating Saadiyat Island within Abu Dhabi's contemporary moment of development and growth. Through promotional language that declares Abu Dhabi as "the capital of progress" and Saadiyat Island as "an island of inspiration," *Saadiyat Experience* walks visitors through a crafted vision of culture and luxury referred to as a "destination for rich hospitality and global attractions."<sup>11</sup> Here, Abu Dhabi's place-making strategy can be analyzed through visual conceptualizations of Saadiyat Island's completion.

While the Cultural District is marketed as the crux of Saadiyat Island's development plan, the museums and cultural centers must be analyzed in tandem with the TDIC's associated ventures in education, retail, and accommodation. In relationship to educational, hospitality, and residential sectors, the Cultural District exists as a highly segregated, single-purpose zone. Enshrining one of the corners of the triangular island, the museums and cultural centers inhabit spaces constructed solely for artistic engagement. Unlike Doha, where museums and galleries are interwoven into the city's existing urban fabric, Abu Dhabi exhibits a place-making strategy that targets undeveloped spaces and encourages new construction to invigorate and brand barren zones. Abu Dhabi does not craft a museological practice through an engagement with existing institutions and occupied spaces. Whereas Doha utilizes existing structures as scaffolding for new exhibitions and work spaces, the natural purity of Saadiyat Island presents a forum for development bereft of pre-existing constraints and anti-modern identities. Contemporary architecture becomes synonymous with museums and culture, while spatial relationships, of key import in Qatar, lack significance due to the abundance of available, unutilized space.

On Saadiyat Island, culture is created, marketed, and distinguished through architecture. Evidently, placement is determined to augment architectural landmarks and to encourage dialogue between visually rich buildings, factors that are manipulated outside of the sphere of local structural histories. On Saadiyat, the possibility of mixed-used development—the comingling of large-scale residential, commercial, and cultural spaces—becomes a lucrative possibility. While the Cultural Sector functions as a nucleus for the display of national and global artworks and artifacts, it exists, foremost, as a component of a larger program. The proximity of the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the National Museum to vanity projects of twenty-first century luxury—exclusive beach clubs, five-star resorts, beachfront villas, and a golf course—corrodes the pedagogy of Abu Dhabi's transnational museums that proclaim multiculturalism and access. Although these American, European, and national centers of education and art profess universalizing messages of cultural exchange, the geography of Saadiyat makes visible a network of exclusivity overtly embedded within the island's self-proclaimed "cosmopolitan" districts for living and leisure. The relationship between the city's

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<sup>11</sup> "Saadiyat Experience," Saadiyat Cultural District Abu Dhabi, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://saadiyatculturaldistrict.ae/en/manarat-al-saadiyat/Saadiyat-Experience/>.

existing urban core and the envisaged island underscores the project's selectivity and segregation.

Corresponding with the findings exposed by the microanalysis of Saadiyat Island's topography, a larger examination of Abu Dhabi's built form uncovers questions of access and audience coded within the built environment. The central business and residential areas in Abu Dhabi, Al Khalidiya and Al Bateen, respectively, exist as highly developed districts in the Western edge of Abu Dhabi's main island. Al Khalidiya, bordering the Corniche, is the architectural center of the city while Al Bateen, comprised of low-lying residential neighborhoods, houses a large Emirati population. These districts constitute the modern image of Abu Dhabi, an identity built upon the economic and architectural wealth of the nation's modest populace and the city's innovative, approach to large-scale construction and design. Saadiyat Island, situated north east of the main island, exists outside of Abu Dhabi's identity-zone. Instead, Saadiyat Island uses this geographic distance to craft a new Emirati identity, in which global genres are appropriated and exploited. Through the presence of the Guggenheim, the Louvre, and the various Pritzker Prize-winning architects, Saadiyat Island constructs an image of global cosmopolitanism. This attempt to construct an image of sophistication is grounded in the interaction between manifestations of multiculturalism and notions of Arab identity. The importation of Western brands puts forth a message of cross-cultural exchange. On Saadiyat Island, the Louvre and the Guggenheim are not mere Western outposts, but Arab branches that aspire to new forms of display and understanding. The architectural programs (analyzed later) reflect a similar thesis through syntheses of architect, material, and motif with global and local references. This relationship, between multicultural and Gulf forms of identity, is evident in the proximity of these museums to Abu Dhabi's traditional urban center. On Saadiyat Island, Gulf urbanism—namely, the hyper-development of “sudden cities,” derided in the West as ephemeral products of architectural kitsch, petrodollars, and debt—is challenged. Saadiyat Island's Cultural District offers a new norm for the Gulf metropolis—a dramatic reinvention of place and identity made possible through engagements with global cultural circuits. Developing into a cultural crossroad in which global and local cultures exist in tandem, Saadiyat Island's reinvention capitalizes upon and targets a new demographic. As the luxury residential and commercial centers denote, Saadiyat Island brands itself towards the Emirates' elite. However, the creation of a cultural sector and the engagement with Western institutions imply a pivot towards a more foreign, culturally inclined jet set. Set apart from Abu Dhabi's pre-existing urban core, Saadiyat Island is an independent enclave, in which new forms of architecture and new material histories attract similarly new audiences. Although the presence of universal museums evokes notions of equalizing architecture and art, these egalitarian concepts are exposed as false upon a closer topographic investigation.

The topographical analyses of Doha and Abu Dhabi reveal two distinct approaches to museum construction and urban development. While both Doha and Abu Dhabi consider the interests of foreign tourists when determining the placement of museums, the degree to which tourism influences site selection differs. Doha has built up the Corniche as a nucleus of cultural tourism, using the MIA and National Museum to designate the area as such through prominent architecture and extensive regional collections. The renovation

and renewal of existing zones, however, denotes an interest in activating centers outside of the Corniche and giving prominence to local structural histories and residents. Abu Dhabi, conversely, displays a museological approach determined entirely by tourism. Saadiyat Island, as an enclave of upscale cultural and commercial spaces, seeks to brand itself through exclusivity and distance.

## Architecture | Overview

The deceptively similar approaches to place-making occurring within Doha and Abu Dhabi reveal their inherent dissimilarities—in audience and intention—through a close analysis of architectural programs. These examinations of vocabulary and topography uncover clear dissimilarities between the two nascent forms of Gulf museology and their associated institutions. Through the cataloguing of structural and spatial divergences, questions of audience and intent yield compelling, evidence-supported claims. Architecturally, the projects within Doha and Abu Dhabi demonstrate comparable visual strategies, in which the commissioning of Western “starchitects” imbues new museological ventures with a legitimacy tied to architectural prestige. The works of Pritzker Prize winning architects—Zaha Hadid, Foster + Partners, I. M. Pei, Jean Nouvel, and Frank Gehry—are presented in the Gulf as ideological expressions of power through which the Qatari and Emirati governments profess cosmopolitan notions of contemporary Arab identity. And yet, this surface-level analysis, in which the utilization of starchitects connotes comparable objectives, neglects to consider the distinct vocabularies and histories emerging within both urban centers.

## Doha | Architecture

The museums of Doha reference regional building traditions and native flora. These familiar tropes are abstracted and updated through the commissioning of starchitects, yet they retain a discernible local identity unobscured by the internationalism of contemporary architecture. The MIA evokes the tiered construct of the Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo and similarly references pre-Islamic Babylonian, Sumerian, and Assyrian architectural tropes.<sup>12</sup> The National Museum adopts a more vegetal configuration, recalling the crystalline, disk-like make-up of the desert rose.<sup>13</sup> Here, architecture and architect synthesize ambitions to establish museums both local and global in character. While the works of Nouvel and Pei reflect the globalization of architecture—namely, the emergence of universalizing design that forgoes associations to place—Qatari museums demonstrate overt undertakings to evoke local histories and programs. Overt references to Islamic and Middle Eastern building traditions and local flora situate these buildings cleverly within their Qatari contexts. And while these allusions may be obscured by the idiosyncrasies of the architect’s hand, both the MIA and the National Museum strive to engage, visually, within their immediate environments. Starchitects function primarily as translators, rendering Islamic and Qatari notions of heritage—both natural and

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<sup>12</sup> Khaled Adham, "Rediscovering the Island: Doha's Urbanity from Pearls to Spectacle," in *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity, and Urban Development*, ed. Yasser Elsheshtawy (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 239—240.

<sup>13</sup> "Qatar Museums," Qatar Museums, accessed February 3, 2016, <http://www.qm.org.qa/en>.

manufactured—into structures that speak, with equal measure, to local audiences and urban spaces. While cultural allusions profess an association with the local, the opacity of these references welcomes more international methods of interpretation. While starchitects are utilized, foremost, to design cultural centers that function as tourist destinations and modern monuments through well-established brand identities, the application of universalizing architectural lexicons expands spheres of engagement. Not entirely Qatari or Islamic, the MIA and the National Museum can be readily consumed by a more international audience—structures that function less as Orientalist apparitions and, conversely, as products of global connectivity. Qatar utilizes starchitects to produce museum-monuments with a dual readability, where architecture is an apparatus of cultural anachronism that simultaneously references the visual history of its environment and the visual potential of global forms of exchange.

Doha possesses a limited architectural history, a paucity ascribed to both the nation's Bedouin heritage and the country's paradigm of rapid urban development in the era of globalization.<sup>14</sup> Qatar has recently professed a new approach towards the preservation of heritage, pledging to foster and promote Qatari and Islamic heritage through policies of simultaneous modernization and preservation.<sup>15</sup> The museums practice of salvaging twentieth century structures to house new art institutions intimates a veneration of the nation's meager structural past in line with the nation's realigned policies on heritage. At these sites, visual discrepancies between Qatar's post-industrial past and contemporary identity are negotiated and resolved. Heritage sites—the structural remnants of Qatar's early urbanism and relics of now cloaked periods of latent growth—are imbued with new identities that ensure the longevity of oft-overlooked buildings. Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern art is housed with a restored schoolhouse. The Fire Station Artists in Residence is located within a former civil defense building. Enclosed with the interior courtyard of the National Museum, the twentieth century palace of the Al Thani family stands as a striking reference to a bygone era. These museums and workspaces underscore an interest in preserving the sparse remnants of the country's pre-petrol history. At these sites, conservation exists in tandem with the expansion of national cultural initiatives. A counter to claims of Gulf superficiality, which traditionally link an abundance of architectural projects with a rash approach towards preservation, the renovation of existing structures confirms this commonly overlooked reverence. While the MIA and Mathaf profess global identities through gestures simultaneously universalizing and Islamic, the practice of renovation denotes an often-overlooked concern to engage with local populations and spaces. This binary, consisting of ambitious new projects by Western architects and the careful renovation of existing structures, presents a museological program similar in its duality. Working with local forms, whether referenced subtly through a modernist lexicon or overtly through a pre-existing edifice, Qatari museums seek to engage both global and local audiences through a hybrid architectural vocabulary. The interaction among Western architects, Islamic forms, and

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<sup>14</sup> Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Cities of Sand and Fog: Abu Dhabi's Global Ambitions," in *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 270.

<sup>15</sup> General Secretariat For Development Planning, *Qatar National Vision 2030*, 8, July 2008, accessed April 18, 2016, [http://www.mdps.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/gsdp\\_en/qatar\\_national\\_vision/qnv\\_2030\\_document](http://www.mdps.gov.qa/portal/page/portal/gsdp_en/qatar_national_vision/qnv_2030_document).

regional histories engenders a dynamic in which Qatar, presenting itself at the intersection of East and West, asserts itself as a global authority, able to engage with traditions both global and local.

#### Abu Dhabi | Architecture

The design of the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the Zayed National Museum participate in a dialogue of globalization founded upon place-making through ostentation and architectural universalism. In Abu Dhabi, local history and culture are overlaid with Western cultural imports. And yet, the accumulation of foreign objects, the forging of alliances with European and American universal museums, and the commissioning of Pritzker Prize winning architects must not be criticized and rejected as veneered neocolonialism. Instead, Abu Dhabi's unique engagement with non-local conventions—in museology and in architecture—must be analyzed as evidence of a self-motivated shift, where Orientalist discourse does not cloud Emirati agency. In this new discourse, Saadiyat architecture can be read as indicative of a greater place-making strategy, in which architecture functions as both repository and attraction. The commissioning of Pritzker Prize winning architects—Nouvel, Gehry, and Foster + Partners among them—substantiates these claims. Monumentality in name and design frees the Saadiyat museums from the confines of local aesthetic conventions, establishing overt challenges to Western museological hegemony through appropriation and proximity. Unlike Qatar Museums capitalization upon architectural binaries—the local Islamic juxtaposed against an ageographical universalism—TDIC presents an index of synthesizing designs, in which architects and scale affirm the city's global credentials.

Close aesthetic readings of the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the Zayed National Museum reveal an attempt to forge a marketable identity through abstracted Arab and Islamic forms. And while Qatar professes a local identity through both contemporary Islamic interpretations and concurrent local renovations, Abu Dhabi interacts almost exclusively with regional, decidedly non-local, forms of Arab-ness. Whereas the Emirate's Bedouin history is firmly situated within a cultural and historic moment characterized by a paucity of sustained architectural production, the museums within Abu Dhabi put forth a program neither wholly Arab nor Islamic. On Saadiyat, the form of new museums reflects the precarious cultural position of Gulf States. Existing with, yet not within, the vocabularies of the global modern and the historic centers of Islam, Gulf museums straddle two prevailing architectural styles—the contemporary and the Islamic.<sup>16</sup> In Abu Dhabi, museums attempt to visually engage with these dominant styles, a resolve that inhibits the formation of cogent links to place. The Saadiyat museums speak less to their immediate geography and more readily to a diluted, yet widely accessible, conception of Islam. This dilution, or paraphrasing, of Islamic identity is visible in the motifs referenced by Nouvel, Gehry, and Foster + Partners. Nouvel created an assemblage of stand-alone galleries, united beneath a large dome, to evoke a Middle Eastern souk complete with the filtered light from tattered canopies and references to ancient irrigation technologies.<sup>17</sup> Nouvel further describes the museum as an “oasis of light,” championing the dome as “a major symbol of Arab architecture” yet “a modern

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<sup>16</sup> Mohammad Al-Asad, *Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism in the Middle East* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), 2—5.

proposal.”<sup>18</sup> Gehry references Arabian wind-towers through the conical and cubic edifices. The TDIC pronounces the allusion as “a fitting blend of Arabian tradition and modern design.”<sup>19</sup> Foster + Partners utilize cylindrical towers to echo the wings of a falcon.<sup>20</sup> In each of these projects, architects engage with and abstract Arabian tropes—mashrabiya, falaj, falconry, and oases—seeking to imbue distinctly modernist designs with a sense of regionalism and heritage. This confluence of global and regional vocabularies functions to remedy two problematizing critiques of Emirati museology: assertions of cultural dissonance and claims of inauthenticity. While critics argue that the Gulf’s insubstantial museological and art histories expose Saadiyat museums as shallow vanity projects, universalizing architecture functions to legitimize collections through direct associations to Western counterparts. The presence of regionalist tropes challenges notions of inauthenticity, seeking to present the Saadiyat projects as inherently Arab and thus as genuine Emirati cultural products. It is, however, important to question whether these institutions profess local interpretations of Arab-ness or, conversely, Western notions of the Arab and the Orient. While Qatar establishes associations to the local through rehabilitation and renewal, Abu Dhabi remains in the contemporary moment, using new construction to reference tradition and heritage. While the work of Western architects can be read as Orientalist constructions, the sanctioning of these structures of the TDIC authorizes these museums as veritable visualizations of Emirati identity.

And yet, this approach to modernization reveals a strong interest in the use of heritage to augment claims of legitimacy. In Abu Dhabi, starchitects and Islamic tropes function similarly. The presence of both actors establishes Saadiyat Island as an authentic cultural hub—a veritable Gulf destination whose authenticity is verified by architectural prestige and regional reference. A reaction to the presumed artificiality of the Gulf<sup>21</sup>, Saadiyat Island employs the idiom of well-established museums and tourist destinations to avoid associations with more kitschy diversion and amusements. Through the commissioning of Nouvel, Gehry, and Foster + Partners, the TDIC recognizes and furthers the tendency, of Western museums, to complete museum construction projects using the talent of acclaimed firms.<sup>22</sup> The construction of heritage mirrors the practice of aligning new institutions with Western museums. Through the use of visible, digestible heritage, Abu

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<sup>17</sup> Sarina Wakefield, "Heritage, Cosmopolitanism and Identity in Abu Dhabi," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses, and Practices*, ed. Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 101.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Nouvel, "The Museum and the Sea," in *Louvre Abu Dhabi: Birth of a Museum*, ed. Laurence Des Cars (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 23.

<sup>19</sup> "Guggenheim Abu Dhabi," TDIC, accessed February 3, 2016, <http://www.tdic.ae/tdiccategories/cultural/Pages/guggenheim.aspx>.

<sup>20</sup> "Zayed National Museum," TDIC, accessed February 3, 2016, <http://www.tdic.ae/tdiccategories/cultural/Pages/zayed-national-museum.aspx>.

<sup>21</sup> See Footnote 5.

<sup>22</sup> There exist many contemporary examples of this trend. The expansion of SFMOMA (San Francisco, USA) by Snohetta, the new Whitney Museum of American Art (New York City, USA) building by Renzo Piano, the Louis Vuitton Foundation (Paris, France) by Frank Gehry, the ongoing expansion of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, USA) by Frank Gehry, The Broad Museum (Los Angeles, USA) by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the Prada Foundation (Milan, Italy) by OMA, the Pérez Art Museum Miami (Miami, USA) by Herzog & de Meuron, and the expansion of the Tate Modern (London, USA) by Herzog & de Meuron are instances of this practice.

Dhabi attracts cultural tourists who seek a nebulous form of truth through travel.<sup>23</sup> The Saadiyat museums thus exist in a moment of harsh hybridity, where Abu Dhabi is both manufacturing conceptions of self to market cultural heritage and, conversely, adhering to a postmodern growth strategy where universalism obscures more local identities. Audience, however, is the driver of these architectural strategies. Architecturally, the Saadiyat museums reflect an interest in engaging with global channels of cultural tourism, aesthetics, and scholarship. Unlike the Qatari regard for local populations for artistic communities, Abu Dhabi demonstrates a clear pivot towards international audiences and institutions. While the Guggenheim, the Louvre, and the National Museum exhibit recognizably Islamic tropes, the pairing of structural universalism and regionalism suggests a museological strategy where existing identities are overlaid to facilitate global interactions.

The architectural vocabularies of Qatari and Emirati museums reflect the theses put forth through topographic surveys. Doha, synthesizing contemporary architecture and renovation, presents both a forward-looking and historically conscious approach. Architects translate regional and local building traditions and motifs into contemporary designs that do not wholly obscure reference points, while restorative practices maintain tangible connections to a limited architectural past. In Abu Dhabi, architects employ contemporary vocabularies with masked references, exhibiting minimal interest in conspicuous Arab tropes and a larger concern with monumentality and awe.

#### Conclusions | Future Research

The differences between the museums in Doha and Abu Dhabi suggest distinct approaches to the same issue, namely the construction of authentic forms of identity in the age of globalization. Responses to the steady evolution of a post-hydrocarbon era, the museums in Doha and Abu Dhabi seek to reconcile rapid development with calls for cultural validity and consumable forms of national identity. Functioning as both the manifestations of the Gulf's cosmopolitan ambitions and vital centers of Arab heritage and conceptions of self, the museums in Doha and on Saadiyat Island grapple with the nebulous concepts of authenticity and legitimacy. The result of divergent governmental strategies, the museums in Doha and Abu Dhabi reflect dissimilar political and economic circumstances that engendered two discrete approaches to Gulf museology. Qatar, engaging with both architects and existing structures, uses museums to assert itself as a regional power and to promote cultural destinations with clear claims to place. Abu Dhabi, although similarly commissioning architects, uses foreign architects, institutions, and architectural programs to promote Saadiyat Island as a destination for global cultural tourists. These claims of variance are consistent across available architectural and topographic evidence.

It is, however, worth probing whether these claims of museological divergence would be upheld upon an investigation into media presence, collections, the language of self-presentation, and audience demographics and scales. Due to the nascency of these

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<sup>23</sup> Dell Upton, "'Authentic' Anxieties," in *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism*, ed. Nezar AlSayyad (New York: Routledge, 2013), 298—299.

projects and the interiority of traditional avoidant Qatari and Emirati cultural actors, these numbers and analyses may be unfeasible or, in many cases, not possible to collect or complete. And yet, it is worth noting that these claims of museological difference would be enriched through further inquiry into the aforementioned domains. Due to recent international political and economic developments, Arabian Gulf oil markets have witnessed significant fluctuations in vigor. On account of such oscillations, many projects in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have been halted or modified. Presently, it is unclear how the sporadic and slowed approach to museum construction and operations will affect the cultural initiatives in both countries. While these changes may alter the form and function of cultural institutions, if following the current trajectory, the museums in Doha and Abu Dhabi will continue to develop into products of distinct interests. In possession of the available—yet limited—architectural and geographical knowledge on Qatari and Emirati museological endeavors, it is clear that these undertakings, as they exist today, cannot be dismissed as products of Gulf superficiality and illegitimate cultural commodities acquired through pretocapital. Instead, these projects demand a more comprehensive and critical scrutiny, through which the architectural and topographic programs unveil dichotomous engagements with internal and external populations and histories.

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## Appendix



Figure One: Map | Doha



**Museum of Islamic Art**  
Architect: I. M. Pei  
Opened: 2008



**Qatar National Museum**  
Architect: Jean Nouvel  
Opened: Anticipated opening in 2016





**Mathaf: Museum of Arab Modern Art**  
Architect: Renovation by Jean-François Bodin  
Opened: 2010



**Fire Station Artist in Residence**  
Architect: Renovation by Ibrahim al-Jaidah  
Opened: 2015



**Gallery Al Riwaq**  
Opened: 2010



Gallery Katara  
Opened: 2010

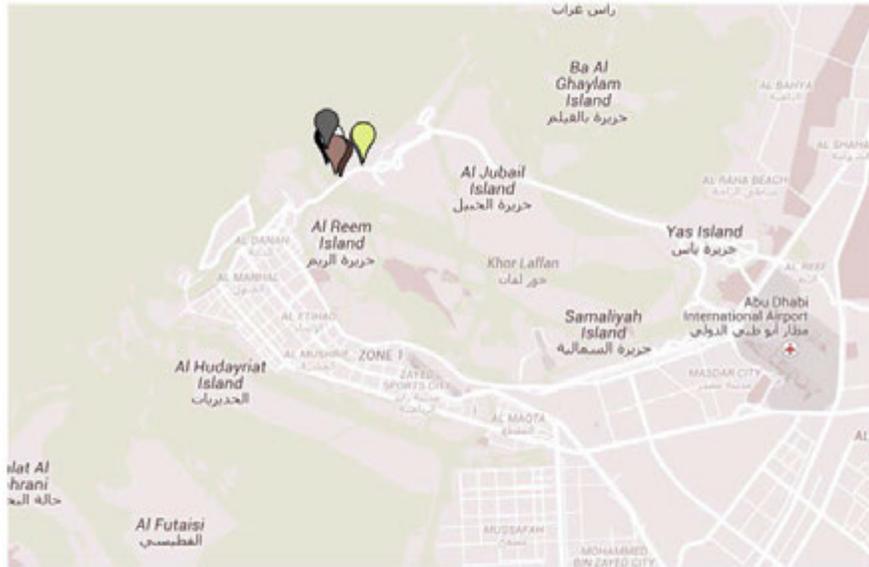


Figure Two: Map | Abu Dhabi

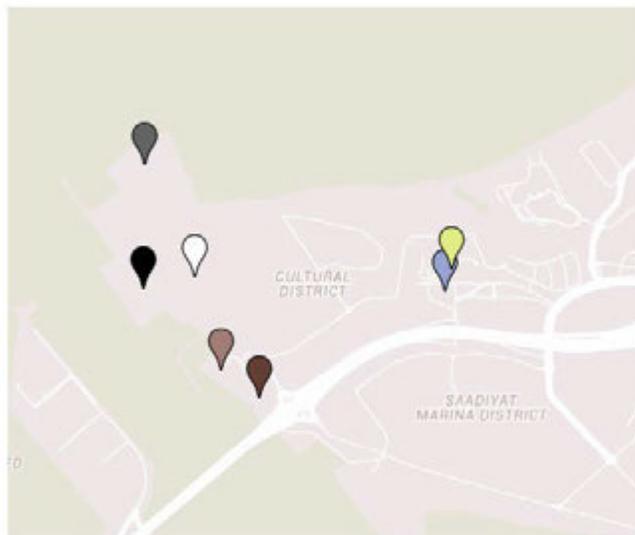


Figure Three: Map | Saadiyat Island



**Zayed National Museum**  
Architect: Foster + Partners  
Opened: Anticipated opening in 2016



**Louvre Abu Dhabi**  
Architect: Jean Nouvel  
Opened: Anticipated opening in 2016

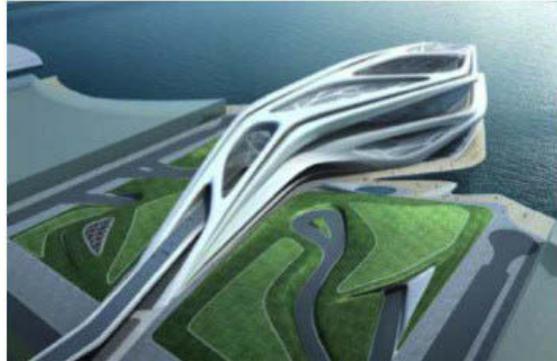


**Guggenheim Abu Dhabi**  
Architect: Frank Gehry  
Opened: Anticipated opening in 2016





**Abu Dhabi Performing Arts Center**  
Architect: Zaha Hadid  
Opened: Anticipated opening in 2018



**Manarat Al Saadiyat**  
Architect: Aedas Architects  
Opened: 2010



**UAE Pavilion**  
Architect: Foster + Partners  
Opened: 2010 (For Shanghai Expo 2010)





**Maritime Museum**  
Architect: Tadao Ando  
Opened: Anticipated Opening in 2018

