



BUILDING NARRATIVES

The UAE's architectural panorama presents a kaleidoscope of styles, underscoring the country's rapid growth and transition. By Christabel Lobo

LOOK BEYOND THE country's newly minted architecture – that includes some of the world's tallest skyscrapers, sweeping superhighways and cutting-edge airports – and you'll discover a diverse range of architectural styles, each serving as a perfect metaphor for the UAE's rapid pace of growth since its founding in 1971.

1960s Winds of Change

A visit to Al Ain Palace in Abu Dhabi transports visitors straight to the country's pre-petrol era – oil was first discovered in the capital in 1958. Dating back to the 1930s, this adobe-style building is an excellent example of local building techniques, with palm-tree roofing, central courtyards and characteristic *barjeel* (wind towers) that provided a natural form of air-conditioning during the desert's harsh summer months.

Apart from tribal sheikhs and wealthy merchants, most people in Abu Dhabi lived in *barasti* houses made from palm fronds. Fresh water and electricity were nonexistent. However, with newfound wealth from oil revenues and the start of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan's rule, Abu Dhabi's

economy flourished – more schools opened, banks were established, and hotels and housing were built.

The rapid modernisation during this decade brought with it an influx of immigrants from Asia, Europe, Africa and the surrounding Arab world, who came to develop the city's masterplans and infrastructure.

Local rulers enlisted foreign architects and planners to design buildings in the country that symbolised modernity and prosperity. The result was a mix of functional concrete structures that drew on international design trends of the time and bespoke projects that represented a nascent national identity.

By the end of the 1960s, city skylines in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi began to transform, setting the stage for the high-rise towers and iconic structures that the country is known for today.

1970s Modernism

By the time the 1970s rolled around, foreign architects and construction companies had set up shop in the UAE. Modernist and international styles of architecture





quickly began to replace traditional ones. As a result, building codes changed, heralding the emergence of multistory concrete buildings in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Government buildings, housing developments and commercial buildings were all designed with modernist facades that featured geometric forms with crisp angles and simple designs. A landmark example from that time period, and also one of Sheikh Zayed Rd's earliest skyscrapers, is the Dubai World Trade Centre.

Advent of Regional Modernism

During the '80s, UAE architecture went through an interesting phase. Local laws established mid-decade mandated that building designs must include some form of Arabic and Islamic elements.

Intricate arabesque motifs, calligraphy, domes and symmetrical archways started to get incorporated into contemporary structures, creating a unique regional Modernist style that continued on for decades – iconic structures like the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and the Emirates Palace exemplify this architectural synthesis.

This conscious effort by the government to establish a unique national identity in the country – one that paid homage to its Islamic roots, while continuing to highlight the nation's hyper rate of modernisation – led to a distinct style that is characteristic of architecture in the UAE today.

Futuristic Facades

Inscribed into the facade of the Museum of the Future are the words of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai: 'the future belongs to those who can imagine it, design it and execute it'. The concept of an ultra-modern architectural marvel is not foreign to Dubai and the UAE at large. Since the city's meteoric rise from a modest pearl-diving hamlet to a global metropolis, it has continuously pushed boundaries.

The Museum of the Future exemplifies this audacious spirit. Resembling an avant-garde sculpture, the building's striking torus shape stands out on Sheikh Zayed Rd, symbolising Dubai's vision as a global innovation hub.

Drive south to Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, and you'll be met with even more

architectural icons designed – and in some case still under construction – by renowned international architects like Jean Nouvel and Frank Gehry. Opened in 2017, the Louvre Abu Dhabi combines modern architectural techniques with Arabic cultural motifs – its signature feature is the latticed dome, inspired by the interlaced palm leaves traditionally used in Emirati roofing.

Upcoming unveilings include the Guggenheim museum by Frank Gehry, and the Zayed National Museum by British architectural firm Foster + Partners, both scheduled to open in 2025, as well as the Abu Dhabi Performing Arts Centre by Zaha Hadid Architects.

Need for Preservation

The allure of a city resides in its architectural plurality, and both Dubai and Abu Dhabi have their fair share. But the country's quick ascension from desert to global hub has triggered drastic shifts in its architectural landscape, where the old is razed to make way for the new.

In order to preserve the UAE's rich architectural heritage, Emirati urban typologist Hussain AlMoosawi has been photographing the country's distinctive facades since 2013. His Instagram (@hugraphy) serves as a visual grid of symmetry, inviting viewers to discover the surprising diversity of architectural styles that exist in buildings across the UAE – oftentimes within the same block.

An essential step to keeping a city's culture, history and memories alive for generations to come, preservation helps restore the balance between abandonment and rejuvenation. In 2016, Abu Dhabi passed the Cultural Heritage Law to safeguard the city's architectural and urban spaces.

Remarkably, architecture serves as an unexpected yet eloquent narrator of the UAE's history, encapsulating its rapid growth and transformation. The diverse range of structures and styles, from restored traditional vernacular buildings in old Dubai to towering futuristic skyscrapers, reveals a nation balancing reverence for its past with a daring vision for the future.

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