

INTERVIEW WITH THE ARCHITECTS

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How does your pavilion respond to the theme of this year's Architecture Biennale?

The theme of this year's Biennale, which is framed by Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara as 'Freespace,' explores the complex spatial nature of architecture. By reducing architecture to its primary spatial quality, excess connotations of technology and historicity may be discarded. 'Freespace' thus becomes at once built and unbuilt, tangible and intangible, present and absent – a space of dual situations that exist simultaneously. These complexities manifest themselves in what we've called 'Spaces in Between,' embodying sensorial, spatial and temporal attributes of our daily lives.

A series of pods placed within the Arsenale site delimit the boundaries between inside/outside. The resulting enclosures induce certain sentiments of inclusion/exclusion as the visitors explore the variation in scale created by the interior boundaries of the pavilion. Visitors are constantly shifting *in between spaces* for an investigative exploration of the kingdom's built environment through a cohesive architectural language.

How does it capture the state of contemporary architecture both on a broader, international level but also as a reflection of architecture in Saudi Arabia today?

The pavilion uses the language of materiality and space to communicate the experiential values of contemporary architectural and planning practices in the kingdom. It is important to note that these practices are an extension of the global discourse on architectural thought and production.

Crude oil can be considered that primordial condition out of which most contemporary construction materials are produced. Hence, Saudi Arabia's oil economy strategically positions the country as a key player in the global building industry in terms of energy supply.

Unfortunately, development across the Kingdom has followed the highway/high-rise trend, completely oblivious to the desert landscape so characteristic of the country. With an abundance of steel, glass, and AC units, the built environment responds poorly to the local landscape and climate.

For this year's biennale, we are translating this dual condition of economy and landscape through the use of resin (a petrochemical byproduct) and sand (a reference to the landscape) to make the walls of the structure. This material becomes emblematic of a dual condition. Furthermore, it references the country's urban and architectural development after the oil boom.

Does architecture influence culture, or is it shaped by it? And how does this manifest itself particularly in Saudi Arabia?

The relationship between architecture and culture falls directly into the dilemma of causality; which came first: the chicken or the egg?

Human interactions with their physical surroundings elicit certain behaviors depending on the form of the given objects/spaces. In turn, the environment becomes subject to appropriation by the populace. This sets up particular trends for the future development of that community.

In Saudi Arabia, architecture and urbanism have stood as a symbol of the country's steadfast modernization. Supported by transportation technologies, an unprecedented form of contemporary culture has prevailed across the Kingdom.

What is the main experience you hope visitors will take away with them?

First of all, aside from the architectural experience of the space itself, we hope that the visitors come to a closer understanding of what Saudi Arabia is and what it is shaping itself to be. It is imperative to have visitors identify similarities between Saudi and their own individual backgrounds. This may demonstrate how with all the differences in the world we still experience very similar situations which bring us together as a society regardless of our race or culture.

Second, we also aim to emphasize the relationship between space and community by creating a heightened awareness of the dual nature of space as both inclusive and isolating.

How did the city of Jeddah specifically shape your work as architects?

Jeddah is always in the background. The influence of the city is present in every urban or architectural space we visit, envision or develop. Being haphazardly planned, constantly changing and fragmented, we are in a constant state of investigation of how design can influence (or be influenced by) the chaotic nature of the city.

Also, we'd like to note that Makkah has greatly influenced our work, as well. The Holy Mosque is one of the most vibrant, egalitarian public spaces that continues to inspire our engagement with the role of architecture in the formation of communities.

What do you hope to do for architecture in Saudi?

We believe architecture, as a critical discourse that can tackle issues of culture, community and economy, needs to develop further. We hope to utilize architecture to create communities that respect and celebrate our natural environment, respond to its needs and project a more sustainable lifestyle for future generations.