

الجناح الوطني لدولة الإمارات  
بينالي البندقية

National Pavilion UAE  
La Biennale di Venezia



La Biennale di Venezia

17. Mostra  
Internazionale  
di Architettura

Partecipazioni Nazionali

## National Pavilion UAE's Biennale Architettura 2021 exhibition will present an eco-friendly cement prototype and photographs by Farah Al Qasimi

- The “future vernacular” prototype is 7 x 5 meters wide and 2.7 meters tall, and constructed from hand-cast MgO-based cement modules made of recycled industrial waste brine
- Artist Farah Al Qasimi presents large-scale images of the UAE's sabkha (salt flats) in her trademark style
- The curators' experimental prototypes are on display at Dubai's Alserkal Avenue throughout May
- Wael Al Awar participates in Curators' Collective, a collaboration of global national pavilion curators

**28 April 2021, United Arab Emirates:** The National Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates' upcoming exhibition for the Biennale Architettura 2021 (Venice Biennale) will present a large-scale prototype structure created from an innovative, environmentally friendly cement made of recycled industrial waste brine, accompanied by commissioned photography by Farah Al Qasimi.

The salt-based prototype is 2.7m tall and 7m x 5m wide on its exterior, creating a walkable interior space the size of an average room, 2.5m x 5m. The structure is formed from up to 3000 modules made of an MgO-based cement designed by the curators, Wael Al Awar and Kenichi Teramoto, in a collaborative research process.

The curators worked with specialist teams at NYU Abu Dhabi's Amber Lab, the American University of Sharjah's Department of Biology, Chemistry and Environmental Sciences, and the University of Tokyo's Obuchi Lab and Sato Lab to develop the chemical formula for the cement and use advanced digital engineering technology to formulate a viable structure inspired by the concept of “future vernacular” architecture. Throughout May, experimental early versions of the prototype will be on display at the *Wetland* research lab in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue.

**Wael Al Awar and Kenichi Teramoto, architects and curators of the pavilion,** said: “Throughout our collaborative research process to develop a building material without the critical environmental impact of Portland cement, we've maintained a focus on a localized architectural practice deeply intertwined with the resources and environment of the Gulf. Our MgO cement is made from brine leftover during industrial desalination, a resource that the UAE has in abundance. It has the strength and durability to be used in modern architecture in standard brick shapes, but for this exhibition, we have been inspired by the UAE's traditional vernacular architecture of coral houses, to hand-cast modules in organic, coral-inspired shapes. In this way we are reimagining modern architectural



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processes and retaining a strong, poetic sense of the region's identity and culture within the structure."

At the National Pavilion UAE, the prototype will be set against 4.5 meter wide, 3 meter high photographs of the Al Ruwais sabkha (salt flats), taken by New York-based Emirati artist Farah Al Qasimi. Taken in her trademark style, the scenic photographs capture the tension between urbanisation and nature in the UAE's sabkha, which have been nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to their scale, cultural significance and ecological complexity.

**Farah Al Qasimi** said: "The scenery of the sabkha sites presents a moment of conflict and resolution. On and below the earth, the sabkha is a serene living environment with many layers of water, sand, salt and micro-organisms which have evolved in harmony to create a delicate ecological system that absorbs more carbon per square meter than the rainforest. But directly above this natural phenomenon are high-tension voltage cables running to massive industrial facilities nearby, emitting an ear-splitting electrical buzz. My photographs of the site capture this tension between industrialization and the environment. I'm very proud to be contributing to the UAE's pavilion, working with a cosmopolitan research team that really reflects the nation's diversity."

Farah's work has been featured by Jameel Arts Centre, The Third Line gallery, Art Basel, New York's Public Art Fund, the Institut du Monde Arabe and the Lahore Biennale, and is currently on show at Toronto's Cooper Gallery, Sfeir-Semler in Hamburg and the Contemporary Arts Space, St Louis.

**Laila Binbrek, Coordinating Director, National Pavilion UAE – La Biennale di Venezia** said: "*Wetland's* opening will mark the UAE's tenth participation in the Venice Biennale, set against the inspirational context of the UAE's 50<sup>th</sup> national anniversary. The exhibition presents a truly groundbreaking potential solution to the global issue of climate change, through a project that is rooted in our local stories, environment and society – reflecting the National Pavilion UAE's commitment to tell the UAE's untold stories while facilitating global dialogue. The ancient ecology of the sabkha will be brought to life in Venice through images by Farah Al Qasimi, one of the UAE's most acclaimed contemporary artists."

The exhibition also includes a 3-minute soundtrack capturing the ecological story of the sabkhas with water moving underground, the desalination process that creates brine and the exhibition's research journey.

An accompanying publication titled *The Anatomy of Sabkhas*, written by urban researchers Rashid and Ahmed bin Shabib and co-edited by Wael Al Awar and Kenichi Teramoto, will explore the ecological and socio-economic significance of these natural phenomena in detail based on case studies, personal essays, and photography. A supplementary volume edited and written by Aga Khan Award-winning architect Marina Tabassum will detail the journey of Wael and Teramoto's research for the Wetland exhibition.

Wael Al Awar is also participating in the Curators' Collective, a collaboration between curators of many of the national pavilions at the 2021 Biennale. Throughout the extended preparation period



of the upcoming edition, the curators have met regularly to develop a manifesto for the future of architecture, generate ideas through dialogue and investigate new avenues to fulfil the Biennale's platform for accessible collaboration.

*Wetland* will open to the public at the 17<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale from Saturday May 22<sup>nd</sup> to Sunday November 21<sup>st</sup> 2021. While preparing for the exhibition, the National Pavilion UAE continues to monitor the situation closely with the safety of staff and visitors as its top priority, and will make a digital version of the exhibition available on its website.

End

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#### Notes to Editors:

#### **National Pavilion UAE – La Biennale di Venezia**

The National Pavilion UAE – La Biennale di Venezia curates untold stories about the UAE's arts and architecture through its participation at the Venice Biennale, and provides a high-profile platform for curatorial concepts that address critical international conversations from a distinctive local perspective.

For each annual edition of the Biennale, one of the world's most significant and rigorous cultural platforms, the National Pavilion UAE appoints and works with curators, artists and contributors to conceive, research and develop an exhibition and accompanying publication that advance and preserve understanding of the UAE's cultural landscape.

Since 2009, its exhibitions have explored the nation's cultural evolution from 20th century experimental artists to the diverse contemporary scene. In 2019, the National Pavilion UAE presented an acclaimed installation exploring geographic and psychological displacement from filmmaker Nujoom Alghanem, and in 2021, architects and curators Wael Al Awar and Kenichi Teramoto will present research into an innovative sustainable cement alternative derived from salt and minerals found in the UAE's Sabkha heritage sites.

In parallel with its exhibitions in Venice, the National Pavilion UAE engages with communities in the UAE to support the growth of the local cultural and creative industries, through public programming and professional opportunities. Alongside an extensive pool of artists, curators, researchers and partners who have contributed to its exhibitions over the years, the UAE's Venice Internship



program has provided training and hands-on experience to more than 170 interns, many of whom are now working successfully in cultural fields.

The National Pavilion UAE is an independent non-profit organisation, commissioned by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation and supported by the UAE Ministry of Culture and Youth.

### **Commissioner: The Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation**

The Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation (SHF) is a private not-for-profit foundation committed to the cultivation of a more creative, connected and thriving UAE community. Based in Abu Dhabi, SHF oversees a diverse portfolio of not-for-profit programs and initiatives spanning the arts, culture, heritage, human development and early childhood development in the UAE and internationally. Underpinning SHF's activities is a common ambition to invest in the knowledge and capabilities of the UAE people in order to support them to unlock their full potential.

### **Supporter: Ministry of Culture and Youth**

The Ministry of Culture and Youth works to enrich the cultural ecosystem in the UAE through initiatives and policies that stimulate the development of the cultural and creative industries and its contribution to the country's GDP, developing new legislation and policies that promote integrated media growth in the country and creating avenues for the youth to invest their capabilities in the aforementioned fields.

The Ministry of Culture and Youth is responsible for empowering and engaging the youth in the UAE by enhancing their leadership skills, involving them in decision-making process and programs, and giving them opportunities to contribute to the creative development of the country.

### **About waiwai design**

**waiwai** is an award-winning multidisciplinary architecture, landscape, graphic and urban design studio with offices in Dubai and Tokyo.

Known for addressing the social, environmental, economical and technological aspects of architectural projects, the firm has worked on prominent cultural institutions including Dubai's Jameel Arts Centre, Jaddaf waterfront sculpture park, Al Warqa'a mosque, Hai d3 and Jeddah's Hayy: Creative Hub.

Formerly known as ibda design ('start' in Arabic), in 2019 the firm was renamed **waiwai** – a Japanese onomatopoeia which refers to the sound of a cheering crowd – to mark its 10-year anniversary.

Dubai and Tokyo each foster multicultural diversity, and the range of cultural backgrounds in the **waiwai** team inspires communication through a clear, simple and deliberate approach to architecture. The founding partners of **waiwai**'s Dubai office, **Wael Al Awar** (Lebanon) and **Kenichi Teramoto** (Japan), have unique stories that first led them away from their home countries, then later to collaborate in Dubai. They share an ability to observe a city up-close and intimately, yet also from afar, with the attentive eye of an outsider.

Their projects layer their individual design sensibilities into an architecture of natural light, time, structure and landscape. By aligning with natural phenomena, **waiwai** seeks to create an



architecture that is more than man-made fabrication, but instead remains open to adaptation and appropriation. The spaces that emerge from this approach are site-specific provocations that encourage unexpected experiences, activities and behaviors.

**Wael Al Awar** founded what was then known as **ibda design** in 2009 after moving back to the Middle East from Tokyo. With interests in natural phenomena, landscape and formless diagrams of relations, Wael has a multi-disciplinary approach to design and is always looking to challenge conventional processes to push the boundaries of design.

**Kenichi Teramoto** joined **ibda design** as a principal architect and partner in 2012, and became a founding partner in **waiwai** following its 2019 rebranding. Teramoto's working experiences have trained him to develop an understanding of culture, geography and materiality. His approach to design is multi-disciplinary, and he has a deep interest in natural phenomena and structure. He is always re-questioning the design approach with the aim of delivering a distinctive design.

They share extensive experience in designing projects of various scales and programs, including art centers and parks, school and university campuses, mixed-use developments, private villas and mosques.

**waiwai** was named among the top 17 architects and top 50 influential designers of the year by Nikkei Magazine in 2019; recognized by Architectural Record's annual Design Vanguard issue as one of the top 10 emerging firms in the world in 2018; and included in Architectural Digest's top 50 offices in the Middle East in 2017.

#### **About Wael Al Awar**

Wael Al Awar founded waiwai design (formerly ibda design) in 2009 after moving back to the Middle East from Tokyo. He has extensive experience in designing projects of various scales and programs, including art centres and parks, school and university campuses, mixed-use developments, private villas and mosques.

With interests in natural phenomena, landscape and formless diagrams of relations, Wael has a multi-disciplinary approach to design and is always looking to challenge conventional processes to push the boundaries of design.

Wael has worked in the Middle East, the West and for several years in Tokyo, working with renowned Japanese architects. He has developed a strong cultural understanding and geographical sensitivity to different project contexts, and offers the perspective of a permanent outsider working with no geographical boundaries.

Wael holds a B.Arch from the American University of Beirut, Lebanon.

#### **About Kenichi Teramoto**

**Kenichi Teramoto** joined **ibda design** as a principal architect and partner in 2012, and became a founding partner in **waiwai** following its 2019 rebranding.

Previously, Teramoto worked with renowned architects in Tokyo and Rotterdam, on local and international projects, building an extensive design experience in both Asia and Europe. His



architectural design proficiency includes a diverse range of projects including art centres and parks, school and university campuses, mixed-use developments, private villas and mosques.

Teramoto's working experiences have trained him to develop an understanding of culture, geography and materiality. His approach to design is multi-disciplinary, and he has a deep interest in natural phenomena and structure. He is always re-questioning the design approach with the aim of delivering a distinctive design.

Teramoto holds a M.Arch from Tokyo University of Science, Japan.

### **About Farah Al Qasimi**

Working primarily with photography, video and performance, Farah Al Qasimi examines postcolonial structures of power, gender and taste in the Gulf Arab states.

Farah studied photography and music at Yale University in 2012 and received her MFA from the Yale School of Art in 2017. Dividing her time between Dubai and NY, Farah has integrated her practice as a social critique and observation of the layered aspects of each place indirectly. Through her bold and vibrant photographs, she explores the unspoken social norms and values embedded in a place, a moment or an object. Her thought-provoking images act as an invitation for the viewer to sense the unspoken boundaries that govern the scenes which they catch a glimpse of.

Al Qasimi's recent works challenge the viewer to consider their own understanding of reality, aspiration, individuality and the reflected image. In series such as 'Funhouse', Farah demonstrates her skill with mise-en-scene in photographs that are richly detailed, evoking a tromp-l'oeil effect, which are at turns delightful, delirious and disturbing. Elsewhere, the artist creates works that confront commonplace notions of figurative photography and portraiture; Back and Forth Disco is comprised of works offering a distinct representation of a subject without allowing the viewer full access to the person, highlighting the unique qualities that determine individuality and capturing the diverse essence of New York City.

Selected exhibitions include Funhouse, Helena Anrather Gallery, NY, USA (2020); Back and Forth Disco, Public Art Fund, New York, NY, USA (2020); Lahore Biennale, Lahore, Pakistan (2020); Open Arm Sea, Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX, USA (2020); March Projects, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE (2019); Arrival, The Third Line, Dubai, UAE (2019); Age of You, MOCA Toronto, Canada (2019); List Projects: Farah Al Qasimi, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, USA (2019); Artist's Rooms, Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai, UAE (2019), Conversation 7 (with Marcela Pardo Ariza), San Francisco Arts Commission, SF, USA (2018); No to the Invasion: Breakdowns and Side Effects, CCS Bard Galleries, New York, USA (2017); More Good News, Helena Anrather, New York (2017), and Coming Up Roses, The Third Line, Dubai, UAE (2016).

She has participated in residencies at the Delfina Foundation, London (2017); the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine (2017); and was also awarded the New York NADA Artadia Prize and the Aaron Siskind Individual Photographer's Fellowship (2018).

### **Wetland exhibition research contributors**



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