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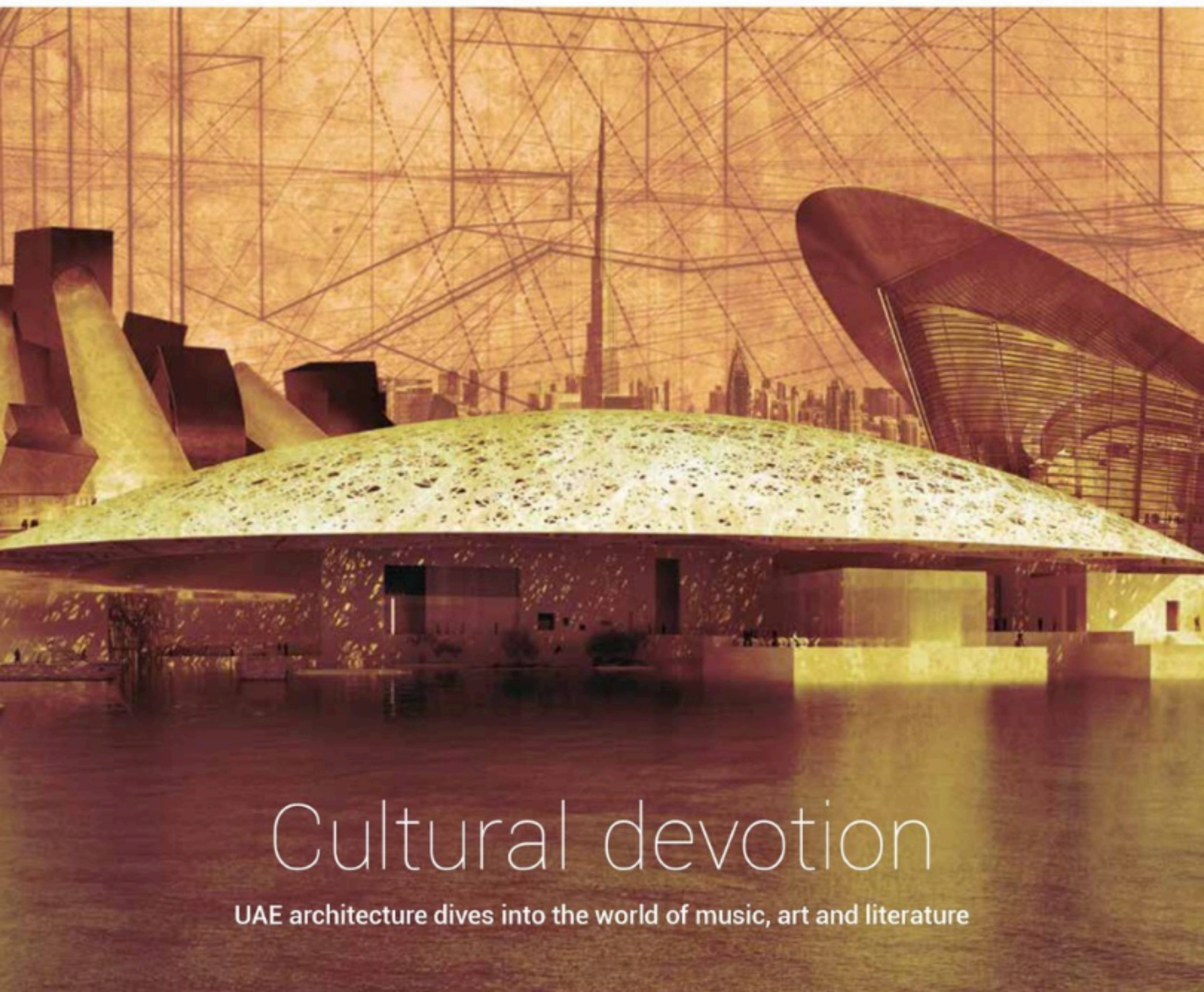
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ADVANCING ARCHITECTURE

Sumaya Dabbagh, Chair of the RIBA Gulf Chapter, speaks about the importance of improving architectural standards in the Gulf region and the role of the RIBA in supporting the advancement of the industry

About the author

Sumaya Dabbagh is a Saudi Architect educated in the UK with more than 25 years of experience. In 2008, she founded Dabbagh Architects, a privately held architectural design firm, recognised regionally for its contemporary design and quality-driven service. In 2015, Dabbagh became the Honorary Chair of the Steering Committee for the RIBA Gulf Chapter. She has served in the RIBA Gulf chapter since its inception in 2009.

Good architecture improves our lives. It creates better buildings and stronger communities and makes better use of the earth's limited resources. The Royal Institute of British Architects champions excellence in architecture. Its rigorous education insures that its members implement the best standards of design.

Architecture has a responsibility not only to create good buildings; but to create the spaces between the buildings that make up our cities.

A tour of many of our Gulf cities can leave the visitor underwhelmed by the lack of identity as well as quality. There is a disparity between the handful of well-designed structures and the majority of ordinary buildings that make up a disconnected urban fabric. Even the better-designed buildings reflect imported or borrowed architecture which may have limited relevance to their context or culture. The quality of the large proportion of buildings ranges from mediocre to poor, mirroring the varying standards of design and construction.

In order to understand how our cities have become what they are, we must reflect on the context of the region and its recent development. Historically, the region has acted as a major trading hub. It is located in a strategic position, at the centre of trade routes between east and west. This attracted, and still attracts, trade, business and people from the region and beyond.

The rich demographics of its population reflect this di-

versity, with each nationality bringing its particular culture, education and experience. This diversity is also reflected in the profession of architecture, where we can find architects and practices with a wide spectrum of backgrounds, education and standards.

Our modest cities, which had developed during the 60s, 70s and 80s, started to grow exponentially. When well-designed and executed buildings started to appear in our cities during the early 90s a shift became apparent. Buildings such as the Kingdom Tower and Faisallia Tower in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Emirates Towers and Burj Al Arab in the UAE, created a reference and established a benchmark. They demonstrated how a well-designed building could add value to the end users and the developers, as well as the city.

Today, high quality buildings have become more common in our cities but they still represent a small proportion of our built environment. The large majority reflect design and construction standards that are primarily commercially driven: where the emphasis is on the return on investment rather than quality, sustainability or the impact on the city that is generated by these buildings.

The fast pace of development of the last 15 years has attracted more architects and professionals from various corners of the globe, further broadening the disparity of standards in the profession as well as cultural relevance in the design. As a result, offerings of architectural services can vary tremendously from one practice to another depending on its background, employed talent and intention. In order for us to produce better architecture and improve our built environment and cities, it is imperative that we establish a set of core values for the profession that create consistency in standards and quality of design and construction. We must also nurture our local talent to build cities that fit our needs, our values and our culture.

As architects and developers, we must recognise and embrace the responsibility inherent in the task of creating our built environment. The Royal Institute of British Architects acknowledges this responsibility. It provides a tightly-regulated profession with high standards of education, and through its strict code of conduct promotes and champions integrity, professionalism, excellence, creativity and innovation.

In recognition of the need to help improve standards in the Gulf, the RIBA, with the support of its Gulf members, established the RIBA Gulf Chapter



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in 2009. The RIBA has a worldwide reputation built up over more than 175 years. It has vast knowledge and experience to offer the region and is globally recognised as a benchmark for excellence in architecture. It sets standards, shares knowledge and demonstrates the economic, social and environmental benefits of good architecture.

The Gulf Chapter's objectives are to bring awareness to these values and help improve the standards of practice in the Gulf. It has set out to fulfil its objectives from the top down through its diverse members, and from the bottom up through education.

Through its members, the Gulf Chapter aims to demonstrate excellence in design and the value that quality can add to our cities. We will work with our members to support them and their continued development through CPD courses, events, forums and discussions.

The RIBA Gulf Chapter has introduced new routes to membership that take into consideration the diversity and backgrounds of architects practising in the region. The Chapter offers Part 3 courses as well as a newly launched Membership Eligibility Assessment Panel, MEAP course. The latter caters for the growing number of local, well-qualified and highly competent architects in practice who do not hold RIBA recognised qualifications.

There are a number of RIBA accredited schools of architecture globally. Currently, the RIBA is in touch with three highly-respected universities in the region with a view to helping them become RIBA Validated Institutions. Through these key initiatives, the RIBA aims to raise its values in the profession in the Gulf, so that we can see more young graduates from the region enter the profession, the impact and influence of excellent architecture will spread across the industry.

RIBA recognises the great potential, energy and source in the young generation of the region and we will see the impact of a more long-term, responsible approach to architecture and development in the Gulf.

We too must recognise this potential in our region, with the mentoring of the RIBA, we can well planned, sensitively designed, sustainable developments. We can co-create our own cities that reflect their context and reflect our identity and our values of which we can be truly proud.