

sand castles

The architecture of the future is here now, rising boldly out of the desert sands of the United Arab Emirates. By Michael Franco

Dynamic Tower, Dubai

THEY ARE LIKE MIRAGES: a towering building that changes shape before your eyes; islands appearing where none were before; the lost city of Atlantis rising on a distant horizon.

But these desert miracles aren't figments of a thirsty traveller's heat-rattled mind. They are the real-life manifestations of the UAE, a federation with a seemingly unquenchable thirst and capacity to push engineering and architectural boundaries to the limit.

Take Dubai's approach to the problem of diminishing coastal real estate. When His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum realised this was happening, his solution was simple in concept if complex in execution: build more. And that's why 4,888,000 cubic metres of rock and 92,234,000 cubic metres of sand were moved to create the outer crescent of the palm-tree shaped island Palm Jumeirah – one of three such islands currently being developed off the coast.

Eye-Popping Megastructures

Appropriately, on this island that literally rose out of the sea, the lost city of Atlantis will thrive once more. Created by international developer Kerzner International Holdings, Atlantis The Palm (www.atlantisthepalm.com/) plans to open the doors to its 1,539 rooms later this year but it has already

been accepting reservations since February. All rooms will have balconies overlooking the island or out to sea; the Bridge Suite – accessed by private lift – will suspend guests 22 stories above the entire Atlantis complex; and the three-storey Lost Chamber Suites will give guests the illusion of being submerged underwater. In addition to the hotel facility, Atlantis The Palm will also include an underwater viewing complex where visitors can take in a variety of marine life while peering down the avenues of the lost city of Atlantis, thanks to creative architectural recreations of the mythical city. And at the heart of the resort, a 30-metre high Mesopotamian-styled Ziggurat temple lets you shoot down several waterslides into a maze of water tunnels.



Elsewhere, taking pride of place is a collection of 17 bars and restaurants including a desert outpost of Nobu, opened by Nobuyuki Matsuhisa and partner Robert DeNiro. Shoppers can get their retail fix along The Avenues retail promenade.

For those interested in visiting the future, the Dubai International Financial Centre recently announced plans to build a 400-metre tall luxury office building known as Lighthouse Tower, due to the unique nocturnal wash of light in which it will be bathed. It will be constructed next to the already iconic Gate Building that took its inspiration from Paris' Arc de Triomphe and houses the DIFC's executive offices. But while its sleek profile will be futuristic, its design as a low-carbon building will also take into account the future of the planet. The design firm Atkins, who created the now world-famous sail-like Burj Al Arab hotel, aims to reduce the building's total energy consumption by up to 65 per cent and water consumption by 40 per cent through such innovations as three built-in wind turbines and 4,000 photo voltaic panels.

Scheduled to be completed in 2010, the new Dynamic Tower by Florentine architect David Fisher is perhaps the best example of where 21st century architecture is heading. The first-of-its-kind structure will feature 80 floors that rotate independently of each other, taking a week to make a full rotation and creating a tower that will look different whenever it is viewed – much in the same way a mirage rising out of the desert shape-shifts, luring you ever forward.

Fantasy Meets Architecture

Taking an other worldly approach to bringing architectural fantasies to life, neighbouring Abu Dhabi will soon have buildings shaped like spaceships, tumbling blocks, alien life forms and a giant shimmering mushroom on Saadiyat Island (www.saadiyat.ae), just off the Emirate's coast. Intended to be an oasis of culture, the island will bring together today's most popular "starchitects" such as Frank Ghery, who will deliver the largest Guggenheim in the world. His 320,000-square-foot structure will hold galleries around a central courtyard and feature the off-balance and sometimes abstract look the architect is famous for.

Tadao Ando, another architect will be looking to the sea for his inspiration for a Maritime Museum that will have a smooth and reflective outer surface and decks that

seem to float in the ship-like interior. Also, Zaha Hadid has been tapped to execute the Saadiyat's Performing Arts Centre which will be a fluid, bulbous structure housing five theatres with a total seating capacity of 6,300. And Jean Nouvel's translucent dome will let diffused light bathe the assets inside a new Louvre, proving that Abu Dhabi's planners are not only adept at planning architectural marvels but – by overcoming the protests of the French public – smoothing over socio-political issues as well.

While Dubai and Abu Dhabi seemingly go head-to-head in the amazing architectural race, in the nearby Sharjah Emirate, the approach is more subtle. Here they are taking existing structures and breathing vibrant new life into them.

Take, for example, the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Culture (www.islamicmuseum.ae). Designed by Halcrow and first opened as the Souq al-Majarra in 1987, the quintessentially Arab-Islamic structure for years welcomed locals and tourists alike who flock to buy its wide range of clothes, perfumes and textiles. After having undergone a massive renovation and transformation into the first museum of its kind in the UAE, the building still displays treasures, but the ceramics, metalwork and glass from the 7th century are for ogling, not purchasing. Its most striking feature – a soaring dome adorned with a mosaic of the zodiac signs in the night sky – can now be enjoyed while sipping tea in the café on the second floor.

The souq is not the only building in Sharjah to get a new name. The Andalusian-style structure long known as Qanat Al Qasba, which stretches along a thousand-metre canal, will now simply be called Al Qasba (www.qaq.ae) after a comprehensive sprucing up. Visitors to Al Qasba can sample a bit of the past by taking a ride in one of many traditional wooden boats known as abras or step into the present

by boarding one of the 42 pod-like structures of the Eye of the Emirates, an observatory wheel that carries passengers 60 metres above the rapidly-changing landscape.

Indeed, these architectural wonders are jaw-dropping on a scale that is unique to the UAE. But perhaps it is the ever revolving, shape-shifting Dynamic Tower above all others that truly embodies the architectural landscape of the UAE – constantly changing, imaginative, and truly revolutionary. ✨

