

Landscape

The cover image shows a tall palm tree in the foreground, its trunk and fronds extending across the frame. Behind the tree, there are modern buildings: one with a textured, golden-brown facade and another with a glass curtain wall. The sky is clear and blue. The text 'Landscape' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font at the top. Below it, 'The Journal of the Landscape Institute' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. To the right, 'Autumn 2016' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

The Journal of the **Landscape Institute**

Autumn 2016

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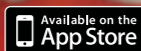
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Update

By Peter Sheard

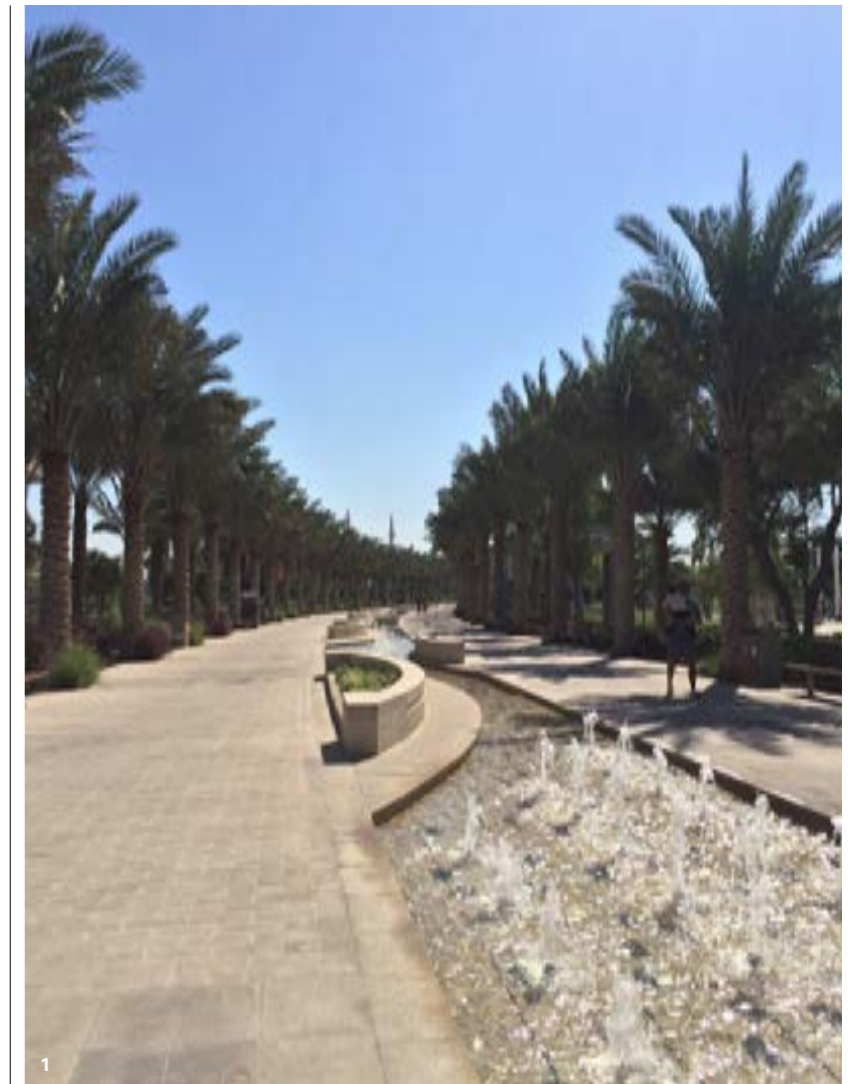
All change for Dubai

As the Middle East faces up to the fact that its current lifestyle is neither sustainable nor desirable, landscape will have a major role to play.

1 – 21st century oases: Royal Mirage Hotels grounds.
© Peter Sheard.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) thrives on good news: it's what visitors expect. Every hotel lobby in the UAE has at least one government-sponsored newspaper declaring some new innovation or other: usually it's to do with a new tourist attraction, or an even taller building, but lately the subject of new parks and open spaces has been making the headlines. Already the Government of Abu Dhabi, for example, has announced the construction of nine new parks and 1.2 hectares of 'urban greenery' together worth more than 9 billion dirhams (£1.7 million). Similarly, Dubai is launching a series of new initiatives to create a more 'connected public realm'. What is behind this new phenomenon? As so often, the answer lies in the past.

Most cities grow organically, and the provision of parks and a useable public realm was part of that process. Not so in the UAE. The past 50 years saw a dizzying rate of growth with the main aim being to establish new cities with airports, skylines, highways and buildings, preferably very tall and 'iconic'. This approach succeeded in establishing a touristic and commercial hub between east and west, to 'future proof' the region when the oil ran out. However it also created cities which consumed huge amounts of power and water, and were totally car dependent. The human scale was lost and, for many Emiratis, so was an important cultural link with the past. Consequently, there are three broad categories of landscape: firstly,



greenery seen from the highway at speed; secondly, peripheral landscape around development plots; and lastly, those 21st century oases of greenery that exist within hotels and theme parks. Beyond these categories there

is very little walkable, usable public realm for social interaction and well-being.

It is primarily this concern about well-being which has prompted the change in Government policy in the



2 – Mushrif Park has had an extensive makeover, becoming a multifunctional, well-connected park that acts as a cultural hub.
© Mable So Photographs

UAE; and, like the earliest pioneering projects, to 'green the desert', it is politically driven. Sedentary lifestyles, high levels of obesity, and cities that are unsustainable in terms of social cohesion and connectivity are seen as something to recalibrate and redesign; and with this new approach comes an examination of the role of the landscape architect in creating these new environments. Potentially, it is a very important role.

As part of this changing approach, the Government and Municipality of Dubai sponsored the 'Smart Landscape Summit' in April, bringing together more than 500 government bodies, developers and design professionals to examine new approaches to greening cities in order to create sustainable, contemporary landscapes using forward-thinking design and techniques – what was described as a 'new paradigm' in landscape design for the region.

It has to be said that plenty of 'buzz-words' were used during the

two days of the summit, including 'naturalistic', 'sustainable' and even 'ecological'. There were good examples of new park and open space provision which attempted to rectify the faults of the past; but the event was a little light on the more fundamental issues of what a landscape architect can contribute to enable a more intelligently planned city to respond to its environment and its cultural heritage. Instead, there was a struggle by many speakers to identify an appropriate design 'brand' which was contemporary UAE (despite all the overwhelming environmental and climatic factors); and a disconnect between creating an international landscape for the tourist, as opposed to an evocative landscape which would make every Emirati misty-eyed. It was not so much a 'new paradigm' as an old paradox.

However, there were many pertinent observations which defined how the region could change its ways and should be of interest to any

landscape architect working in this dynamic place. Jason Turner of Dubai-based GHD made the case for re-examining how to plan for a city like Dubai which is now a multi-cultural hub of 9 million people and a top-five tourist destination in the world but has 'manifestly failed' to provide an 'international quality of environment'.

His solution was to use the example of biophilic city growth where a more organic approach was *de rigueur* and where the built and green environment occurred concurrently and were indistinguishable. This point was well made, but would have to involve retro-fitting existing open spaces to really work. This has actually happened at the Mushrif Park in central Abu Dhabi which has undergone an expensive makeover, turning an isolated open space into a multifunctional, well-connected park that now acts as a cultural hub for the city.

Similarly, Geoffrey Sanderson of AECOM, who has spent 30 years in

3 – City Walk, Dubai is a pedestrian-dominated environment, which is a welcome change.
© Peter Sheard

the region, argued for a cultural reconnection to the landscape of the oasis, which defined culture and calm, together with the adoption of native planting and attitudes. This would adopt the philosophy of the Anthropocene Era movement which argues that the major dynamics of the 21st century, such as global urbanisation and climate change, are landscape-architectural in nature and that landscape architects can and must address them with both scientific knowledge and artistic imagination. Geoffrey called many of the designs that he witnesses 'fundamentally dishonest' and said that they will prove to be 'a rod for our own backs'. In addition, he suggested that the landscape industry was not fit for purpose when it came to supplying appropriate plant material. These were brave words in the context of Dubai, but compelling nevertheless as it was his premise that the answer lay in the correct planning

of the urban environment not in its 'greening'. The answer lies in the past.

It was evident that park planning is becoming smarter in the UAE, if smarter means less energy-demanding. Al Khazan Park in Abu Dhabi is lit by low-energy LED lighting, including its sports pitches, while more than 60% of its water is treated, and many of its furniture elements use local recycled materials. In Sharjah, the Al Noor island park retained all its existing trees despite pressures to remove them, supplementing them with native species, and creating a wildlife reserve of considerable charm and individuality.

Misha Mittal, an urban planner with the Abu Dhabi municipality, observed that although the city faced challenges with exponential growth, many opportunities were arising from re-planning whole districts which were now more than 50 years old and no longer sustainable. Garden city principles were proving adept at

giving more people accessible neighborhood parks and a hierarchy of shaded streets, totally reversing the harsh and traffic-dominated urban grain of the past.

Dubai is similarly re-learning. For example, whereas Dubai Marina, which dates from the height of the boom years, is an exercise in public realm as a setting for retail therapy with its unshaded, tree-less public realm (which simply forces you to go shopping), the newer 'City Walk' is far more sympathetic to the pedestrian, and creates an environment largely without cars with a distinct, if rather North American, street scene. It's not perfect, but at least the cars have been tamed and it encourages people to walk and jog.

Another example is the Dubai International Financial Centre, which was envisaged as a walkable, pedestrian-friendly environment where the vehicle was banished underground. Its 'Gate Village' creates a network of narrow



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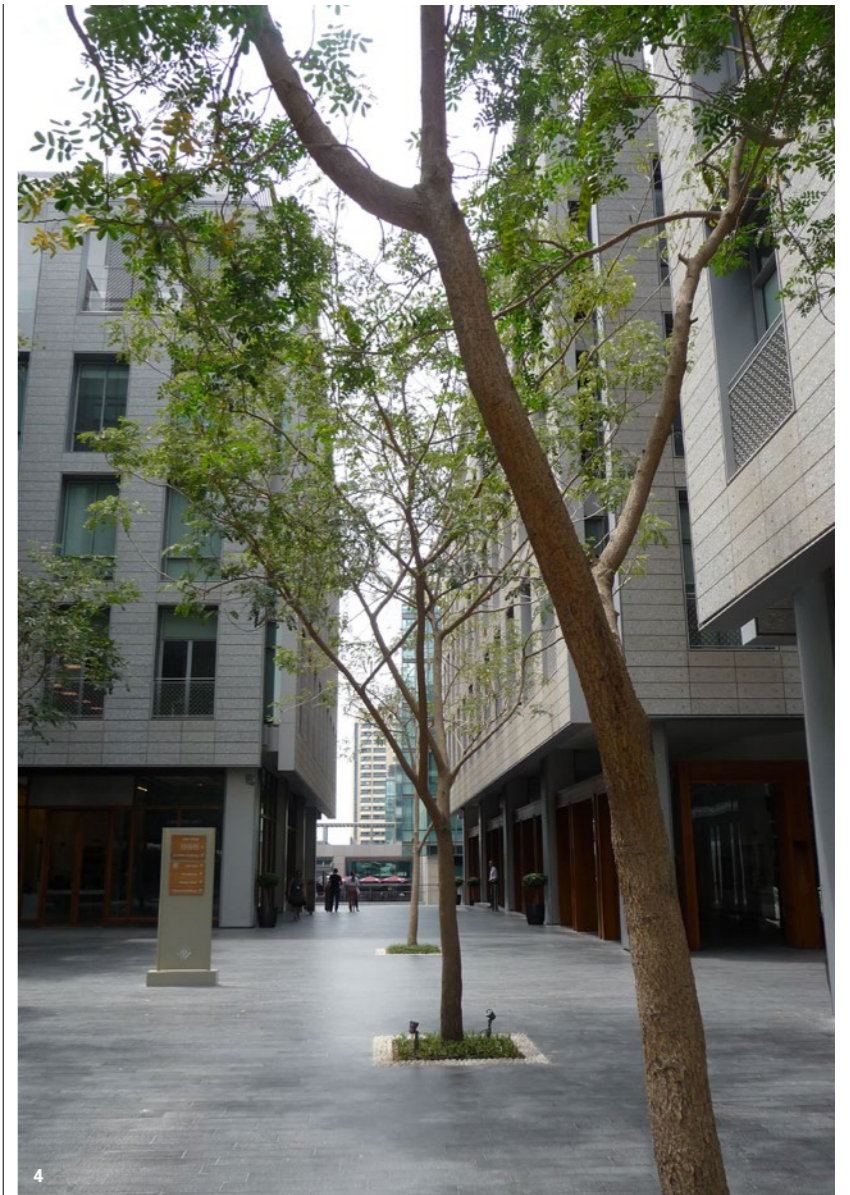
4 – Dubai International Financial Centre has some excellent buildings and has become a centre of the arts scene. It has a walkable environment. © Peter Sheard
 5 – Constitution Gardens in Kuwait is, in part, a clean and rich oasis. © Nelson Garrido, NG Photography

shaded streets with contemporary buildings (designed by Hopkins) which has become a centre of the arts scene in Dubai.

The summit examined other precedents in landscape design but too many were not from the Middle East and used examples (of Singapore in particular) which were at odds with the challenges facing the UAE. This was due to a combination of a paucity of local examples, and the tendency of various speakers to market themselves, however unwisely.

However, examples do exist in the Middle East: In terms of parks, the Constitution Gardens in Kuwait designed by SdARCH Trivelli & Associati of Italy, has significant cultural resonance with its two gardens reflecting the ‘old era’ (without a constitution) and the ‘new era’ (with) of the country. The first garden is untidy and rugged with native plants; whilst the second ‘new’ garden is a clean and rich oasis with water reflecting the sky. At the fulcrum is a large totem sculpture representing the constitution and the plurality of the society. It is, in the words of the designers, ‘a garden of meanings’ that would grace any city.

In terms of planning, consider Msheireb Downtown in central Doha, Qatar, where a 7 hectare, dilapidated city block has been demolished and a new piece of town is being carefully inserted. Its streets are narrow and shaded, with the buildings’ massing



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designed to funnel cooling winds. Open spaces are small, serendipitous and sparse in their detail and moreover accommodate trams, cyclists and pedestrians.

Finally, and remarkably, the only compelling example of the sort of city planning to which so many speakers at the summit aspired, was provided by Perkins + Will's Qatar Research and Development Complex which, although a campus, is a city-scale block. The plan's adoption of a tight urban grain, limited traffic access, and a spatial order which promoted a pattern of open spaces of different characters and design, made this a very intelligent planning exercise. The social interaction it encouraged was very Qatari; and the scale and nature of the landscape created a comfortable, stimulating and usable environment. Furthermore, street trees provided shade and filtered dust; whilst the streets encouraged walking and cycling and attenuated storm water.

The challenges facing the UAE's cities are not unique: rapid urbanisation, climate change, and a dawning realization that the way they have been planned in the past, is not going to be a viable model for the future. The solutions are multi layered and multi-disciplinary; and involve reconnecting to the human scale and experience. Places like Dubai, the host of the summit, are truly global: its



architecture, the scale of its roads and parks, the developers and designers employed, and most significantly, its residents and visitors are international.

The city is a mega-oasis, and a mirage. The most popular visitor attractions are its shopping malls, iconic buildings and its hotels: not, unfortunately its parks and open spaces. This is a situation which cannot continue if Dubai is to avoid becoming 'yesterday's' destination: a sort of arid Morecambe. As John Smith, professor of architecture at the American University of Dubai said, the region is 'at a generational moment' where demands for a different quality of environment

are becoming difficult to ignore. Meanwhile, billboards in the UAE still portray rather dispiriting tableaux of residential towers surrounded by acres of distinctly unsustainable greenery which would look more at home in Florida or Turkey. The solution, only touched on at the summit, is multi-layered and complex, but if they are bold enough, landscape architects are well placed to provide leadership in guiding this process, and creating an external urban environment which embodies an alternative future for the UAE.

Peter Sheard is a freelance landscape architect, garden designer and writer based in London.

6 – Msheireb Doha is a deliberate design for a piece of walkable city in the centre of a metropolis. © Gensler

7 – Salwa Development in Dubai, showing a city that is in love with 'icons'. © Perkins + Will



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