

Smart Living

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The United Arab Emirates thrives on good news, it's what visitors expect. Any 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 have 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 over 9 billion dirhams (£1.7). Similarly Dubai is launching a series of new initiatives to create a more 'connected public realm' that people can experience. What is behind this new phenomenon? The answer is in the past.

Most cities grow organically, and the provision of parks and a useable public realm were part of that process. Not so in the UAE. The past 50 years saw a dizzying rate of growth with the main aim to establish new cities with airports, skylines, highways and buildings, preferably very tall and iconic. This would create a touristic and commercial hub between east and west, and '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 too 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 within hotels and theme parks. Outside of 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 UAE and like the earliest pioneering projects to 'green the desert' it is politically driven. Sedentary lifestyles, high levels of obesity, and cities which are unsustainable in terms of social cohesion and connectivity are seen as something to recalibrate and redesign; and with it comes an examination of the role of the landscape architect in creating these new environments and potentially it is a very important role.

As a result the Government and Municipality of Dubai sponsored the 'Smart Landscape Summit' in April, bringing together over 500 government bodies, developers and design professionals to examine new approaches to greening the cities which create sustainable, contemporary landscapes using forward-thinking design and techniques and a new paradigm in landscape design in the region. It has to be said there were many buzz-words used during the two days of the Summit such as 'naturalistic', 'sustainable' and even 'ecological', and there were good examples of new park and open space provision which attempted to rectify the faults of the past; but was a little light on the more fundamental issues of what a landscape architects can contribute to more intelligently planned cities which respond to its environment and its cultural heritage. Rather 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. 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, which are worth noting by 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 nine million people and a top five tourist destination in the world but has 'manifestly failed' to provide an 'international quality of environment'. The solution was to use the example of Biophilic city growth where a more organic approach was de rigeur 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 occurred at the Mushrif Park in central Abu Dhabi which has undergone an expensive makeover turning an isolated open space into a multi-functional, well connected park which now acts as a cultural hub for the city.

Similarly Geoffrey Sanderson of aecom and 30 years in 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 urbanization and climate change are landscape architectural in nature and that landscape architects can and must address with both scientific knowledge and artistic imagination. Geoffrey calls many of the designs he witnesses 'fundamentally dishonest' which will prove to be 'a rod for our own backs'. Moreover he suggested the landscape industry was not fit for purpose when it came to supply appropriate plant material. 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 its greening. The answer lies in the past.

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

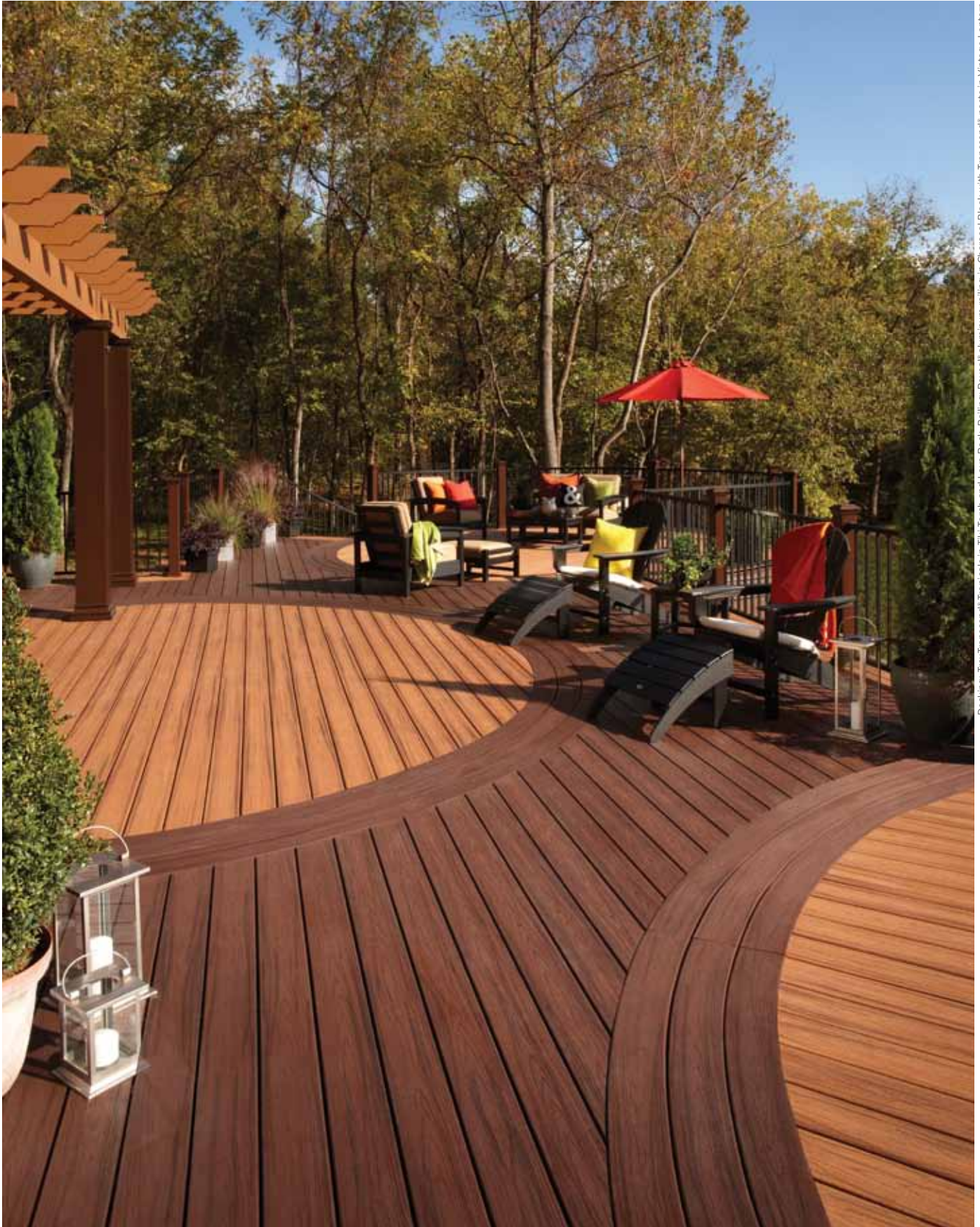


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Misha Mittal, an urban planner with the Abu Dhabi municipality observed that although they faced challenges with exponential growth, many opportunities were arising from re-planning whole districts which were now over fifty years old and no longer sustainable. As such 'Garden City' principles were proving adept at giving more people accessible neighbourhood 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 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 shaded streets with contemporary buildings (designed by Hopkins) which have become a centre of the arts scene in Dubai.





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The summit examined other precedents in landscape design but too many were not from the Middle East and used examples (Singapore in particular) which were at odds with the challenges facing the UAE. This was 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 SdARCHTrivelli&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 and it would grace any city frankly.



In terms of planning take the Msheireb Downtown in central Doha where a 7 hectare, dilapidated city block has been demolished and a new piece of town carefully inserted. Its streets are narrow and shaded, whilst the buildings' massing funnels cooling winds. The 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 the 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.



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The challenges facing the UAE's cities are not unique, rapid urbanization, 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 Architect at the American University of Dubai stated 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. 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. ■

'21st CENTURY OASES: ROYAL MIRAGE
HOTELS GROUNDS'

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