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# ART IN THE PUBLIC REALM IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

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## SUMMARY REPORT

Heba ElCheikh and Eckhard Thiemann | April 2018



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This is a qualitative report commissioned by the British Council to map the art in the public realm field in the Gulf countries, specifically the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

This is a partnership project between Shubbak and Mahatat for contemporary art.

Cover: Julio La Fuente sculpture in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Image © Wolfgang Kaehler/LightRocket.

This page: sculpture at Doha airport, Qatar by Tom Otterness. Image © Guilhem Vellut.



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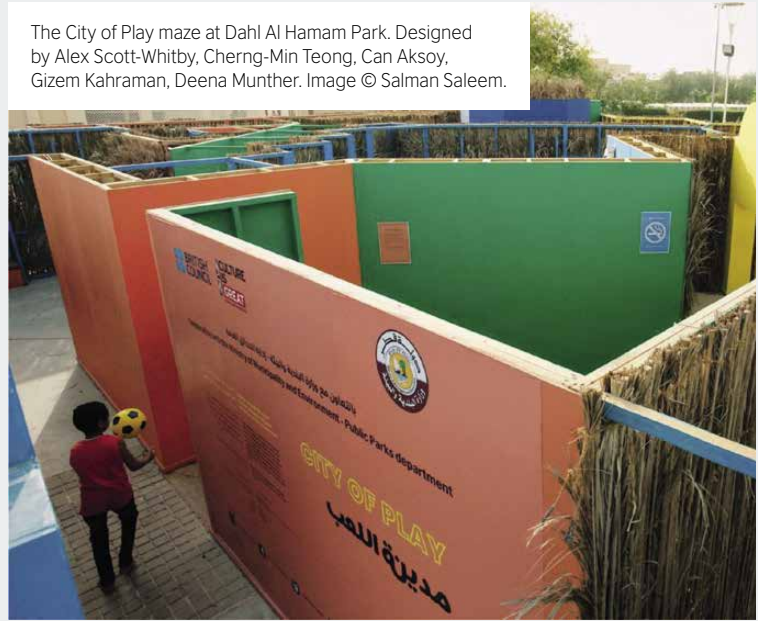
## **INSIGHTS INTO ART IN PUBLIC REALM IN THE GULF COUNTRIES:**

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# INTRODUCTION



The main entrance to Umm Al Emarat Park, Abu Dhabi. Image © Umm Al Emarat Park.



The City of Play maze at Dahl Al Hamam Park. Designed by Alex Scott-Whitby, Cherng-Min Teong, Can Aksoy, Gizem Kahraman, Deena Munther. Image © Salman Saleem.



Umm Al Emarat Park children's area. Image © Umm Al Emarat Park.

## SCOPE OF THE CONSULTANCY

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The arts scene in the Gulf countries is vibrant and growing. This report aims to help the British Council's partners to understand the context, discourses and experiences that relate to exhibiting art in the public realm in the Gulf. It was developed as part of the British Council's research into cultural skills, which aims to set the foundations for new partnerships between the UK and Gulf arts sector, as well as offering opportunities for knowledge and skills sharing.

The focus of the research was on three countries – Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar as there are major events planned in these countries in the next few years such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the Dubai Expo 2020.

The consultancy gathered evidence of opportunities and provided recommendations for readers about the best ways to provide art in the public realm and reach the target audience. The scope of the consultancy included:

- identifying potential partners, who can support the delivery of public art
- recommendations on potential locations, content and type of artwork
- evidence from the target audience – gathered through focus groups and surveys – of the potential to reach large audiences.

## METHODOLOGY

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The consultancy took place from January to April 2018, including desk research, field trips to the three countries, report writing and submission.

The two consultants used a number of empirical and field-based research methods including desk research, 39 in-depth semi-structured interviews, one focus group with 12 university students and 24 questionnaires circulated through local partners, to collect data and the needed evidence to complete the report.

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

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### Time and data collection limitations

As with much research, this report had a short timeline for delivery, which limited the extent of the possible research. For logistical and permissions reasons, planned focus groups were sometimes re-designed as consultations via questionnaires instead. This led to a smaller research sample than originally anticipated.

As such, the data sources used were predominantly country visits and interviews, with additional data collection from questionnaires.

Country visits ranged between five and ten days. Visits to KSA were limited to the cities of Jeddah and Riyadh, and in the UAE to Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

### Terminology limitations

The term 'art in the public realm' means different things to different sectors and people. In the UK the term is mainly associated with commissions,

interventions and outdoor events, mainly in urban locations, which offer an accessible and direct engagement with cultural activities. Its theory and practice is guided by concepts of democratisation of spaces, removing barriers to experiencing the arts for audiences.

Over the course of our research there was a lack of common understanding of the term 'art in the public realm' by a number of partners and those consulted. A common question was 'what is art in the public realm?' In the Gulf States most arts institutions are relatively young and one of the main aims in audience development is to build up loyal audiences for a growing number of building-based institutions.

Parallel to this there is a growing provision of large-scale outdoor events. During the winter months the evenings and nights become the key locations to experience cultural events. These range from themed festivals, which combine theme-park like activities with music stages, to street-art displays to light shows and national day celebrations. All these – and in some cases also tradeshows and sporting events – were referred to as 'art in the public realm' by interviewees.

The consultants provided a short presentation of types of public realm interventions, including architectural mappings, light shows, spectacle performances, audio walks, parades, participatory activities and temporary sculptural installations.

The lack of a common framework of terminology meant that a number of discussions were limited in scope, and also limited the focus group engagement with the topic.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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As part of a Gulf-wide initiative, the British Council commissioned Eckhard Thiemann (Shubbak), and Heba ElCheikh (Mahatat for contemporary art) to scope opportunities for major public art presentations in the Gulf region. They also discussed the potential for development of art in the public realm in the Gulf region. The consultancy was designed to identify opportunities for the development of art in the public realm in the region.

The research focused on Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar as these countries are planning major international events (Dubai Expo 2020, FIFA World Cup 2022), or are creating public spaces for entertainment which will provide enhanced opportunities for Arts in the Public Realm activities in the future.

The two consultants used a number of empirical and field-based research methods including desk research, 39 in-depth semi-structured interviews in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, one focus group with 12 university students and 24 questionnaires circulated through local partners, in order to collect data and evidence to complete the report.

In the course of this research it was found that the term 'art in the public realm' was generally equated with any outdoor event which gathers people, including outdoor concerts, national day celebrations, theme parks, fun fairs and shopping mall activities, as well as more conventional sculptural installations. Some art-specialist organisations applied stricter definitions, which included community engagement, social engagement and documentary practices.

The Gulf is facing a period of rapid expansion in its cultural provision. Governed by national policies like Vision 2030 (KSA), Qatar National Vision 2030 and Vision 2021 (UAE), the region is proactively developing new events, festivals, creative spaces and critical discourse. Some events like national days are producing events of entertainment and civic pride at a monumental scale using the latest technology in lighting, mapping and drones. Outdoor festivals resemble a mixture of theme park, fun fair, music and stage programmes and family entertainment. These events attract huge audiences, with one festival alone attracting one million people across five days.

The outdoor event sector is primarily commissioned by government entities or developers, working in close partnership with event management companies.

Sometimes selected through a tendering process, sometimes directly appointed, event management companies play a crucial role in researching and programming content, as well as managing logistics and marketing. The background of these organisations is often marketing and PR and important drivers include commercial, branding or

media coverage targets. Many interviewees were expecting direct pitches from the consultants for content.

Parallel to the large-scale outdoor sector there is a growing network of specialist arts institutions, who develop curator-led and artist-focused programmes, often with a strong emphasis on talent development. Many acknowledged a desire to work more closely within neighbourhoods, engage local communities, re-interpret localities and chart changes to the urban fabric or demographic changes. Some felt that local artists would benefit strongly from greater exposure to critically engaged art in the public realm. Many favoured an approach which would lead to ephemeral and subtle works including elements of live performance.

## OPPORTUNITIES

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The Gulf States offer many points for collaboration with the UK cultural sector. The Gulf is very successful at large-scale spectacular events.

When presented with different examples of public realm interventions, our research revealed that many respondents expressed an interest in work which championed direct human interaction and playful ideas.

There are two distinct sectors for engagement:

### Outdoor events sector

If the definition of art in the public realm is applied widely and encompasses the outdoor event economy, there are many potential partners who are looking for content for a fast-expanding festival scene. Government entities, developers and event management

companies are all open to proposals, pitches and suggestions for projects. Event management companies are a key player and organisations interested in making art in the public realm for Gulf audiences will need to start making direct contact with this growing sector. They will require concrete proposals for outdoor performances, music, parades, light features and engaging content.

### Specialist arts institutions

There is also an interest within specialist arts organisations to develop more artist-centred residency-based initiatives, which critically engage with the fast changes to urban or demographic conditions, and use archival, participatory and socially engaged practices. This process should be accompanied by a programme of theoretical and academic discourse.

# KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

THIS IS A TIME OF RADICAL CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION IN KSA, TAKING PLACE AT UNPRECEDENTED SPEED.

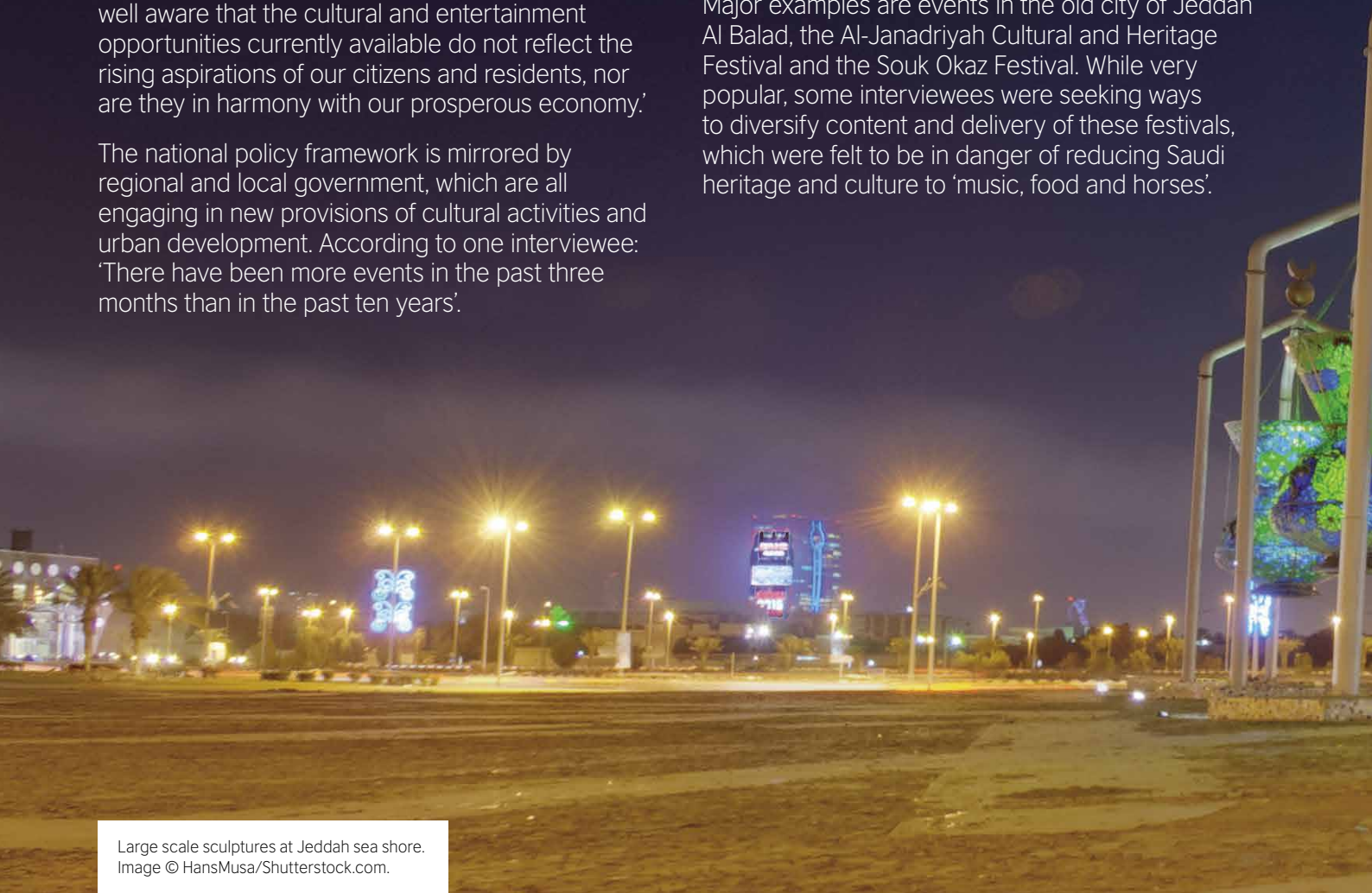
The country has embarked on the ambitious Vision 2030 programme of transformation towards an outward facing nation with 'promoting culture and entertainment' included as a major goal:

'We consider culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life. We are well aware that the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our prosperous economy.'

The national policy framework is mirrored by regional and local government, which are all engaging in new provisions of cultural activities and urban development. According to one interviewee: 'There have been more events in the past three months than in the past ten years'.

## OUTDOOR AND HERITAGE FESTIVALS

Saudi Arabia has a tradition of large-scale, folkloristic and heritage-based festivals, which draw large audiences and can include performance, music, light installations, poetry competitions and parades. Major examples are events in the old city of Jeddah Al Balad, the Al-Janadriyah Cultural and Heritage Festival and the Souk Okaz Festival. While very popular, some interviewees were seeking ways to diversify content and delivery of these festivals, which were felt to be in danger of reducing Saudi heritage and culture to 'music, food and horses'.







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## The first Jeddah Entertainment Boulevard in January 2018 attracted audiences of over one million across its five days.

More recently a new type of outdoor festival, initiated and driven by the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) has emerged. These are outdoor events with a mixture of theme park, stages for music and circus acts, parades, DJs and light shows alongside food, merchandise and fun-fair activities. Held in parks, seafronts or specially converted locations, and delivered by event management companies, these festivals are growing rapidly and ambitiously rolled out for large audiences nationally. The first Jeddah Entertainment Boulevard in January 2018 attracted audiences of over one million across its five days.

Event management companies play an important role in generating content and delivering these events. These companies often come from a marketing and PR background and the development of content tends to be driven by the potential to attract high volume audiences. Some leading agencies have exclusive contracts with government bodies commissioning large-scale events.

The key government entities supporting this growth in festivals are the GEA, General Authority of Culture (GAC), and the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Heritage. The General Authority of Culture will become the main regulatory and licensing body, and sees its role as monitoring, supervising and promoting public art events. The GEA is the main body to build up a sustainable commercial cultural sector. It is the driver behind large outdoor festival development.

Many interviewees pointed out that the logistics of staging works in the public realm are complex, requiring a range of permissions and licences from landowners, municipalities, the General Authority of Culture and other relevant authorities. Event management companies have the relevant know-how and contacts to plan and ensure smooth delivery of a project.

### ARTS SPECIALIST SECTOR

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Saudi Arabia also has a number of very active arts specialist organisations working in the public realm. The Saudi Arts Council hosts the annual 21,39 Jeddah Art Week. Art Jameel is developing its outdoor sculpture museum and new commissions for the new creative centre Al Hayy. Misk Art Institute is planning a citywide art week in Riyadh.

These initiatives are more driven by curators and engage with the historical or societal context of a location. Occasionally they also include direct participation or research into local communities and residents.

### ART IN THE PUBLIC REALM DISCOURSE

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Discourse about art in the public realm is focused on ambitions to activate new or underused spaces, audience development, and the potential for greater synergies and collaborations across organisations. For the state sector, the main driver for most new initiatives is developing internal tourism sector and a stronger offer of the leisure activities.

## SURVEY RESULTS

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The questionnaires from KSA revealed an interest to see more interventions that activate parks or neglected sites with a historical value. Previous public realm activities were welcomed as being accessible, easy to reach and attracting a diverse audience of 'young crowds, females, and families'. Young people generally learn of public events either through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, or from news outlets and mailing lists.

## OPPORTUNITIES

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The UK cultural sector is well placed to serve and collaborate with the fast growing sector of outdoor events in Saudi Arabia. Government entities and event management companies are open and responsive to proposals, pitches and suggestions for products. Concrete proposals are welcomed for outdoor performances, parades, light features and interventions with playful engagement. There is strong interest in work which champions direct human interaction rather than spectacles reliant on high technology.

Parallel to this, there is interest in deeper engagement with specialist arts organisations to develop more artist-centred initiatives with longer lead-in periods and possibly residencies, which test out new concepts of public art and pioneer direct engagement with local communities.

Mahatat is a Cairo-based social and cultural enterprise founded in 2011. Through contemporary art practices, Mahatat seeks to transform public spaces, create opportunities for exposure to the arts and offer needs-based learning experiences to artists, practitioners and entrepreneurs.

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The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.