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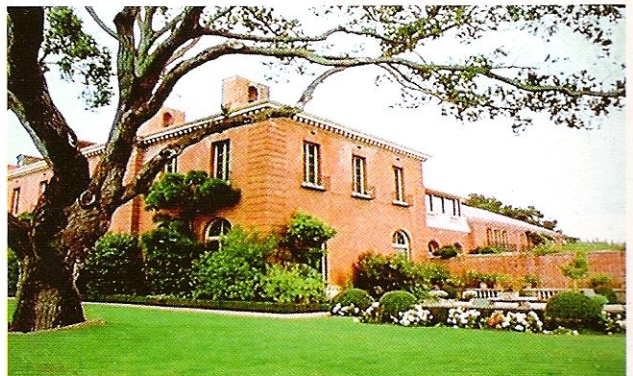
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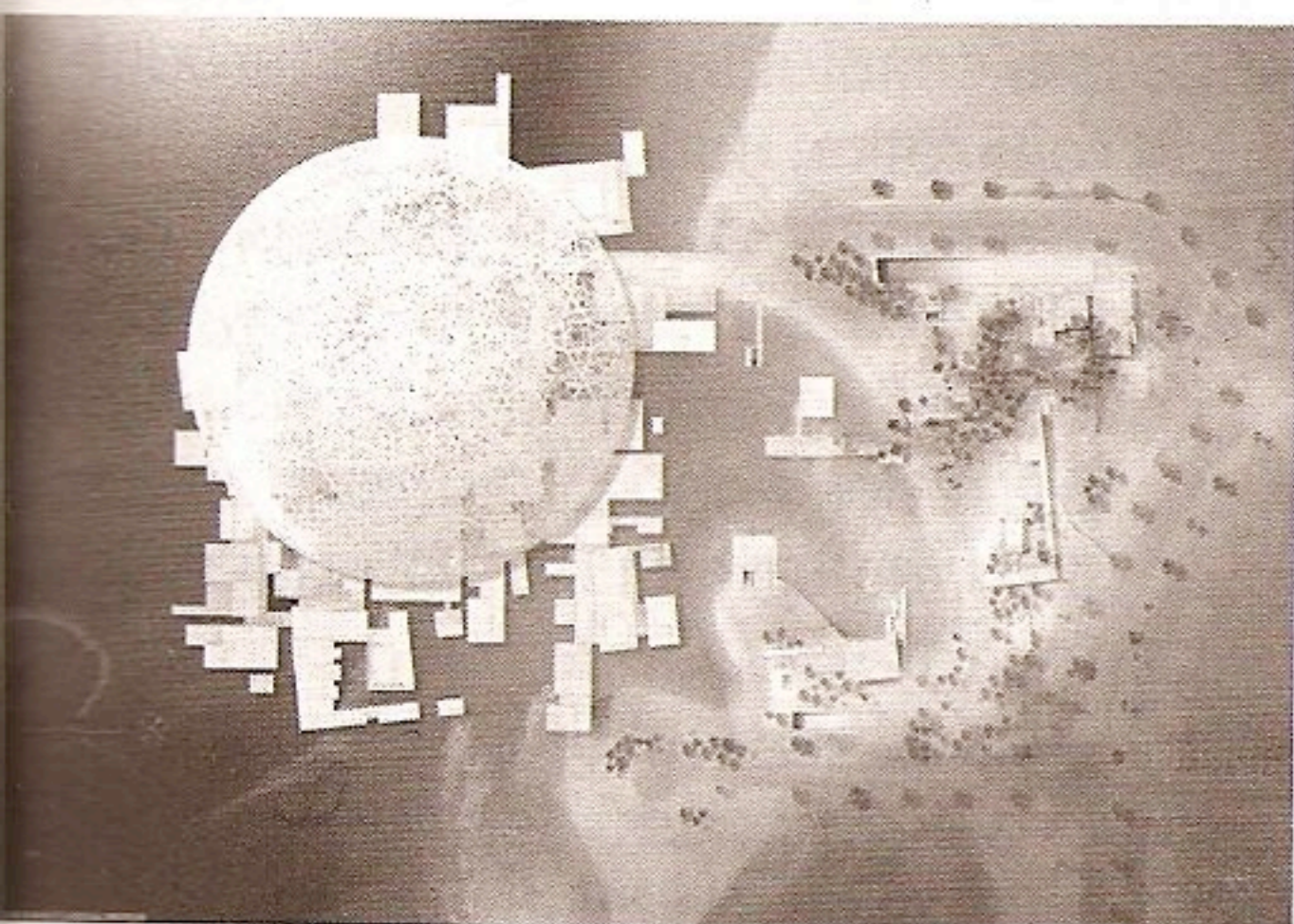


Culture and Travel

The Louvre goes to Abu Dhabi.

By Maïa Morgensztern

In spring 2007, the then French culture minister, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, signed a partnership with Sheik Sultan bin Tahnoon al-Nahyan, president of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and emir of Abu Dhabi, to open a Louvre museum on the island of Saadiyat. According to France's Ministry of Culture, this "universal museum will bridge cultures and foster a dialogue between the two nations," while respecting the values set by the 2002 law on French national collections. The latter includes a not-for-profit mission, access to culture for all, and inalienability of the artworks. The Saadiyat building, scheduled to open in 2013, will have a total capacity of 24,000 square meters, including 6,000 square meters for display of a permanent collection, and 2,000 square meters for temporary exhibitions.



Aerial view of the Louvre Abu Dhabi: "A form archetypal to all civilizations" © Ateliers Jean Nouvel

The deal includes €1 billion for the use of the Louvre name for 30 years, a few hundred loans of artwork from the French national collections, 15 years of consulting services, and, above all, a white mushroom floating on water designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning French architect Jean Nouvel — all to put the emirate on the world's cultural map.

The last time Jean Nouvel was commissioned to erect a building for a major French art museum, the *grande nation's* cultural elite splashed gallons of ink across its newspapers to express its discontent: the eclectic structure

and colors of the Musée du Quai-Branly, designed to display works from the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Southeast Asia, were not only deemed too chaotic and messy but, more important, they raised ever hovering questions of Western representation of "exotic" cultures. In the design statement for the Louvre Abu Dhabi, similar boxes on the diversity form are checked: the 180-meter-diameter double dome becomes "a form archetypal to all civilizations" with "dreamy thoughts" of "fancy tales" and "forgotten chimeras"; and the lush gardens, in keeping with Islamo-Arabian tradition, alternate with collections of buildings to form a long promenade that ends in a micro-city of its own, like the tourist mecca that is the Alhambra. But browsing through the glossy plans and beautiful renderings of the project feels a bit like going on a date with a gorgeous Ivy League quarterback on a sports scholarship: once the first-sight drool has dried, there is not much to stay excited about.

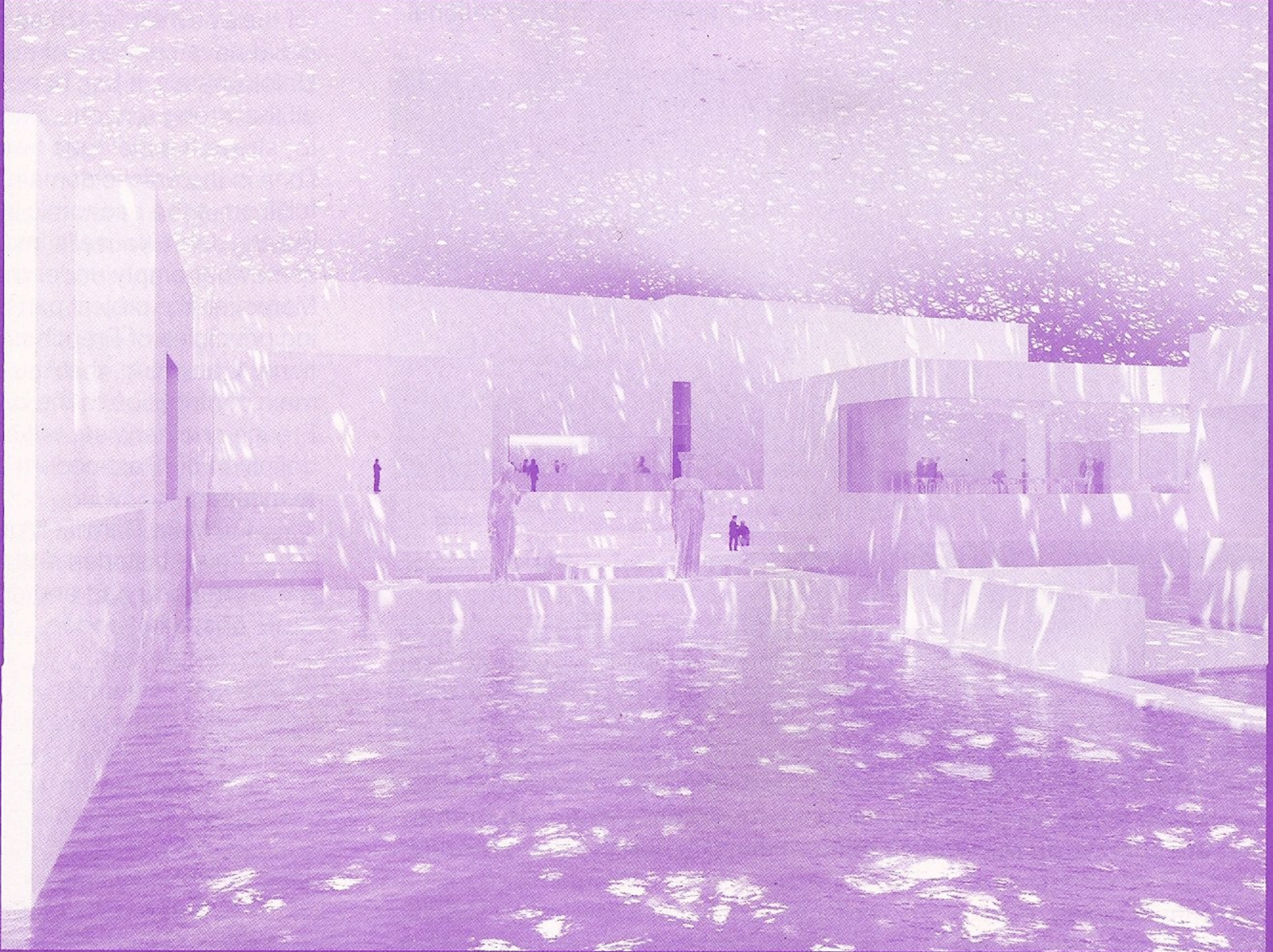
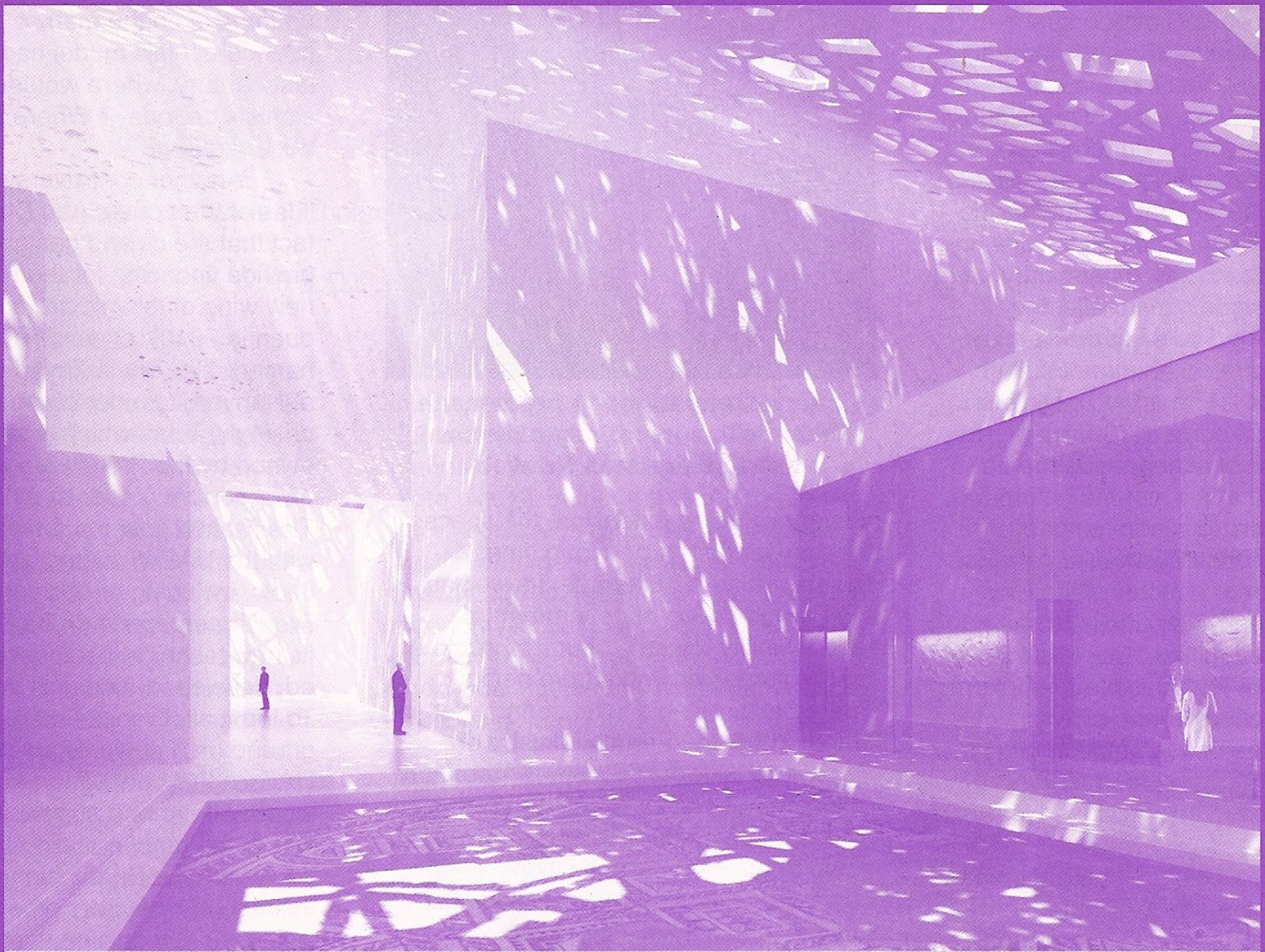
Granted, establishing a durable bond between architecture, historically charged foreign content — after all, the Louvre is the most visited museum in the world — and a culturally diverse environment is no small task.

To begin with, the UAE is a relatively new country. Born of the fusion of conglomerate powers in 1971, after the British withdrew from the region, it underwent staggering development, becoming a major international platform for businesses related to oil. Today only 20% of the population was born in the country. Given such a divergent and diluted heritage, how can the state create a sense of belonging? The UAE, eager to shape its national pride while diversifying its sources of income away from oil, seems to have opted for more of a Western franchise identity than a regional one (in addition to the Louvre, a Guggenheim Museum and offshoots of the Sorbonne and New York University are being planned). The 29 square kilometers of Saadiyat will include 29 high-end

hotels, three marinas for about 1,000 boats, two golf courses, and numerous up-market villas. The plan is to transform Saadiyat Island into a "strategic international tourism destination."

The cultural role of the Louvre in Abu Dhabi remains unclear. Will it be to teach about Western history and society through the arts? The fact is that most of its collection must not sit well with the UAE's cultural values and therefore poses a problem if the satellite museum's real mission is to promote cross-cultural understanding. Raising this issue seems to upset local officials. When asked about the Louvre Abu Dhabi's artistic content, Sheik Sultan bin Tahnoon al-Nahyan declared that the Emirates have "a history and a culture. Not everything can be done so brutally ... We will take into account our cultural constraints, but little by little the market will win." Although this statement does leave room for "edgier" artworks to join the collections in the semi-distant future, it clearly acknowledges that, for now, social and religious values will filter exhibitions' checklists. The UAE is not a democracy: the interests of the state are not separate from those of the family in power. The risk is that French officials are building a private collection to meet the tastes of the ruling family, with an illusory public mission whose official intention of ushering in a cultural breakthrough to the area might reach out to only a fringe of the local population, in effect building a bridge between wealthy elites, not between cultures.

For France, however, the Louvre Abu Dhabi will bring all kinds of benefits, above all financial. Long considered the paragon of welfare states, France is slowly running out of funds while cultural projects in need of financing are burgeoning. In 2008, the government allocated more than €122 million to the Louvre, representing half the museum's total budget. Out of the whopping €1 billion to be paid by the UAE, €400 million is for use of the Louvre's name, €195 million constitutes a 15-year fee for scientific expertise and advisory services to organize exhibitions, €165 million over 20 years is to pay for French museum professionals' expertise in helping with the Abu Dhabi collection, and €25 million will be allocated to sponsorship. The remaining €190 million will be shared between the other 11 loaning institutions among French Museums over a 10-year period. The Louvre's estimated annual revenue, on top of the fee money,

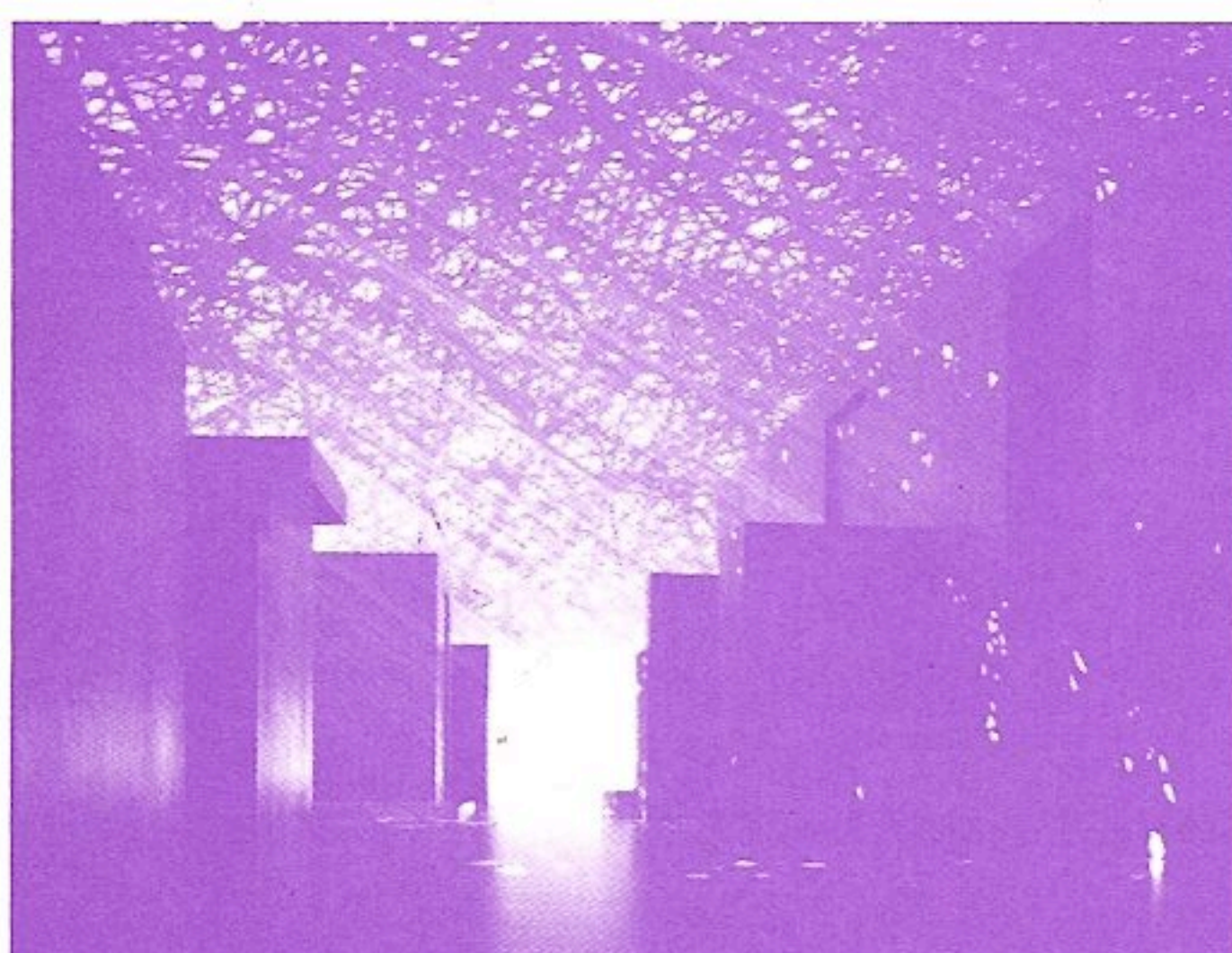


Interior renderings of Jean Nouvel's design for the Louvre Abu Dhabi:
"Dreamy thoughts of fancy tales and forgotten chimeras" © Ateliers Jean Nouvel

is calculated to be €30 million over the 30-year period during which its name can be used. For now, that income is earmarked for the creation of additional scientific, cultural, and pedagogical programs, for the betterment of staff working conditions, and for efforts that further the mission of the Grand Louvre.

Needless to say, in a country proclaiming its *exception culturelle*, the publication of the deal's figures sparked heated debates over the role of culture in French society. The art critic Didier Rykner gathered some 4,700 signatures from art professionals opposed to the project, and a few months before the deal's ratification, former director of the French National Museums Françoise Cachin and former director of the Picasso Museum Jean Clair published an article in *Le Monde* entitled, "Our Museums Are Not for Sale." But despite the polemic, the French government, slowly awakening to the scope of the country's economic difficulties, agreed to the project and recently even introduced further contentious proposals.

The pressure of globalization has caught up with the arts in both the private and public sectors; art indices, strategic capital, and expansion planning have now



Interior rendering: "A promenade that ends in a micro-city of its own."
© Ateliers Jean Nouvel

artworks and, by extension, the spaces that house them. For a long time, the sacred aura of the arts, as well as the French notion of governmental responsibility toward culture, to some extent protected artworks from being treated as profitable investments. Yet, in March 2006, the French Ministry of Culture considered the report "Economy of the Immaterial," which suggested an American model of deaccessioning some of the national collections, in part to buy new ones. This challenged the very principle of inalienability that normally applies to French national



The project is located at the tip of Saadiyat Island: "A floating white mushroom designed to put the emirate on the world's cultural map" © Ateliers Jean Nouvel

become essential to the shaping of art collections and of museum architecture. Deaccessioning, in particular, has been aggravating the commodification of

collections, including the Louvre's. This would mean that a corpus of professionals could decide to sell some "lesser works" to buy a masterpiece that came

up for sale on the market. However, taste changes. If this model had been applied last century, where would all the Impressionists be today? Where the so-called degenerate art?

Another controversy on the sidelines of the Louvre Abu Dhabi deal is the fact that the oil and gas giant Total will provide financing for the Paris Louvre's new wing of Islamic art (scheduled to open in 2010), of which a floor is to be named after Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, founder of the UAE. Not surprisingly, Total, which is still partly owned by the French government, has an important presence in the UAE. The French government has other ties with the UAE involving large financial deals, including Airbus contracts, and the French aerospace group EADS will see its new technical-composite plane designed, developed, and built in Abu Dhabi. To top it all, France has recently broken ground on a new military base in the UAE. In this context, one cannot help but wonder if, among all possible cities where the Louvre could have settled, the choice of Abu Dhabi might have been influenced by factors other than cultural.

In my opinion, the presence of the Louvre's franchise in Abu Dhabi could have been an interesting project. Unfortunately, it has been created for all the wrong reasons. Its official mission to "stress the dialogue between civilizations in the artistic domain" will be hard to fulfill amid the economic implications, leaving Jean Nouvel's impressive dome somewhat empty under the hood. Moreover, the project parts with the founding principles of French national collections. If anything, the Abu Dhabi Louvre's main contribution to the cultural sector, French or otherwise, will be to extend the definition of "Postmodern" from artwork to museum.

— Maïa Camille Morgensztern is an art historian and dealer for contemporary art and design. She is based in London.