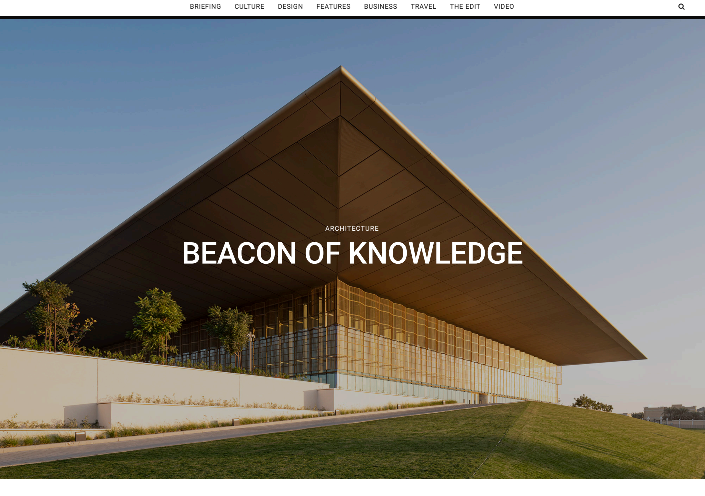


ARCHITECTURE

BEACON OF KNOWLEDGE

Sharjah's HOUSE OF WISDOM builds on its storied Baghdad namesake as a marketplace of ideas and cultural exchange, aided by the latest technology.

WORDS BY CATHERINE BOLGAR
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATALIN MARIN

What is the role of a library in the 21st century? Sharjah's newly opened House of Wisdom is challenging stereotypes and inviting in new possibilities.

"The House of Wisdom reimagines libraries of the 21st century," says Marwa Al Aqroubi, its director. As expected, it's a repository of books (more than 100,000 eventually, plus 200,000 e-books) and diverse digital resources. But it's about far more than reading. It is designed to be a true marketplace of ideas, where people can connect, discuss and trade thoughts. "While we learn from books, we learn equally through people and their diverse perspectives, through discussions and experimentations," Al Aqroubi says. "As a monument commemorating Sharjah's tenure as UNESCO World Book Capital 2019, it was fitting that the House of Wisdom be designed as a futuristic social and knowledge hub supported by innovative and cutting-edge technologies."

Some of those technologies include the "book espresso machine" to print and bind books on demand in minutes. The Al Jazri Lab is equipped with 3D printers, laser and vinyl cutting machines and computer numerical control tools. Someone with an idea can access the large online library of open-source designs or get help turning original plans into tangible objects. The makerspace is especially useful for students from nearby University City to produce prototypes without investing in expensive equipment.

Until about a generation ago, libraries were strictly for books, and rather unwelcoming. "You had to climb high steps. You were really entering a temple," says Ken Worpole, a social historian and author of many books on architecture, landscape and public policy, including *Contemporary Library Architecture: A Planning and Design Guide*. "Now the buzzword is transparency. They're no longer temples of knowledge; they're now meeting places of ideas. People using them are bringing in ideas as well."

The House of Wisdom has numerous spaces to bring people together—meeting rooms and a conference room, pods suspended above the central courtyard, exhibition spaces, an auditorium and a café. The space is flexible to allow for diverse uses, whether book or film clubs, art shows or other social gatherings, but also to allow it to adapt to future uses not yet imagined.

The design also emphasises transparency, with glass separations and long sight lines. Stepping into the spacious lobby, you can see through to the dense greenery in the central courtyard. You can look up to the mezzanine, with the Al Jazri Lab and other activity spaces enclosed—for quiet—behind glass. You can see out to the formal gardens or to The Scroll, the 36-metre-tall, Gerry Judah-designed contemporary interpretation of the ancient Arabic scroll that stands like a sentinel before the building. You can glance over to the "Little Reader Space," with children sprawled on colourful oversize cushions, playing games, making crafts and looking at books. Adult readers occupy quieter corners, including the Ladies' Diwan.

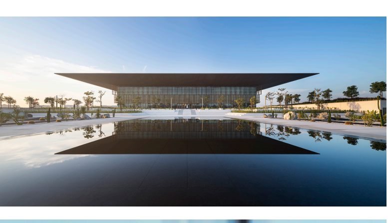
The building, designed by renowned architects Foster + Partners to be a landmark, is essentially a glass cube encased in delicate, vertical ribbing. The cantilevered roof stretches 15 metres beyond the building, looking like a sheet of paper floating on top.

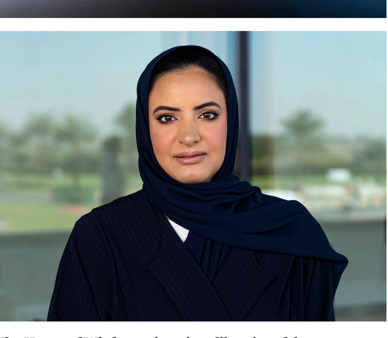
"It's a transparent building," says John Blythe, one of the partners on the project for Foster. The building is on a slight mound, making it stand out, while also lowering the car park just below the line of sight for the most part. The result "elevates and gives the building prominence. It's a beacon on the main road that runs by."

By night, the building glows invitingly. By day, it maximises natural light without heat thanks to clever design, traditional in concept but modern in execution. The overhang shades the glass walls for much of the day. Fixed vertical screens of aluminium filter the light on the upper storey. On the ground level, hinged shades made of laser-cut bamboo—chosen for renewability—are adjustable, personalising comfort.

"We tried to allow people to create their own environment in the building," Blythe says. "The screens take a lot of heat out."

The central courtyard recalls traditional Islamic architecture. Open to the sky and filled with plants and water features, it provides a connection to nature and a place to relax.





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The House of Wisdom translates the vision of HH Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Member of the UAE Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah, to make the emirate a truly global cultural hub. Its name stakes out its ambitions.

The original House of Wisdom, or Bait Al-Hikmah, was built in the late 8th century in Baghdad. Scholars are divided about the honours—whether Al Ma'moun, the seventh Abbasid caliph, created the House of Wisdom or extended the library of his father, Caliph Al Rasheed, in size and scope. Regardless, for four centuries, the House of Wisdom attracted scholars from around the world.

"It was a brand-new world at the time," says Wisam Abdul-Jabbar, adjunct professor of intercultural education at the University of Alberta. With the arrival of the Abbasids around 750 CE, "the empire remapped itself. Moving from Damascus to Baghdad wasn't just a strategic shift toward trade routes on the Tigris River, but a mental and cultural change."

The Abbasid House of Wisdom became an intercultural centre for research, with outreach programmes and external events. While Europe was languishing in the Dark Ages, the Islamic world entered its golden era by standing on the shoulders of the Greek giants and going even further, with discoveries in science, medicine, mathematics and more that are used to this day. The House of Wisdom held a vast library, notable for its translated books. Al Ma'moun funded the Translation Movement of great works from Greek into Arabic, paying translators the weight of completed books in gold.

"The funding was so extravagant that scholars could actually make a living out of doing research. Knowledge reflected status," Dr. Abdul-Jabbar says. "Al Ma'moun initiated salon discussions and debates. Invited speakers shared discoveries and discussed their thoughts and opinions. Different research clusters organised meetings.

"This wasn't exclusively about knowledge," Dr. Abdul-Jabbar adds. "It was also entertaining, like *Jeopardy*, where participants demonstrated intellectual prowess."

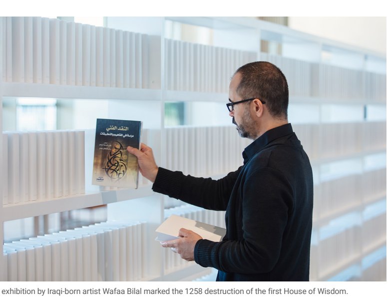
The Abbasid House of Wisdom came to a brutal end in 1258, when Baghdad was sacked by invading Mongols. They are said to have thrown so many manuscripts into the Tigris that the river ran black with ink for seven days. The House of Wisdom was so thoroughly destroyed that no archaeological remains have been found.

Sharjah's House of Wisdom pays homage to the Abbasids in several ways. Al Rasheed Hall is a high-tech conference room equipped with the latest audio-visual aids, while Al Ma'moun Exhibition Space brings art and culture to a diverse audience. And Sharjah's collection includes 11,000 books in different languages.

Another nod to Baghdad: the House of Wisdom's first art exhibition was *168:01* by Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal. The title refers to the 1258 destruction of the first House of Wisdom and the ink-stained river: a week equals 168 hours. "After that, what do we have? White books, washed of ink," Bilal explains. "Now add one minute, to turn the clock backward."

The exhibition consists of shelves of plain white books. The public is invited to turn the clock backward by replacing a white book with a book on a table. The books have been requested by university libraries in Iraq, where looters destroyed 70,000 books in 2003. Exhibition goers donate books, undoing the destruction and turning the shelves "back into the colours of knowledge." Bilal invites donors to keep the white books as reminders of their participation and to fill them with words, with sketches.

"I wanted an element that was participatory, that was rewarding for the people in both the conflict and comfort zone," Bilal says. "You give something and they give you back a book."



An exhibition by Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal marked the 1258 destruction of the first House of Wisdom. Photograph by Shurooq.

"*168:01* is to restore the materiality of books and knowledge in them but also to restore human spirit. Modern destruction is very profitable. When dust settles, places are left behind to treat their wounds. I want to reverse the plot—I have an emotional connection to the place and have a moral responsibility to rebuild a place that built me."

A native of Kufa, Bilal fled Iraq after refusing to fight for Saddam Hussein. After two years in a refugee camp, he found a new home in the US. "I rebuilt myself," he says, getting a degree in art, then a graduate degree. He has been teaching art at New York University for about 12 years.

On the walls around *168:01* is another project by Bilal, *The Ashes Series*, an unusual collection of photographs. Bilal collected press images of the destruction of his homeland and recreated them in miniature scale, then photographed them—a photo of a model of a photo of a physical place. "Like a dollhouse," he says, but sometimes the scale is off just enough to be disconcerting, "to trigger something unsettling in the viewer's mind."

The ashes are the even bigger kick in the gut. Each model was covered with 21 grams of ashes. "Scientists say that when a person dies they immediately lose 21 grams of weight," he says. "It's the symbolic weight of a human soul."

Together, the projects mourn the senseless destruction of war and offer hope of a new beginning based on knowledge and connection. They could not have a better venue than in the new House of Wisdom, which is picking up the mantle from the Abbasids and creating a new centre for thinkers from all realms.

"The House of Wisdom was conceived with the idea of becoming a permanent residence for curious minds, dreamers, and learners, and most importantly, to bring people and culture together," Al Aqroubi says. "Also designed as a space to enhance cultural understanding, tolerance, and cross-cultural communication between nations, all our programming will align with these goals. This will surely solidify Sharjah's legacy as a bridge between cultures and a safe space for coexistence."

A NEW CHAPTER FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

"The bright stars of the skies are far to touch; but there are other shiny stars that you can touch easily: The books of the libraries!" —*Mehmet Murat Ildan*

In an era when information from anywhere is available at our fingertips, a new generation of public libraries is grabbing attention with bold design and amenities that expand the very definition of "library." And with it, come new library patrons.

"Libraries have been rediscovered by young people," says Ken Worpole, a social historian and author. "No doubt, access to free use of the Internet is paramount now—so many people don't have that. Because it happens in a building that is light and modern and has the presence of books, it does give it a degree of seriousness. The library is not a fun palace. It's got a 3,000-year history that's part of culture."

Libraries as collections of clay-tablet texts date back to 2600 BCE in what today is southern Iraq. Similar archives and libraries of clay tablets were found across the Gulf and Middle East. The Library of Alexandria in Egypt made that city into a centre for scholarship. The spread of Islam was accompanied by a spread of literacy, as the Prophet's followers encouraged newcomers to read and memorise the Quran.

While past libraries were designed as temples to books, which one entered in order to shut out the world beyond, today's libraries liberally use windows to connect with the outside world. To avoid canyons of books, shelving is low enough to see over, and is often on casters so it can be moved aside for events like book clubs, poetry readings or discussion groups. Librarians are rearranging books, too, to mix and match fiction and non-fiction, as well as different kinds of authors, to create a new culture.

Bibliotheca Alexandrina, an immense complex shaped like a sundial tilted toward the Mediterranean, opened in 2002 near the site of Alexandria's ancient storied library. Designed by Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta, the 11-storey cylindrical library has a capacity of eight million books, but so much more: special libraries for the visually impaired, for children, for maps, for multimedia; four museums; four art galleries; a planetarium; a conference centre; and a laboratory for restoring manuscripts, among other things. The grey granite cladding is carved with texts in modern and extinct languages.

PHILIP GAME / ALAMY

Dokk1, in Aarhus, Denmark, revives former dockyards on the city's eponymous river. Schmidt Hammer Lassen designed the building as a "mediaspace," and the library calls itself "the citizens' house" where residents can access local government services. In addition to a café (now de rigueur in public libraries), it has play areas, a children's theatre and multimedia, including games.

SCHMIDT HAMMER LASSEN ARCHITECTS

Tianjin Binhai Library has a glowing sphere at its centre, called "the eye," which houses an auditorium. Floor-to-ceiling shelves, with integrated stairs, undulate around the sphere like waves lapping at a shore. The futuristic space, designed by MVRDV, is bathed in stark white. Two roof decks offer spectacular views.

OSSIP VAN DUIVENBODE

#168:01 #ABBASID HOUSE OF WISDOM #AL JAZRI LAB #BAIT AL-HIKMAH #BOOK ESPRESSO MACHINE #FOSTER + PARTNERS #GERRY JUDAH #HH SHEIKH DR. SULTAN BIN MOHAMED AL QASIMI #HOUSE OF WISDOM #MARWA AL AQROUBI #THE ASHES SERIES #THE SCROLL #UNESCO WORLD BOOK CAPITAL 2019 #WAFAA BILAL

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Encompassing culture and the arts, design and architecture, business and entrepreneurship, travel and lifestyle, Hadara is a bi-annual journal that gives voice to a modern and contemporary Sharjah and the people who are shaping it. A dynamic mix of print and online media, Hadara has its roots proudly in Sharjah, but is a platform for ideas of regional importance.

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