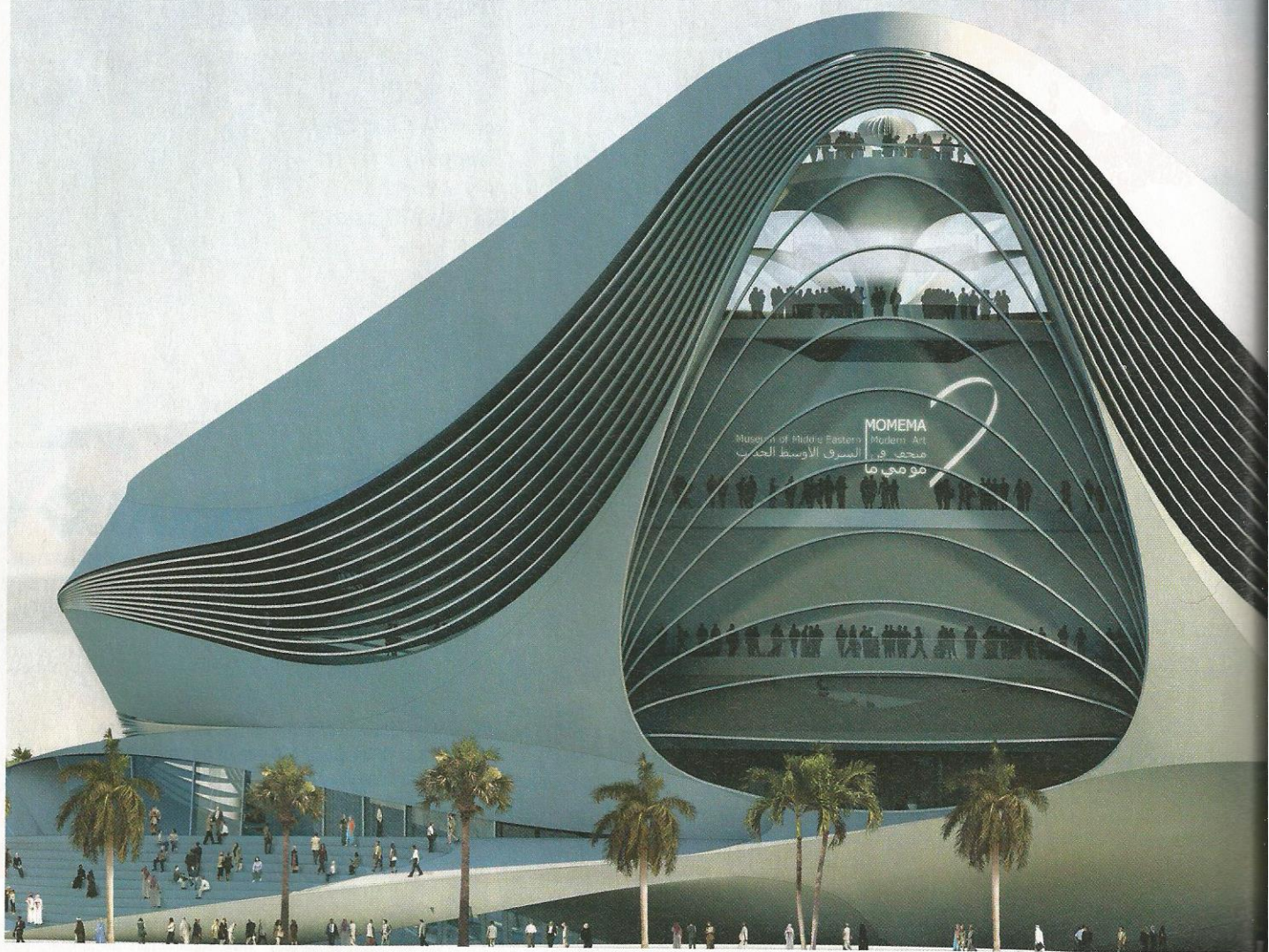


# Cultivating the Creek





Dubai Creek is about to change. In a big, big way. Chris Lord finds out more from **Michael Schindhelm**, the city's director of culture, heritage and arts

There's a scene in Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* that resonates with Dubai. Klaus Kinski runs to the top of a belltower overlooking a muggy Peruvian town – ringing the bell, he screams in Germanic tones 'I want my opera house! I want my opera house!'

Both *Fitzcarraldo*'s Amazon and Dubai are home to incongruous opera house projects – one in the rainforest, the other in the desert. Both are emblems of vision. And both, ironically, have an impassioned and erudite German at the helm.

'We needed to ask, how do we shape this city?' states Michael Schindhelm, Dubai's director of culture, heritage and arts. 'How do we find an overall umbrella which we could call the cultural identity of Dubai?'

The novelist, natural scientist, librettist and film-maker cuts a formidably prolific figure. Before taking Dubai's cultural reins this year, Schindhelm managed theatres from Basel to Berlin, and was the driving director of three major opera houses in the German capital.

'There are already 2 million people living in this city and 7 million tourists arrive annually – that's over half a million a month,' he tells *Time Out* from his office in the heights of

DIFC. 'There's a metropolitan infrastructure, but compare it to European cities where you find museums, concert halls, opera houses... that's what Dubai has to be about now. It has to fulfil the demands of a city in order to achieve cultural sustainability.'

When plans for the Dubai Opera House were announced in 2006, the design world literally gasped. Zaha Hadid's sleek, highly conceptual design (overleaf) of a dune-like structure rising from a sculpted body of sand left many amazed, but also a little confused. Surrounding Hadid's building was a huge, seemingly endless body of water. The world thought this was a desert – where do stretches of water like this come from in such an environment? Are we about to see yet another exercise in sand dredging to house this thing?

Cut forward two years, Schindhelm is instated as director for only a few months before a string of high-profile announcements begin to etch a picture of what Dubai will one day become. And it's happening on the Creek, Dubai's only substantial natural body of water. Khor Dubai is probably the biggest project of cultural reinvention going on anywhere in the world right now. With Dubai's love

of all things hi-tech, the project will see the area reshaped into a cultural village to rival many of the world's traditional art hubs. Not, it would seem, without a hint of rivalry with Abu Dhabi. They got (Frank) Gehry, Dubai gets Hadid. They're getting a Guggenheim and a Louvre, Dubai gets something called a 'universal museum' and 7 million cu ft of museums, galleries, studios and (inevitably) hotels stretched across the two banks of the Creek. To put that into perspective, the Burj Dubai stands at just over 1.5 million cu ft.

Plans so far include the Museum of Middle East Modern Art (left), the world's first ever museum dedicated solely to the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), a revitalisation of the Bastakiya (which Schindhelm describes as an 'engine for the entire creek'), The Universal Museums project, which will show a vast array of art from around the world and, of course, the opera house on the Creek's only natural island.

The language used to describe the project has already soared to lofty heights. Having said that Khor Dubai intends to be a 'living museum', I ask Schindhelm what that might

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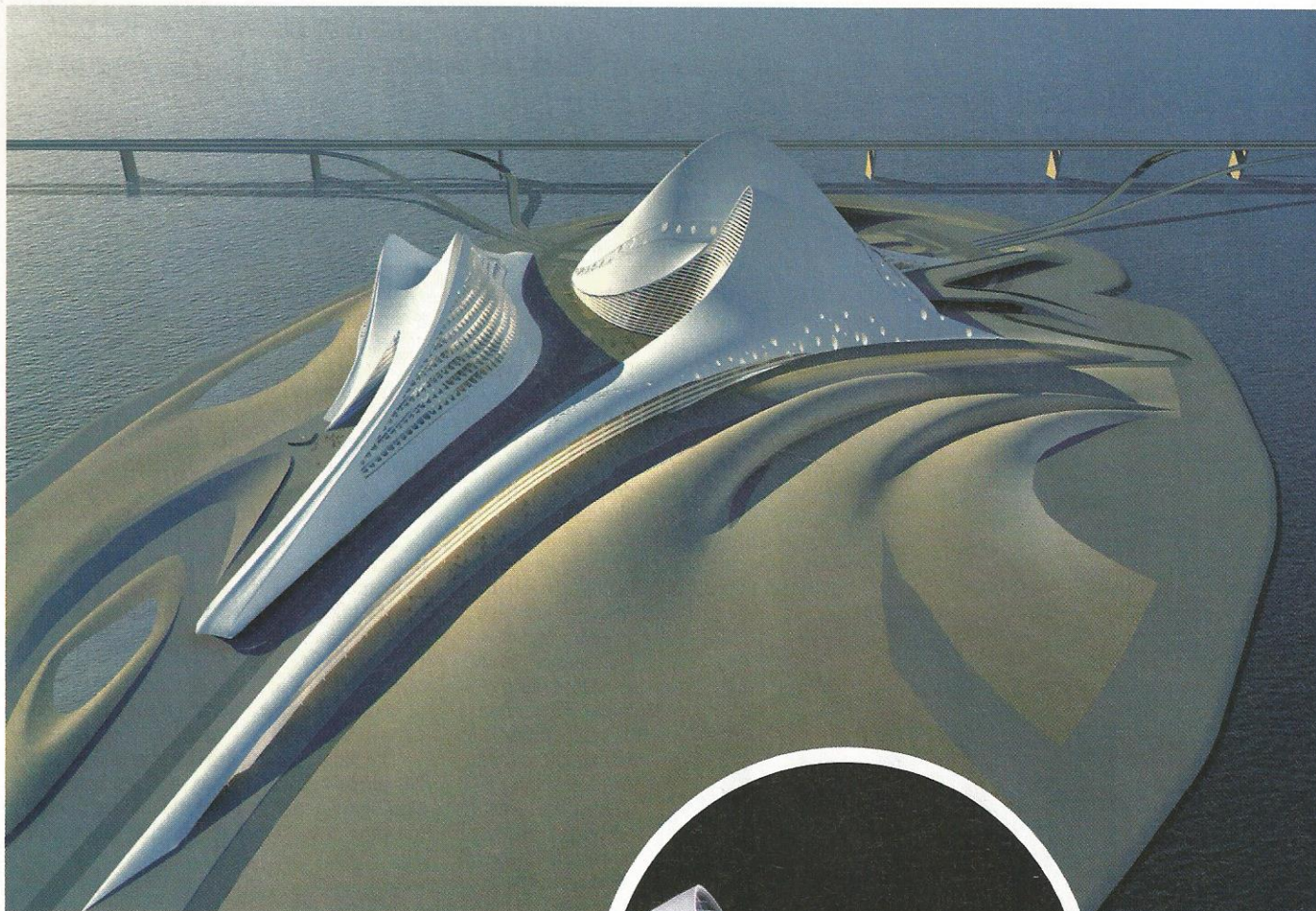
be. 'Dubai itself is already like a living museum,' he replies. 'People come here from all over the world and bring with them their own culture, their cuisine, lifestyle, fashion. In other parts of the world where you see this same mix of cultures, it creates a melting pot that forms an overall identity. But everyone who comes to Dubai remains anchored in the local cultures from their part of the world. This is a new form of cultural communication.'

It's a good point. If we follow Schindhelm's intoxicating vision, this old port town will come full circle, marked by a return to its roots as a hectic hub of cultural exchange and stocked by a transient population that meets to trade and express the strains of their own culture on a global platform. '[Dubai] reflects something of the age of total mobility that we live in now,' Schindhelm continues. 'Sometimes we have to make this visible, to create public spaces where you can see how these different cultures are represented and how they communicate with each other.'

The ways he intends to do that remain slightly mistier than his romantic vision. But, he continues, 'If you take the opera house, it shouldn't be a purely Western opera house.'







*Zaha Hadid's plans for the Opera House*

We will create an overall programme that reflects the expectations of the different cultures that come here. We will show Arab dance, Indian dance – we'll try to find and create new forms by blending these styles with those of Europe and other parts of Asia. We've got a unique opportunity to display an unseen variety of cultures.' The plan, as he sees it, is to also form partnerships with the major collections of art and antiquity from around the world and bring in huge cultural and historical showcases to these shores. We envision something like London's Great Exhibition only a tad less industrial (and Victorian).

## **It represents a new form of culture – what I would call a global culture**

It's time we bring talk round to specifics: what about the Museum of Middle East Modern Art? 'Dubai is already a hub for Middle Eastern art because of the vibrant gallery scene,' Schindhelm replies. 'We want the museum to reinforce this and to compliment these private businesses by having a public space to showcase art from

the region'. Sounds good, but what use is a showcase for local talent, if the talent can't afford to work anywhere?

*Time Out* recently ran a feature about the difficulty that many local artists face in trying to find studio space to work in. It's not for lack of space. We live in a desert after all. It's the absolutely overwhelming cost of setting up anywhere.

'This is very important,' Schindhelm agrees, 'otherwise the project wouldn't make sense. Part of our design is to create an environment for artists to work here comfortably. Look at Berlin – it's a very affordable place, probably the most affordable capital in Europe. That's why you will find a lot of artists there. If we want to have younger artistic activity in town, we have to make sure the space we're creating is affordable'.

But there's another issue here. The Opera House was announced back in 2006. Now we've had a string of very ambitious announcements. How long can we really expect to wait before we'll see developments on these projects? 'There are different timelines because of the different scale of the projects.

The opera house is probably the longest timeframe at 2012,' Schindhelm explains, 'but we don't want to wait until then to have concerts and performances of an international calibre.' The plan, according to him, is to set up temporary venues until the larger permanent projects are completed. 'We need to

find space, but we shouldn't wait six years for a project to be completed. The same goes for getting big international art shows out here; we don't want to wait until 2012 for the museums to be finished.'

An hour with Schindhelm gives an altered vision of Dubai. His ideas are infectious and reassess the overarching transience around us. As I leave I ask if, after half a lifetime of managing theatres, he finds something theatrical about the town? 'Of course. That people would come here from these places with their tragedies, their dramas. They hope to find a place with better living conditions and yet still carry these histories around with them. Cities in Europe were established in a totally different way. What we see here is something very much of the 21st century. It represents a new form of culture in general, what I would call a global culture.'

See [www.cultureartsdubai.ae](http://www.cultureartsdubai.ae) for updates