

celebrate

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The introduction of free wireless internet access at Abu Dhabi Airport, Terminal 1 from today. It's not a moment too soon and terminals 1A and 2 are to follow shortly



The Dubai Opera House, to be located on a man-made island in the Dubai creek, was designed by the Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid.

culture and was beset with factional wrangling about how to maintain the various cultural organisations.

"Berlin became more and more of an island without any industry and that's why today it is bankrupt. It was never a boom town but it became a very interesting environment for the arts because it's cheap to live there, easy going, an incubator for European arts that attracted many young and very powerful artists. It became a cultural

months and met other developers working on cultural developments I became more and more involved. Sheikh Mohammed announced last year that culture should be an important pillar of Dubai. After developing the hardware of the country we are developing the software.

"We are at the beginning of something really interesting. For a long time there was no reason for discussing cultural develop-



aware of it but I never collaborated. It wasn't easy to prove that 20 years later when it all surfaced but I had a lot of friends from different countries who backed me up."

Schindhelm worked for several years as a chemist at the Academy of Sciences in Germany where a colleague was Angela Merkel, the current German Chancellor, but it was only a matter of time before he decided to strike out in a direction closer to his heart. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 made that possible.

"It was a not a wrench to leave my job as a chemist. I was never really a passionate chemist because I was always more interested in culture. I started translating and writing.

"For me the breakdown of the wall was not just the reunification of East and West Germany, it was a connection to the world. I had the opportunity to go to America and to Italy. It was the rebirth of many of my dreams and wishes that I never could satisfy during 30 years of my life. To me it was opening the door to the world."

His experiences during the years when his homeland struggled for its identity forged a steely character and he believes it prepared him for his role helping Dubai establish a cultural identity.

"There are many things to say about us Germans when it comes to our own identity because we were divided for a long time. It was like living on an island and it created a strange mentality. We were always very keen to know what was going on in the other Germany in comparison with our own situation. When the wall came down it was a dream come true for all of us."

After the initial euphoria, however, the reality proved difficult as the West began the slow process of assimilating 17 million East Germans into the new federal state.

"There was disappointment on both sides," Schindhelm remembers. "The west-

erners were not happy because it was the poor part of the family returning to the fold. The East Germans underestimated their capability to be flexible and to adjust to this new form of freedom. We had developed quite a few cultural differences."

In 1995 he accepted a job as director of Theater Basel in Switzerland, partly to get away from the constant intellectual and political sniping. "Sometimes I got outraged by the *petit bourgeois* discussion and German/German discussions about our cultural differences," he says. "In the beginning the West Germans patronised us a lot. It made us feel like illiterates, being forced to learn everything from scratch again. Everything from the quality of the coffee we would drink to the clothes we wore were completely different social standards.

"West Germans had very big mouths, they thought they knew better about everything. I never minded raising my voice though at the same time I felt there was more to life than struggling with these issues."

Even then he could not escape the residue of his country's political struggles and he found himself fighting to defend his reputation against the spy rumours. "There was a lot of fuss created and I finally wrote about it in *Die Zeit* newspaper. In Switzerland my employer set up a committee of three people to look into the files and make a decision about whether or not to believe me. They decided in my favour. When I came back to Berlin in 2005 the same story surfaced again before I started the new job and once again they set in place a committee from the government but they reached the same conclusion. It was crucial for them to know that this person was really clean."

His position as CEO of the Siftung Oper, incorporating the city's three major opera houses, was not without problems and Schindhelm was once again faced with the consequences of two separate nations struggling to become one after unification.

Berlin's coffers were seriously depleted. During the Cold War, major companies like Siemens and Deutsche Bank had decamped to Frankfurt and Munich, making them the prosperous cities that they are today. Berlin had only a comparatively small budget for

ropean arts that attracted many young and very powerful artists. It became a cultural hub. There are 90 museums and 50 theatres and it's the only city in the world with three big opera houses. You need a lot of money to run these institutions.

"The idea of merging the three opera houses was born to save money. The opera houses consumed half of the city's budget for culture. At the same time it became a political issue. The Deutsche Oper was seen as 'our' opera house by the West Berliners and they were determined to save that one and the two others, the Komische and the Staatsoper, would be seen as 'our' opera house by the East Berliners.

"On top of this there was a lot of hypocrisy when it comes to reforms. They would talk about it but do nothing. When I came up with proposals to enhance our businesses, they would never get back to me and hesitated to make the next step. At election time the mayor tried also to get some benefit by bashing high culture."

The row over financing cultural reforms spilled over into the media during the 2006 election period and Schindhelm realised he was hamstrung by the unwillingness to force through reforms.

"I gave them an ultimatum. Either they gave me the opportunity to create things or I would go. I didn't want to stay and waste my time there. I decided to return to my home near Lugano and go back to writing and filmmaking. I thought it would be good to concentrate on one of my own projects rather than running a big organisation."

It was during this time that the phone call came from Sama Dubai, a subsidiary of Dubai Holdings, who were looking for a cultural adviser. It changed the direction of his life again, and brought him to Dubai and an environment where cultural ambitions were supported at the highest level.

Schindhelm, who is divorced with four grown children, says: "I could see that this was a challenge because this was a big construction site. But if you really want to develop something from scratch it was a great opportunity. It made sense because you have to develop hardware before you can develop content. So I changed my plans and came to Dubai in March 2007 to work for Sama Dubai as cultural director and adviser for content development."

His first assignment was the development of the opera house on a natural island off The Lagoons development, a Zaha Hadid design shaped like a sand dune. Hadid is clearly someone Schindhelm admires.

"I like her very much and enjoyed working with her. She has a very strong personality. She is always fighting for her own ideas. For a long time she was very famous without having any buildings built. She is always strong in defending her ideas," he says.

His role as director of the DCAA gradually evolved and Schindhelm says he is "proud and happy" to be representing the Dubai government. "After I was here for some

no reason for discussing cultural developments here, although there was culture in place. Now we are taking the next step. We have to deal with cultural sensitivities. What we have to think about now is what kind of cultural identity is suitable for a city like Dubai. There's no other city in the world with such a cosmopolitan fabric.

"We also want to set up educational programmes in order to open the minds of the young generation to culture and to cultural education. It's very important that we don't forget the local and regional commitment. I am a foreigner coming from another culture. I am not the almighty expert on everything. We are a team here. I am working with a lot of Emiratis and talking about how to reinforce their culture in Dubai.

"People are coming from many countries. We should represent their culture also - western, Asian, Indian, Chinese and Russian cultures - but first and foremost Arabian culture. That's why if it comes to the opera it should not be just Western opera. We should focus on Indian and Arabian musical theatre and dance as well."

He emphasises that there is no rivalry with Abu Dhabi and the capital's ambitious plans to develop their own brand of culture. "Both emirates should develop culture in their own way. They have different approaches. I adore very much what they are doing in the capital. Dubai will develop differently."

Along with the Dubai Opera House, the Gulf Film Festival, the International Film Festival and Art Dubai, two immediate major projects for the authority are the development of the Museum of the Prophet Mohammed and the Universal Museums project.

Schindhelm explains the museums project, which began with co-operation with a group of German museums and is becoming an international concern.

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Michael Schindhelm

Dubai Culture and Arts Authority



Schindhelm said he "very much enjoyed working with" Zaha Hadid. Stan Honda / AFP

"The aim is to create an umbrella which gives international museums the opportunity to exhibit their collections here in Dubai in different spaces: The Louvre, the British Museum, the Metropolitan NY, Berlin, Dresden, Munich and Hermitage, St Petersburg are associated in an informal group of museums calling themselves Universal Museums. We are planning to get them involved in our project and others like Beijing. It is one of our primary objectives over the next few years."

Right now the creation of the "Dubai Brand" is a priority. The exhibition at Art Basel, described by *The New York Times* as "the Olympics of the art world", features two separate looks at the Dubai cultural scene. Using both film and photography, a group of Dubai based artists represent the insider's view, and the Dutch artists Charlotte Koolhaas (daughter of Rem) and Reineke Otten portray street life in the emirate from a foreigner's point of view.

"It's very important that we have to understand that Dubai is still an Emirati city. It's not only a platform for international players. It's a city with heritage, with a local population, with its own culture and understanding of art. Our main objective is to make sure that this culture and heritage doesn't disappear."