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SAUDI CULTURE ROCKS!

“This company-built Center will serve the community’s needs in the fields of knowledge, culture and the arts. My hope for this project is that it will be a source of enrichment that will inspire our younger generation to reflect on the golden era of Islamic culture.” -- Saudi Aramco president and CEO Abdallah S. Jum’ah.

It was early May and I was playing outside with my friends’ 2 year old daughter, Layan, on her birthday. With indescribable glee, she showed me what, for all intent purposes, looked like a pile of rocks. I asked her what it was and with an almost exasperated look said, “It’s a house!”

She pointed out the entrance, all the rooms, and soon I couldn’t help but feel silly. Of course it’s a house, and a really nice one at that.

A couple weeks later, I saw another pile of rocks, and they proved to be no less impressive. I was attending Saudi Aramco’s 75th Anniversary, a grand event where they pulled out all the stops in celebrating this momentous occasion. Even the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz Al-Saud was there to honor the celebration. The highlight of the evening though, was the unveiling of Saudi Aramco’s latest and greatest initiative to date, the King Abdulaziz Center for Knowledge and Culture.

As part of the ceremony, King Abdullah placed the cornerstone of this Center with the help of two young children. The cornerstone itself is actually a piece of an oil well, Dammam Well No. 7. What’s significant about this well is that it’s the first well to pump out a steady stream of oil back in 1938, ushering in a new era for the company, the Kingdom and indeed the world. So it’s only fitting that a part of the well that developed the country’s natural resources will now be a part of the development of its rich human resources as well. From an oil pump to a culture pump in the span of seven decades.

THE CENTER

Face value, it really is a pile of rocks, but just as with Layan’s pile, it truly is so much more than that. It’s 45,000 square meters of pure knowledge and culture.

The Center is a testament to the vision of its namesake, King Abdulaziz. Just as he ruled based on Saudi traditions while adapting to the modern world, so too is the Center a modern cultural and learning institution firmly rooted in Saudi heritage and customs.

The Center will offer an array of exhibits, events and learning tools that engage and educate

students, adults and scholars. By exposing visitors to the achievements of our past and inspiring them with what the future holds, the Center strives to develop the potential of each and every visitor that attends. It will also serve as a bridge between cultures, bringing Saudi culture to the world and world cultures to Saudi.

DESIGN

The Cultural Center is designed by Snohetta, an integrated landscape, interior and architectural firm based in Norway. Hardly a stranger to cultural masterpieces, the firm's past works include the Bibliotheca Alexandria in Egypt and the Oslo National Opera House in Norway.

Following the ideal that a design must reflect the society in which it resides, Snohetta's use of larger-than-life rocks turns out to be a clever analogy, for just as the country's geological rocks house petroleum energy, so too will these rocks house human and cultural energy. The appearance, sizes and arrangement of the rocks symbolize the simultaneous unity, diversity and interdependence of the peoples of the Kingdom and the rest of the world.

While the outside of this Center inspires the soul with its artistic shape, it's what's inside the Center that inspires the mind. While the rocks physically express the concept of reaching down into the earth, representing our past, and reaching upward into the sky, representing our future, this is mimicked by the Center's interior design and layout as well. The museum and archives, celebrating achievements of the past, will be located underground. Present time will be on the ground level, populated by an auditorium and exhibition spaces that facilitate interaction, dialogue and exchange. Finally, the future is expressed as an upward projection into the sky, suggesting education, exploration and new horizons, containing the library and children's education center.

SECTIONS

The Library:

This is more than just a collection of books. The Center's library will be a veritable portal into the world of knowledge, offering the public a hub of digital information, knowledge exchange, and more than 300,000 books that explore the subjects of history, culture, the sciences, economics, industry, trade, Islam, art, travel, literature, crafts, horticulture, agriculture, archaeology, music and many more.

A special section within the library will be dedicated to preserving an impressive collection of rare documents relating to the history, culture, economy and politics of the Kingdom and the Middle East. Some of its most rare and valuable treasures include 19th century translations of literature and histories from Arabic, Farsi and other languages published by the Oriental Translation Fund; an early edition of William Starbuck Mayo's 1849 novel Kaloolah and a number of books belonging to the Harry St. John Philby Collection.

The Museum:

The museum exhibitions will include Islamic architecture, calligraphy, painting and ceramics;

Islamic science and its influence; the Saudi Arabian cultural heritage; the natural history of a variety of environments on our planet and international cultural treasures.

“There will be an emphasis on encouraging art appreciation and creativity whether through Islamic or local and international art movements.” -- Wafa Al-Zaid, part of the museum team.

The museum will highlight different parts of its collection through rotating exhibits and will also stage exhibitions with works on loan from other institutions, bringing culture from around the country and around the world for visitors to explore. Moreover, there will even be online exhibits, starting with the current exhibit entitled “Bridging East and West” -- a photo exhibit highlighting the works of Saudi Aramco’s first magazine, Saudi Aramco World, over the last 60 years.

Exhibition:

The main exhibition hall will host an array of events throughout the year, from technical seminars to performances of plays and musicals. More so, local organizations will have access to modern facilities to host their local and international conferences, presentations and meetings, increasing the Kingdom’s role in global business. Smaller events such as workshops, meetings, retiree celebrations, graduation ceremonies and banquets will be held at the Center as well.

Of particular interest on this level of the Center will be the adaptable creative spaces, affording band and theater rehearsal areas; podcasting and blogging stations; art, recording and video studios; and "imagination rooms", all geared to inspiring visitors and affording them an outlet for their creativity and imagination.

Children’s Learning Center:

To borrow a well-worn adage, the future are our children. In that respect, the Center has paid special care to include a state-of-the-art children’s museum and library, housing multimedia exhibits that incorporate storytelling, video, audio and self-directed study to encourage interaction and hands-on learning.

“[This project] is an opportunity to genuinely and innovatively enrich our community and particularly engage our children in gaining life-long learning skills.” -- Michelle Seaters-Alireza, part of the children’s learning center team.

The children’s learning center will work hand in hand with Saudi and international schools, developing traveling exhibits and interactive educational programs designed for students of all ages. The goal is to prepare, empower and inspire as many young Saudis as possible to become active members of their communities.

And Much More:

Other facilities throughout the Center will include a media center, visitor center, gift shop, cafe, lounge, and outdoor grounds where one can walk and linger amidst greenery, ponds, picnic areas, playgrounds and an educational garden that features plants of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.

ONLINE

For those of you that, like myself, simply can't get enough of knowledge and culture, I imagine that, as with any other institute, it will most likely be frowned upon to try and stay in the Center after hours. However, even that scenario has been anticipated. You'll be pleased to know that the Center will actually have a second, more universal, location that can be accessed by anyone anywhere around the world. The online knowledge center will be a rich resource for those seeking to further their education, enabling visitors to download articles on topics such as health, safety and the environment. E-learning courses will also be provided through the website, along with links to educational institutions outside the Center, including universities both in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and outside the Kingdom, and other institutions that offer online learning. Links to the Saudi Government Scholarship program, the Saudi Aramco Scholarship program and other websites offering advice and assistance to individuals seeking higher education will also be available.

For those that still have quite a few years to go before they even start thinking of college, the online Discovery Oasis will present a compelling array of interactive games, videos and activities to bring Saudi and other cultures to life for children, as well as give them enjoyable opportunities to learn and achieve a deeper level of comfort with computers and the Internet.

VOLUNTEERING

Committed to human development, the Center aims not only to inspire its visitors to increase their knowledge, but also to inspire them to contribute their time and talent and help others increase their knowledge. A culture is only as strong as its community, and the Center's volunteer program offers opportunities for Saudis of all ages to help address a variety of community needs in areas such as education, health care, child care and youth leadership. Even now there are events that people can volunteer for, including a festival day for families of prisoners on June 18th, a summer program, school kit campaigns for needy families, and the hospital volunteer program. These and more can always be found at the Center's website, <http://www.culturerocks.com>.

Personally, I can't wait to show Layan this pile of rocks.