

matt jones

From *identity* magazine (Motivate Publishing, Dubai), March 2007.

Three of a kind

identity talks architecture, art and Abu Dhabi with three Pritzker Prize-winning architects at the January unveiling of their futuristic designs for the UAE capital's Saadiyat Cultural District – Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and, in his first ever interview in the Middle East, Japan's Tadao Ando. Text: **Matt Jones**

Gehry's Guggenheim for the Gulf

[PULL-OUT QUOTES:]

“This is an opportunity not just to build in a foreign country, but to establish a milestone in the future of art museums”

“I'm doing a building for a mad visionary art person in a place that's romantic, seductive, exciting and new for me”

[BODY COPY:]

Born in Toronto, Canada, in 1929, Los Angeles-based Frank Gehry is best known as the architect of the iconic Guggenheim contemporary art museum in Bilbao, Spain, which according to author and critic Hugh Pearman, “instantly became the single most famous building in the world” on its opening in 1997.

Writing in the *New York Times* in 1989 – the year Gehry received architecture's highest honour, the Pritzker Prize – critic Paul Goldberger declared that from an aesthetic standpoint, his buildings “are among the most profound and brilliant works of architecture of our time”.

Now 77, Gehry was commissioned to design the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, a museum for contemporary world art that's due for completion in 2012. The design was unveiled by the celebrated architect at a special exhibition at the city's Emirates Palace Hotel in January attended by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Chairman of the Executive Council.

After the ceremony, Gehry sat with *identity* to discuss his royal appointment, the need for plumbing in ‘art’, and what the UAE football team's victory in the Gulf Cup could mean for the cultural development of the nation. Excerpts:

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As the celebrated architect of the Guggenheim Bilbao, could you talk us through how you became involved in the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi?

Well I'm wondering that myself, why I'm here. I have enormous respect for [Guggenheim director] Tom Krens. He and I managed to make the building in Spain. It was his vision 15, 20 years ago that led to that. He does have a vision for the future of art, he has proven that he understands it, and so when he asks me to do something it's very difficult to refuse. Having said that, I did refuse. I refused because of my age and travelling, and I refused because I thought it would be difficult for me given the commitments I already have to become knowledgeable enough about this culture to be relevant, architecturally. And that's no little thing. That's a real big issue to me. So, for all of those reasons I thought it best that I don't get involved. Somebody prevailed.

So who twisted your arm?

It was Sheikh Sultan [HH Sheikh Sultan Bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, Chairman of Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority and the Tourism Development & Investment Company], who came to Los Angeles and was kind enough to spend some time with me privately and explained to me the worthiness and intent of this project, what they wanted to achieve, their belief in Tom, Tom's vision, and their willingness to explore that architecturally. At the end of that meeting with him I felt more inclined to believe the reality of this and more inclined to understand that it was an opportunity not just to build a building in a foreign country, but to establish a milestone in the future of art museums, and that it was something that couldn't be done elsewhere – there was a commitment, a political and financial commitment, that this culture in this place could do that. It wasn't perfect, I mean nobody's perfect, but it was very convincing.

When Sheikh Sultan shared with you the vision of Saadiyat Cultural District, what was your reaction? I understand that nothing on this scale has been attempted before. Have you been involved in a project on this scale?

Well, yes and no. I was involved with Columbia, Maryland in the late '60s. It was vacant land and I did some of the first buildings and initial planning with them. That was one of the first American mid-20th century new towns. It fell into the realm of normal commercial development, it wasn't anywhere near the vision and culture of this thing.

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Your building in Abu Dhabi will be standing alongside buildings by Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid and Tadao Ando. Surely it's unique for one city to be taking on such a big project in one go?

Well those people I consider friends and colleagues, and that is going on around the world – bringing groups together. I've worked with Nouvel before and I've worked with Zaha before.

Could you talk us through the key elements of the design?

The intent of the museum is to build a building that houses World art, not just Western or Asian or Islamic, but it's contemporary art, and stuff that's being done now as we speak, as we build, and that will be done. Within that realm there are works of art that we would call classic, that are well known, that have already been exhibited somewhere, and that would be housed in core galleries, which we call the classical galleries – fairly simple, rectangular, white rooms with lighting and air conditioning etc. Then there are the galleries for works that have not been shown, new works that are problematic, that are edgy, by new artists from around the world – China has certainly seen some very good artists, Mexico, Africa, there's been a show at the Guggenheim Bilbao of contemporary African art. That work would be in the next 'ring'.

I see it as the rings of a tree, so the inner core is classical, the next ring are these works that are contemporary that have been made already that are not being shown in our time, and it would be Tom as curator who would develop and dialogue between the cultures. Then the third ring is the more industrial galleries that are free spaces, big, unfinished, and those would be places where maybe a resident artist could come in and spend six months and make a bunch of work that's site specific that would have no place to go because there's nobody else who has a gallery that big – until people realise that they're going to have to make galleries like that. It is happening, that idea is happening, but the artists themselves are doing these spaces, they're building their own because the museums that are currently available don't have any space.

I think the only place like it is Mass MoCA [Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art], which Tom Krens helped form. So the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is thought about as like a classical museum with Mass MoCA embedded in it, because of this variety of space. Some of these galleries will be big enough to have an actual performance piece, an artwork performance with an audience. So the building is unique. It probably will be four or five years before it's completed, and before the world realises what it can do in there.

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What are the key differences between Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and your most well known work to date, the Guggenheim Bilbao?

Well they don't look alike. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is attempting to understand the region it's being built in, so it's dealing with the immediate external spaces to the building being treated with a climate control device that's as old as Abu Dhabi – wind-towers that cool the winds and take the hot air out. The blue cones in our building tend to be like that. They're like teepees – the hot air rises. We actually have a group of experts that's helping us develop that so it really will work, and that means all the immediate exterior spaces to the building would be cooler than the rest of the outdoor spaces and would be available for sculpture and for events that may take place. I discovered the last time I was here that personally I like being outside even if it's damn hot and I realised that culturally people feel more comfortable outdoors. The clothes and everything would suggest that using the outdoor spaces is preferable to air conditioning.

What's the response you're looking to provoke in people who visit the museum?

Whatever I provoke is not intentional. I don't try to provoke. I want the building to engage people emotionally, so it's not a flat experience, there's something happening inside that makes them think about how they feel. I've been doing pretty well at that in other buildings.

And in keeping with your approach to architecture, the building itself is a work of art.

I didn't say that.

But you see architecture as art.

You know, the problem with saying that is that it's a loaded thing to say in the context of today. One of my artist friends poo-poops architecture as art because you have to put plumbing in.

To put it another way, would you hope that people come to see the building on its own merits as well as what it contains?

Well I guess the answer is yes. The reason is not just for the building's sake, but that the building enhances the experience of the topic it's being used for.

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How would you hope that it changes attitudes to art and architecture and culture in general in Abu Dhabi and the UAE?

This is a young culture in terms of the 21st century. It's closer to its roots than any of us have been in the West. In the 1960s this was desert, so they're pure in a way, but they've hit the wall of the 21st century and oh-my-God how do you deal with it? They do have the resources to deal with that. I suppose that's not an accident – it was meant to be this way by some bigger force in the world. I think they have an opportunity, if they do this right, to establish themselves if not in a leadership position in a very equal position to the rest of world culture and I would hope they succeed in that. Yesterday they won the football [Gehry was a guest at the final of the Gulf Cup] so I'm sure that's an omen.

Some have commented that something very new and exciting is happening with the Cultural District project and elsewhere in the Gulf, in Doha. Do you see yourself as being part of, or encouraging, some sort of renaissance in the arts here, an Arabian renaissance that has parallels in history with the city states of Italy?

I don't really know what my role is here. I'm not presumptuous to imagine any great role. I'm doing one building for a mad visionary art person, Tom, in a place that's romantic, seductive, exciting and new for me. I suppose somewhere in my own history I come from the desert. I think it's built into all of us.

And yet there is a sense that this is a very momentous announcement, a very historic occasion. Are we not living in history?

Well we're announcing the potential of living in history. We haven't achieved it yet. This will boil down to who's playing with who and how do you make it happen. There's a lot of learning curve that has to go into this on all sides before we pull this off. There's a vision, there's a desire, there are resources, there's a place and a commitment, and it has to become a partnership. It's not quite that yet. It's feeling its way toward a partnership. It's not going to be great until it's a partnership.

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[PANEL:]

The verdict: Oh my GAD!

The question that's on many people's minds, if not on their lips, is whether or not Frank Gehry's design for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi ('GAD') will do for the emirate what his iconic Guggenheim Bilbao has done for tourism in the Spanish port city? Or might GAD be regarded by future biographers as an interesting footnote in the long and distinguished career of an architect whose most acclaimed work could be behind him?

Only time (and the opinions of influential architecture critics) will tell. Ultimately, the public – art lovers from around the world as well as local residents – will vote with their feet, and they won't have the chance to do that until the museum opens in 2012.

The comparisons with Guggenheim Bilbao are inevitable – how could they not be when a large image of Gehry's Spanish masterpiece dominated the exhibition space at the Emirates Palace Hotel where the model and designs for Guggenheim Abu Dhabi were unveiled (a prophetic indication, perhaps, of how the former could overshadow the latter in a final assessment of Gehry's career)?

But though inevitable, comparisons of Gehry's Guggenheims are unwise. GAD is a different design for a very different region: less smooth and graceful than its European counterpart; edgier and more chaotic.

While Gehry remains true to the 'deconstructivist' approach he pioneered with the likes of Rem Koolhaas and the Dutchman's protégé Zaha Hadid in the late 20th century (a radical move away from traditional considerations of proportion and conventional structure in architecture, aided by new computer and construction technologies), and while GAD is further evidence of Gehry's artistic assertion that buildings can be sculptural, it is nonetheless a distinctive project founded on the architect's own interpretation of the Arabian landscape, culture and sensibilities.

For the record, Gehry says that in Abu Dhabi he has been able to consider design options that wouldn't be possible in the United States or Europe. This admission alone will support any claims by Abu Dhabi that its Guggenheim is unique.

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The look of GAD is the result of an evolution that has taken place in Gehry's work since the 1990s, when his designs for the Guggenheim Bilbao and its close relation, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, attracted so much attention (after funding delays, the latter opened in 2003).

What's evident in the GAD design is that Gehry has departed from the whimsical curves and shining titanium surfaces that had become his trademark, towards greater use of textures, light and colour. The significance of the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim is that it's a milestone in the architect's journey – it may even turn out to be one of the last stops.

The Gehry-designed MARTa Herford museum in Germany, inaugurated in 2005, is a link in this evolution of his work – a variation of the Guggenheim Bilbao's curves in brick cladding and topped with metal sheets. Metal reappears in the Abu Dhabi design, but it's used more sparsely, folded sharply into an apparently random jumble of stone squares and distorted squares in a structure that's quite different to the iconic buildings Gehry designed for the last decade of the last century. At the age of 77, Frank Gehry has lost his curves.

Gehry's Abu Dhabi Guggenheim may not have the formality and obvious geometry of I.M. Pei's Museum of Islamic Arts, which enjoys a similar waterfront location along the coast in neighbouring Qatar, but that's no bad thing. GAD is what the Museum of Islamic Arts could look like if a few blue cones were added for ventilation and the whole thing was 'deconstructed' with a shaking so vigorous that the guts of the structure spill out onto the shoreline.

Gehry's design does seem to suggest the aftermath of a violent act, as if the museum's various galleries are comprised of the debris remaining after a severe storm or earthquake. Ultimately, the design invites the notion that after receiving the brief Gehry picked up his bag of architectural tricks and toys and emptied the contents onto the table. What has tumbled out may not have the wow factor of the Guggenheim Bilbao, but that's relative: GAD might not be hailed as a world icon and yet could still have more than enough magic to impress and attract visitors from near and far – even before they learn about the art inside.

As he fast approaches his 80th year, one wonders what's next for the wily wizard of contemporary architecture. *Matt Jones*

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[GEHRY CAPTIONS:]

Born in Toronto in 1929, Los Angeles-based Frank Gehry is best known for his design for the Guggenheim Bilbao.

Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum for contemporary art, located in the city's planned Saadiyat Cultural District and due for completion in 2012, will cover 29,728 square metres, making it the largest Guggenheim in the world.

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, designed by Guggenheim Bilbao architect Frank Gehry, will have around 12,077 square metres of exhibition space, featuring permanent collections, galleries for special exhibitions, a centre for art and technology, a children's art education facility, archives, a library and research centre, and a state-of-the-art conservation laboratory.

In the Gehry design, four storeys of central core galleries containing classical contemporary art are laid out around a courtyard. Two more rings of galleries span out from the core.

The blue cones of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi are Gehry's contemporary interpretation of traditional Arabian wind-towers, channeling cool air down into the immediate exterior spaces and enabling hot air to rise out.

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Hadid sets the stage with ‘liquid space’

[PULL-OUT QUOTES:]

“I wanted to take part in this because it’s a heroic project. The possibility of doing a state-of-the-art building doesn’t happen every day”

“The ambition of the Cultural District project inspired us to push the boundaries even further”

[BODY COPY:]

Baghdad-born Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid, 56, was the first woman to receive architecture’s Pritzker Prize in 2004. London-based Hadid talks to *identity* about the Performing Arts Centre she has designed for Abu Dhabi.

How long have you had links with Abu Dhabi?

I came for the first time almost 10 years ago by invitation to look at the possibility of building the third crossing [construction on Hadid’s Sheikh Zayed Bridge is currently under way].

How did your involvement in Saadiyat Cultural District and in the design of the Performing Arts Centre come about?

We’ve been involved for a very long time with the Guggenheim, not only in terms of exhibitions, but we did a study for the Guggenheim in Tokyo, and in Taichung [Taiwan]. I’ve been involved with them since 1992 and this summer we had a retrospective of our work in the Frank Lloyd Wright building [the New York Guggenheim]. So I’ve been very involved with them for a long time and this came out of that relationship.

Because we’re friends of [Guggenheim director] Tom Krens and I’m also friends with the United Arab Emirates, having vested interests here – a bridge and so on – we really wanted to take part in this project because it’s a heroic project. The possibility of doing a state-of-the-art building doesn’t happen every day. Of course, there are limitations and restrictions, but it’s a rare opportunity, particularly in the Arab world, to be a part of something that connects all of us from different regions. And that is really the spirit I’d like the Arab world to have. Therefore, I think it’s an incredible moment for me as an Arab and an incredible moment for all of us as international architects to be sitting here together doing this. Tom was a tremendous believer in this project and so enthusiastic that I never thought twice about doing it.

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Would you talk us through some of the design elements of the Performing Arts Centre?

In the master plan for the Cultural District they've carved out canals for smaller pavilions and the idea is that on the water's edge there'll be what they call 'the pearls', which are a few institutions, including the contemporary art museum, the Maritime Museum, this one and another museum that's more embedded into the land. So this is one of the pearls that are strung on the edge of the island. And so the idea is that we actually push the project into the water. So the idea for the Performing Arts Centre is a kind of bundle of spaces and arteries that are connected to the land and shoot out to the water.

What's the inspiration for the design?

We've been working for a long time with ideas of landscape and topography, ideas of aggregations or bundles of spaces, so it really comes from this research. It starts off with trying to push the boundaries in terms of how you can string together opera, theatre and a music hall – how they can actually overlap. Over the years, we've done many competitions to do with performing arts spaces and so we've looked at this idea of how you can stack things, how you can spread things. We're doing the opera house in Guangzhou in China. And so the design doesn't come from a one-off inspiration, but the ambition of the Cultural District project inspired us to push the boundaries even further.

Does the project have all the hallmarks of a Zaha Hadid design or is there something of a departure in it for you?

It relates to the body of work we're working on now, which has progressed or changed over the years but is really in the same family of projects. For four or five years in our ideas we've been aiming for very fluid spaces, and the idea of a combination of fluidity and liquid space is really part and parcel of the idea for this project.

Has your Middle Eastern heritage, being born in Baghdad, influenced the design in any way?

Of course you are an Arab and therefore you bring some things with you, but it also depends on what your value system was when you were growing up. It's not necessarily about the formal language of the Arab Muslim world, but of course you bring some of these things with you – maybe ideas of fluidity of landscape, the idea of dunes, not necessarily in this case, but these often influence me in other projects. Obviously, you carry your heritage with you.

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Is there anything you've taken out of the experience of designing stage sets that has gone into creating a centre for the performing arts?

I don't think so, but then the sets we've done, for example for the opera in Austria, have also been about topography and landscape. We've done a variety of performing arts spaces, including one in Luxembourg; the Cardiff opera house project was very famous; and later on there was a variety of other projects – an opera house in Taichung. So there's a body of work that relates to the idea of performance and also to the idea of the promenade and how you move around a building for performing arts – how you see sea views in the intermission. You come to think in different ways about theatres and seating. That research was done over many projects.

Have you gone for a design which is theatrical or isn't that what you're trying to achieve?

Not really. Let's put it this way, most of our work is theatrical in the sense that it has to have an impact on the environment and on those who visit these things. We're not really from the minimalist school of thinkers, although sometimes these buildings can be very beautiful and peaceful. But in our work we're always trying to be quite extreme and challenging, especially in the organisation of a project. Our research is interesting in the sense that what it uncovered were the incredible ways of recreating performance spaces that couldn't have been anticipated 20 years ago.

You obviously design with end users in mind. Beyond that, are you designing for a UAE context or for an international audience?

It doesn't really matter. The idea with public projects is that anybody can go to them, so you really have to think about music space, how music sounds, and about an identity that could work for a variety of different people.

How would you want the public to react to this space?

I'd want them to be surprised, but what's fundamental is that these spaces work well acoustically and that people enjoy music and sound through them. The setting is also very stunning, so the whole experience will be very nice for those who live here and who visit the country.

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The publicity surrounding this project is going to be seen by local girls who are perhaps growing up with ambitions to be architects. Do you see yourself as a role model for Middle Eastern women?

I didn't set out to be, but I think that by default you are one and if that encourages other women not only to do architecture but to pursue careers professionally in the Arab world, then it's good to be role model. It's very important to be able to have independence and pursue careers. I come from a generation in Iraq where everybody – all my classmates – are professionals. There's nobody who isn't. Architecture is particularly difficult not only because it's a male-dominated profession, but also because it's difficult to pursue, so I hope I encourage them.

You're currently lecturing at universities in the US and Europe. Could we be seeing you lecture at universities in the Emirates in future?

I would like to. I have professorships in Austria and sometimes in America. I've been invited to give lectures here quite a few times. I just have to find the right time to come and do it. It would be very exciting.

[HADID CAPTIONS:]

Zaha Hadid's 62-metre high Performing Arts Centre in Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Cultural District will house five theatres: a music hall, concert hall, opera house, drama theatre and a flexible theatre, with a combined seating capacity for 6,300 – 1,100 more than London's Royal Albert Hall. The 52,000 square metre structure could also house an Academy of Performing Arts.

Hadid's Performing Arts Centre will be part of an inclining ensemble of structures that stretch from Tadao Ando's Maritime Museum at its southern end to Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi at the northern tip.

The concert hall in Hadid's Performing Arts Centre is above the lower four theatres, allowing daylight into its interior and offering dramatic views of the sea and city skyline from the huge window behind the stage. Local lobbies for each theatre are orientated towards the sea to give visitors a constant visual contact with their surroundings.

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The solitary form of Tadao Ando

[PULL-OUT QUOTES:]

“The museum’s solitary form defines a space that’s an encounter between Abu Dhabi’s maritime past and the future of Saadiyat Island as a global cultural city”

“The gate, similar to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, stands like a monument of an era”

“The building’s arched void is a technological challenge to construct”

[BODY COPY:]

In his first ever interview in the Middle East, Japanese architect Tadao Ando, recipient of the Pritzker Prize in 1995, talks to *identity* about his contribution to Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Cultural District – a monumental new Maritime Museum.

How did you become involved in the Maritime Museum project?

I was invited by the Guggenheim Museum and accepted because it involves the designing of a museum that aims to preserve the important history and memory of Abu Dhabi’s traditions and its relationship with the sea in a newly created city of the 21st century.

Could you describe the key elements of the design and what you hope it will reflect?

The main key element is the sea itself. The building floats over a vast water court that visually merges the site and the sea, reinforcing the maritime theme of the museum. I hope the presence of the water will reflect the importance of preserving the history and past traditions of Abu Dhabi and its relationship with the sea.

Would you take a similar approach to designing a Maritime Museum in Abu Dhabi as you would in Japan?

Japan is an archipelago surrounded by the sea. We also have a strong cultural and industrial relationship with the sea that became part of our tradition, like the pearl and fishing industry. In a similar way to the Abu Dhabi maritime tradition, the Japanese have lived in close connection with the sea, extracting its resources daily, but also learning from it to maintain its ecological balance for future generations to come.

What’s the inspiration for your design?

The inspiration comes from the observation of Abu Dhabi’s nature, landscape and maritime traditions. I wanted to design a building that would reflect a shape, simple but elegant, and common to the local environment and the Arabic culture.

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The design brief was to develop a form that expresses Abu Dhabi's landscape and traditions and has been shaped by the force and fluidity of the wind. How have you achieved that?

The building is about 100 metres long and 30 metres high and its solitary form stands like a gate over a vast water court, defining a space that's an encounter between Abu Dhabi's maritime past and the future of Saadiyat Island as a global cultural city. This gate, similar to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, stands like a monument of an era, symbolically connecting the wind of the past with the wind of the future. Its void acts as a monument, materialising the Abu Dhabi people's consciousness of advancing into the future without forgetting to preserve their history and traditions.

The French architect Le Corbusier has been a major influence on your work. Why this particular architect and does the design of the Maritime Museum reflect his influence?

I admire Le Corbusier's challenging spirit in relation to new ideas. In this sense, the building's arched void and shape is a completely new design and a technological challenge to construct.

You've often stated that light is an important controlling factor in your work. How have you harnessed it for the Maritime Museum?

The museum is architecture over the sea. The very characteristic strong light of the seaside's sun will help to sharply define the volume and shape of the building. The movement of this light during the day will give a different expression to the building and at the same time the light that penetrates the aquarium will create a different atmosphere in the interior exhibition space.

How would you want the public to view this work?

The museum is comprised of an exhibition space below sea level and a building volume above sea level. Through this composition I would like the public to physically experience and feel the importance of the sea, not only as a tradition to be preserved, but also as an opportunity to discover a new spatial experience. I hope this experience will bring some level of consciousness among the museum's visitors about the importance of preserving the environment and history, which I believe will be a challenge of the 21st century.

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[ANDO CAPTIONS:]

The elegant architecture of Tadao Ando's Maritime Museum features a unique space 'carved' out of a simple structure and shaped by the force and fluidity of Abu Dhabi's wind. The solitary form stands like a gate over a vast water court, which visually merges the site with the sea.

Ando's Maritime Museum in Saadiyat Cultural District takes its inspiration from Abu Dhabi's natural surroundings, landscape and maritime traditions. Inside, its ship-like interior features ramps and floating decks that guide visitors fluidly through the exhibition space.

There's a second space below ground in Ando's Maritime Museum – a reception hall with an enormous aquarium. A traditional dhow floats over the aquarium and can be seen from different perspectives.

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