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How the Middle East is setting standards in sustainability

The region's shopping malls are known for luxury and modernity, but also meet international standards – and their governments' own high standards, which reflect local conditions and needs



Lunch at a restaurant in The Dubai Mall. The region has gone from playing catch-up to setting a lead. Photograph: Ahmed Jadallah/Reuters

Most in the west would probably regard the Middle East as lagging behind on sustainability. The stereotyped view is one of flashy over-consumption to match a glut of wealth from oil production. The story I heard on the ground was rather different.

Ibrahim Al Zubi is head of sustainability at [Majid Al Futtaim Properties \(MAFP\)](#), which develops and manages some of the shopping malls the new Middle East is famous for, such as the [Mall of the Emirates](#), which houses more than 500 retail brands.

More than 100 million people visit MAFP malls every year. Al Zubi previously worked for the government and is associated with educational campaigns to raise awareness of issues such as climate change, as well as spearheading the development of unique and progressive standards.

"Our region is unique," Al Zubi told me. "A lot of best practices have been absorbed from somewhere else, but the hybrid approach is always the best. Singapore would be the closest comparison – [Dubai](#) is setting the example for others to follow."

The malls of the Middle East are famous for their gleaming modernity, their luxury stores and opulence. What is less well known is that construction in the Middle East is taking a lead in sustainability standards. One of MAFP's competitors, [Msheireb](#), has a regeneration project in Qatar that will contain the largest cluster of [LEED](#) (green building standard)-certified buildings in the world: a total of 100 buildings all targeting gold and platinum status. Besides attention to individual buildings, the whole

development is angled to catch a prevailing northwest breeze, creating a comfortable microclimate.

Al Zubi told me that the region has gone from playing catch-up to setting a lead. MAFP's Mall of the Emirates is not only a top 10 global mall in business terms, it is also one of the only malls in the world with a LEED gold award. It helps that the region is booming again, after a hiatus during the credit crunch. But Ibrahim also told me that it is "different from 10 years ago" – the environmental standards have become perceived as an integral sign of quality and, crucially, they have been adapted to local conditions. What is "eco" for a building in (cold and wet) Great Britain may not even be relevant in (hot and dry) Dubai.

LEED (from the US) and the BREEAM standard (a UK equivalent) form a basic international reference point for development in the region. But Middle East governments, Al Zubi explained, have also developed their own standards to reflect local conditions, needs and challenges. Abu Dhabi has developed PEARL, and Qatar has QSAS, part of which has already been made mandatory. That's a fairly straightforward account, but Al Zubi warned me against oversimplification: "It takes a lot of research to understand the region properly."

The work of governments in setting these standards has provided a common base for defining quality, he said. His time in government was "more like working for an NGO", and governments had applied the standards first to their own buildings. In the United Arab Emirates, "all new government buildings must be at least two-star" – this in turn has helped to create a local green building market, boosting skills and training.

The other important factor, Al Zubi told me, was private-development companies such as MAFP being family-owned: "It is never just profit, or just passion; it is always both." Perhaps, though, he added, we would have heard more of this passion from the region if there had not been a stringent culture of modesty.

As Al Zubi pointed out: "Qatar gave over \$11bn to foreign aid last year, [but] you would never hear them making a song and dance about it. A lot of that kind of thing is not captured. It's one of the things the family companies do right, keeping a low profile. You won't see any annual reports detailing how many orphans we have helped – 'showing what you have done' is not the Muslim way."

Al Zubi pointed out that with 60% of the population under 30 and high unemployment in some countries in the region, creating jobs is actually the number one priority for a family-owned company such as his. The mall they are developing in Lebanon will create 2,000 jobs in retail alone.

And on the social side of sustainability, Al Zubi said there had been rapid moves to make sure health, training and worker safety are in accordance with the highest standards – something the region has been criticised for.

Al Zubi said the key goal that governments and companies such as his are aligned on is the need to foster entrepreneurship. Previous generations could rely on safe jobs in government or corporate-style companies, but the prospects of a new generation will depend far more on entrepreneurship.

The governments in UAE have committed to awarding at least 10% of all their own contracts to SMEs, and Al Zubi told me that many are expecting a small business and entrepreneurship boom across the region. Boosting this local culture of entrepreneurship, Al Zubi told me that the result was something like a reverse brain drain, bringing people with education and experience of best practices from elsewhere in the world back into the region.

This is an edited excerpt from John Grant's book, Made With

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