



## Aga Khan Award for Architecture

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### W I N N I N G P R O J E C T S

#### **Wasit Wetland Centre**

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

*Architect:* X-Architects, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

*Client:* Environment and Protected Areas Authority, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

#### **Project description**

Part of a much larger initiative by Sharjah's Environment and Protected Areas Agency to clean up and rehabilitate this ancient chain of wetlands along the Persian Gulf coast, the Wasit Wetland Centre aims to supply information and education about this unique environment and to encourage its preservation.

In designing the visitor centre, the architects took advantage of the site's natural topography to minimise its visual impact by making it appear submerged into the ground. Visitors descend a ramp to arrive at an angled intersection between two linear elements of the building: one, to the sides, containing services and administrative offices; the other, ahead, a long viewing gallery flanked by aviaries where birds can be seen in their natural habitat. At the far end of the viewing gallery, a third linear element, running perpendicular, houses a café and multipurpose space with views out over the open wetlands.

A cantilevered steel truss roof over the viewing gallery avoids the need for peripheral columns, allowing seamless glazed façades. The interior is deliberately minimalistic throughout, placing the full focus on the surrounding nature: informative displays are the only adornment on the supporting central wall. The façade glazing is slightly tilted, to enhance reflections of the landscape for the birds while minimising reflections for people looking out. The floor being lower than the ground outside, a continuous concrete sill provides a place to sit and contemplate birds at their level. To counter the very hot desert climate, the roof is well insulated and the glass is shaded by its overhang. Some fabric shading is also provided over the aviaries. Rainwater harvested from the roof is discreetly directed to specific areas of the landscape via carefully placed spouts that are camouflaged by landscape elements.

Six bird hides scattered around a lake created in the middle of a 200,000m<sup>2</sup> site follow a unified aesthetic but are each individually designed for their context, and employ some recycled wood and plastic in their construction, reinforcing the ecological message.

What had become a waste dumping ground has had its indigenous ecosystem restored, and is proving a popular place for visitors to appreciate and learn about their natural environment.



## **Jury Citation**

The Wasit Wetland Centre stands out as a remarkable, indeed unique, collaborative project combining architectural excellence with a deep commitment to ecological imperatives.

It also achieves highly commendable educational and recreational purposes. Less than four years after its completion, a large number of local visitors, especially schoolchildren, attests to the project's overall success and its positive impact in a broader social context.

Perhaps some of the most striking and exemplary aspects of the project are to be found in its most unconventional virtues. Architecturally speaking, it is intent on disappearing from sight. It merges into the natural environment in ways that respect the site's integrity – a wonderful way of reminding us that architectural merit resides more and more on a structure's capacity to blend into an environment rather than challenge it.

Likewise, the project's major contribution to its urban environment is in its reclamation of close to 20 acres of former wasteland by diverting it from the temptations of real estate development and valorising it as a form of natural capital.

In doing so, the Project sets a powerful precedent that encourages low-impact and environmentally conscious development in a region known for its propensity to go in the opposite direction.

## **Project data**

### **Wasit Wetland Centre**

**Sharjah, United Arab Emirates**

#### **Client**

EPAA (Environmental and Protected Areas Authority), Sharjah, United Arab Emirates:

Hana Saif Al Suwaidi, *chairman*

#### **Architect**

X-Architects, Dubai, United Arab Emirates:

Farid Esmaeil, Ahmed Al Ali, *founding partners*



Brian Walter Abarintos, Christian Geronimo, Mirco Urban, Dana Sheikh, Pariya Manafi, *design development*

Haider Al Kalamchi, *mechanical engineer*

Eyad Zarafeh, *structural engineer*

#### Contractor

Darwish Engineering Emirates, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

#### Landscaping and Zoology

Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife:

Paul Vercammen, *operations manager*

#### Project Data

Site area: 200,000 m<sup>2</sup>

Ground floor area: 2,534 m<sup>2</sup>

Cost: 7,600,000 USD

Commission: 2012

Design: 2012

Construction: 2014–2015

Occupancy: 2015

#### X-Architects

X-Architects is a critical architectural studio founded in 2003 by principal architects Ahmed Al-Ali and Farid Esmaeil.

Ahmed Al-Ali graduated from the American University of Sharjah with a degree in Architecture. He contributes to various research projects and has collaborated on Abu Dhabi's Urban Planning Council building and neighbourhood guidelines. He is a board member of the Canadian University of Dubai, the UAE University of Al Ain and the Al Hosn University in Abu Dhabi. He is actively involved in academic spheres and is a recurring critic and lecturer at various educational institutions and associations. Ahmed recently lectured and joined a panel discussion called 'Housing the Spring' at the Graduate School of Design of Harvard University.

Farid Esmaeil studied architecture at the American University of Sharjah School of Design. He has lectured in various universities and institutions worldwide and is a regular guest critic. He was a speaker at TEDx in Abu Dhabi, Harvard University, the University of Toronto and Doha Architecture Forum. He exhibited and contributed to the Venice Biennale in 2008, 2014 and 2016.



Since 2003, X-Architects has developed an international reputation with a significant and diverse portfolio of work ranging from masterplans, civic and cultural buildings, offices and residential buildings to private houses. X-Architects believes in design as a process. The studio conducts research into creating a built environment that is adaptive and contextual. The sensible yet critical design approach recognises the inherent complexity in modern-day building and harnesses this complexity to produce projects that are culturally robust, place sensitive and environmentally friendly.

X-Architects projects have gained continuous recognition and have been exhibited in international venues like the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in London in 2011 and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen 2014. In 2010, Al-Ali was honoured with the Mohammed Bin Rashid Award for Young Business Leaders.

Website

[www.x-architects.com](http://www.x-architects.com)