

Habitat by Design

Birds, People, and Place

Edited by Vicky Richardson



ARCHI  TANGLE

AGA KHAN AWARD
FOR ARCHITECTURE



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An aerial view of the Wasit Wetland Centre taken shortly after its completion in 2016



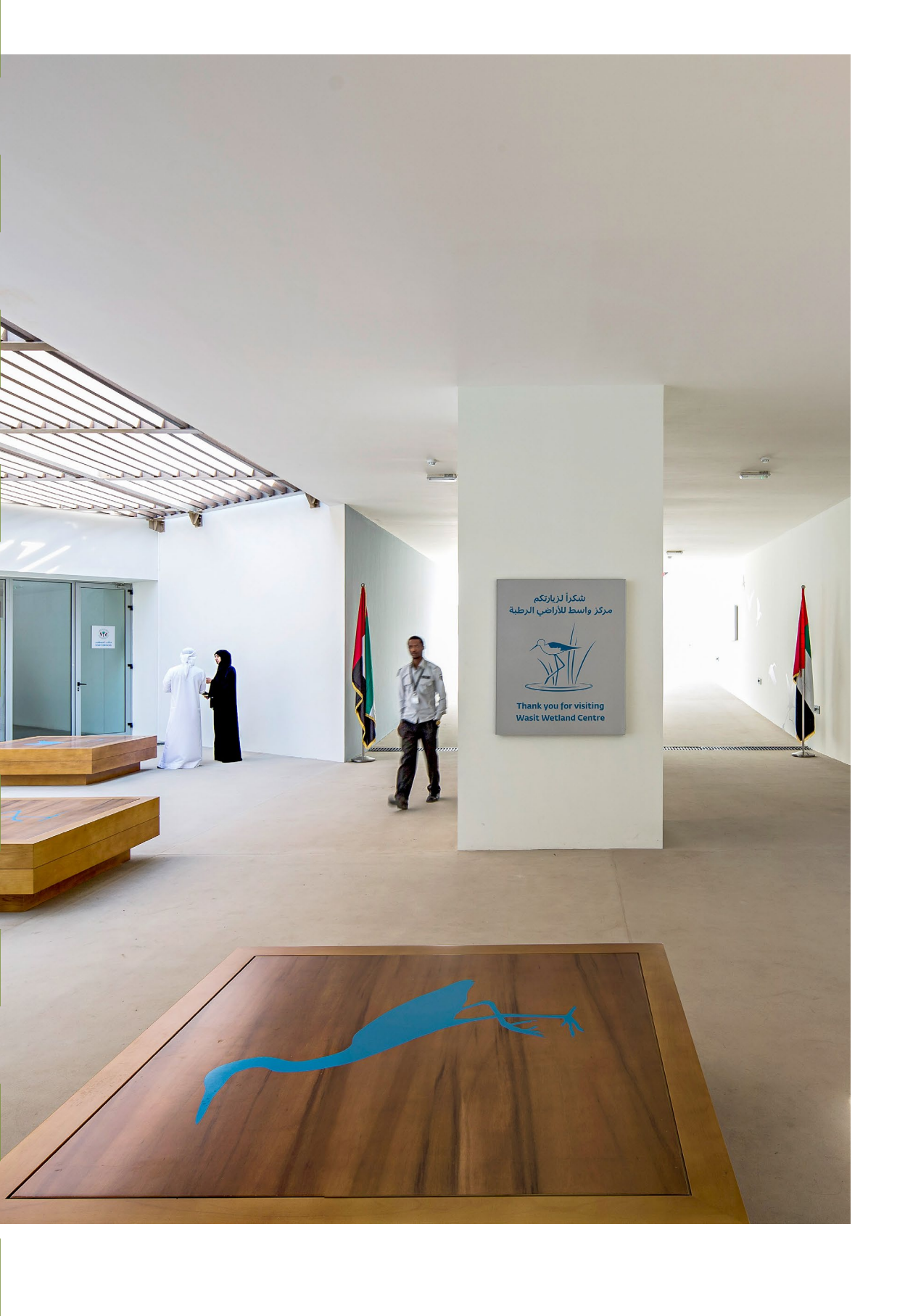


A wide ramp leads visitors to the sunken visitor centre, photographically captured before planting has matured.





A shaded courtyard is a place for orientation before visitors enter the viewing galleries and education spaces.



شكراً لزيارتكم
مركز واسط للأراضي الرطبة



Thank you for visiting
Wasit Wetland Centre



The centre provides six aviaries, each with a distinct terrain for the conservation and breeding of endangered species.





Walkways allow visitors to leave the galleries and explore the terrain of the aviaries.





Nearly ten years after completion, only the entrance ramp is visible in the landscape of mature shrubs and trees.



Foreword: Nature Matters

Farrokh Derakhshani



Shallow saline lagoons at Wasit following rehabilitation of the landscape

One of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture's considerations at its inception was the relevance of the new built environment to its context, and how architects can design projects that enhance users' sense of belonging. This commitment has shaped the Award's mission from the beginning, raising questions about who designs for whom, for what purpose, and how exceptional achievements might be disseminated through the Award's triennial cycle.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, architectural production across much of the Muslim world – especially in countries lacking schools of architecture established before the 1960s – was largely imported rather than drawn from local knowledge, for want of local professionals. As a result, a built environment alien to surrounding populations soon came to shape many cities. What is encouraging today is that a new generation of local talent is now designing for their own regions, learning not only from Western models but also from their own heritage.

The first project in the United Arab Emirates to receive an Aga Khan Award for Architecture since the Award was established in 1977 is evidence of this shift. Designed by two local architects educated at the American University of Sharjah, the Wasit Wetland Centre للأراضي الرطبة مركز واسط (*Markaz Wasit lil-Aradi al-Rutbah*) was one of twenty projects shortlisted by the 2019 Master Jury from 381 nominations from fifty-five countries and ultimately became one



Wadi Hanifa Wetlands in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
Recipient of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2010.

of the six award-winning projects. The on-site review of the project revealed a scheme addressing one of the central issues of our time: the architectural profession's responsibility towards a degrading environment, nowhere more pressing than in regions where urban growth continues to accelerate.

For decades, Wasit – an area of 450 hectares – was little more than a no man's land. It was sabkha – saline and unfit for building – and had gradually become a place for what the city no longer wanted, from construction waste to abandoned vehicles and oil residues. Yet the birds kept coming. Because of Sharjah's groundwater, shallow pools continued to accumulate beneath the rubbish; by the 1990s, many species were still using the landfill as a migratory stop-over. The wetland had not been erased by waste; it had simply continued to function, unseen, its natural processes reshaping human intervention in the form of rainwater harvesting, landscape engineering, and decades of monitoring.

It is, in every sense, *Habitat by Design: Birds, People, and Place*. The project returned what had become a wasteland to the city, its citizens, and to migratory birds. Today, Wasit reminds us that environmental restoration is no longer simply a matter of conservation but of resilience. As climate change increases pressure on fragile ecosystems and rapidly growing cities, projects like the Wasit Wetland Centre demonstrate that architecture and landscape design can minimise environmental harm, regenerate ecological systems, strengthen biodiversity, and create places that are capable of adapting over time. In this sense, investments in wetlands, water



**Middle East Technical University Reforestation Program in Ankara, Türkiye.
Honoured with an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1995.**

management, and public access to nature are essential civic infrastructure, reinforcing the resilience of both communities and the landscapes on which they depend. Over recent decades, Sharjah has been a pioneer in the region in its pursuit of a balance between urban development and the protection of its heritage and natural environment. The Emirate has consistently invested in projects that conserve habitats while accommodating growth.

Land settlement, landscape, and intelligent ways to enhance the built and unbuilt environment have long concerned successive steering committees and the master juries of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, which have recognised environmental projects well before they entered international discourse. These early recognitions seem all the more relevant today as environmental challenges become more urgent and increasingly inseparable from questions of climate resilience. The projects that endure are those that understand landscape and settlement as parts of the same whole, improving the conditions for both nature and human life. The Wasit Wetland Centre, designed by the UAE-based practice X Architects, continues this tradition of restraint: recessed into the landscape, the building reveals little more than its roofline, allowing the wetland and its birdlife to remain the principal focus. As its architects, Ahmed Al Ali