

# Cityscape in the spotlight



**Clockwise from top left, photographs taken by Marco Sosa of the Blue Souk in Sharjah that was built in 1978; and the Ibrahim Building in Abu Dhabi built in the 1980s, which will both feature in the exhibition; the under-construction National Pavilion of the UAE at La Biennale di Venezia.**

Courtesy Marco Sosa / National Pavilion UAE;  
Reem Hantoosh /

**O**n Saturday, the UAE will officially mark its graduation into a whole new cultural level, when its new permanent pavilion opens to the public in Venice for the first time.

Acquired last year through a 20-year hospitality agreement with La Biennale di Venezia, the UAE became the first Gulf country to have a pavilion for the art and architecture biennales that run on alternate years in Italy's picturesque city.

Having renovated the space, which inhabits part of the Arsenale, a shipyard built in the 12th century, the team behind the National Pavilion of the UAE are now ready to present their first show: *Lest We Forget – Structures of Memory in the UAE*.

Broadly speaking, the show contains an archive of the architecture in the UAE over the latter half of the

20th century with a particular focus on the 1970s and 1980s, a period that the curator, Michele Bambling, says is largely overlooked.

However, her method of collecting data has involved the help of the whole community and, as such, she is not just presenting official photographs and architectural plans but personal memories donated to the project in the form of spoken word interviews, treasured snapshots, memorabilia, old postcards, sketched floor plans and even a video recorded while driving along the streets of Abu Dhabi.

“There will be a lot of material never seen before placed alongside more familiar content but everything will be presented in a new context that will hopefully engage all the visitors,” says Bambling.

One of the ways she has chosen to do this is to place the bulk of the material in 76 drawers, which run around the walls of a central gallery under a timeline charting the major landmarks of the UAE’s architectural progression.

The drawers are not only laid out chronologically but arranged by theme, such as arish (the palm fronds used for the traditional housing of the UAE), coral stone and the discovery of oil and how that led to the use of reinforced concrete. There is a numbering and label system so visitors can easily navigate and pinpoint the areas of their specific interest. Some drawers even light up when opened.

“I’m an art historian so from a

curator’s point of view I was interested in the old curiosity cabinets and how to make that more contemporary,” Bambling says. “I love the idea of a sense of discovery because there is a bit of magic in that and I also wanted people to have the intimacy of looking at the objects one on one and being able to touch and feel the exhibits.”

Bambling has been careful to concentrate only on architectural aspects and urban development – this is the architecture biennale after all – but she has housed the material within the framework of the UAE’s historical development and international events while simultaneously bringing in personal memory.

“It is complex but it is rich and interesting. It also can sound overwhelming, which is another reason why I decided to put it as a hidden

are screen panels playing filmed conversations between scholars, historians and urban planners who are all interested in architecture but may have not met in a professional capacity before.

“None of it was rehearsed and it has only been slightly edited,” says Bambling of the videos, “because the idea of this and the whole show is that it is an opportunity for people to make discoveries from primary material.”

On the exterior of the walls are more formal figure-ground diagrams – two-dimensional maps that show the relationship between built and unbuilt space. There is also a catalogue that contains different information and that functions as a “memory book”.

The depth and scale of the show is extremely ambitious, but with the calm overseeing eye of Bambling and her team of architects Adina Hempel and Marco Sosa, who are both professors, it promises to be a very successful show.

Importantly, the project is ongoing. The idea of creating an archive can never be exhausted so, although the material presented in Venice is finite, the project itself grows day by day as more people discover and contribute to it.

When the six-month show is over in Venice, the team will bring the material back to Abu Dhabi and represent it in another, much larger show along with other material in the spring of next year.

● **La Biennale di Venezia, the 14th international architecture exhibition runs from Saturday to November 23 in the Giardini and Arsenale venues and other locations around Venice**

✉ [aseaman@thenational.ae](mailto:aseaman@thenational.ae)



Lest We Forget, the UAE's first Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale, tells the stories of buildings of the 1970s and 1980s, writes [Anna Seaman](#)