

# Branding Saudi Arabia's Capital: How Riyadh Uses Urban Place Marketing, Mega-Events, and Urban Destinations as Tools to Brand the City in Line with Vision 2030

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## Abstract

This paper explores the employment of urban and architectural branding strategies within Riyadh's plan to become a globally recognized city. Within this framework, the text examines Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and its spatial impact on the city's urban environment. The paper discusses how mega-events and urban mega-destinations function as branding, place marketing, and placemaking tools to showcase this vision and promote a "new" Saudi Arabia image. The paper also examines in how far globally established values of culture, leisure, greening, wellbeing, connectivity, and quality-of-life are leveraged in the branding process of Riyadh's mega-destinations to communicate a positive image to a transnational class of metropolitan business travelers and tourists, and an affluent, cosmopolitan Saudi middle class. Deliberating this market-oriented methodology's various implications, the paper concludes with a call for a more participatory and inclusive approach to Saudi Arabia's urban branding process to enhance long-term credibility and identification. To achieve the outlined objectives of this paper, the author employed a combination of qualitative methods that included on-site field research, literature reviews, and conversational interviews with various stakeholders that include representatives of involved architectural and urban planning offices, members of the academic community, and citizens of various professions and age groups.

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## Introduction

The focus of this article is the employment of urban and architectural branding strategies within Riyadh's plan to become a globally recognized city. Within this framework, we examine Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and its spatial impact on the city's urban environment. The role mega-events and urban mega-destinations play in branding and place marketing is explored, as well as the ways in which placemaking tools are used to showcase this vision and promote a "new" image of Saudi Arabia. Finally, we identify the extent to which globally established values of culture, leisure, greening, wellbeing, connectivity, and quality-of-life are leveraged by mega-cities to communicate a positive image of both a transnational class of metropolitan business travelers and tourists, and an affluent, cosmopolitan Saudi middle-class. The article concludes with a call for a more participatory and inclusive approach to Saudi Arabia's urban branding process to enhance long-term credibility and identification.

## Literature Review

In the last two decades, many urban researchers from different parts of the world, including Dormans and Lagendijk (2004), Jensen (2005), Kavaratzis (2004, 2009), and, more recently, Rory (2016), Mishra (2016), Dupe (2018), and Alraouf (2019), have commented on the importance of city marketing and placemaking as potent tools to position cities on the global map. The branding of cities becomes even more critical in transforming an industry-based service economy to a knowledge-based experience economy. A knowledge-based economy rests

on the synergy of knowledge production, dissemination, and use where human capital is the driver of creativity, innovation, and generation of new ideas, with reliance on information and communication technology as an enabler. In contrast, the experience economy emphasizes the central role of experiences as an economic catalyst for cities to differentiate themselves globally. Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore (1998) originally coined this term in their seminal work "The Experience Economy." Already in the 1990s, they argued that the offer of goods and services is no longer enough for companies to compete in the global marketplace. Instead, corporations must offer unique and memorable experiences to engage customers and consequently inspire sales. According to Pine et al. (1998), experiences have emerged as new economic offerings, "as distinct from services as services are from goods." Following this paradigm shift in the consumer industry, many researchers in the field of architecture and urban planning, including Klingmann (2010), Muratovski (2012), Gravari-Barbas (2013) and Helmy (2008, 2020) have explored how architecture is employed as a strategic medium to stage unique experiences that help places get noticed on the global map and attract potential customers. In the case of cities striving to shift from an industrial-based service economy into a knowledge-based experience economy, the desired customer base comprises tourists and highly educated and productive knowledge workers that can produce and disseminate knowledge-based services to drive future economic growth and urban development. According to Yigitcanlar (2007), the experience of future knowledge cities must be crafted and staged in such a way

to attract and retain the right mix of entrepreneurs, knowledge workers, investors, and tourists.

To launch the transition from a product- and service-oriented economy to an experience-focused knowledge economy, cities also need to establish a strategic vision and communicate their competitive advantages with a distinctive image to make potential investors and other target groups aware of their inherent attributes, incentives, and features. Adopting a marketing philosophy to meet places' operational and strategic goals has been globally established both in practice and theory (Kotler, Haider. & Rein, 1993). When cities strive to gain the attention of multinational corporations and well-qualified human capital, they need to establish a market-oriented planning process to diversify their economic base and develop mechanisms for flexibly adapting to changing conditions.

In the GCC, several vision documents adopt a market-oriented planning process to facilitate the transition from an industrial economy to a more knowledge-based experience economy. Crafted by international management consulting firms, they include the UAE Vision 2021, the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, the Qatar National Vision 2030, and the Saudi Vision 2030. Based on established global formulas and amended with a series of implementation plans, these "visions" are guided by the aim to facilitate a phased transition from a petroleum-based economy towards a more diversified knowledge-based economy by combining social and economic reforms with urban planning objectives (see also Alraouf, 2017).

This paper aims to demonstrate the significant role of place branding as a means to implement some of the social and economic goals of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 within the urban fabric of Riyadh to make it more attractive to a young Saudi middle-class, visitors, and tourists. While the paper focuses on four mega destinations that are planned in the capital, the paper also highlights how place-branding with its combination of large-scale public events, mega-projects, creation of landmarks, and involvement of 'starchitects' is elevated to a strategic national planning program that - as part of the country's Vision 2030 -seeks to create a marketing personality for each of its regions. Specifically, the paper seeks to demonstrate how mega-events and integrated urban destinations function as place marketing and placemaking tools to implement a new national lifestyle that rests on the creation of public cultural, sports, and leisure experiences, which are mandated by the Vision 2030's Quality of Life Program (Vision 2030, 2017), and which in turn seeks to promote the image of a "new" cosmopolitan Saudi Arabia.

### Place Branding

According to Habibah et al. (2013), Gravari-Barbas, (2013), and Dupre (2018), place branding, place marketing, and place-making play a crucial role in the overall process of implementing a strategic vision and reforming the experience and image of a place both in terms of streamlining its inherent attributes to the desired target market as well as curating new interventions to suit the expectations of an affluent highly mobile and cosmopolitan clientele. As it has been argued by Richard Florida (2019), the author of "The Rise of the Creative

Class," "the gathering of people, companies and resources into particular places with particular specialties and capabilities generates efficiencies that power economic growth." Thus, the object of place marketing is not the marketing of the place itself with its mundane day-to-day realities, but rather a highly designed representation of the same, which entails crafting a specific image, which appeals to an external targeted audience (the desired customers). As Bailly (1994) observes, "urban marketing is based on representations; this enables us to tackle not the city itself but its meaning in a symbolic and ideological context." It is this line of thinking that makes Hubbard and Hall (1998) come to the conclusion that "it is perhaps best to consider the entrepreneurial city as an imaginary city, constituted by a plethora of images, marketing messages and staged representations." According to Pike et al. (2004), a place's image is a critical determinant of how citizens and businesses respond to it because "images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information" identified with a particular region. As such, a city's image similar to the idea of a corporate brand and can inspire trust or distrust. A city's image can also stimulate economic growth patterns over an extended period (Klingmann, 2010). Along with constructing a distinct place identity that appeals to a suitable target market, public relations also play a significant role as an integral part of urban marketing. City marketing typically employs a mix of social media campaigns, press releases, and event calendars that include the hosting of mega-events such as marathons, expos, and high-profile cultural happenings to enhance awareness and appeal of places as visitable and exciting destinations. According to Oliveira (2012), the number of sports and cultural events designed to attract visitors, tourists, and investors to places has multiplied many times over during the last twenty years. As Krupar and Al (2012) argue, "other common marketing strategies involve attracting feature films and television series to shoot episodes in the city. Cities go out of their way to accommodate film crews and companies, hoping that such depictions will attract mass media audiences' attention."

In addition to marketing events and advertising campaigns, cities also strategically transform the urban fabric to suit international investors' expectations and an affluent transnational middle-class lifestyle. As has been demonstrated by numerous examples, architecture and urban planning—when strategically used—play a vital role in the marketing of regions to attract residents, businesses, and tourists. In the last two decades, cities in the West, the Middle East, and the Far East have attracted much attention by constructing iconic developments, such as sports stadiums, convention centers, prestigious museums, art districts, commercial destinations, and polished heritage sites. Abu Dhabi, for example, gained much notoriety by constructing the Saadiyat Cultural District, which comprises five museums, including among other cultural facilities the Louvre Abu Dhabi, designed by star architect Jean Nouvel, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, designed by Frank Gehry, and the Sheikh Zayed National Museum by Foster + Partners. Dubai made headlines by building "Downtown Dubai," a mega-destination, which includes an array of superlatives such as the Burj Khalifa (the tallest tower in the world), adjacent to 'Dubai Mall' (the largest mall in the world) and the 'Dubai Fountains'

(the highest fountains in the world) - all constructed by prestigious international firms. Doha soon followed suit by reconstructing its entire downtown as an integrated walkable heritage district (Souq Waqif) while also building an array of spectacular cultural and leisure destinations, which include the National Museum, designed by Jean Nouvel, an OMA-designed library, and the Al Wakrah Stadium, designed by Zaha Hadid.

Urban branding and marketing campaigns then promote these urban interventions by using compelling images, catchphrases, and social media promotions that capture a particular place's highlights. Examples might include slogans such as "museum quarter," "cultural city," "creative city," "festival city," "waterfront city," each of which encapsulates a particular vision of a place. However, most frequently, place marketing entails a curated combination of multiple approaches, which might involve signature design, star architecture, heritage districts, and event hallmarking to substantiate and reinforce a city's image as "the" place to "live, work and play." Both architecture and urban planning constitute essential ingredients of city branding to craft the "right" image in the eyes of prospective visitors, tourists, and investors (external dimension). Perhaps, even more important, they are also necessary to create a meaningful and sustainable identity for current and prospective residents (internal dimension).

### Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Quality of Life Program

As part of its Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has developed a long-term plan to reduce the economy's dependence on petroleum by boosting investment in the private sector. The plan includes opening up new industries, most notably in the tourism sector, by capitalizing on its long-ignored historical and cultural treasures to create jobs for Saudi Arabia's booming population. Vision 2030 is prominently affiliated with King Salman's son Mohammed bin Salman – or 'MBS' – promoted to crown prince in 2017 and has branded him as a powerful forward-thinking ruler both within Saudi Arabia and internationally. As Kinnimont (2017) comments in her paper "Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract", Vision 2030 is not limited to economic issues. It includes many social and cultural aspects as well that are related to shaping a new image and perception of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the author notes that Vision 2030 "contains aspects that refer to relations between citizens and the state, which include promises of transparency, communications, and consultation with the public; more social freedoms, from entertainment to exercise; a narrative about an authentic society rooted in local traditions; a narrative about a "vibrant society," including a very cautious opening of space for civil society."

As the innovative application of knowledge and advanced technologies has become a central economic driver for shifting resources from an industry-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, education, diversification of the economy, and national prosperity become critical concerns within Saudi Arabia's vision document. Consequently, Vision 2030 promotes extensive reforms to the education system to come closer to creating a

knowledge society, which is ready and able to compete on the global map. Targeting a relatively young population where more than 30% are under the age of twenty-five, the strategy also implies a degree of social liberalization with its embedded "Quality of Life Program." The envisioned improvements include "developing an ecosystem to support citizens and residents' participation in cultural, leisure, and sports activities," along with implementing a



**Fig. 1:** Balloon rides at Tantara Festival (part of Saudi Seasons), Al Ula, Saudi Arabia.  
Source: SCTH.

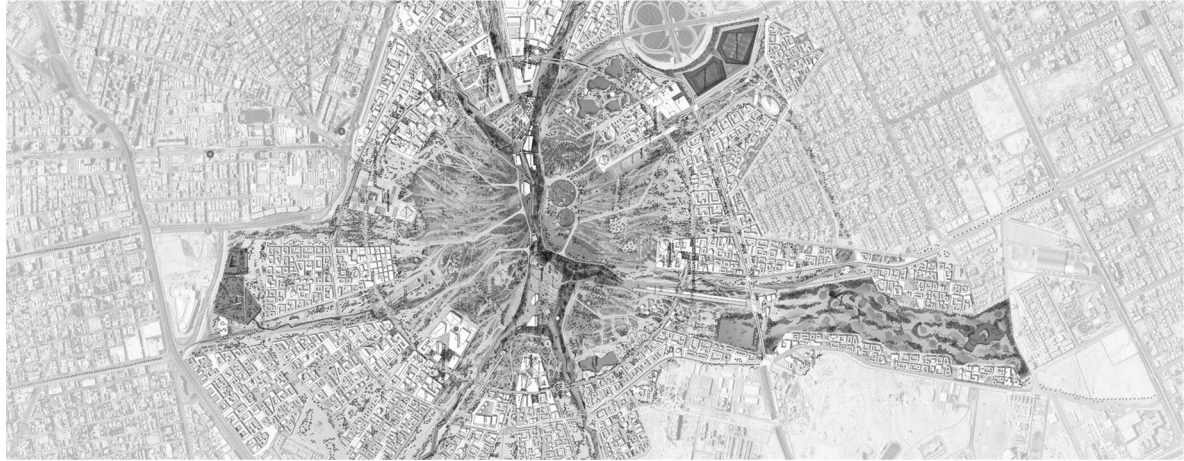


**Fig. 2:** As part of the country's plan to become a hotbed for tourism by 2030, Saudi Arabia's Amaala Resort is an ultra-luxury destination, located on the Red Sea's northwestern coast, hosting galleries, artist studios, and sculpture gardens.  
Source: Public Investment Fund.

cultural infrastructure. The intention is to construct a comprehensive lifestyle set-up that appeals to various social segments in different regions and a young urban aspiring Saudi middle class. By promoting active participation in leisure, cultural, and entertainment activities and by encouraging a culture of public life in general, the government seeks to foster an entrepreneurial spirit, particularly among young Saudis (currently mainly employed in governmental sectors) to open creative ventures and to improve the image of Saudi cities nationally and abroad. As Kinnimont (2017) remarks, "To boost the country's image, a large volume of interviews and articles, across Arab and Western media, with and about Mohammed bin Salman and Vision 2030 have focused substantial international attention on Saudi Arabia's ambitions to open up, develop and modernize" and "international public relations efforts are important as vehicles to attract international investment, especially at a

time when Saudi officials perceive their international image as having hit a low point while smaller Gulf states, notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have benefited from more successful international marketing and branding efforts."

### Tourism and Place Marketing



**Fig. 3:** Covering 13.3 square kilometers, King Salman Park is conceived as a mega-destination, comprising various ecological, cultural, recreational, and sports attractions, integrating with several mixed-use and residential districts. Source: Omrania.

A related target of Vision 2030 is to position one or more Saudi cities within the world's best 100 cities. To meet this goal entails a substantial makeover of most Saudi cities to become more open in terms of their cultural offerings by building parks, museums, art galleries, and entertainment venues and by significantly upgrading public transport and urban infrastructures in general. In parallel, it calls for effective place marketing strategies to promote this endeavor on a national and international scale to convince skeptics within the country and worldwide.

In the past three decades, the Saudi government has undertaken numerous regional planning tasks to develop its thirteen regions. Guided by the aim to reduce disparities between cities and rural areas and distribute resources for a more balanced development, regional planning has again become a big concern under Vision 2030 (Almughairi 2019). New strategies have been set in place that aim to create a national and international tourist industry to generate jobs, keep more of the money spent on tourism within the country's borders, and promote Saudi Arabia as a new frontier for world-class tourism. With these goals at the forefront, Saudi Arabia currently works on several regional plans that incorporate the creation of large-scale entertainment, mostly in the form of theme parks, resort areas, the preparation of various notable heritage sites, and an extensive program of cultural institutions such as libraries, art institutions, and museums. These planning initiatives are coupled effectively with place marketing and public relations. With media campaigns aimed at an international audience, Saudi Arabia brands each of its regions "as a destination like no other." Through curated mega-events and sophisticated social media promotions, a new national image portrays a mix of stylish Arabian hospitality, ancient heritage sites, and upscale entertainment. To disseminate the message of a "new

Saudi Arabia" strategically across the web, the Kingdom's tourism board and a program called "Gateway" organized supervised trips for famous travel bloggers and influencers who started posting pictures from various Saudi regions, praising the country's beauty. The influencer Lana Rose who lives in Dubai, told her 1.6 million followers that "visiting Saudi Arabia felt like Disney's Aladdin come to

life" (Lorenz, 2019). According to the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, British and Chinese tourists were the top international visitors, with approximately 140,000 people requesting tourist visas. This number is quite significant as Saudi Arabia had been one of the world's most challenging countries to visit, issuing visas only for business trips and religious pilgrimage for a very long time (Nereim, 2019).

Along with the newly developed national tourism campaign, the government launched a place marketing initiative called the "Saudi Seasons" in 2019. This event program consists of a sequenced annual event program that showcases and promotes each region with a series of government-sponsored themed entertainment, cultural, art, and sports events. The program also highlights each region's heritage sites and natural features by spotlighting designated places through various art, music, and cultural events. Each of the Saudi Seasons lasts for approximately one to two months. The selected locations transform into grand spectacles with concerts, fireworks, light shows, and other forms of large-scale entertainment. Meanwhile, the Saudi Seasons are also backed by a significant P.R. engine that promotes Saudi Arabia on an international scale within the Middle East and especially to Western countries guided by the aspiration to reform the country's image while inspiring tourism within the various regions. A digital App facilitates bookings and informs prospective visitors about events and accommodations while also providing a link to tourist visas' seamless issuance.

The Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage highlighted the centrality of the "Saudi Seasons 2019" in the country's tourism sector's activation while also boosting related service sectors and providing temporary and permanent jobs. One representative noted that the

"Saudi Seasons 2019 aimed to raise citizens' living conditions and build a vital society," which is a key value of the Quality of Life Program. The program also drew attention to Saudi Arabia's tourist attractions, including "fascinating scenery, the long-standing Arab culture, ancient historical sites, and advanced infrastructures," to raise the domestic expenditure, while boosting economic activity" ("Launching the Saudi Seasons," 2019). By raising international awareness of the country's heritage through a curated mix of large-scale festivals and cultural events, one of the Saudi Seasons' long-term goal is to promote the restoration of the country's numerous historical and heritage sites, many of which are not commonly known internationally. A related goal is to register them with UNESCO if they are not registered already. For example, a crucial effort has been expended to publicize the historic city of Al Ula, which is situated next to the Nabatean site of Madinah-Saleh (already registered with UNESCO). The "Winter at Tantora Festival" linked to the Saudi Seasons, promoted this ancient site through spectacular balloon rides and unique outdoor experiences ranging from large scale art installations, music performances to fine dining experiences in nature ("X marks the spot," 2019).

### Mega Destinations as Catalysts

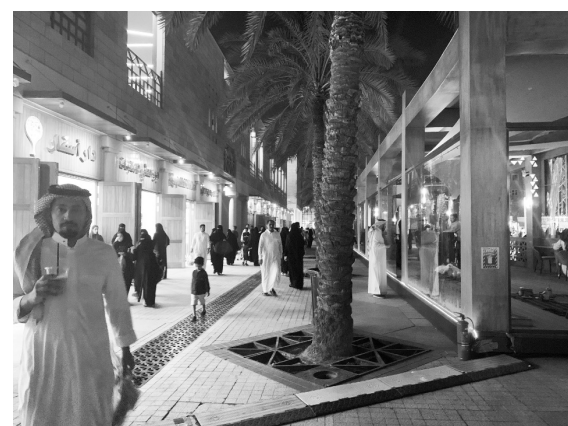
In parallel to this extensive event program, government officials launched a Saudi Cities Program to create a framework for a sustainable urban future in Saudi Arabia following international standards (Saudi Future Cities Program, 2020). According to Short (2013), place marketing, when viewed in a global context, entails urban spatial change that is signposted by cultural ensembles that are designed by signature architects and "enacted in global spectacles" (Short, 2013). Consequently, as part of its 2030 Vision, the Kingdom has expended large sums of money in crafting iconic urban destinations that prepare Riyadh and other Saudi cities for the post-carbon era and reposition their image as the next big destination for tourism. The framework's main pillars suggest a new form of urbanism following globally established standards for sustainable growth, compacted settlements, transit-oriented urban development, walkability, and mixed-use urban centers. Guided by the aim to transform Saudi cities and municipalities into people-friendly places, streamlined urban environments are being designed to attract high-profile national and international human capital with the prospect of considering Riyadh and other Saudi cities as quality places to "visit, live, and work." In this regard, many government-sponsored megaprojects have been announced in the last two years since MBS rose to power, motivated by the goal to change the face of the Kingdom and provide jobs. These projects nationwide include Neom, a future cross-border mega-city in the Tabuk Province of northwestern Saudi Arabia, which plans to incorporate smart city technologies into a futuristic live/work and tourism destination. Other grand touristic developments include the Red Sea Project. This large-scale uber-luxury resort area seeks to leverage the Red Sea's natural beauty and mountainous backcountry for high-end tourism. Jean Nouvel's Sharaan resort in Al-Ula and Amaala are other large-scale high-end resort areas near the Red Sea's northwestern coast. Qiddiya, comprised of large-scale theme parks on Riyadh's outskirts, is



**Fig. 4:** A calendar of nightly events spotlights various underexposed sites of the city. Photograph by author, 2020.



**Fig. 5:** Riyadh Season. Light projection and music transform the squares around the Masmak castle into nightly event spaces. Photograph by author, 2020.



**Fig. 6:** Pop-up restaurants, market stalls, and cafes transform Riyadh's historic downtown into a hip social gathering space. Photograph by author, 2020.

designed as a family entertainment city that primarily targets local and regional visitors.

### Composing the New Riyadh Brand



**Fig. 7:** At-Turaif, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, bordering Riyadh, transformed into a nightly event site during the Diriyah Season. Photograph by author, 2020.



**Fig. 8:** An example of Najd mudbrick architecture in At Turaif opened to the public after an extensive restoration in December of 2019. Photograph by author, 2020.



**Fig. 9:** Salwa Palace, restored as an extensive outdoor museum with a series of indoor galleries, sprawls across 10,000 sq/m. The walls of Salwa Palace were animated by artistic projections during the Diriyah Season. Photograph by author, 2020.

The coupling of place marketing with large-scale planning initiatives also applies in Riyadh, the country's capital city, which is also the government's seat. Until recently, Riyadh has held a somewhat jaundiced image as a rather conservative and close-minded city for work with not much public space to play and socialize. To revise this image according to the government's mandate, Riyadh launched the biggest entertainment event of the Saudi Seasons: the "Riyadh Season." The Riyadh Season encompassed many events, including an array of concerts with international stars, cultural events, dining experiences, and theatrical happenings, many of which took place at underexposed inner-city sites of historical significance that are rarely visited by the Saudi middle class. Through curated nightly experiences, many Saudis rediscovered these locales that were reinvented and transformed into a casual, colorful public realm. Cultural and artistic activities, along with musical performances and light shows, suggested a new type of social lifestyle, which manifested many of the Quality of Life program's principles as a direct extension of the Vision 2030.

To amplify its impact further, the Riyadh Season combined with yet another separate "Season" for the Kingdom's ancient capital Diriyah, which lies just on the outskirts of proper Riyadh city and is home of At-Turaif, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While news channels did not publish visitor numbers on the Diriyah Season, Riyadh's multi-location festival hosted over 5 million visitors in its first three weeks alone. People from the surrounding districts and the region flooded the various event sites in part to enjoy the official entertainment, but more often also just to see and be seen, meet, and simply to enjoy a social atmosphere in a public space. Above anything else, this two-month event transformed a quiet and restrained urban fabric into a place of active social exchange and entrepreneurship. Besides attending different cultural and entertainment events, people had a reason to have informal gatherings by walking through impromptu markets, cafes, and outdoor lounges dotted with unique food stands and exhibits. The General Entertainment Authority - the government body in charge of such festivals in the Kingdom - revealed that Riyadh Season generated \$270 million in revenues, attracting 10.3 million visitors and providing over 34,700 jobs. These factors, combined with longer-term strategies to rebuild the urban realm, are expected to build a positive contemporary image of the capital among young Saudis and raise its international profile and status among foreigners overseas (Nabbout, 2019).

On the planning side, the ambition of the Riyadh program is to transform the city from a composition of isolated car-driven neighborhoods into a network of connected walkable districts, which would enhance social integration, walkability, and public life in general (all Quality-of-Life criteria) in the longer term. The new metro system, which is currently under construction, will undoubtedly play a big role in this endeavor as a significant connector with five lines that reach most of the city's extent. In addition to the renovation and urban renewal of several inner-city sites, a further extension of Wadi Hanifa, the city's valley, is also planned, which has been redesigned as a large-scale public recreational park zone over the past ten years.





**Fig. 10:** Riyadh Green – Vision of Downtown Cultural District, featuring cultural facilities built in the traditional style surrounded by extensive parkscapes. Courtesy of Riyadh Green.



**Fig. 11:** Sports Boulevard conceived as a public spine for pedestrians and cyclists cutting across the city with spanning 30 km from Al Olab Dam in Historical Diyarlah (north) to Al Madina Al Monawara Road (south). Courtesy of Riyadh Almasar.



**Fig. 12:** Example of a large-scale public sculpture, which is part of an extensive cultural program covering Riyadh's entire urban area with more than 1000 interactive installation artworks and landmarks. Courtesy of HWKN.

## Heritagescapes and brandscapes: the case of Diriyah

Another on-going urban destination in the making is presented by the renovation and expansion of Diriyah - the Kingdom's ancient capital - into a comprehensive touristic mixed-use destination. Located on Riyadh's outskirts, Diriyah was founded in 1446 on the banks of the Wadi Hanifah. As communities grew around this valley, Diriyah developed into a central gathering point in the Najd Region because of the unifying efforts led by Mohammad bin Saud and Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdul Wahab. Diriyah comprises Al Bujairi and At-Turaif districts, both significant landmarks in establishing the first Saudi state in 1744. At-Turaif was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2010 and is recognized as one of the world's largest mudbrick cities. For many decades this historical city was sealed off to the general public and lay in ruins until 2010 when the government decided to renovate the area and preserve it according to UNESCO standards. Since then, many of the mudbrick ruins have been stabilized and rebuilt with traditional techniques. Various historical courtyard homes were restored and repurposed as a souk for demonstration, traditional crafts, and foods. In 2018, as part of the Vision 2030, the aim expanded to transform this site into a world-class destination with the Diriyah Gate Authority's formation. Spearheaded by Jerry Inzerillo, a celebrated New York visionary recognized for his innovation in high-end hospitality, tourism, and entertainment, the Diriyah Gate Authority has been working on escalating Diriyah into a "Cultural and Lifestyle Tourism Destination." Guided by the mission to "celebrate Saudi history, culture, and traditions through art, music, fashion, and entertainment for guests of all ages" (DGDA, 2020), the seven sq. km mixed-use project will comprise a collection of museums and galleries in addition to a range of luxury and lifestyle retail brands, large-scale sports and entertainment facilities as well cafes and restaurants. Leading luxury hospitality brands, including Aman Resorts, will be located near the already established Formula-E racetrack and a 15,000-seat arena for international sporting events (Diriyah Gate Project, 2020). The 2019 Diriyah Season, in many ways, branded the site with temporary themes that anticipated what is now in the process of being developed as a permanent tourist destination. The mega-event introduced different themes for different user groups, which are included as permanent programs in the urban masterplan of the Diriyah destination. These included "Diriyah Oasis", a large amusement park with family attractions. "Discover Diriyah" featured large sports events from a boxing championship to Formula E-racing, a tennis cup, and an equestrian festival. The "Bujairi Experience" comprised fashion events by local and international designers at the "Diriyah Design area", and a "fine dining experience" featuring an array of high-end pop-up restaurants (Diriyah Season, 2020). All event sites were animated by atmospherics that included choreographed lighting and sound effects, music, and projections transforming the various locations into nuanced sensory environments.

This branding strategy, which uses temporary events to build excitement before a completed destination opens to the public, is commonly used in high-end real-estate ventures worldwide, as illustrated, for example, by Smith (2014) and Grodach and Ehrenfeucht (2015). One example is the conversion and expansion of the iconic Battersea power station in London into a large-scale thriving mixed-use district. This mega-destination completed the construction of its first phase in 2020 with three more construction phases to complete (Battersea Power Station, 2020). During these construction phases, the marketing team keeps the public engaged by hosting pop-up shows, light spectacles, outdoor events, and exhibitions, which also include a self-guided heritage trail that visitors can tour. By having regular events at phased large-scale construction sites, the intent is not to make people wait for the final completed project but rather to include them as actors in an on-going process. This process-oriented technique of staging unique events and experiences forms an integral part of place marketing to build-up a cumulative hype for potential investors, visitors, and residents. Following this strategy, the Saudi government, in parallel to hosting temporary events, builds excitement by announcing architectural signature projects in successive intervals that include the Urban Heritage Museum Administration Center, an iconic structure designed by Zaha Hadid Architects, and the Addiriyah Contemporary Art Center, which was recently won by the Italian firm Schiattarella Associati Associates.

As Sklair and Gherardi (2012) argue in their paper "iconic architecture as a hegemonic project of the transnational capitalist class," the conservation of the historic urban landscape and the construction of iconic architectures are synergetic expressions of a demand for the same "global urban product," aiming at creating a cosmopolitan image. By merging the historic structures' conservation with the construction of new iconic institutions designed by international star-architects, the Diriyah Gate Authority seeks to maximize the brand appeal of what is already a UNESCO certified heritage site. Through a combination of staged heritagescapes (Di Giovine, 2009) and brandscapes (Klingmann, 2010) into a complex and hyper-sophisticated urban product, heritage and iconic modern buildings become reciprocally supportive in promoting the expansion of Diriyah as a world-class destination.

### Quality-of-Life and well-being destinations

More recently, government officials announced four ambitious giga-projects within central Riyadh, which are known as "King Salman Park," "Sports Boulevard," "Green Riyadh," and "Riyadh Art." The four projects' concept is to showcase and implement the Saudi Vision 2030's "Quality of Life" Program in the urban realm on a grand scale to solidify the colloid between physical creation and social behaviour patterns, initiated through the Saudi Seasons. According to the government, this four-tiered initiative aims to "significantly improve the lives of its citizens, transform the city into an attractive destination, and make it one of the world's most liveable cities." Simultaneously, it aligns with the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, "to create sustainable cities and communities, driving urgent action against climate change" ("Riyadh's ambitious \$23bn program," 2019). All

four "Wellbeing Projects" are targeted at "improving Saudis' way of life" by providing various new leisure opportunities in a city that currently lacks such amenities. They are also regarded as urban catalysts to open up Saudis' reclusive lifestyles by encouraging more physical activity, leisure, and out-of-home entertainment in the conservative capital. All four grand projects together seek to embrace globally established formulas of sustainability by promoting a greener, healthier environment, presenting envisioned milestones in making Riyadh a recognized sustainable city – "one that will enhance the lives of its citizens while finding solutions to the difficult challenges facing all cities across the world today" (Saudi Future Cities Program (2020).

### Green Riyadh

The Riyadh Green project is arguably one of the most ambitious urban forestation projects in the world. The intention is to plant 7500,000 trees in a city of seven million people, which would equate to growing more than one tree for every person in the capital, increasing vegetation coverage in Riyadh from the current 1.5% to 9.1% in 2030. ("First phase of Riyadh Green," 2019). The program aims to strategically grow the quality and quantity of all vegetation in urban and suburban settings and develop an interconnected network of green areas, seeking to enhance the urban ecosystem. Using a diversity of local tree species, which can survive in the Riyadh environment, the forestation initiative plans to cover car-parking sites, healthcare facilities, government facilities, schools, university campuses, mosques, and 16,400 km of road and street spaces. (Egis Group, 2020). The vegetation, which creates over 1000 km of green belts along utility lines, will be watered by recycled water from an irrigation network with the expectation to improve air quality and lower air temperatures in Riyadh. The Riyadh Green Program also includes establishing 48 parks in the capital and over 3000 parks within residential neighbourhoods in the effort of promoting Riyadh as a sustainable world-class "garden city." (Riyadh Green, 2019)

### Sports Boulevard: Health & Walkability

Sports Boulevard encompasses a 135km long axis that bisects the city from east to west, connecting the Hanifah Valley in the west of the town with the Al Sai Valley in the east. The project seeks to encourage Riyadh's citizens to follow a healthy lifestyle by exercising and participating in different sports, mainly by walking, cycling, and horse riding. (Riyadh Adhalmasar (2019) The project intends to create a rich cultural, environmental, and recreational ambiance by introducing various events and activities aligned with the goals of Vision 2030 and the Quality-of-Life Program to increase regular participation in athletic activities. Conceived as an urban green corridor that runs alongside underutilized urban spaces, the Sports Boulevard flows under raised inner-city highways and next to the metro line's elevated part. The intention is to create a vast pedestrianized spine through the city that connects various neighbourhoods and links with numerous attractions that include art districts, sculpture gardens, an open waterway filled with treated greywater, public plazas, green gathering spaces, outdoor cinemas, and designated areas for live music. At the Western end of the city, this public corridor terminates at an iconic sports



tower, which is designed as a high-rise building with areas for different indoor sports that stack on top of each other. ("Sports Boulevard," 2019). This extensive urban intervention showcases the Kingdom's Quality-of-Life mandate in the form of a public destination that seeks to increase the public participation in sports activities while at the same time offering opportunities to walk and socialize in a pedestrian-oriented atmosphere, which to this day are rare in the car-oriented urban fabric of Riyadh.

### Riyadh Art

Meanwhile, the 'Riyadh Art' project envisions to transform the capital into a global cultural hub. Based on Vision 2030, the program seeks to grow Saudi Arabia's contribution to arts and culture by employing an extensive masterplan that covers the entire urban area of Riyadh with more than 1000 interactive art installations and landmarks. These will be created by local and international artists, architects, and landscape architects and distributed at vital urban nodes. Commissioned by the Royal Commission of Riyadh (RDA), this project emphasizes the city's position as a global art destination by "combining modernity and authenticity to meet the Kingdom's Vision 2030" ("1,000 artworks installation," 2019). New York firm HWKN worked in a consortium with UAP and London-based Futurecity to design this extensive masterplan with ten programs covering residential neighbourhoods, gardens, parks, public squares, and transit stations. The project also envisions the building of galleries for well-known artists in designated city squares, unusual playgrounds in neighbourhood gardens designed by famous artists, the installation of upscale artworks across the city, cultural tourist destinations, and creative city gateways, located at the entrances of Riyadh. An installation of sculptures at significant traffic intersections and bus stations together with unique pedestrian bridges will strengthen the city's connectivity and encourage citizens to walk. Through Riyadh Arts, the Kingdom expects to gain much publicity in the art world, which might help attract creative talent and market Riyadh as a cultural destination internationally and nationally.

### King Salman Park: Recreation

Conceived as a new green heart for Riyadh (Omrana, 2019), the King Salman Park master plan is perhaps the most significant of the four projects. Utilizing Riyadh's former military airport base to build a large-scale lifestyle destination, the development will showcase an extensive ecological park loaded with activities as its centre node to boost local and foreign tourism and enhance Riyadh's visibility on the regional and international map. Designed by the Riyadh firm Omrania in collaboration with Henning Larsen, a Danish firm, the park's masterplan comprises a mix of residential compounds, hospitality, and retail around a large public park, including several educational, cultural, and entertainment facilities. Several metro stations and bus rapid transit stations will serve this destination. Its internal "urban loop," or circular promenade, will connect seven museums, including an aviation museum, an astronomy- and space museum, a science museum, a horticultural museum, a virtual reality museum, and an architecture museum. The park itself consists of a circular arrangement with a series of

branching valleys, water features, and gardens that emanate from the site's center. Green areas and open spaces will encourage walking, cycling, and rest, while several plazas will host outdoor cultural and entertainment events (see also Alsammarae, 2019).

The park will also provide an arts and entertainment section that will include a national theatre, an open-air theatre, and several cinemas. Among its sports facilities will be a massive golf course, a sports complex, a games area, and a water sports section. Through a combination of impressive ecological features, entertainment facilities, shopping, and cultural offerings, King Salman Park seeks to promote a large-scale, leisure- and health-oriented "lifestyle community" that implements many of the Quality of Life programme's top-down objectives that include the provision of high-quality entertainment, culture, and sports. Above all, King Salman presents one of the world's largest parks in the heart of the city that is expected to draw people from the greater Riyadh Area as well as visitors, ex-pats, and international tourists.

The question with the above megaprojects is, of course, if, when, and to what extent they will be realized. While the plans succeeded in impressing the media nationally and abroad, the main concern is how much of Vision 2030 and its associated economic action plans will actually be implemented. The collapse in global economic activity caused by the Covid-19 crisis, the subsequent crash in oil prices, and higher deficits have raised questions about the prospects for Vision 2030 and the Saudi projects sector, making it less likely that authorities can increase spending on infrastructure. Policymakers and economists alike are already trying to manage expectations by saying in interviews and conversations that if Saudi Arabia meets 70 percent, or even 50 percent, of Vision 2030's goals, this will be excellent progress. Meanwhile, most of the Kingdom's megaprojects have their timelines already extended due to the austerity measures the government recently instituted in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis (see Tricaud, 2020).

Another potential challenge could be that Saudi Arabia might be faced with internal questions in how far Vision 2030 is actually a national project aimed at a Saudi constituency and how far it is to impress an international audience. Kinnimont (2017) comments that Gulf economists have, for some time, expressed skepticism about strategic 'Vision' documents written with massive input from the major international management consultancies, without public consultation and debate on these issues." This also holds for the planning services of the urban infrastructure and planning projects. While Jerry Inzerillo, the CEO of the Diriyah Gate authority, emphasizes that almost all of their staff is Saudi, the consultants they hire are international to an overwhelming degree. Nearly all commissions for the grand projects have been awarded to multinational, mostly Anglo-Saxon planning and construction companies. Consequently, local Saudi mid to small-size planning firms to-date are given little stake in shaping Riyadh and other Saudi cities' future environments.



**Fig. 13:** Covering 13.3 square kilometers, King Salman Park is designed to be the largest urban park in the world, comprising a variety of ecological, cultural, recreational, and sports amenities. The park landscape's circular form branches out into a series of valleys (inspired by Saudi Arabia's seasonally dry wadi river beds) that infiltrate the surrounding urban fabric. Courtesy Omrania.

### Riyadh – towards a Global City?

Short (2013) argues that while the globalizing project of cities might vary in detail according to their respective context, it is also characterized by many similarities. Shaped by new nationalisms, a neoliberal agenda, and a self-conscious global look and feel, the globalizing project, according to Short, includes a reimagining of the city, which in turn commands a rewriting of the city for external and internal audiences, whereby the hosting of events helps to institute its program. Furthermore, several researchers including Sassen (2001), Helmy (2008), Sklair and Gherardi (2012), and Gravari-Barbas (2016) demonstrated that globality is followed by its symbols, among which large-scale events and iconic architecture are commonly used. As this paper has demonstrated, Riyadh is implementing these principles by rewriting the city's cultural, economic, and social context through the Vision 2030's Quality of Life Program, the launch of mega-events, and the building of emblematic spectacles.

Any city that aspires to become part of the "world cities" (Sassen 2001; Short 2004) is furthermore expected to construct internationally recognized buildings by "starchitects." And as Gravari-Barbas (2016) argues, "contemporary cities are characterized by policies expressing a simultaneous attachment for urban heritage and a fascination for iconic architectural projects." This reciprocal relationship, as illustrated by the case studies, is expressed in Riyadh's urban planning strategies, where heritage sites and new iconic developments are expanded and - in the case of Diriyah - merged to become emblematic mega-destinations. Abiding by globally established marketing formulas to maximize brand appeal, these destinations' core aim is to attract international attention, tourism, and human capital, particularly in the high-tech and producer service sectors. In addition, all of the proposed Saudi mixed-use destinations are marketed as one-of-a-kind experiences that speak to the envisioned lifestyle for a young, educated, and progressive Saudi middle class. Architecture and planning become vital tools of a cultural and economic transformation that implements the Vision 2030 documents' objectives by setting the stage for an urban ecosystem that boosts citizens' and residents'

participation in cultural and sports activities. A mix of large-scale cultural attractions, boutique districts, bicycle- and jogging trails, and branded retail that synergize the four 'C's' of culture, consumption, cool, and cosmopolitan, seek to promote a contemporary urban lifestyle. As emblematic megaprojects are employed as urban catalysts that are strategically positioned to put Riyadh and - by extension Saudi Arabia - on the international map, they follow the prescriptive formula of a transnational, cosmopolitan class, eager to integrate its activities, both regular (work or housing) and periodic (tourism), into places that bring symbolic added-value to their lifestyles. By producing exclusive urban landscapes characterized both by "world-status heritage" and "world-status star-architecture," government officials create a new interpretation of the local while mobilizing the global by integrating their efforts into the worldwide network of the international firms and star architects who build these projects. In parallel, social media and marketing campaigns target local and international tourism and suitable professional classes, which are envisioned to consume the new "global" Riyadh brand.

### Conclusion

While Saudi Arabia's mega-events along with the announcement of spectacular mega-destinations have undoubtedly spurred much curiosity in the global media, much of their long-term credibility will rest on the successful integration of place branding 'from above' and branding 'from below' to be able to sustain interest from a broad mix of internal and external audiences. This means that urban branding and planning must go beyond the notion of spectacle and publicity campaigns connecting to the locally existing place-based identity (Savage et al. (2005). In terms of branding, this would mean that top-down market-driven initiatives must be successfully combined with the community's own social, economic, and cultural aspirations. Consequently, according to Jensen (2005), there is a need to take urban branding out of governmental offices and corporate quarters and into the local and regional public. This means that the Vision 2030's Quality of Life program as the guiding document for the country's envisioned image ought to emphasize and encourage bottom-up strategies that include public participation, voice, tolerance of difference, and the protection of minorities as the new rationale and value base for place marketing as a regional growth agenda (see also Biancini and Ghilardi, 2007). As researchers, including Dyer and Certomà (2017), Liu, Dupre, Jin and Weaver (2019), and Li, Zhang, Hui, and Lang (2020) have emphasized, we need to build socially inclusive processes of reimagining the city to avoid the risk of brand alienation. Not just to invoke social and spatial justice in the city, but as Jensen (2005) has pointed out, also because all evidence seems to suggest that a 'city of difference' has the potential of real innovation and news contributions to the economy. Inclusive branding and planning strategies result from public dialogues based not on the strictly top-down pursuit of the "public interest" but on the politics of inclusion and mandatory negotiation. As Dormans and Lagendijk (2004) have commented more than a decade ago, "genuine inclusion can only be reached when, after a period of intense and open dialogue, coalitions are formed that bring together the various voices present in a city." It is in this field of tension between the 'official culture' and

the 'other' urban cultures that there is scope for more inclusive types of interventions (Thomsen (1996) that address the broader urban context and account for different voices to be heard. According to Kern and Bolay (2014) and Liu et al. (2019, 2020), this links to the issues of the complex dialectics of material space and discursive representation of different social and economic classes. By creating a more participatory and inclusive dynamic in its urban planning and branding processes through consultation and negotiation between the government, private developers, and the public, Riyadh (and by extension Saudi Arabia) may be able to strike the right balance between, on the one hand, the need to develop proactive and focused strategies of global positioning and, on the other, the sustaining of inclusive dialogue with its urban and regional communities. A representation of pluralistic interests by means of consultation and active participation would not only lead to a greater sense of pride and legitimacy of these urban mega-destinations on behalf of Saudi Arabia's citizens but could also serve as an inspiration to other centralized systems of government in the GCC on how to fully involve inhabitants in the decision-making process of urban development projects to set a precedent for a more sustainable and inclusive environment.

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### Keywords

city branding, placemaking, urban renewal, urban destinations, place marketing, urban planning, heritage, tourism, signature architecture