CultureSummit Abu Dhabi closes by proposing creative ideas for change

A final day of panel sessions and performances ended with key takeaways and proposed solutions

Press Release

- HE Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak (https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/in-the-news/Mohamed_Khalifa_Al_Mubarak/2751846456/), Chairman, Department of Culture and Tourism (https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/company/Department_of_Culture_and_Tourism-1002990/) - Abu Dhabi: “A major achievement of CultureSummit has been the unifying of goals; we are poised to make a real difference to the future, moving from wishing to doing.”

- Alexandra Munroe, Senior Curator, Asian Art, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum; Interim Director, Curatorial Affairs, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi: “We are at a critical point of shift; a time of radical cultural, technological and political revolution. We must formulate a new social contract, a call to action that starts with ourselves.”

- Tim Marlow, Artistic Director, Royal Academy of Arts: “Listening is critical, rather than being offended and shutting other voices and opinions out. I believe that articulation of difference is important, and empathy does not preclude disagreement.”

- Anna Paolini, UNESCO Representative in the Arab States of the Gulf and Yemen: “The voice of the youth has been a major theme of the summit, and participation from different age groups is something to consider for next year’s event.”

- John Prideaux, US Editor, The Economist: “The UAE holds a unique position in hosting these conversations, and this event probably could not have taken place elsewhere in the region.”

Abu Dhabi: The third edition of CultureSummit Abu Dhabi has come to an end, with its inspiring schedule of panel sessions, interactive workshops, and artistic performances resulting in creative ideas and outcomes that will be translated into tangible positive change. Organised by Department of Culture and Tourism (https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/company/Department_of_Culture_and_Tourism-1002990/) - Abu Dhabi (DCT Abu Dhabi), the event took place from 7 - 11 April at Manarat Al Saadiyat (https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/in-the-news/Al_Saadiyat/2142962057/) in Abu Dhabi.

Over five days, CultureSummit Abu Dhabi 2019 presented a dynamic series of panel discussions and interactive workshops around the topics of art, media, heritage, museums, and technology, as well as cultural performances and networking events. This edition’s theme of ‘Cultural Responsibility & New Technology’ addressed questions of how cultural agents can be more engaged in addressing global challenges, and how creativity and technology may be harnessed for positive change.

The final day’s programming began with the session Can we burst the bubble? Moderated by John Prideaux, US Editor of The Economist, the panel examined how the rise of social media has broadened the distribution of media content but also made it easier for people to exist in an echo chamber, with potentially dangerous consequences for themselves and society at large. Participants questioned how governments, media companies and tech firms might work to promote dialogue and the genuine exchange of ideas.

- Jason Leavy, Managing Director, MENA, VICE Media posited that net effect of social and digital media is the exponential expansion of influence. VICE started as a print magazine with limited influence, but digital completely changed the game. He noted that conversations are no longer owned by the traditional media institutions, but rather belong to everyone now. New platforms can provide a counter-narrative, and enable a type of global education, as previously unheard voices now have the tools to tell their own stories and access previously unreachable audiences. This is something that certainly should be celebrated. The most crucial goal for media agents is to reach the right audiences, but there is also the ethical dimension – ensuring different viewpoints are represented, but also making sure that they are valid in this age of ‘fake news’. In modern life,
are overwhelmed with information but do not always have the means to analyse; we are “information rich, but insight poor”. He believes that tech giants have a role and responsibility to perform checks and balances where possible, to ensure the information they are disseminating is credible. He also noted the change in consumption habits, and how VICE has had to adapt and adjust their content to reflect this.

- **Amani Al-Khatatbeh, Founder and Editor, MuslimGirl.com** spoke about how she founded her platform, MuslimGirl.com, as a reaction to rampant Islamophobia in the US post-9/11. It was created to be the safe space that she couldn’t find in real life, somewhere for young Muslim women to connect and find others like them, and figure out together how to navigate modern life as Muslim woman. It also became somewhere this audience could develop their own identities, something that this generation had been robbed of due to the imposition of certain narratives by much of the mainstream media. She spoke to the vital support that the site has received from important platforms such as YouTube, and noted that the biggest revolution is that the rise of digital and social media has allowed people to tell their stories on their own terms. To this end, having trust in the platform is crucial. She also remarked that content is a gateway into globalising conversations for everyone, and spoke about the recent influx of non-Muslim visitors to the website, people wanting to engage and educate themselves, which shows the importance of these resources as a way of people taking the initiative to break themselves out of the echo chamber.

- **Joyce Baz, Head of PR & Communications Middle East & North Africa, Google** explained that Google’s basic mission is to connect people with the information they seek. They collaborate with publications from around the world to keep up with the news cycle, striving to deliver the most up to date, relevant and authoritative information to their users. She noted that platforms such as theirs are in a constant fight against misinformation. With the glut of content that exists, it is difficult for many platforms to keep up and to regulate it. She said that Google has had to course-correct as they go along, updated recommended videos, suggesting broader topics for readers; the process is a combination of human intervention and machine learning. Consumers need to be conscious of avoiding filter bubbles when searching for news, and the media needs to learn the balance of feeding relevant but responsible content. She said that she is optimistic that people and platforms will get better at navigating and managing the deluge of content, and noted that trust in content providers will be ever more important.

UNESCO recently stated that the protection of cultural heritage in crisis is not a luxury, but a fundamental humanitarian and security issue. **Which new actors for heritage in emergencies?** explored the gaps and opportunities associated with the pursuit of this idea.

- **Moderator Alessandra Borchi, Coordinator of the Heritage Emergency Fund, UNESCO**, opened the panel by reiterating that culture is not a luxury, but rather a key imperative; and posited that the importance of heritage is that it reveals the fabric of a society, fosters reconciliation, and promotes development. She explained the need not only for substantial financial resources, but also to involve all stakeholders involved in emergencies, even those not typically involved in the cultural domain. Both preventive and reactive measures should be implemented in the safeguarding of heritage.

- **Valery Freland, Executive Director, ALIPH** noted the gap between the massive destruction of heritage in recent years and the international response. Certainly, the lack of financial resources has contributed to this. He explained that ALIPH is the only organisation fully dedicated to the protection and restoration of heritage, and using these to build peace. ALIPH is a public/private partnership and can intervene both in cases of emergency and also work on less critical projects. Their ethos is to prevent, protect, and renovate. They are ready to work with NGOs and international organisations that are able to intervene in conflict areas, but it is difficult to find the right actors who have this ability. He feels that new implementations of instruments are needed, a new
Benjamin Charlier, Legal Adviser, Advisory Service on International Humanitarian Law, International Committee of the Red Cross, explained how his organisation, now 150 years old, is mandated to provide assistance to victims of armed conflict. He pointed out the difficulty of knowing the exact place of culture in international humanitarian law, although its importance is not in question; it is far more than the protection of stones and bricks. Heritage matters because it affects the lives of individuals and communities, representing their most fundamental values. There is no doubt that the protection of heritage is part of the fundamental values of laws dealing with armed conflict in general. He noted that history has shown over and over that war is the worst enemy of art and culture; deliberate attacks against them are now often part of war strategies, and are often precursors to mass atrocities against individuals and communities. He noted that the international legal framework around protection of property in armed conflict is comprehensive; as legal arsenal is there, the real issue is fostering new ways of respecting and implementing this arsenal. He advocated for preventative measures, saying that “it is in times of peace that you can best prepare for war”. The most important considerations in relation to taking action are coordination and humility from international actors.

Lieutenant-Colonel James Hancock, Partnership Directorate, NATO, noted that his organisation is the largest military alliance in world, and posited that the time is right to raise awareness of the issue of heritage protection both internally and externally. NATO tries to raise awareness and understanding among its 29 member nations of why the war on cultural identity is important. How we go about implementing cultural heritage protection measures is crucial. NATO has introduced education and training on this, which is now institutionalised in the armed forces of the 29 nations, but he feels it is also their responsibility to advocate externally too. They provide partners across the globe with programmes and training that includes this subject. He noted that the protection of cultural heritage resonates with NATO’s core values; preservation and protection of culture is ingrained in their mission. We cannot wait until post-conflict; restoration processes are made much easier when heritage was considered and protected as much as possible during the conflict.

Outside the specific legal frameworks in which individuals must operate, what are the cultural responsibilities of artists and writers, museums and academic institutions with regard to creative freedom - how much should we defend the right to offend? Moderated by Tim Marlow, Artistic Director of the Royal Academy of Arts, Can we debate freedom of expression? asked if context is always the key factor, or if there is a plausible universal moral code that should govern our attitudes towards censorship.

Artist Monica Narula, Founder of the Raqs Media Collective, believes that freedom of expression must be seen as part of the human experience. We must examine what the thresholds are that are permitted, that we negotiate in our everyday experience. Free speech is only as important as free listening. There is a freedom of negotiation in art practice and in curation, but often times having explicit rules makes these processes easier. Artists are free to express and to ‘unsettle’, but when they do this, they are choosing the terms by which they are unsettling things. There is also the question around ownership of stories – it is not just what is said, but how it is said and who says it. Then it is possible for it to be spoken of in multiple ways. She noted that we must also ask who has the right to speak of the future – those with ‘expertise’ or those who will be around to experience it?

Alexander Kellner, Director, National Museum (Rio de Janeiro) noted how broad the notion of ‘freedom of expression’. He believes we all have a responsibility to be accountable for what we express. Artists have to be fully free – sometimes even to annoy or offend – and thus it falls on museums and galleries to take responsibility for what they will show, taking into consideration their audiences and their mission. He believes that it is important for museums to sometimes show things that might not be hugely popular. While freedom of speech is crucial, and in theory everyone should be able to talk about anything, a real problem lies in trying to speak for those that have been victimised – we must respect the boundaries of our own lack of experience.

Artist Khaled Hourani expanded on the notions of freedom of speech and freedom to listen, to note that sometimes the freedom to be silent is just as important. He sees art as an opportunity to understand each other and generate hope for coming generations, not only in areas of conflict but everywhere. We must use freedom of speech responsibly, and one of the ways he often tries to express himself in his work is through humour, as this expression is universal. He noted that when there is no state, for instance in his home country of Palestine, it gives authority to everyone to start saying what they will. Of course freedom of expression is not always positive, he said, for instance when individuals or groups promote hate speech, but he personally feels the responsibility of using his art as a platform.
Following these was **Indexing Architecture**, a conversation between HE Sheikh Salem Al Qassimi, Assistant Undersecretary, Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development, UAE, and Kate Goodwin, Architect, Royal Academy of Arts, speaking to the documentation and preservation of architectural heritage.

- HE Sheikh Salem Al Qassimi noted that architecture is a major component in the broad definition of what we consider culture. Great importance is placed on sustaining and maintaining ancient heritage sites, but it is just as important to document and preserve underappreciated modern architecture. It is often maligned, but we are now realising the importance of architecture from the 1960s, 70s and 80s. In order to document it properly, we must put policies in place, and undertake proper research to understand which examples we need to be preserving. This has historically fallen under the responsibility of municipalities, but now the UAE is taking a look at this from a cultural perspective. He noted that the recently launched UAE Architecture Initiative is doing this, focusing on a programme of education, research, documentation tailor to focus on what is most important for UAE right now.

- Kate Goodwin agreed that architecture relates to culture in a very fundamental way; it is a social art, forming a huge part of everyday life. She noted that the Royal Academy was founded by artists and architects together. Architecture can be elevated into the realm of ideas and incorporated into bigger cultural conversations. As far as her institution’s practices, architectural aspects are focused on through programming, as naturally it is difficult to bring architecture into the gallery space. In considering modern architectural heritage, she noted the interesting parallel conversation in the UK, where similar to the UAE Architecture Initiative, experts are revisiting the value of buildings from the 1960s and 70s. She noted that architecture is often responding to its time, and asked how we edit and curate what is seen as valuable to tell these stories.

Wrapping up the CultureSummit programme, and reflecting on the insights and outcomes of the previous days, was the **Closing Panel and Remarks**. This final session featured representatives from the event’s organisers and cultural partners.

- **HE Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak** (https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/in-the-news/Mohamed-Khalifa-Al-Mubarak-2751846456/), Chairman, Department of Culture and Tourism (https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/company/Department_of_Culture_and_Tourism-1002990/) - Abu Dhabi: “A major achievement of CultureSummit has been the unifying of goals. Participants have been deciding the future by listening, giving, and collaborating, and are leaving with a unified strategy. What we have learned from each other will stay with us, and we are poised to make a real difference to the future – moving from wishing to doing. We have been inspired to talk to our networks, and encourage everyone we know to focus on issues from the summit and help us find real solutions.

“The UAE’s Founding Father, Sheikh Zayed, before he created the UAE, he built a museum. This museum told the history of the region, and how we are all connected. Our cultural connections are things we continue to cherish and celebrate, and it is in this spirit that we created CultureSummit. An overall takeaway from the summit is a feeling of great optimism; that these problems are all of our problems, and we are going to fix them together.”

- **Alexandra Munroe**, Senior Curator, Asian Art, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum; Interim Director, Curatorial Affairs, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi: “**I learned so much throughout this event; about connectivity, actively listening, and reconsidering my position in the world. A key takeaway is fluidity of thinking, and I truly believe that any problem can be solved by the coming together of passionate minds from differing geographical and professional spaces. We are at a critical point of shift; a time of radical cultural, technological and political revolution. At this moment of recalibration, we must formulate a new social contract, a call to action that starts with ourselves.**”

- **Tim Marlow**, Artistic Director, Royal Academy of Arts: “**Listening is critical, rather than being offended and shutting other voices and opinions out. I believe that articulation of difference is important, and empathy does not preclude disagreement. One takeaway for me is that institutions can’t be everything to everyone, and shouldn’t try to be. There is a balance to be struck between institutional expertise and listening to outside forces, and this is what cultural institutions should strive for.**”

- **Anna Paolini**, UNESCO Representative in the Arab States of the Gulf and Yemen
The voice of the youth has been a major theme of the summit, and participation from different age groups is something to consider for next year’s event. I believe the sessions have succeeded in establishing the importance and relevance of cultural heritage and the fundamental value it brings to people and societies. The last few days we have created new connections and new networks that will continue to move forward and address these critical issues.”

John Prideaux, US Editor, The Economist:

“The UAE holds a unique position in hosting these conversations, and this event probably could not have taken place elsewhere in the region. I am grateful for the opportunity to have taken part in CultureSummit. Freedom of expression was a theme we touched on, and this comes out of tolerance and empathy. At its best, culture itself is about empathy, getting us past our focus on the individual and thinking about our role in wider society. Culture connects us to each other and to a broad sweep of human history, and contributes to mankind’s best moments.”

Afternoon workshops took place throughout CultureSummit, brainstorming key issues through a cross-sectorial thinking process brought forward by the participants. They focused first on elaborating on the major questions posed in the plenary sessions, then on seeking answers, and finally developing ideas for concrete and impactful actions that may be taken by cultural leaders, artists, institutions, governments and other actors.

The insights and outcomes gleaned from four days of ground-breaking dialogue are:

- Exploring the development of new technology to create Virtual Reality (VR) museums to provide greater access to cultural heritage and art, including the establishment of a pilot project in a nation in the Global South;
- Establishing an innovative, paradigm-defining funding platform for talents and cultural practitioners to support financing models;
- Establishing an international digital heritage database to be shared among researchers and museum professionals; and
- Researching optimum metrics to determine the success of museums and cultural institutions.

These initiatives, to be discussed with the Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi and CultureSummit partners, are envisioned as leading to a series of working groups and satellite events, with the aim of presenting the results at CultureSummit Abu Dhabi 2020.

The artistic performances on CultureSummit’s final day were from the Rizwan-Muazzam Qawwali Group, a long-standing Pakistani Qawwali music band, and a demonstration of Al Ayyala, the traditional Emirati cultural performance.

CultureSummit Abu Dhabi is a unique global platform that brings together leaders in arts, heritage, media, museums, and technology to identify ways in which culture can play a pivotal role in raising awareness of global issues, building cultural bridges and promoting positive change. The event aims to determine an annual cultural agenda that will address the world's pressing challenges and provide practical solutions.

Under the theme ‘Cultural Responsibility & New Technology’, this year’s programme features panel discussions, performances and interactive workshops crafted in collaboration with five cultural partners representing influential sectors in the fields of media, heritage, arts, museums and technology.

CultureSummit 2019’s five partners are The Economist Events, providing expertise in discussing issues related to media, information and its policies; UNESCO, addressing the tangible and intangible role of heritage in societal change; the Royal Academy of Arts, confronting pressing issues from the international art world; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, exploring how museums can shape the future of culture; and Google, heading the technology stream to craft discussions related to technology’s impact on arts, culture and media.

Etihad Airways is the Official Airline Partner of CultureSummit Abu Dhabi 2019.

While CultureSummit Abu Dhabi is an invitation-only event, the public is invited to watch the livestreaming of the daytime performances and panel discussions via the website at www.culturesummitabudhabi.com.

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About CultureSummit Abu Dhabi
Culture Summit is a forum that convenes leaders from the worlds of the arts, museums, heritage, media, technology, education and public policy, to identify ways that culture can raise awareness, build bridges and promote positive change. The 2018 edition was attended by 400 delegates from 90 countries.

The Summit will take place at Manarat Al Saadiyat (https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/in-the-news/Al Saadiyat/2142962057/), Saadiyat Cultural District in Abu Dhabi, with events and tours scheduled exclusively for participants.


The Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi conserves and promotes the heritage and culture of the Abu Dhabi emirate and leverages them in the development of a world-class, sustainable destination of distinction that enriches the lives of visitors and residents alike. The Department manages the emirate’s tourism sector and markets the destination internationally through a wide range of activities aimed at attracting visitors and investment. Its policies, plans and programmes relate to the preservation of heritage and culture, including protecting archaeological and historical sites and to developing museums, including the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Zayed National Museum and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. The Department of Culture and Tourism supports intellectual and artistic activities and cultural events to nurture a rich cultural environment and honour the emirate’s heritage. A key role played by the Department is to create synergy in the destination’s development through close co-ordination with its wide-ranging stakeholder base.

About the Economist Events

Economist Events hosts over 80 events annually across more than 30 countries on topics that convene world-class thought leaders on a range of strategic business issues. For more information visit: https://events.economist.com (https://events.economist.com).

About UNESCO

UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It seeks to build peace through international cooperation in Education, the Sciences and Culture. UNESCO's programmes contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals defined in Agenda 2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

Political and economic arrangements of governments are not enough to secure the lasting and sincere support of the peoples. Peace must be founded upon dialogue and mutual understanding. Peace must be built upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of humanity. By promoting cultural heritage and the equal dignity of all cultures, UNESCO strengthens bonds among nations.

About the Royal Academy of Arts

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded by King George III in 1768. It has a unique position in being an independent, privately funded charitable institution led by eminent artists and architects whose purpose is to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. Its public programme promotes the creation, enjoyment and appreciation of the visual arts through exhibitions, education and debate.

The Royal Academy has launched a new campus as part of the celebrations of its 250th anniversary year. Following a transformative redevelopment, designed by the internationally-acclaimed architect Sir David Chipperfield RA and supported by the National Lottery, the new Royal Academy of Arts reveals more of the elements that make the RA unique – sharing with the public historic treasures from its Collection, the work of its Royal Academicians and the Royal Academy Schools, and its role as a centre for learning and debate about art and architecture – alongside its world-class exhibitions programme. Major exhibitions in recent years have included Ai Weiwei and Anselm Kiefer to Abstract Expressionism and Charles I: King and Collector. Royalacademy.org.uk

About Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Founded in 1937, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation is dedicated to promoting the understanding and appreciation of art, primarily of the modern and contemporary periods, through exhibitions, education programs, research initiatives, and publications. The Guggenheim network that began in the 1970s when the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, was joined by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, has since expanded to include the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (opened 1997) and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (currently in development). The Guggenheim Foundation continues to forge international collaborations that celebrate contemporary art, architecture, and design within and beyond the walls of the museum, including the