

# ARCHITECTURE *not Architects*

*Architectural Digest met with Professor Yasser Elsheshtawy, appointed to curate the Emirati pavilion at the 2016 Venice Biennale*

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When asked about his initial reaction to the theme of the 2016 International Architecture Exhibition, Professor Elsheshtawy has a chuckle. The Biennale is chaired by Alejandro Aravena, a Chilean architect well-known for the social dimension of his work. Given this background, there was much speculation in architectural circles that the social component would figure strongly in his curatorial directive. Sure enough, "Reporting from the Front" was immediately understood to not be a platform to expose the glitziest projects of the past two years, but to represent the battle to "improve the quality of the built environment and consequently people's quality of life", to use Aravena's own words.

We are meeting the amiable professor on the sidelines of Art Abu Dhabi. Elsheshtawy, who has been teaching at the University of the Emirates in Al Ain since 1997, is the first to admit that architecture in the UAE is premised mostly on the iconic and the spectacular. In fact, more than a local phenomenon, spectacular architecture or "Dubalization" as coined by Elsheshtawy himself, is a model actively being exported and adopted throughout the region. But in the shadows of these tall towers and shiny malls, there is a level of raw urbanism that goes largely unnoticed which has been the focus of Elsheshtawy's academic research: how people interact on street corners, how people appropriate abandoned sites for gatherings, how people modify the built environment to better suit their needs. In fact, despite Dubalization, 'people' is the word that comes up most often in the course of our conversation.

Fittingly, what Elsheshtawy and his team will unveil at the Emirati pavilion in Venice next year is a detailed exposé of the Shaabi housing. Meaning 'folk' or 'people's' house, the Shaabi was a form of housing introduced by HH Sheikh Zayed in the late 60s to settle the Bedouins within the various cities of the Emirates. The typology was very basic and quite likely drew inspiration from

the indigenous nomadic settlement: a single storey compound consisting of a few rooms, square-shaped with an inner courtyard and a fence. In Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai and Sharjah, entire neighbourhoods were created using the Shaabi model. Bedouins settled in and modified the houses according to their needs: some introduced intricate landscaping and planted luxuriant gardens, to the extent that the houses today are almost completely lost in an oasis of greenery; others were subdivided to reflect the demographics of the specific families. For Elsheshtawy, the Shaabi house exemplifies a time of architecture on a human scale in the UAE, where modern housing drew inspiration from the past and was flexible enough to be modified by the humans who lived in it. As he puts it, "the houses retained the basic structure but they were transformed into something that was a true reflection of the culture. Shaabi housing is a very interesting example of an architecture that is adaptable". Today, the Shaabi neighbourhoods are being razed to give way to new buildings and only a few houses survive.

A Google search of "Shaabi housing" will produce the question "did you mean Sahara housing" - illustrative of the dearth of information on the subject. Elsheshtawy intends to redress this. "What we are trying to do with the Pavilion is conduct a scientific observation of the Shaabi neighbourhoods, documenting them and how they have changed. The idea is to trigger conversations amongst viewers". He justifies his choice on other grounds as well: "For one, this topic will show a different side of the Emirates. There's a notion that there's little authenticity in this country, and that whatever is old is replaced with the new. By highlighting the Shaabi housing, we hope to present a different side of the UAE". Lastly, he's not unhappy that the choice of the Shaabi housing over all possible other topics can be seen as a small act of rebellion, an inherent critique of current urban and architectural practices in the UAE: "The Shaabi house may no longer be suitable for people and their needs; however, what it is being replaced with may not be suitable either. There are lessons that can be drawn here. What these specific lessons are should be left open to a conversation."

A man with glasses, wearing a white button-down shirt and dark trousers, stands in front of a wall of vertical wooden slats. To his right, there is a large, geometric sculpture made of light-colored wood, resembling a pyramid or a cube. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows on the floor.

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Yasser Elsheshtawy at Emirati Expressions IV: Conventions of Arts in front of ‘Camouflage’ by Zeinab Al Hashemi