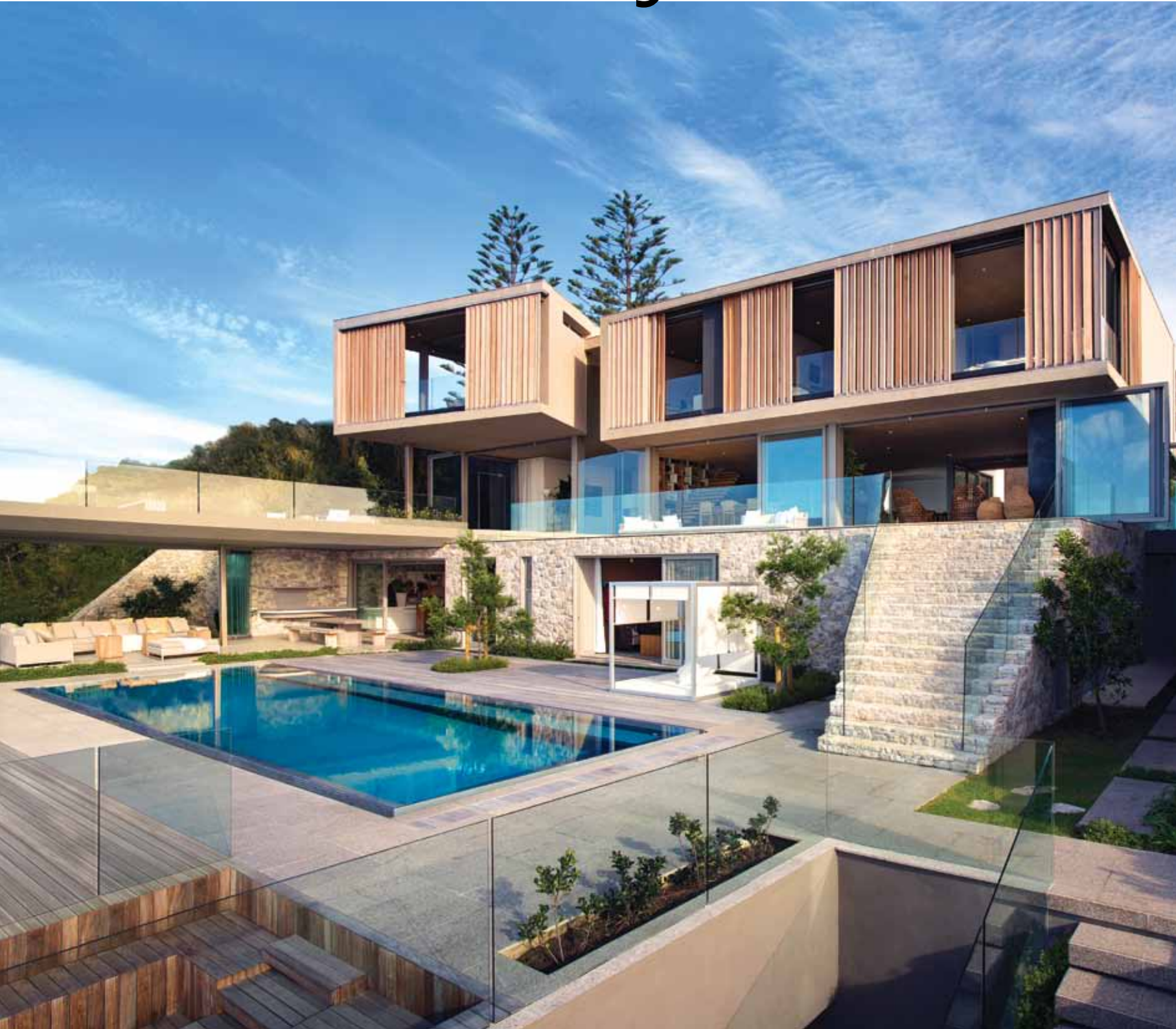


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Oceans apart: breathtaking beachfront living
That's entertainment: today's smart media rooms
Marco's mark: in pursuit of design excellence
Summer vibes: the mesmerising power of blue

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Mehiha Archaeological Centre by Dubai-based Dabbagh Architects



Centre of attention

Two new visitor centres in Sharjah highlight the emirate's rich history and diverse ecosystem, and feature eco-friendly construction and operation.

TEXT: STEVE HILL
PHOTO: GEERY O'LEARY & SHUROOK

PROMISING PROSPECTS

The Mleiha Archaeological Centre in Sharjah has been designed by Dubai-based Dabbagh Architects to be "environmentally and historically sensitive" to its setting.

The structure grows out of the ground organically with a ramp that allows visitors to view a highly significant Bronze Age tomb and its surroundings from a roof terrace.

The form of the building, generated from the circular tomb, is a series of concentric sandstone walls that blend into the red-sand landscape.

Internally, the fluid layout and curved walls guide visitors through the lobby, an exhibition hall and a café where the space opens out to offer views of the surrounding desert.

Sumaya Dabbagh, the founder of Dabbagh Architects, who has some 20 years' experience in the fields of architecture, interior design and project management, said a visitors' centre, by definition, is a 'live' attraction rather than a museum.

She said: "For the Mleiha Archaeological Centre, the surroundings are rich with many archaeological findings.

"This provided an opportunity to design the building in a way which would enhance this relationship and maximise the interaction between the visitor and the attraction, which in this case is a Bronze Age tomb.

"The building is sensitively placed, respecting the historic nature of the site as well as its setting into a potential World Heritage Site."

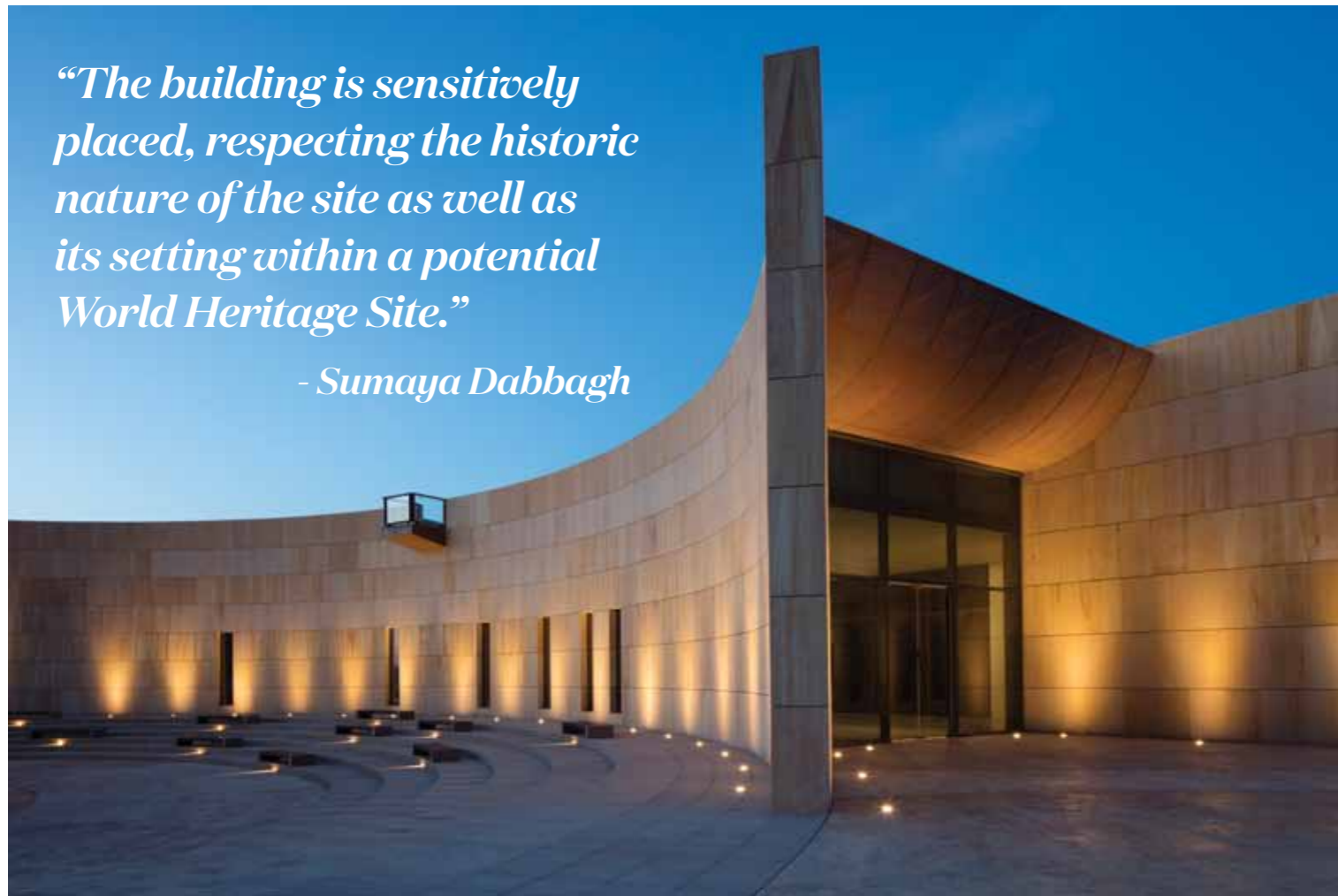
Sustainability was a key element to the design, according to Dabbagh.

Solar panels on the roof of a service block power water heaters, while the use of LED lighting reduces heat gain and energy consumption. The orientation of the building shields interior spaces from the desert sun, and small window openings have been placed where natural light is most needed.

Water-efficient systems are in place in wet areas, and

“The building is sensitively placed, respecting the historic nature of the site as well as its setting within a potential World Heritage Site.”

- Sumaya Dabbagh



Sumaya Dabbagh

indigenous plants have been used in landscaping as they require less watering and are better suited to the desert environment.

Trees were also transplanted or retained within the courtyard area.

Recyclable copper was used for roof cladding as the material will weather organically, changing in colour over time to enhance the natural beauty of the material. And the use of regionally sourced sandstone cladding also takes into account the harsh desert environment while also being durable and low maintenance.

Internal finishes include the use of recyclable linoleum flooring, while noise pollution was reduced by having mechanical, electrical and plumbing services sited in a standalone block adjacent to the main building.

Dabbagh, a Saudi national who studied architecture under the late Peter Smithson and Sir Ted Happold in the UK, added: “Design by Dabbagh

Architects is modern and contextual, where form follows function as well as location, context and orientation.

“Our focus is on design aspects such as light, space and materials in relation to the human scale.

“As an architect practising in the GCC and the UAE in particular, there is a strong demand for and emphasis on iconic and visually striking architecture.

“It is an approach that identifies architecture as an object and targets primarily our sense of vision... only one of our five senses.

“Our challenge and goal as architects is to change this mindset of many developers. There is huge potential and opportunity to design architecture that can feed all our senses.

“Although this approach may give way to ‘understated architecture’, it can result in a much richer experience of that architecture.”