

Jeddah Opera House: Inspired by the Rhythm of Al-Balad

A new local landmark, Henning Larsen draws inspiration from historical Al-Balad for the Jeddah Opera House's unique architectural identity, celebrating life, culture, and local nature and geology.

Located on the Red Sea waterfront, the opera will connect residents and visitors to the sea by a cultural spine, with a natural canopy, running from the city, through the opera house, to the water. The identity of the new Opera Quarter, part of the Jeddah Central masterplan, is driven by the opera house and its relationship with the landscape; creating a social space that promotes cultural encounters, houses events, and becomes a destination for future generations.

Preserving Al-Balad

Inspired by the dense character of historic Al-Balad with its complex web of lanes, souqs, and Barahaats, the opera is nestled within its urban fabric. The urban form of the neighborhood is shaped over time, buildings are stitched together like an urban archipelago – the Jeddah Opera House a natural extension of this unique additive character.

With geometric volumes inspired by Al-Balad, the opera will have a distinct appearance from different perspectives in the area. Approaching from the city, the building is broken down to a human scale to complement the urban fabric. From Eve's Plaza, the massing is a dynamic composition of volumes and from the waterfront promenade, it appears as a twin-volume structure, a beacon on the Red Sea coastline.

More than an opera, a home for all

Designed for inclusive programming, the 150-seat Rehearsal Hall, the mid-scale 750-seat Playhouse theatre, and the 1500-seat opera Red Sea Theatre, are flexible performance spaces which will host world class touring theatres and orchestras, as well other commercial events and community education and outreach.

Louis Becker, Global Design Principal, Henning Larsen:

"The tradition of theatre grew out of public space and everyday life – the casual choreography of meetings on the street, the song of shopkeepers competing for attention, the kaleidoscope of colours, scents, and textures.

Through a careful balance of tradition and innovation, the opera serves as a bridge between old and new, symbolizing the evolution of art in Jeddah. We are proud to see our design for the Jeddah Opera House begin to take form."

Cultural canopy

The cultural spine creates a sense of discovery for the visitor on the approach to the opera, weaving from the city to the Red Sea with buildings clustered along the central path. Carefully selected local vegetation types

have been integrated into the plan to enhance the microclimate and improve biodiversity, water management, and air purification. Walking routes are shaded to mitigate the heat stress and buildings are positioned to direct the wind flow, encouraging natural urban ventilation. The inclusion of light-weight textile shading creates more shade when needed, extending the comfortable microclimate. Moving closer to the beachfront and park areas, the landscape encourages social interaction through sensorial experiences, creating inviting spaces for gatherings.

Within the smaller alleys nestled deep within the urban plan, Wadi vegetation provides a cooling presence with its dense foliage, improving the feeling of discovery. The North entrance to the opera is a continuation of the urban fabric, creating an urban Barahat which reflects the inner foyer of the building, offering both an outdoor and indoor living room for the city. The alley on the West side will connect this Barahat with the Opera Park via a universally accessible ramp complete with planters.

The materials used throughout the public realm echo the area's diverse geology, a variety of stones from the main plaza to the beach offer visitors a journey through the country's rich natural formations. These diverse natural elements converge around the Opera house, imparting character to its facades and distinguishing its entrances, where visitors can celebrate both the country's rich culture and natural diversity.

More than a facade, an inhabitable artwork

Al-Balad's ties to music and mathematics are apparent in the playful rhythm of the architecture. The opera house façade design represents a musical way of breaking the long regular horizontal and vertical building lines, plane by plane. On a large scale, the composition of the façade comes alive, each section is playfully shifting between the levels.

The materiality of the opera house is driven by vernacular elements, coral stone and wood. Deep, solid stone acts as a natural climate barrier, only perforated by intricate window detailing in the form of multi-layered Mashrabiya's that add finesse to the façade and create traditional Roshans.

The Jeddah Opera House pattern blends traditional Al-Balad craftsmanship with Henning Larsen's approach to architecture and light. As pedestrians approach the opera, the Roshans offer a glimpse into the activities inside. The irregularity of the façade pattern makes each Roshan unique, from small niches to large rooms for people to gather. The careful placement of these individual and communal spaces within each foyer of the opera house directly informs the external expression of the façade.

From a distance, the glowing volumes of the opera house are designed to catch the visitors' attention, leading them towards the opera, and defining its image from both the city and the sea. New architectural details are revealed as visitors approach, including the inside out illumination: the interior lighting filters through the vertical shading of the facades, making the building look like a lantern. By illuminating the curved stone elements of the facades with subtle lighting and by keeping the outermost layer of

vertical solar shading dark, the shadings appear as delicate silhouettes against a bright background, visually communicating the depth of the façade.

Inside, in the grand foyer a panoramic window creates a framed view of the Red Sea, bathing the foyer in natural light that ebbs and flows with the tide of the day. Along the waterfront, arid and drought-resistant vegetation is deliberately chosen to mirror coastal nature, offering unobstructed views of the sea.

Henning Larsen won the international design competition for Jeddah Opera House. Construction is now underway.

For further information contact

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About Jeddah Opera House

Project: Opera House
Location: Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Expected completion date: September 2027
Size: 32,000 sqm
Client: Jeddah Central Development Co.
Architect: Henning Larsen
Landscape Architect: Henning Larsen
Engineers: Buro Happold
Acoustics: Nagata
Stage technique: dUCKS Sceno
Renders: Vivid-Vision

About Henning Larsen

Henning Larsen is an international studio for architecture, landscape, and urbanism with design hubs in Copenhagen, New York, Singapore, Berlin, Sydney, Stockholm and Oslo. At the heart of our design philosophy is the play of light and nature. We bring joy to those who occupy our spaces by shaping the conditions for human interaction. We work at the nexus of creativity and experimentation, always looking to the lasting impact on communities and their environments.

Drawing on a Scandinavian ethos, we develop context-driven, sustainable designs that provide lasting value to users, local communities, and cities. We aim to contribute social spaces that engage people and inspire human interaction. We approach our clients with curiosity and a desire to listen, inspire, collaborate, and innovate.

Our distinctive portfolio has received some of the highest honors in our profession, including the Architecture Laureate of the Premium Imperiale,

The European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture - Mies van der Rohe Award, and the European Architect of the Year Award, 2019.