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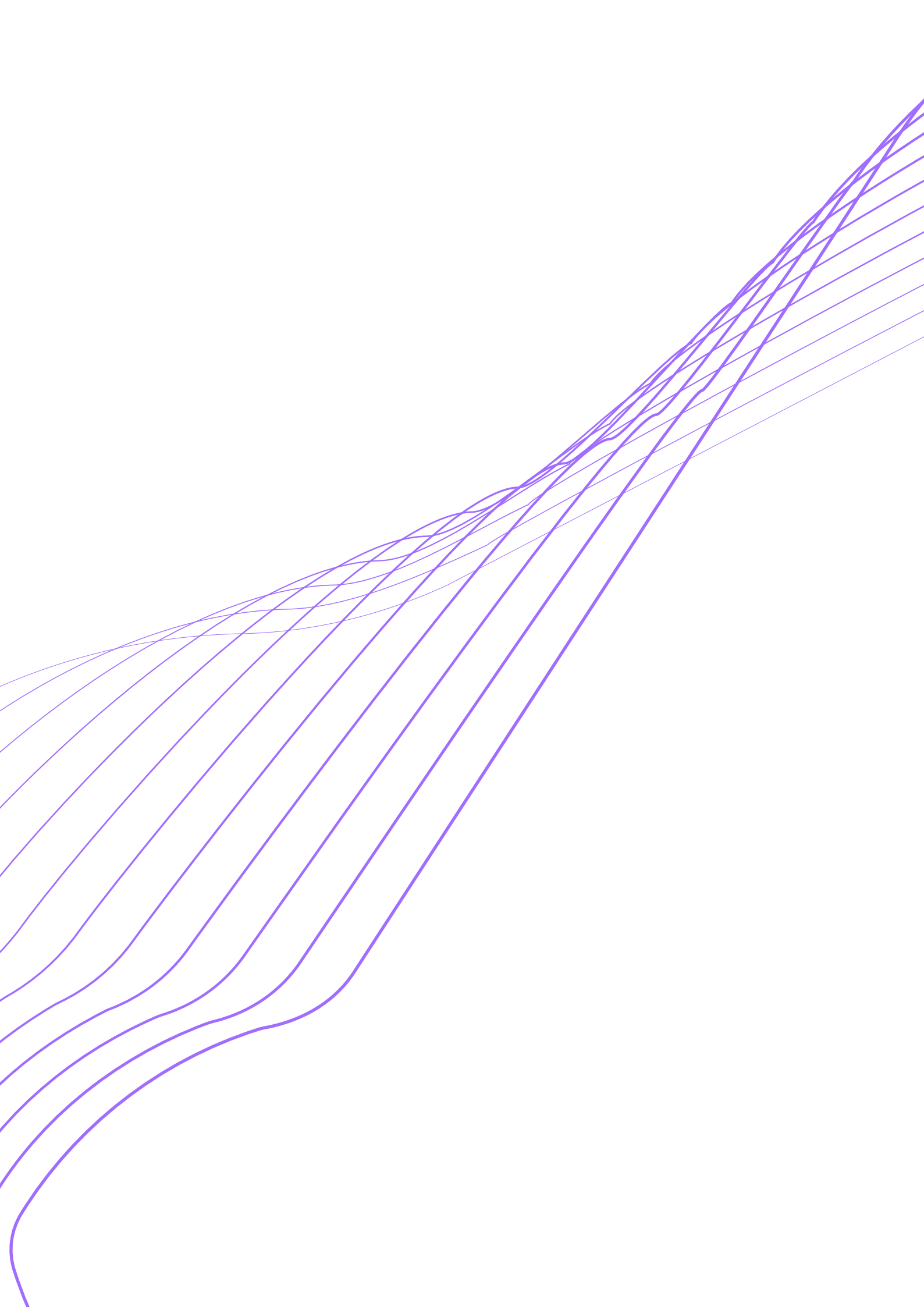
HERIOT WATT UNIVERSITY

Discovery Series | 2026 edition

Building the UAE's next chapter

How women are reshaping value, resilience and innovation in the built environment.





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Foreword

We are delighted to publish the third edition of the Grant Thornton UAE and Heriot-Watt Discovery Series, in which we highlight the contribution of women in leadership roles across the vibrant and growing built environment in the UAE.

As the sector evolves from landmark megaprojects to connected, technology-enabled and human-centred communities, the competitive advantage will come from resilience, innovation and the ability to harness the widest possible range of talent.

The central question is no longer whether diversity, sustainability and technology matter. It is whether organisations can combine them to create long-term value. The leaders who succeed in the coming decade will be those who recognise that workforce capability, innovation adoption and sustainable growth are increasingly linked.

The insights in this report suggest that women are playing a far more influential role in this transformation than is often recognised. Across architecture, sustainability, real estate, education and digital innovation, female leaders are helping shape how communities are designed, how assets are operated and how future talent is developed. Their experiences provide valuable insight into the capabilities the sector will need both now and in the future.

The opportunity ahead is not simply to build more, but to build smarter, more resilient and more inclusive environments that create lasting economic impact and social value.



Hisham Farouk
Chief Executive Officer
Grant Thornton UAE



Professor Dame Heather McGregor
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Introduction

For two decades, the UAE has been renowned for its iconic megaprojects, from the Burj Khalifa to the Palm Jumeirah and Yas Island. Today the strategy for its built environment is rapidly shifting direction to encompass infrastructure, geopolitical resilience, AI adoption and a heightened focus on sustainability.

Yet as the country continues to diversify and modernise this strategically important sector, there is a significant opportunity to continue to strengthen workforce diversity - a challenge faced in this sector all over the world.

Based on interviews with five prominent female leaders across construction, technology, real estate, architecture, sustainability advocacy and education, this report analyses how women are driving innovation, navigating barriers, and demonstrating resilience to shape the UAE's landscape, and profiles a further 20 women who have helped to visibly build the country (see Appendix A).

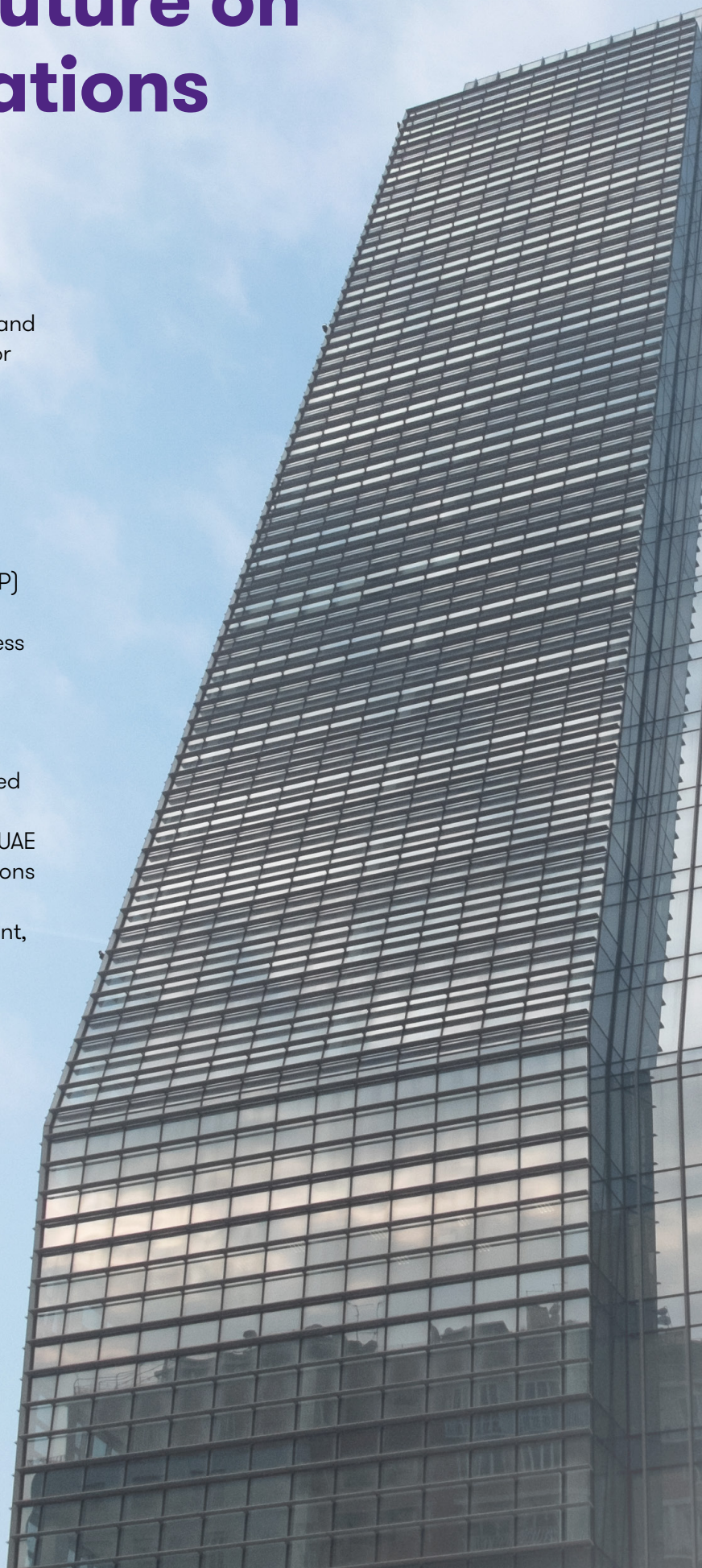
As projects become more complex, data-driven and sustainability-focused, competitive advantage will increasingly depend on how effectively businesses combine diverse skills, technological capability and strong leadership. Organisations should therefore treat talent, innovation and sustainability as interconnected business priorities, rather than separate agendas.

Building the future on strong foundations

The built environment, a sector which spans workspaces, homes and public spaces through to transport networks, critical utilities and infrastructure, is of significant importance to the UAE's economic diversification, competitiveness and long-term resilience. The importance of the sector has intensified as the country looks to national and international rail networks and increased investment on the east coast.

In total, more than a fifth of the UAE's economy is directly linked to the built environment. Construction accounted for 12.9 percent of the UAE's $517.2 billion gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025, with real estate adding a further 7.4 percent, according to the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre (Cabral, 2026; Coutinho, 2026; UAE Government, 2026b).

Despite geopolitical uncertainty in 2026, the sector remains resilient. As HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President, Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, told the UAE Cabinet, "We do not wait for the perfect conditions to continue delivering… The UAE does not stop, and it will not stop." (Paul, 2026; UAE Government, 2026a).





Data supports the confidence of the country's leaders.

1 UAE leads the regional recovery

Construction in the wider MENA region has strengthened since June, with the UAE leading the way, according to GlobalData's Construction Projects Momentum Index (Foreman, 2026).

2 Market confidence remains strong

The projects market remains "robust", said Ed James, Head of Content and Research for MEED, a MENA-wide economic news magazine (James, 2026). The GCC region saw a decline in the immediate months after air strikes began, but "surged again" in June, he said, indicating a fast recovery. If the pace set in the first six months continues, 2026 could end up vying with 2024 as the best year ever for new contracts (James, 2026).

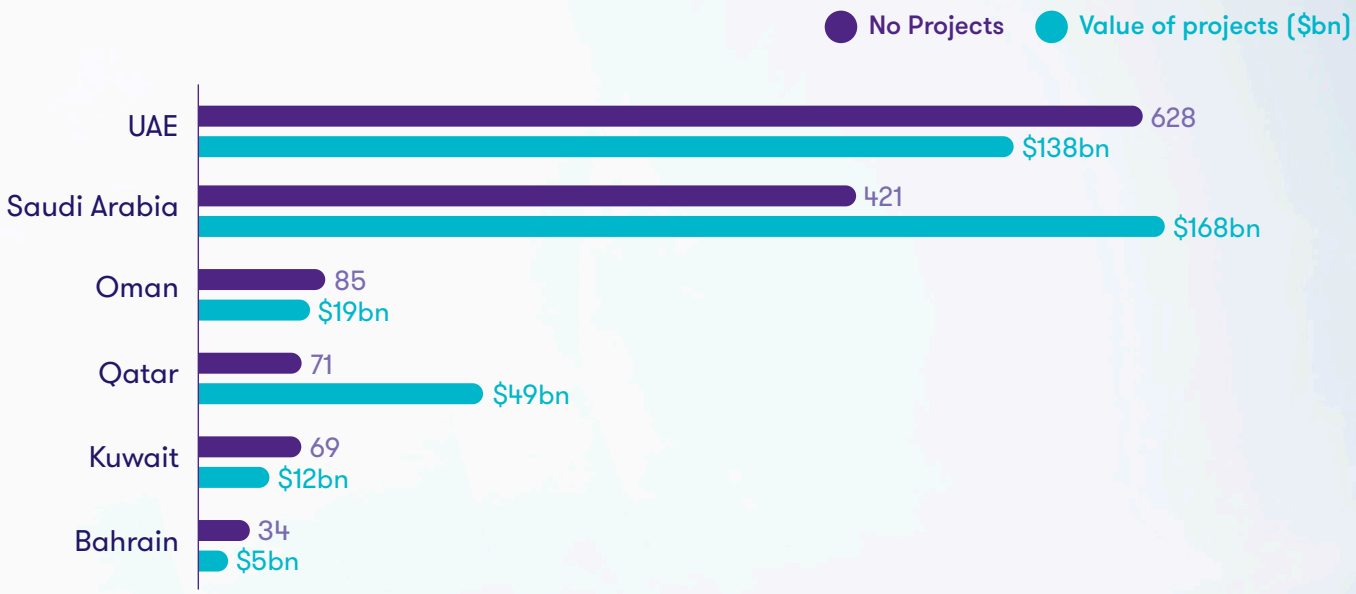
3 The Gulf's largest construction market

The UAE is the Gulf's largest construction market by project volume, with 628 confirmed active developments valued at $138 billion as of mid-2026, according to a report from the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ADCCI).

4 Complexity is replacing scale

Both globally and locally, the sector is moving towards fewer but more complex projects, led by integrated systems in energy, utilities and infrastructure (ADCCI, 2026, p. 33; Construction Week, 2026).

GCC's confirmed pipeline of projects to 2030



Source: ADCCI/ GlobalData, 2026

In the UAE, a strong energy project pipeline, steady housing demand and a growing base of specialised industrial projects are "sustaining" construction activity, Ali Mohamed Al Marzooqi, Director General of ADCCI says (ADCCI, 2026, p. 2; Construction Week, 2026).

However, while the UAE construction sector showed the highest growth year on year in 2025 at 11.1 percent (Cabral, 2026; Coutinho, 2026; UAE Government, 2026b), growth is expected to slow temporarily across the year to 4.8 percent (GlobalData, 2026).

Measures are being put in place to manage this. The UAE is pressing ahead with large-scale urban development, transport and clean energy projects, with a focus on east coast expansion to remove the reliance on the Strait of Hormuz and national transport networks.

A list of the UAE's completed and upcoming megaprojects is included in Appendix B.

Executive insight

As infrastructure, energy, mobility and urban development become more interconnected, businesses will need to think beyond individual projects and disciplines. Commercial viability, sustainability, technology and long-term societal impact will increasingly inform decisions collectively. This creates an advantage for organisations that can bring diverse expertise to the table early and collaborate across traditional sector boundaries.



Building a more balanced future in the built environment

From architects to urban planners, civil engineers to surveyors and real estate consultants to site managers, there is a diverse range of professions to be found in the built environment.

The sector, however, remains one of the most "gender-segregated" in the world, with women entering the industry often met with biased attitudes, discrimination and unrealistic demands (Norberg and Johansson, 2020).

Globally, construction is still considered a "non-traditional" field for women; most in the field work in administrative and clerical positions (Edirisinghe et al., 2025).

While the pipeline has a wide entry point, it is extremely leaky. Women comprise 56 percent of UAE graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Dubai Media Office, 2019) but a large gender gap remains in positions of leadership in STEM fields (Dickson and Alharthi, 2025) and women represent less than one-third of the STEM workforce worldwide (World Economic Forum and LinkedIn, 2025, p. 13).

The path to employment for women STEM graduates in the UAE remains "precarious" (Alzaabi, Ramírez-García and Moyano, 2021).

In the US, 14.3 percent of all employees in construction are women - a number that has barely changed since the 1990s (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026). Across the European Union's 27 countries, women account for an almost identical 14.5 percent of the workforce (European Construction Observatory, 2026, pp. 35–37). The share of female workers in architecture and engineering in Europe is much higher, at 32 percent. Just six percent are employed in on-site trade occupations (European Construction Observatory, 2026, pp. 35–37). In the UK, women's representation in the sector stands at a healthier (but still low) 24.6 percent. The UK also shows a huge loss of early-career talent; almost half of women who leave the industry do so before the age of 34 (Kanageswaran, 2025).



Diverse leadership strengthens decision making by expanding ideas, experiences and solutions. By creating cultures where women are visible, supported and empowered to lead, businesses are better equipped to drive innovation and long-term value creation.

Hisham Farouk, Chief Executive Officer, Grant Thornton UAE

The same barriers to career development for women in the built environment are frequently reported worldwide: rigid and long work hours, work-family balance and multiple-role conflict, a male-dominated culture and negative perceptions of women's abilities (Navarro-Astor, Román-Onsalo and Infante-Perea, 2017; Ghanbaripour et al., 2023). Turner et al. (2021) recommend resilience training for women working on-site in construction. A study of 18 Emirati women leaders in construction and engineering found the workplace environment to be the most prevalent issue, followed by physical and safety concerns and cultural and societal norms. However, most of the participants had positive experiences and gained early access to leadership roles (Hamani et al., 2024).

Positively, technological developments such as digital design and automation are reducing some reported barriers, while the growth of sustainable construction and human-centric infrastructure are seen as areas where female contributions can have a great impact (Amponsah-Asante et al., 2026; Habib, 2026).

Executive insight

Expanding the talent pipeline alone will not close the gap. Businesses also need to focus on where talented women are being lost between education, employment and leadership. Creating clearer pathways for development and progression can help organisations retain a broader range of skills and perspectives at a time when projects are becoming more complex, technological and multidisciplinary.

The UAE: leading progress

The UAE has a demonstrable commitment to the UN's sustainable development goal SDG-5 (gender equality), through an integrated framework of policies, legislation and strategies, notably We the UAE 2031, the National Policy for Empowerment of Emirati Women 2023-2031 and the UAE Gender Balance Strategy 2027-2031 (UAE Government, 2026c), while 88 companies including DP World, Masdar and Jacobs have signed the UAE Gender Balance Council's SDG-5 pledge to place women in 30 percent of leadership roles (Webster, 2022; UAE Gender Balance Council, 2026).

At the top of the pipeline, female board representation significantly strengthens corporate governance, transparency and sustainability outcomes (Abed, Al-Najjar and Salama, 2025), with the UAE mandating quotas for women on listed boards in 2021 (Elbahrawy, Pacheco and Omar, 2021; Reuters, 2021). The GCC Board Gender Index Report shows positive growth in UAE female representation year on year, with 14.7 percent of board positions in the country's real estate sector held by women in 2026 (McGregor, 2025; McGregor, Locke and Dino, 2026).

The country's dedication to gender equality has been paying off. The UAE was ranked 13th globally and first regionally in the United Nations Development Programme's 2025 Gender Inequality Index (UAE Government, 2025), and first across the Arab countries (69th worldwide) in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025, one of only four countries to have achieved full gender parity in parliament (World Economic Forum, 2025).

88

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Ranked 1st

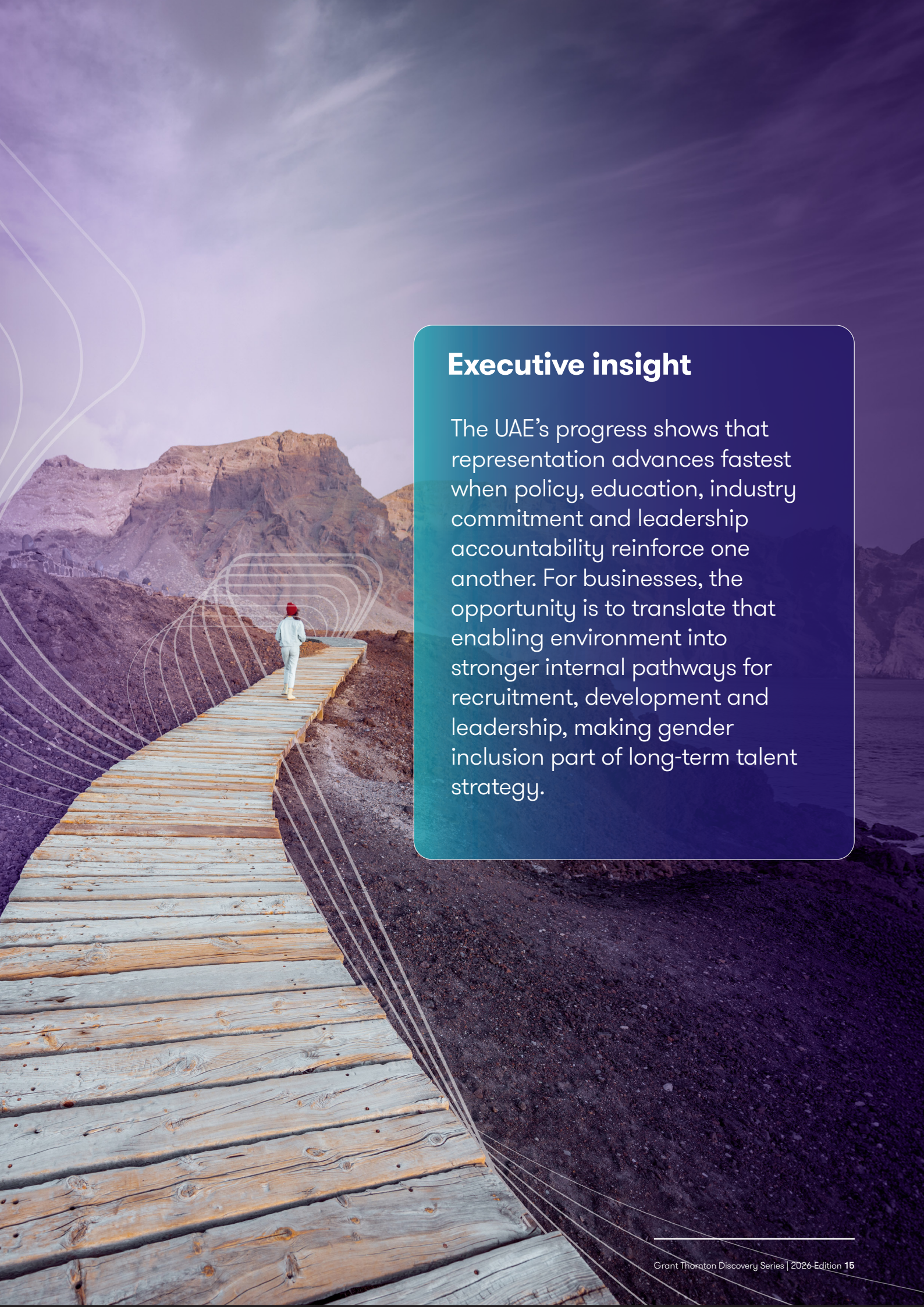
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1 of only 4

countries to have achieved full gender parity in parliament (World Economic Forum, 2025).



Executive insight

The UAE's progress shows that representation advances fastest when policy, education, industry commitment and leadership accountability reinforce one another. For businesses, the opportunity is to translate that enabling environment into stronger internal pathways for recruitment, development and leadership, making gender inclusion part of long-term talent strategy.

The role of innovation, AI and sustainability in the built environment

The UAE ranks among the fastest-growing AI talent markets globally, along with India, Brazil, Poland and Malaysia (PWC, 2026) and it is estimated that AI will contribute at least $96 billion (14 percent of GDP) to the UAE economy by 2030 (PWC, 2021).

The foundation of the UAE's ambitions can be seen back in 2017 when the UAE National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2031 was launched (Hansberry, 2026). As well as having a world-first AI minister, the UAE announced in September 2026 that it has begun to use a Cabinet AI Adviser System of 32 specialised AI assistants (Amir, 2026). It has also launched an AI curriculum for all schools (Paul, 2026), having created its own AI large-language models (LLMs), Falcon, Jais (which understands local Arabic dialects) and Noor (Cabral, 2023).

Globally, the built environment is undergoing a digital revolution powered by AI, robotics and 3D concrete printing to address long-standing challenges in productivity, safety and material waste (Abioye et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). Machine learning and computer vision optimise project scheduling and proactively manage site safety (Abioye et al., 2021; Egwim et al., 2024), while robotics automate high-risk physical tasks like autonomous excavation and structural inspections (Liu et al., 2024).

In the UAE and GCC, technologies play a critical role in rapid urban growth and driving sustainability goals (Balasubramanian et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2024).

Developers use the Internet of Things (IoT), drone tracking and offsite prefabrication to streamline logistics and automate assembly (Balasubramanian et al., 2024).

AI acts as a primary tool for hitting the UAE's Net Zero 2050 milestones, for instance in collecting, validating and reporting newly mandated emissions data (John, 2026). The UAE is also deploying digital twins - virtual, live copies of systems such as cities or a power grid, powered by real-time data and AI - to simulate urban conditions and enforce climate resilience (Eagle, 2026).

Executive insight

As digital technologies are becoming more embedded in the built environment, organisations should focus investment on applications that improve project delivery, safety, sustainability and asset performance, while building the data foundations needed to scale them effectively. Technology will create the greatest value when it is part of business and infrastructure strategy from the beginning.



Key findings

This section synthesises insights from five female leaders transforming the built environment in the UAE, who were interviewed by Heriot-Watt University specifically for this report: **Dr Habiba Al Mar'ashi**, Co-founder, Emirates Green Building Council; **Mireille Azzam-Vidjen**, Executive Director, JLL; **Dr Harpreet Seth**, Architect and Educator; **Leila Sobek**, Founder, BMA Studios; and **Dr Sonia Zahiroddiny**, Chief Information Officer, Innovo Group. Drawing on their combined construction technology, real estate, architectural, sustainability advocacy and academic research expertise, they outline the future of the industry in the UAE.

Innovation, AI and sustainability in the UAE: moving with technology

- **Dr Zahiroddiny** is driving a pragmatic approach to AI at Innovo Group, focused on measurable value, impact and quick wins while simultaneously fixing legacy data foundations to scale AI at an enterprise level. She is excited at new developments in wellbeing-centred design, using data from neurochemical changes in the brain when a human interacts with their environment to inform changes to lighting, acoustics and air quality.
- **Ms Azzam-Vidjen** points out that while JLL has created bespoke AI tools and trained staff extensively in AI use, clients rely on consultants for on-the-ground, real-time insights and experience, which cannot be replicated by generic AI outputs. The time freed up should be used to gather more insights in the field and upskill people to challenge AI, she adds. **Dr Seth** is also a proponent of keeping the human touch from the start, insisting students keep hand-drawing on-site in physical sketchbooks to tell a story AI cannot mimic.
- **Ms Sobek** uses robotic fabrication for synthetic Glass-Fibre Reinforced Polyester (GFRP) facades on commercial projects, but notes generative AI concept design remains inaccurate without strict human control.
- **Dr Al Mar'ashi** believes that one of AI's primary values lies in measuring impact and patterns in data accurately - such as in air quality - rather than estimating or using averages. She points to Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA's) world-class record in minimising water leaks thanks to its AI use.

The need for gender diversity in the built environment: growing talent pipelines and overcoming barriers

- **Dr Al Mar'ashi** recalls campaigning to "open the doors" and reach students at a time when Emirati universities did not offer any environmental degrees: sustainability is now a mandatory school subject. She encourages young Emirati women to move into sustainability-related careers as "custodians of the planet". **Ms Azzam-Vidjen** also highlights the role of government, saying public-sector female leadership has set the scene for the private sector, and female participation in real estate is at an all-time high.
- Women had "more to prove" 20 years ago, says **Ms Sobek**, when construction and architecture were more male-dominant industries, while **Dr Seth** adds that mothers provide the "ripple effect" for their daughters' careers: she regularly took her children on site with her, and her daughter is now an engineer.
- **Dr Zahiroddiny** finds the technology sector "much less" diverse than the engineering field she was promoted from but, having now reached the C-suite, says the biggest barrier she has encountered has not been over her gender but in resistance to transformation. A human-centric approach has helped her navigate this and the large teams she leads.

An evolution in the UAE's built landscape: human-centric communities and master planning

- **Ms Sobek** notes Expo 2020 as a turning point for UAE master planning because organisers did not treat it simply as a six-month event, turning pavilions into long-term residential and commercial districts with a full level of basement parking across the whole site from the outset.
- **Dr Seth** argues that the industry must move beyond 'wow factor' towers to design accessible public spaces with people at their core. Her own self-built Dubai home has challenged regional design norms with light-filled architecture and fluid indoor-outdoor living. **Ms Azzam-Vidjen** adds that there is power in designing spaces that "write the story" of how people live their lives.
- **Dr Al Mar'ashi** speaks with pride of the UAE's sustainability journey, with the new UAE Climate Law advancing UAE's Net Zero 2050 strategy, sustainability becoming part of developers' marketing plans and the 100+ GCC companies who are now members of the UN Global Compact. **Ms Sobek** adds that sustainability has evolved from afterthought into core strategy in initial design.

Conclusion

The built environment in the UAE is entering one of the most significant periods of transformation in its history. The sector is being reshaped by technological innovation, sustainability imperatives, demographic change and an increasingly sophisticated approach to urban development. The country's shift from landmark megaprojects towards connected, resilient and human-centred communities presents an opportunity to not only reflect on what is built, but also on who helps to build it.

The experiences of the five women featured in this report - and the career trajectories of the 20 other women profiled in Appendix A - demonstrate that female leaders are influencing some of the UAE's most important conversations around sustainability, architecture, real estate, digital transformation, education and master planning. Yet their stories also reveal that many of the traditional barriers associated with the built environment around the world, such as under-representation in leadership and the challenge of retaining talented women, remain.

A consistent theme throughout is the importance of visibility, mentorship and community. Progress is accelerated when successful leaders of both genders actively support the next generation, challenge outdated assumptions and create opportunities for others to succeed. Building a stronger pipeline of female talent is not simply a matter of fairness; it is increasingly a business necessity for an industry facing skills shortages and growing complexity.

The report also highlights an important shift in how success is defined within the built environment. The future is unlikely to be characterised solely by taller buildings, larger developments or faster construction. Instead, the sector's leaders are placing greater emphasis on sustainability, liveability, wellbeing and the creation of places that meet human needs. The strongest projects of the coming decades may be those that combine technical excellence with social value and environmental responsibility.

AI and advanced technologies will undoubtedly play a central role in the future. However, the women interviewed were remarkably consistent in their view that technology must remain a tool rather than a substitute for human judgement. Data, automation and AI can enhance decision-making, improve productivity and strengthen sustainability outcomes, but creativity, leadership, empathy and professional experience remain essential and will be the skills employers look for in the next generation of hires.

The UAE has positioned itself at the forefront of both technological innovation and championing gender inclusion. If it can continue to strengthen educational pathways, broaden leadership opportunities and harness the talents of the widest possible range of people, it is well placed to create a built environment that is not only smarter and more sustainable, but also more inclusive. The women profiled in this report demonstrate that this future is already being shaped today.



The future will be shaped by the talent we develop today. When women leaders are visible, they do more than inspire others: they change how organisations think and work. Their influence paves the way for future generations to lead, innovate and create lasting economic and social impact.

Professor Dame Heather McGregor, Provost & Vice Principal, Heriot-Watt University Dubai

Interviews with women leaders



Dr Habiba Al Mar'ashi

Co-founder & Treasurer/ Board Member, Emirates Green Building Council

An Emirati environmentalist, mother of four and grandmother of three, Dr Al Mar'ashi co-founded the Emirates Environmental Group (EEG) in 1991. She was the first Emirati woman to work at the Federal Chamber of Commerce before becoming Director of Administration and Human Resources at the Dubai Development Board. She left government in 2000 and established the Arabia Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Network in 2004. Two years later, she co-founded the Emirates Green Building Council, the first such council in the Arab world and only the eighth globally.

Dr Al Mar'ashi was the first Arab woman to serve on the board of directors of the UN Global Compact, and spent seven years there, during which she established and became president of its GCC Network. In 2021 she was appointed a director of the World Green Building Council.

What inspired you to pursue an environmental calling?

Mine has never been a conventional path but there was always one consistent thread - a deep sense of responsibility towards my country, the environment, my people and society. I grew up in a family where education, knowledge, discipline and service to the country were deeply valued. My father taught my siblings and I that, as human beings, we do not own anything: we come and leave empty-handed. But during the short time we are here, we are custodians of the planet.

I was in my early twenties when we established the EEG; the environment was still a new concept everywhere. I was a young mother (my youngest son was under a year old) and working full-time in government as well as running a flower shop. Rosa Flowers was where we held EEG meetings back then. But when you have a calling in life, you manage.

> As human beings, we do not own anything: we come and leave empty-handed. But during the short time we are here, we are custodians of the planet.

The UAE is moving at incredible speed with sustainability. What excites you the most?

I promise you, I never expected to see so much achieved in this short period of time. The UAE has strategies for energy, water consumption, storage capacity. We have seen new laws and regulations, such as federal law no.11 of 2024. The UAE's climate law came into full force in 2026, mandating all entities - including those in freezones - to measure, track and manage their carbon emissions as part of the UAE's Net Zero 2050 strategy (Al Nahyan, 2026; John, 2026).

Sustainability in the built environment has become part of private developers' marketing plan; today, they pride themselves on saying their development is sustainable. In hospitality, innovation forced the sector to look at sustainability, from energy and water conservation to materials, food, buildings, operations, procurement and the supply chain.

When I joined the UN Global Compact in 2006, not a single company in the GCC was a member. By the time I finished with the UN in 2015, 110 of the strongest companies in the GCC region had become members of the UN Global Compact. These are the seeds I managed to sow.

Where do you think AI is making the biggest impact?

One of AI's most important benefits is the ability to measure impact and understand patterns in data more accurately, not just estimate or taking averages - for example, in air quality. This will help make sustainability interventions more targeted and effective.

AI is playing a big role in measuring CO2 and dealing with Scope 1, 2 and 3 [these greenhouse gas emissions must be reported as part of the UAE Climate Law (John, 2026)]. Now organisations are looking within the UAE for AI solutions, as we have the expertise and experience here.

There's also the wonderful example of Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA). It stands tall globally in improving water leaks, which are among the lowest in the world. [DEWA uses AI to monitor leaks and faults, isolate and repair them, which reduced its water losses to 5.3 percent in 2021 compared to 15 percent in North America (Gulf News, 2022; Utilities Middle East, 2022)].

What is your advice for the next generation of Emirati women coming into the sector?

When I started, one of my main objectives was to open the doors of academic institutions and reach students. There were no undergraduate or postgraduate degrees in the country that dealt with the environment. Today, it is a mandatory part of the school curriculum, and there are ample qualifications.

I'm so proud when I see young Emirati women who have studied environmental public health, environmental engineering or renewable energy here in the UAE, then found their way in the workforce to form part of the country's sustainability journey. They have a golden opportunity: I advise them to make the most of it. Even if they have not taken environmental studies as an undergraduate, they can change career path and make their mark in the country's sustainability field.

I advise everyone: keep learning because the road and the challenges in front of us are getting harder and harder. We must not lose focus. The environment is huge; it is life itself.



Mireille Azzam-Vidjen

Executive Director and Head of Strategic Consulting Middle East and Africa, JLL

With over 22 years of consulting experience, Mireille Azzam-Vidjen has spent 19 years at global real estate services and investment management company JLL. She leads a team of over 100 in the largest property consulting division in both the region and within JLL and has overseen developments and giga projects across the UAE, Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle East spanning one billion square metres of land. She previously worked as a senior business analyst at Ernst & Young and has bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration from the American University of Beirut.

What has been the common thread throughout your career?

I joined JLL in 2007 as a senior analyst when our regional team was under 30 people; today, we manage over 90 complex projects simultaneously and I've grown my team from 25 to more than 100. My curiosity, rather than real estate itself, was my starting point. I like to understand what the data is telling us, how we can translate it into better decisions. Consulting gave me that kind of career, but then real estate turned out to be a fascinating field in which to apply that curiosity. There is something powerful about how the spaces we design end up writing the story of how people live their lives - where they linger, who they bump into, whether they walk to work. Very few industries let you watch the cause and effect so visibly.

> There is something powerful about how the spaces we design end up writing the story of how people live their lives.

Where do you think AI is making the biggest impact?

For sure, consulting is going through disruption. We use our own bespoke JLL GPT and other enterprise-level AI tools in a number of ways - to streamline processes, enhance knowledge management, interrogate information, synthesise large datasets, stress-test outcomes. I don't see that this will reduce the value of the consultant, I think it just moves our value further up the chain. The differentiator becomes: are we asking AI the right questions? Are we challenging it?

JLL's consulting advice is validated and sanity-checked through our exposure to the entire real estate lifecycle. That means our advice is not theoretical but validated through knowledge we gather from interactions with developers, occupiers, operators and end users in a specific submarket at a given point in time. AI cannot challenge or replace this value.

Clients have their own AI tools too. What they come to us for is the insight and knowledge that sits behind our tools - what's happening on the ground, not a generic, theoretical output about whether a project is feasible. They want to know what the project next door has done right or wrong, what end users are saying, or why a specific competing project achieved a price premium over market averages. The time we as consultants are freeing up, we need to spend in data collection, insights-gathering, field research and upskilling our people to challenge outputs.

What trends excite you the most in the region?

I'm very fortunate that the Middle East has been going through this extraordinary transformation since I started my career, which has given me and my team significant exposure to unique, mega-scale and giga-scale projects which are often unprecedented in scale and ambition.

In the UAE, particularly post-Covid, the real estate market has been on an upward trajectory - and that's a direct result of a lot of changes the government was offering, like golden and retirement visas, which opened the market to foreign buyers and were very well received.

It's not only the real estate, but the ecosystem that supports it, like hospitality or tourism. When I got here in 2007, the UAE had very specific targets in terms of visitations and a massive number of hotel rooms were being delivered, but at the same time there was a calendar of events, promotions to visit Dubai, and Emirates Airlines played a huge role in people transiting and spending a day or two here. So it was always real estate plus the wider economic picture and the conducive business environment.

In Saudi Arabia, we're also fortunate to be working on some of the most exciting projects, which are really challenging the status quo. Again, Saudi is on a massive journey - enhancing the ecosystem, legislation, regulations and incentivising foreign investment.

A lot of regional government authorities promote female leadership, and that trickles down and sets the scene for the private sector. You have much more female participation in real estate than ever before.



Dr Harpreet Seth

Head of Architecture and Associate Professor, Heriot-Watt University Dubai

Dr Seth is a registered architect and ran her own practice, Intarch International, before entering academia over 20 years ago. She holds a PhD in Architecture and Urbanism from Wolverhampton University, UK, and a master's degree in architecture from the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi, India. Dr Seth's husband is also an architect; their son is an artist and their daughter a mechanical engineer.

What made you become an architect?

My father built gravity dams, so I was born in Nangal in Punjab, India, when he worked on Bhakra Nangal Dam, then we moved to Tanzania because he was invited by the president to supervise some dams. My ethos is rooted in my years growing up in Africa. I believe nature gives us joy, and that you should allow it - desert, oceans, mountains - to be a part of day-to-day life. Architects are dreamers. When I arrived in Dubai - under 30 with two kids, Sheikh Zayed Road was non-existent - Dubai was just beginning to boom. One of the key projects my husband and I worked on together was the ballroom of the Burj Al Arab.

What new way of doing things in the UAE excites you most?

My career has been about shifting from 'ego-centric' to 'eco-centric' architecture: how human experiences can empower the lives of all, not a select few. We need to move away from the next 'wow' factor - what's the next tallest building? - because it has become visual clutter that no longer wows me. Architects and designers are beginning to have conversations about replacing this 'wow' with something more humble, with more humility in design and construction, where people are at the core. The people building our city are never seen, never heard. When we celebrate the everyday common man, irrespective of their standing in society, then truly we have evolved as a nation where the wellbeing of everyone matters.

What project are you proudest of?

My husband and I built our house in Dubai, Rangshala, which means Atelier of Colours. Today, I think that house is a sacred space and a testimony to a woman's power as a designer. We got the freehold land in Dubailand 15 years ago. It took eight years to build, and we finished three years ago. For me, the play and movement of light was very important. It has a series of outdoor rooms and courtyards, so there is no clear definition of when you are inside or outside. Design is becoming very global, and it needs to be more 'glocal', which comes from your culture, your sensibility and your values as a family.

Where do you think AI is making the biggest impact?

AI is here to stay; we must embrace it by making well-informed choices. It is an excellent testing and time-management tool. AI's tangible intelligence complements human intangible intelligence - feelings, emotions and gut instinct. But AI cannot take over that; it is the greatest part of the human race. But working together is the best combination.

My husband and I are founders of the Urban Sketchers Dubai chapter. If you ask AI to sketch the old clock tower in Deira, the experience of live sketching, standing in front of the tower, the emotions you capture could never be captured by AI. That sketch has life because I was part of the experience: all my senses were engaged. AI can take a factual image of that sketch; it can never capture the story behind it. That is why, within our university programme, students still use sketchbooks. Once you have sketched it, you can allow AI to take it further, but the start cannot be AI. Sketch is a state of flow; AI is not.

What will help build the next generation of talent?

Change starts at home, in the family unit. Mothers have the biggest role to empower their daughters. If you educate one daughter and allow her a voice, letting her pursue her dreams, it has a ripple effect on your extended family, the community and society at large. As a child, my daughter took pride from seeing me work right through her growing years; I used to take both children on site with me. The younger generation are so much more fearless. My motto is stolen from my daughter: 'Female is the future'. She has a T-shirt which says it, and she lives it, believes it - and she is it.

> My career has been about shifting from 'ego-centric' to 'eco-centric' architecture. We need to move from the next tallest building to something more humble, where people are at the core.



Leila Sobek

Founder and Director of BMA Studio

Ms Sobek founded BMA Studio in 2015 as a multidisciplinary, full-service architecture and design firm offering architecture, interiors, master planning, design management and construction supervision. Based in Dubai, BMA has offices in London and Cairo. BMA's portfolio includes private estates as well as landmark residences and signature developments for industry leaders such as Emaar, Nakheel and hospitality groups including Fairmont. A chartered member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), Ms Sobek with more than 25 years of experience has two master's degrees, in digital design from the UK's Architectural Association (AA) and in architecture and urbanism from IUST. She moved to Dubai in 2006 and first worked for Naga Architects for four years. She is married and a mother to two teenage daughters.

What was it like as a woman in the industry when you started out, versus now?

Twenty years ago, construction was more of a male-dominant industry, 100 percent - even architecture was. And as women, unfortunately, we had more to prove. You needed to be more consistent, more accurate than male colleagues. And if you wanted to do full scope, from design to construction, it was even more tricky.

I have a hands-on approach; even as a junior, I was always curious to see how design could be turned into a building. I look at the architect as a master orchestrator, creating a symphony to make a beautiful building. So at BMA we don't only do design. I don't believe in just creating the concept then passing it on. I believe that, if you have a vision for a project, stay with it and your client to make it happen. Even 11 years ago when I set up the business, I would offer full scope and people would say, "OK, you do the design and then what?" Now I see clients come in with a design and they want you to make it happen for them.

Where do you think AI and robotics are making the biggest impact?

When AI started, I think most of us tried to ignore it - that it would be gone again before we knew it. But it didn't; of course, now we use AI in communications, research, brainstorming, testing ideas. At the office, we have a team working solely on AI. There's progress in AI every day and you cannot miss out on that. Even things relevant a month ago are obsolete.

But I do believe AI is just a tool. It's still not very accurate; even if you control it you get, say, 70 percent accuracy. I don't think it's going to replace architects' ideas or designs, and I hope it never replaces human minds and creativity.

Robotics have moved ahead way before AI, and portions of buildings can be manufactured with robotics. We recently finished a commercial building - a showroom - on Jumeirah Beach Road that I'm proud of. It's a complex design using Glass-Fibre Reinforced Polyester (GFRP) - a synthetic material fabricated in a robotic way and installed on-site in the majority of the exterior facade. It helps fabricate areas that you cannot do with a conventional system. But using robotics on a bigger scale, in the majority of construction? We still have a way to go.

The UAE is moving at incredible speed with sustainability. What is exciting you the most?

Expo 2020 changed the industry and Dubai a lot. Dubai looked at Expo not as a six-month event but with a master design, as a planned city. We worked on the Expo Czech Republic and Slovakia pavilions and, for example, not many people know that there is a level of parking under the whole Expo community. That shows that they looked at it as a long-term project, keeping the possibility to turn it to a permanent neighbourhood afterwards.

Years back, too, sustainability was just check boxes - like, do you have solar panels? Now it comes into design strategies from a very, very early stage in design. What's shifting in sustainability is mobility - how people can commute in a better, greener way with more biking areas, shaded areas, trees. ARM Holding is developing a very ambitious neighbourhood [The Park Dubai, replacing the old Jebel Ali racecourse with a highly walkable five-square-kilometre city built around a huge central park (Fast Company Middle East, 2025; Rizvi, 2026)]. They are bringing smart city ideas and sustainability even into the master planning, as fundamental elements. It's going to be very interesting to see how they shape it into a reality.

> There's progress in AI every day and you cannot miss out on that. But I do believe AI is just a tool. I hope it never replaces human minds and creativity.



Dr Sonia Zahiroddiny

Chief Information Officer, Innovo Group

Dr Zahiroddiny joined construction company Innovo and moved to Dubai in 2025. She previously spent 10 years at High Speed 2 (HS2) in England, first as Building Information Modelling (BIM) Strategy Manager, then Head of Digital Engineering and then as Chief Information Officer (CIO). Before that, she spent two years at Transport for London (TfL) leading BIM implementation. She holds a bachelor's degree in computer networks technology, master's degree in business information systems management and a doctorate in BIM and computer sciences, all from Northumbria University in the UK, and a subsequent master's degree in cognitive neuroscience and neuropsychology from Birkbeck, University of London.

What barriers have you overcome in your career so far?

When I started out in engineering, which was heavily male-dominated, I didn't realise just how much less diverse the tech industry would be. That became apparent when I became a CIO and moved solely into the technology sector.

That said, my biggest barrier hasn't been my gender; it's been resistance to change. My focus has been around technological adoption, cultural shift and challenging people to adopt a growth mindset in industries that are built on tradition. Digital transformations are inherently challenging; they fail when organisations resist change. Leading large and complex digital transformations in the UK, I've learned to navigate that resistance with empathy and clarity.

What's your leadership style?

Since I became CIO, I've adopted a coaching style of leadership, where I try to put the ownership on my team. I believe outcomes are delivered through people, so I'm very human-centric in my approach. Undertaking my 'leader as coach' studies deepened my understanding of coaching principles and how effective they can be in leadership roles.

Where do you think AI is making the biggest impact?

The UAE has the right vision and aspirations around AI. At Innovo, we're aligning ourselves to this vision: we're not chasing hype - our strategy is grounded in a pragmatic approach and creating measurable value. The real question for us is: will our clients feel the impact? Can we deliver our projects faster, cheaper and safer? But we also want to build the data foundations that will make AI work and scale at an enterprise level, so we can improve productivity. So the strategy is some quick wins with tangible value but, in parallel, fixing the data foundations.

What really interests me, partly because of my second MSc in cognitive neuroscience, is bridging cognitive neuroscience, AI and the built environment through performance data. Think about lighting, temperature, air quality and the spaces we design - all of these impact our wellbeing. These environmental factors trigger neurochemical changes in the brain. Imagine if we could actually measure those changes to inform policy or influence how we design spaces. It's an emerging research area, and it genuinely excites me.

> What genuinely excites me is bridging cognitive neuroscience, AI and built environment - measuring how environmental factors trigger neurochemical changes in the brain. This can inform policy and influence design.

What can a country like the UAE learn from an enormous project like HS2?

UK high-speed railway HS2 was originally planned as 540km of track connecting Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham to London in a 'Y-shaped' route (Krishna, 2020; BBC News, 2026; Kingsley, 2026). The project broke ground in 2020 and is now due to be completed in the late 2030s at a cost of around $137 billion (BBC News, 2026). Phase 2 extensions to Manchester and Leeds were cancelled, and top speeds reduced from 360kph to 320kph (BBC News, 2026; Kingsley, 2026).

There are several key lessons the UAE can take from HS2 in delivering mega infrastructure programmes. Apply systems thinking from the outset - understand all the interfaces, dependencies and risks before committing to timelines. Get the commercial arrangements right early on; this sets the foundation for everything else. Prioritise pragmatism over hype. Focus on delivering measurable value, rather than chasing innovation for its own sake. And, finally, make better use of technology and data from the outset to improve project delivery.

HS2 was an amazing learning curve. We won awards for our digital twin vision [live, virtual copies of real-world objects, systems or processes] and digital engineering adoption. But it was about far more than just building a railway - it was about creating jobs and upskilling the workforce. It truly was a step change in how we approach infrastructure delivery.

HS2 was a UK Department for Transport-sponsored project and, understandably, highly political. I think the government underestimated its scale and complexity.

Methodology

This report combines expert interviews with desk-based research to explore the experiences and perspectives of women shaping the built environment sector in the United Arab Emirates.

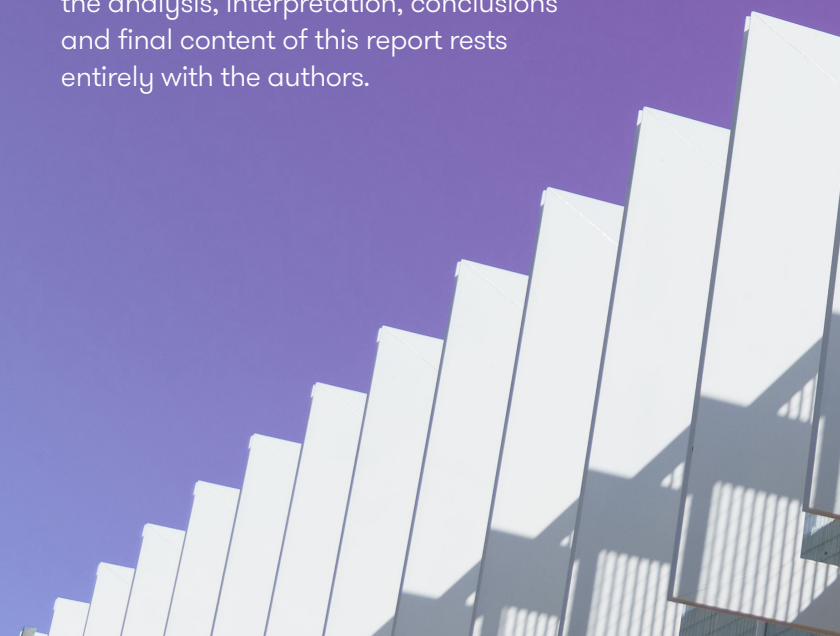
The research was conducted by Heriot-Watt University, in collaboration with Grant Thornton, and draws on semi-structured interviews with five senior female leaders from architecture, real estate, sustainability, construction technology and higher education. Participants were selected for their recognised leadership roles and significant contributions to the sector. Together, they represent a range of disciplines that influence the planning, design, delivery and operation of the built environment in the UAE.

Interviews of 60-75 minutes were conducted online in English during August 2026, and explored career journeys, leadership experiences, barriers to progression, technological change, sustainability and the future talent pipeline. Conversations were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. A semi-structured format allowed interviewees to discuss both common themes and issues specific to their own professional experience.

The interview findings were supplemented by a review of academic literature, industry reports, government publications and publicly available data relating to construction, real estate, architecture, sustainability and gender equity. This wider evidence base provided context for the interview insights and enabled the authors to identify themes relevant both in the UAE and internationally.

Finally, a list of 20 prominent female leaders in the UAE built environment was built using multi-source, expert-informed purposive sampling. Candidates were systematically selected and triangulated using three data streams: public media content analysis; formal recognition in industry 'to watch' lists; and academic peer elicitation and consensus validation. Biographic profiles were curated from open-source reporting, publicly available biographies, press releases and CV analysis.

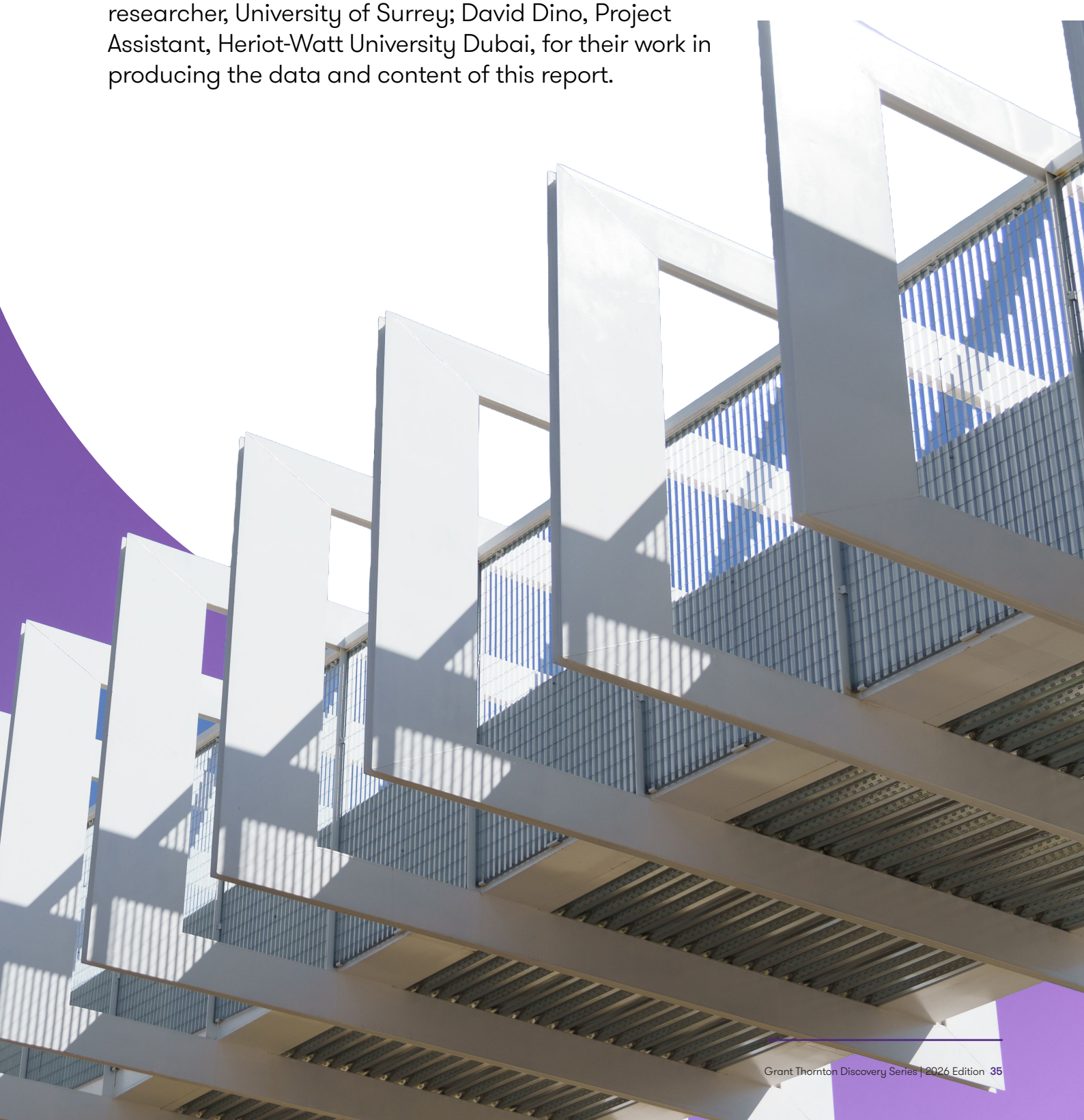
During the research and drafting process, the authors used generative artificial intelligence tools, including Microsoft Copilot and Teams, Google Gemini and NotebookLM and OpenAI ChatGPT, to assist with interview transcription, summarisation, background research and editorial refinement. All outputs produced using AI tools were reviewed and independently verified by the authors. Responsibility for the analysis, interpretation, conclusions and final content of this report rests entirely with the authors.



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Appendix A

20 women who have visibly shaped the UAE's physical environment

1. **Farah Addada,** Head of Workplace and Design UAE, Project and Development Services, JLL
2. **Noora Al Awar and Fatima Al Zaabi,** Co-founders, Studio D04
3. **Khadija Al Bastaki,** Executive Director, Dubai Design District
4. **Dr Alamira Reem Al Hashimi,** Urban planner, architect and historian; author of Planning Abu Dhabi: An Urban History
5. **Salwa Al Maflahi,** Group Executive Director, Sustainability and Community Outreach and Worker Welfare, Aldar
6. **HH Sheikha Shamma bint Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan,** President and CEO, Frontier25
7. **Muna Al Osaimi,** CEO, Strategy and Corporate Governance Sector, Roads and Transport Authority
8. **Azza Alsuwaidi,** Chief Operating Officer, Etihad Rail
9. **HE Hala Badri,** Director General, Dubai Culture and Arts Authority
10. **Dr Aisha Bin Bishr,** Vice President of Digital Transformation, The Global Diwan
11. **Sumaya Dabbagh,** Founder and Principal, Dabbagh Architects
12. **Farida Farag,** Market Director, Cities and Communities, AtkinsRéalis
13. **Anuradha Harish,** Chief Commercial Officer, Dubai Holding Real Estate
14. **Friba Hossaini,** Lead Tunnelling Engineer, Jacobs
15. **Layal Naeem,** Associate Director, Special Projects, Arada
16. **Farah Naz,** Global Climate Advisory Director, SJ Group
17. **HE Majida Ali Rashid,** CEO, Real Estate Development, Dubai Land Department
18. **Iman Abi Saab,** Buildings Director, Middle East, and Regional Technical Excellence Leader, Mott MacDonald
19. **Amira Sajwani,** Managing Director of Sales and Development, Damac Properties; Founder and CEO, Prypco; Co-founder and COO, Amali Properties; CEO, AlphaHAS
20. **Nada Taryam,** CEO, Beeah Real Estate; Managing Director, Beeah Group

Appendix B:

The UAE's megaprojects - completed megaprojects

Project	Estimated cost	Description	Completion date
Dubai International Airport	$7.5bn	One of the world's busiest airports for international passenger traffic; Terminal 3 alone was the largest building by floor area upon completion	1968-2016
Jebel Ali Port expansion, Dubai	$9.5bn	The world's largest man-made harbour, and the busiest port in the region	1979-2018
Zayed International Airport, Abu Dhabi	$3bn	The 742,000 sq m Terminal A expanded passenger capacity to 45 million annually. Digital biometric systems mean no physical passports or boarding passes	1982-2023
Burj Al Arab, Dubai	$1bn	The original '7-star' sail-shaped luxury hotel. Due to reopen in 2027 after an 18-month restoration	1999
Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi	$3bn	One of the most opulent luxury hotels ever constructed	2005
Palm Jumeirah, Dubai	$12bn	World's largest inhabited man-made island, adding 56km of coast	2007
Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, Abu Dhabi	$545m	One of the world's largest mosques; can accommodate more than 40,000 worshippers	2007
Dubai Mall and Downtown District	$20bn	One of the largest shopping malls in the world by total land area	2008
Dubai Metro	$7.8bn	The world's longest driverless rapid transit system at launch - red and green lines open	2009/ 2011

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The UAE's megaprojects - completed megaprojects

Project	Estimated cost	Description	Completion date
Yas Island, Abu Dhabi	$40bn	Features Yas Marina F1 Circuit and three theme parks, including world's largest indoor theme park (Warner Bros) and region's first indoor marine park (SeaWorld)	2009-2023
Burj Khalifa, Dubai	$1.5bn	Tallest building and freestanding structure in the world at 828m	2010
Masdar City Phase 1, Abu Dhabi	$22bn	One of the world's first sustainable, low-carbon urban communities powered by clean energy	2010
Al Maktoum International Airport (Phase 1), Dubai	$8bn+	Airfield and logistics hub of Dubai South. Originally opened with one runway and cargo flights. Expansion of passenger terminal as Emirates and Fly Dubai hub announced in 2024; second runway complete in 2026	2010-
Saadiyat Island Cultural District, Abu Dhabi	$27bn	Abu Dhabi's flagship cultural hub: home to Louvre Abu Dhabi	2007
Dubai Opera & District	$330m	A 2,000-seat multi-format performing arts centre built to resemble a traditional dhow boat	2016
Dubai Water Canal	$1bn	A 3.2km, 6m-deep man-made waterway connecting Dubai Creek with the sea, with 8.5m-high bridges so luxury yachts could pass beneath	2016
Louvre Abu Dhabi	$1.5bn	'Museum in the sea' featuring a 7,500-tonne floating dome	2017

Appendix B:

The UAE's megaprojects - completed megaprojects

Project	Estimated cost	Description	Completion date
Ain Dubai & Bluewaters, Dubai	$1.6bn	An artificial lifestyle island containing the world's tallest observation wheel (250m), which opened in 2021	2018/ 2021
Expo 2020, Dubai	$7bn	A 4.4 sq km city that welcomed 24m international Expo visits	2021
The Museum of the Future, Dubai	$136m	Oval building wrapped in 1,024 separate stainless steel composite panels and covered in Arabic calligraphy	2022
Etihad Rail, nationwide	$11bn	A 1,200 km nationwide rail network linking all seven emirates. Freight operations fully active; passenger operations began mid-2026	2026-

The UAE's upcoming megaprojects

Project	Estimated cost	Description	Completion date
Al Habtoor Tower, Dubai	$1bn	One of the world's largest single-tower residential buildings at 86 storeys	Late 2026
Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi	$1bn	Designed by Frank Gehry, at 30,000 sq m, this will be the largest Guggenheim globally	Late 2026
Etihad Rail - national passenger network	Part of $11bn network	The full national passenger rollout will connect 11 major cities and regions, from Al Sila near the Saudi border to the port of Fujairah	2027

Appendix B:

The UAE's upcoming megaprojects

Project	Estimated cost	Description	Completion date
Wynn Al Marjan Island, Ras Al Khaimah	$3.9bn	A 70-storey, 352m integrated resort tower hosting the UAE's first licensed gaming casino	2027
Palm Jebel Ali, Dubai	$5bn	Twice the size of Palm Jumeirah, spanning 13.4 sq km with 16 fronds and 91km of beachfront	2027 onwards (phased)
Dubai Reef	Undisclosed	One of the world's largest purpose-built artificial reef programmes, it aims to deploy 20,000 reef modules across 600 sq km off Dubai's waters by 2027	2027
Hafeet Rail - UAE-Oman rail link	$3bn	A 238 km joint-venture railway connecting Abu Dhabi and Al Ain to Sohar Port in Oman for passenger and freight transit	2027 - 2028
The Island - MGM District, Dubai	$1.2bn	A man-made luxury island hosting MGM, Bellagio and Aria resort properties	2027 - 2028
East Coast Ports Expansion -Fujairah Terminals	Undisclosed	DP World's new deep-water Al Rugaylat container terminal and Dibba general cargo terminal on the Gulf of Oman, giving trade access that bypasses the Strait of Hormuz	2028 - 2029
Dubai Creek Harbour & Dubai Square	$3bn	**Sprawling waterfront district housing Dubai Square, an AI-integrated indoor commercial and retail development**	2028 - 2029

Appendix B:

The UAE's upcoming megaprojects

Project	Estimated cost	Description	Completion date
Hudayriyat Island Master Plan, Abu Dhabi	$8bn	A 51 sq km lifestyle and sports island, more than half the size of Abu Dhabi Island, master-developed by Modon with high-end residential communities	2028 - 2029 (Phase 1)
Ramhan Island, Abu Dhabi	$3.5bn	An ultra-luxury natural island community by Eagle Hills featuring over-water villas and a Ritz-Carlton Reserve	2028 - 2029
Burj Azizi, Dubai	$1.5bn	A 725m skyscraper on Sheikh Zayed Road rising to become the world's second-tallest building	2028 - 2030
Dubai Metro	$15bn	The blue line will link Dubai Silicon Oasis, International City, and Mirdif, while the gold links Al Barsha, Business Bay and Jumeirah Golf Estates	2029/ 2032
Mohammed bin Rashid Solar Park, Dubai	$13.6bn	The world's largest single-site solar installation, scaling to a total capacity of 5,000 MW	2030

Appendix B:

The UAE's upcoming megaprojects

Project	Estimated cost	Description	Completion date
Dubai Expo City	$2.7bn	Turns the Expo site into a futuristic urban hub for 35,000 residents and 40,000 professionals, using 80% of the original build	2031
Al Maktoum International Airport Expansion (Dubai South)	$35bn	A multi-phase expansion adding five parallel runways and 400 gates to become the world's largest passenger hub	2030s (phased)
Saqr 2.0, Ras al Khaimah	$1bn	Greenfield port expansion on reclaimed land adjacent to RAK Maritime City	2028 (Phase 1)
The Park Dubai	$5bn	Redevelopment of former Jebel Ali racecourse into a 5 sq km green urban district with a central park the size of London's Hyde Park, surrounded by eight walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods and cycle tracks	TBC

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