

For Immediate Release
9 September 2020



Left: The Flying Saucer, Sharjah, UAE, 2020. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation
Right: The Flying Saucer, Sharjah, UAE, 2020. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic. Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation

Sharjah Art Foundation Completes Renovation of Iconic Brutalist Building, ‘The Flying Saucer’

Renovation Restores Landmark Building’s Original Silhouette and Adds New Spaces for Installations, Public Programmes and Community Gatherings

Building Reopens to the Public on 26 September 2020 with New, Site-Responsive Installation by Lindsay Seers and Keith Sargent

Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) today announced the completion of a major renovation of **The Flying Saucer**, a Sharjah architectural landmark acquired by the Foundation in 2012. Used as a SAF venue since 2015, the futuristic, Brutalist structure was constructed in the mid-1970s in the heart of downtown Sharjah. Modified over the decades to house various businesses, starting as a one-stop-shop restaurant, newsstand, tobacconist, gift shop, patisserie and delicatessen, the renovation, led by SAF and **SpaceContinuum Design Studio**, helmed by SpaceContinuum Founder **Mona El Mousfy**, has restored the original character of the building, while also introducing a new outdoor public space and lower-level community space with a café, library, sunken courtyard and activity spaces. An urban nodal space for the Foundation and the emirate at large, the preserved and adapted building and site will serve as a place for community gathering around art, public programmes and events.

The newly renovated Flying Saucer will reopen to the public on **26 September 2020** with ***Nowhere Less Now³ [flying saucer]***, a new multimedia installation by **Lindsay Seers** and **Keith Sargent** which responds to the building’s architecture. The work is the third iteration of the episodic work *Nowhere Less Now*, which is co-commissioned and produced by Artangel, London; Sharjah Art Foundation; and the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart,

Tasmania, and addresses British colonialism and the artist's journey through history in search of (the) truth. *Nowhere Less Now*³ [*flying saucer*] uses the architectural elements of The Flying Saucer to narrate an alien's landing on Earth and subsequent attempts at understanding human patterns through geometry, gestures and movements. In the coming months, the Foundation will also offer self-guided audio tours of the site and an expansive timeline display that allows visitors to delve into the building's history and unique architectural features.

"The Flying Saucer has been beloved by generations of Sharjah residents since its opening in the late 1970s. It was important that we not only preserve its characteristic structure but also restore it for our community as a space for convening, learning and creating," said **Hoor Al Qasimi, Director of Sharjah Art Foundation**. "While preserving the original building's distinctive qualities, the project also adds a new layer of vibrancy to the space and allows us to better engage with communities across the emirate—an ethos that guides all of the Foundation's architectural and historic preservation work. We are thrilled to reopen The Flying Saucer with Lindsay Seers and Keith Sargent's new multimedia installation that will activate the space and respond to its architecture."

Sitting at the intersection of several residential areas near the centre of the city, The Flying Saucer—with its distinctive design as well as spatial and key location in the heart of urban life—has long been inscribed in the collective cultural memory and place identity of Sharjah residents. Constructed in the mid-1970s and opened in 1978, the building's architecture draws from a combination of space-age and Brutalist influences that permeated the period. Notable elements of its design include a wide circular dome floating above a ring of eight columns, a star-shaped canopy projecting beyond a fully glazed panoramic façade and light and open interior space supported by angled V-shaped pillars.

Initially conceived as a French-inspired store combining a restaurant, newsstand, tobacconist, gift shop, patisserie and delicatessen, The Flying Saucer has undergone a series of functional and design transformations over the past several decades. As the building changed hands—becoming a supermarket and then a fast food restaurant—its architecture was modified through the incorporation of an annex, interior partitions and a false ceiling that hid the concrete dome and ceiling structure from the inside. The peripheral structural pillars were also clad with silver aluminium panels.

Three years after acquiring the building in 2012, Sharjah Art Foundation began the process of returning The Flying Saucer to its prior form in preparation for the exhibition *1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates*, curated by Hoor Al Qasimi for the National Pavilion UAE La Biennale di Venezia at the 56th International Art Exhibition that year. For this temporary renovation, the building was stripped of its exterior cladding and interior elements, including the false ceiling and partitions, fully revealing its over seven-metre high dome and impressive structure.

The current renovation project, which began in 2018, continues the work started by the Foundation in 2015, removing the added annex and moving all support functions to the underground in order to restore the building to its original silhouette and enhance the open character of the interior gallery space. This intervention also includes two new additions designed to complement the building spatially and programmatically and support its function as

a community hub and resource. The first is an exterior **Platform**, an open, outdoor public space designed to act as a spatial and programmatic extension of The Flying Saucer, that will host social events, performances and outdoor art installations. The second major addition is the underground **Launch Pad**, a community space that houses:

- The 'Green Crater,' a sunken circular courtyard filled with lush vegetation and natural light
- A convivial, multi-activity café overlooking the 'Green Crater'
- An extensive curated library
- Various programmes including film screenings, workshops, performances and readings to be held in the open café or library spaces or in one of several enclosed 'pods,' including the 'Meeting Pod' designed for smaller convenings; the larger, multipurpose 'Activation Pod'; or the 'Craft Pod' equipped for art workshops and hands-on activities

Together, these dynamic spaces will invigorate the building with a wealth of new programmatic possibilities, not only as an architecturally vibrant exhibition venue but also as a hub for gathering, creating and learning. Reviving the flexibility, centrality and rich socio-cultural history of this iconic building, this new transformation aims to re-integrate The Flying Saucer within the daily lives of Sharjah residents.

This project continues Sharjah Art Foundation's work to preserve the rich heritage and history of the emirate's built environment in order to create spaces for the presentation of contemporary art as well as to meet the needs of the local community. Other major architectural projects completed by the Foundation in recent years include Al Mureijah Art Spaces (2013), a complex of five new contemporary buildings that were built alongside six existing historical structures that are home to SAF's contemporary galleries; Al Hamriyah Studios (2017), artist workspaces and exhibition areas constructed on the site of a former souq; and Rain Room Sharjah (2018), a site-specific permanent installation by London-based artist collective Random International.

About Sharjah Art Foundation

Sharjah Art Foundation is an advocate, catalyst and producer of contemporary art within the Emirate of Sharjah and the surrounding region, in dialogue with the international arts community. Under the leadership of founder Hoor Al Qasimi, a curator and artist, the foundation advances an experimental and wide-ranging programmatic model that supports the production and presentation of contemporary art, preserves and celebrates the distinct culture of the region and encourages a shared understanding of the transformational role of art. The foundation's core initiatives include the long-running Sharjah Biennial, featuring contemporary artists from around the world; the annual March Meeting, a convening of international arts professionals and artists; grants and residencies for artists, curators and cultural producers; ambitious and experimental commissions; and a range of travelling exhibitions and scholarly publications.

Established in 2009 to expand programmes beyond the Sharjah Biennial, which launched in 1993, the foundation is a critical resource for artists and cultural organisations in the Gulf and a conduit for local, regional and international developments in contemporary art. The foundation's

deep commitment to developing and sustaining the cultural life and heritage of Sharjah is reflected through year-round exhibitions, performances, screenings and educational programmes in the city of Sharjah and across the Emirate, often hosted in historic buildings that have been repurposed as cultural and community centres. A growing collection reflects the foundation's support of contemporary artists in the realisation of new work and its recognition of the contributions made by pioneering modern artists from the region and around the world. Sharjah Art Foundation is a legally independent public body established by Emiri Decree and supported by government funding, grants from national and international nonprofits and cultural organisations, corporate sponsors and individual patrons. All exhibitions and events are free and open to the public.

About SpaceContinuum Design Studio

SpaceContinuum Design Studio FZLLC is a UAE-based architecture design consultancy founded in 2014 by architect Mona El Mousfy. With interdisciplinary collaboration at its core, the research-based architecture practice explores the relation between space, shared social practices and socio-cultural conditions. The practice conceives a project as a layering of space continuums across scales, and the ensuing development of cultural meaning. SpaceContinuum is presently engaged in various projects for Sharjah Art Foundation and Sharjah Architecture Triennial.

About Sharjah

Sharjah is the third-largest of the seven United Arab Emirates, and the only one bridging the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Reflecting the deep commitment to the arts, architectural preservation and cultural education embraced by its ruler, Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Sharjah is home to more than 20 museums and has long been known as the cultural hub of the United Arab Emirates. In 1998, it was named UNESCO's 'Arab Capital of Culture' and was designated the UNESCO 'World Book Capital' for the year 2019.

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