

Press release

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The Royal Commission for AlUla and the French Agency for AlUla Development accelerate Saudi-French cultural collaboration

Villa Hegra arts and culture project appoints CEO and architect to welcome the new stage of development for the institution and landmark destination dedicated to promoting and nurturing art and culture

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 8 February 2023: The Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) and its partner the French Agency for AlUla development (AFALULA), have marked further milestones in its Saudi-French cultural collaboration as it establishes foundations for two new arts and cultural hubs in the heart of AlUla.

This announcement follows the visit of Mrs Catherine Colonna, French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, to Riyadh on 2 February, during which key stakeholders discussed the Franco-Saudi cultural collaboration and the new stages in the development of the Villa Hegra.

Inspired by some of France's most prestigious cultural institutions, Villa Hegra, a new creative institution, will host cultural and intellectual activities while bringing together the best of Saudi Arabia and France's artistic and creative scenes to be enjoyed by an international and local audience.

The origins of the Villa Hegra project emanate from the principles set out in a foundational intergovernmental agreement signed in April 2018 between Saudi Arabia and France, embodied by the close collaboration between RCU and the French Agency for AlUla Development (AFALULA). Rooted in AlUla's exceptional heritage, Villa Hegra will base its ambitions and actions on Saudi and France's shared cultural wealth. It will engage in an artistic interchange between France and Saudi Arabia and, more broadly, between European and Arab cultures. This collaboration was recently strengthened by the appointment of Sophie Makariou as Scientific Director in charge of the Culture and Heritage division for AFALULA.

Villa Hegra will develop as an incubator for artists and creators, structured around several complementary cultural spaces. It will promote the awakening of the artistic senses through the implementation of ambitious projects and will contribute positively and actively to the world's cultural development.

The architecture agency Lacaton & Vassal wins the competition for the design of the Villa Hegra

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A Franco-Saudi jury chaired by the architect Jean Nouvel and bringing together eminent personalities from the fields of art, culture and architecture, selected the Lacaton & Vassal Agency, winner of the 2021 Pritzker Prize, from among five candidate teams, for the design of Villa Hegra.

The architect will work to bridge the urban city and the oasis, by proposing a contemporary rereading of the duality between the old town and the summer farms located in the palm grove that faces it.

Fériel Fodil is appointed Chief Executive Officer of Villa Hegra

Fériel Fodil, who has been appointed as Chief Executive Officer of Villa Hegra, has been working at the Château de Chantilly since 2016, most recently as Deputy CEO, after starting as CFO and serving as its interim CEO for nearly two years. The Château de Chantilly hosts the second largest collection of classical art painting in France after the Louvre Museum.

Prior to this experience, Fériel oversaw all financial aspects and strategic planning for the pre-opening of the Abu Dhabi Cultural District in the United Arab Emirates. This project aimed to establish the largest concentration of museums in the world. She began her career as an auditor at PriceWaterhouseCoopers, in Paris and Washington DC.

The Villa Hegra pre-opening programme to start in 2023

The artistic direction of the Villa Hegra pre-opening programme has been entrusted to a duo of Saudi and French curators. Aimed at both a local and an international audience and will promote dialogue between European and Saudi cultures. This will include: artist residencies, an art commission, scientific workshops for kids, an open-air performance programme, new creative technologies summer courses for teenagers, as well as movie concerts.

Nora Aldabal, Arts and Creative Planning Director, RCU, said: "Through long-term partnerships RCU is responsibly and sustainably regenerating the cultural and natural landscape of AlUla, enhancing quality of life and creating a global, sustainable destination that is empathetic to the environment, history, culture and people of AlUla. RCU is establishing a thriving ecosystem of creative talent, a place where artists can immerse themselves in our legacy of celebrating and embracing culture and creativity. For example, our upcoming exhibition of FAME: Andy Warhol in AlUla will showcase one of the world's most famous and recognisable artists and provide opportunities for the community to learn from a series of workshops and masterclasses in screen printing and design. Through Villa Hegra, AlUla will continue to become a meeting place for the local community and an eclectic international audience of artists. Villa Hegra will highlight emerging Saudi and international artists while also actively elevating AlUla's standing on the world's artistic and creative stage. Artists travelling to AlUla will have the opportunity to develop and grow, drawing unique inspiration from our stunning landscape, rich heritage, and ancient culture."

Fériel Fodil is appointed Chief Executive Officer of Villa Hegra said: "I am honored to have the opportunity to lead such a remarkable institution that will contribute meaningfully to the cross-cultural dialogue between Saudi Arabia and France and more generally between the Arab world and Europe. Villa Hegra will embed itself in the rich heritage of the Al Ula region and will be a key milestone in the ambitious development of Al Ula as a unique cultural and touristic destination globally."



Gérard Mestrallet, Executive Chairman of AFALULA, said: “Only one year after the signing in Jeddah of the intergovernmental agreement between France and Saudi Arabia for the creation of Villa Hegra, these various announcements testify to the considerable progress of the project and mark a new stage in its development. This is indeed a milestone in the history of the conception of this cultural institution of reference, dedicated to arts and culture, which seals the artistic dialogue initiated between France and Saudi Arabia and, more broadly, between European and Arab cultures. Villa Hegra embodies the encounter between the heart of the Arab world and the French creative spirit.”

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About RCU (Royal Commission for AlUla)

The Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) was established by Royal Decree in July 2017 to preserve and develop AlUla, a region with outstanding natural and cultural heritage, located in northwestern Saudi Arabia. The RCU's long-term plan takes a sensitive, sustainable and responsible approach to urban and economic development in order to preserve the natural and historical heritage of the region, while making AlUla a privileged place where it is possible to live, work and visit. The plan encompasses numerous initiatives in the fields of archaeology, tourism, culture, education and the arts, to address different priorities in economic diversification, empowerment of local communities and the preservation of heritage, as part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda.

About AFALULA (French Agency for AlUla development)

Born from an intergovernmental agreement signed by France and Saudi Arabia in April 2018, the French Agency for AlUla Development (Afalula) was founded in Paris in July 2018. Afalula aims to support, in a spirit of co-construction, its Saudi partner, the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU), in the sustainable economic, touristic and cultural development of AlUla, a region with an exceptional natural and cultural heritage located in the Northwest of Saudi Arabia. The agency's mission is to mobilize all French know-how and expertise and to bring together the best operators and companies in the fields of archaeology, museography, architecture, urban planning, tourism, hospitality, infrastructure, horse, education, security, agriculture, botany and sustainable management of natural resources.

About Lacaton & Vassal

The Office Lacaton & Vassal based in Paris, has an international practice, working on public buildings, housing and urban planning. All the projects are based on a principle of generosity and economy, serving the life, the uses and the appropriation, with the aim of changing the standard and a strong commitment for sustainability and social impact. Working carefully with climate and everything already there, reuse, transformation instead of demolition and always restarting from the empty, is also a principle of the office's attitude.

The main works completed: the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, the Architecture school in Nantes, the FRAC, Regional collection of contemporary art in Dunkerque (France), completed, 2013 and significant housing projects: House Latapie, Bordeaux, "Cité Manifeste", social housing in Mulhouse and Paris, the transformation of modernist social housing blocks in Paris and Bordeaux, a housing tower block in Geneva.

Current projects: Renovation of the Kampnagel theatre in Hamburg, transformation into housing of a former building hospital Saint Vincent de Paul hospital in Paris



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