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مجلس الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا للترفيه والجذب السياحي
Middle East and North Africa Leisure & Attractions Council

VENDOR TALK – JULY 2022

CREATING UNIQUE VISITOR ATTRACTIONS IN A CROWDED MARKET

Find out what your unique story is
to reap the long-term rewards.



Walk along the busy boulevards of any global city and you could be forgiven for suffering with double-vision. The malls, the brands, the entertainment centers are often duplicated - providing lots of convenience to local consumers but little distinction compared with other cities.

This *build-it, badge-it, open-it, repeat-it* mentality is accentuated by the ability of operators and investors to create brilliant blueprints for entertainment centers and then roll them out across a region. A great way to build portfolios fast, but not always with an eye on creating unique visitor destinations that flourish in the long term.

Speaking from my own experience in the UK, I've seen the meteoric rise and fall of many visitor destinations that have simply been too similar to other branded attractions in our mature leisure and entertainment market. What matters more now, both in the UK, and other mature leisure markets around the world, is a unique offer inspired by the people that will visit it or inspired by the location that it resides in.



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So what is the solution?



Let's take FECs (Family Entertainment Centers) as an example.

If I was to describe to you an FEC that I visited in the region, where I could buy a coffee, play on redemption games and exercise on a trampoline - would you know which brand and location I was talking about?

But if I was to talk about a place that I visited in the US where visitors could play with art installations and enter the experience through a fridge door - you'd know the exact attraction I was talking about, right? Meow Wolf.



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Ask Important Questions

Creating a unique visitor destination goes beyond adding the city name to the logo on the front door - it means taking more time, consideration and opinions of your target audiences to achieve an experience that is locally aligned and commercially viable. To do this, consider the following questions for your existing or new FEC concept:

- How will the people, their behaviour, the climate, the history, the micro-culture of a location all affect the FEC experience?
- How could you bring local traditions, artists and musicians to inspire the decor, design and overall experience of your FEC?
- What will your local target audience group tell you about the experiences they like and don't like? How are you using these insights to tailor your offer?
- How could you tailor the mix between digital and physical experiences, based on local consumer's desires or trends over the next 5-10 years?

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A great example in the current market is the Museum Of Illusions in Riyadh. They've understood the gap in the market for a hands-on experience that creates intrigue, laughter and an abundance of social media amplification that locals love. It's playful, for adults and children, and has been a much welcome attraction into the mix of the capital. For a global entertainment chain, they have provided a brilliant personal experience fit for Riyadh.

The evidence

The need for more unique, locally-inspired experiences extends beyond just my opinion. Back in 2018, the Saudi Arabian General Authority for Statistics published the findings from their *Household Culture and Entertainment Survey*. They revealed the main reasons why Saudis did not travel inside the country for entertainment purposes.

22% pointed towards a lack of tourist places to visit and 21% said there was a lack of cultural and entertainment activities/shows. Despite significant investment in the region to reverse these results, tourism and culture cannot simply be 'bought in'. Tourism and culture develops organically from the DNA of a city or region or group of people.



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The aforementioned reference to the Meow Wolf experience in the US is underpinned and inspired by local people - a thriving art community in Santa Fe. This is a modern-day example of culture and tourism in action right now, it is successful because of its story.

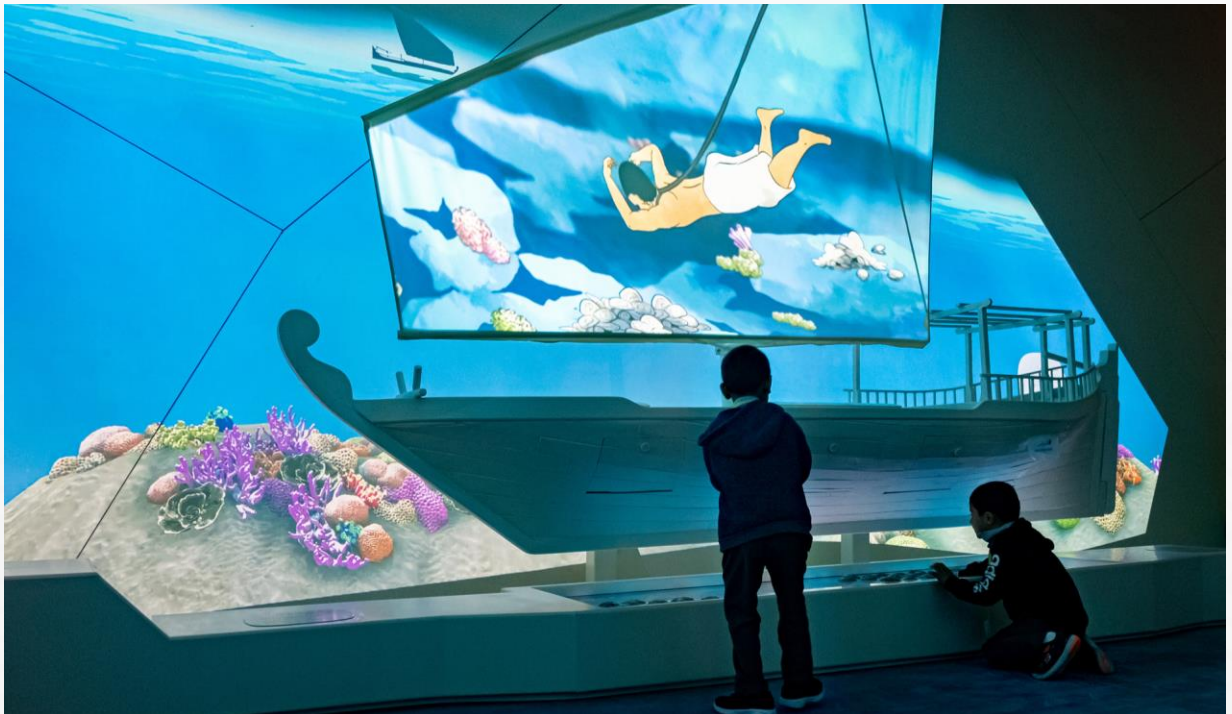


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Another good example is Qatar. This time, inspired by their coastal landscape and rich source of heritage sites, their cultural attractions reflect their past. Look no further than the National Museum of Qatar with architecture inspired by the desert and sea, with unique experiences that represent the country's DNA, such as family workshops on the historic pearling industry.



Shopping malls

Let's also consider shopping malls and mixed-use developments across the Middle East. Retail continues to recover in a post-Covid market with transaction volumes in Saudi Arabia alone falling by 23.4% in Q1 2022, compared to the same period last year .

While the real estate market has switched its attention to leasing space to high footfall leisure operators (ironically FECs) to recover their fortunes, what could we do to make our shopping malls more unique to our people and locality?

Visitors want more than an experience, or meal, or retail purchase when they visit malls - they want to feel part of a like-minded community that appreciates the aesthetics and story of a location they call their **favorite destination**.



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For those looking for a benchmark shopping mall or district, look no further than Camden Market in the UK. With over 1,000 shops, stalls, bars and cafes, Camden Market has thrived on counter culture by providing a diverse community of creatives to trade since 1974.

In the last 10 years, the market has established itself as a go-to tourist destination in London. The destination attracts 28 million visitors per year and has been recently put on the market for £1.5bn (US \$1.87bn) a 275% increase in value since being purchased in 2014 for £400m (US \$500m).

There is always going to be a place for traditional family entertainment centers and traditional shopping malls too, but for those operators, owners, IP franchises and real estate companies that want to stand out in a crowded Middle East market - find out what your unique story is to reap the long-term rewards.



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Author Credits:

Robbie is Insights Analyst Lead at Katapult. He works on providing data-driven audience and market trends, as well as operational insights, to assist the client and design team in creating immersive, commercially-successful experiences. Robbie has over 10 years' experience in the leisure and tourism industry and has worked with iconic brands, theme parks, family entertainment centres, museums and visitor attractions around the world. He is a dedicated Board Member of his local art and cinema centre, QUAD.

About Katapult:

[Katapult](#) designs themed attractions and experiences that amaze and engage visitors globally. Our work is enjoyed by 50 million visitors, at 81 attractions, in 18 different countries, every year. As well as increasing guest experience, we thrive on helping you generate more income, more fans and bring the vision for your attraction to life.

Disclaimer:

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