

UAEU DESERT ARCHITECTURE & URBANISM COMPETITION

# DESERT BY DESIGN

## AL AIN EDITION 2026

**Future Heritage: Designing the Next Layer of Al Ain's Identity**

Shaping the future through heritage, climate innovation, and desert wisdom.

AED 320,000

Free registration

COMPETITION CONDITIONS



UAEU GOLDEN JUBILEE

# 50 YEARS OF LEGACY

## Rooted Legacy... and a Promising Future

DESERT BY DESIGN celebrates UAEU's Golden Jubilee through a design platform for Al Ain, where heritage, sustainability and innovation come together to shape tomorrow's oasis city.



## FUTURE HERITAGE

Designing the next layer of Al Ain's identity



COMPETITION CONDITIONS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

# DESERT BY DESIGN

DESERT BY DESIGN is a UAEU-led annual architecture and urbanism competition that advances architectural identity, climate-responsive design and desert urbanism through real cultural and environmental contexts.

The AI Ain 2026 Edition asks participants to engage with one of the UAE's most layered desert-oasis contexts and to imagine how contemporary design can extend its identity responsibly.

### **The intelligence of place**

shade, thresholds, water, landform, materiality, public life, memory, hospitality, movement and environmental adaptation.



## 2. AL AIN AND THE DESERT CONTEXT

# DESERT CONTEXT

Al Ain is shaped by the relationship between desert climate, oasis ecology, archaeological memory, cultural continuity and modern urban growth.

Its identity is found in fortifications and heritage structures, but also in palm groves, falaj logic, shaded routes, courtyards, thresholds, landscape edges and daily social practices.

Oasis ecology

Falaj logic

Shaded routes

Public life



### 3. COMPETITION THEME + 4. DESIGN CHALLENGE

# FUTURE HERITAGE

## Designing the Next Layer of Al Ain's Identity

Heritage is understood here as a living system rather than a static image. The challenge is to propose the next layer of Al Ain's identity through architecture, landscape, interpretation, public realm and environmental design.

### GUIDING QUESTION

**How can contemporary design contribute to the next layer of Al Ain's identity while remaining grounded in its environmental and cultural logic?**

Proposals should move beyond replication of the past and instead reinterpret heritage as a living and evolving system.



5. OFFICIAL COMPETITION SITE

# TWO FIXED OFFICIAL SITES



Participants must select one of the two official competition sites. Proposals must be developed within the boundaries of one designated site and demonstrate understanding of Al Ain's cultural, environmental, historical and urban context.

**Alternative self-selected sites are not permitted.**



## OFFICIAL SITES



### 01 Site 1 - Al Ain Oasis Edge Redevelopment Area

Historically identified for a traditional souq and heritage marketplace, this site offers an opportunity to create a destination that celebrates Al Ain's cultural identity while strengthening heritage, tourism, community activity and economic development.



### 02 Site 2 - Al Rubainah Cultural Destination Site

A prominent site with potential for a cultural destination, landmark or hub that complements the Al Ain Oasis setting and reinforces the city's cultural identity, visitor experience and heritage interpretation.



SITE CONSIDERATIONS

# DESIGN WITH CARE

## 1 Heritage character

Respect the heritage significance and character of AI Ain.

## 2 Oasis landscape

Respond appropriately to the oasis landscape and surrounding urban fabric.

## 3 Climate response

Incorporate sustainable and climate-responsive design strategies.

## 4 Visitor comfort

Enhance accessibility, walkability, visitor comfort and public engagement.

## 5 Culture + tourism

Strengthen connections between heritage, culture, tourism and community life.

## 6 Long-term value

Consider adaptability, resilience and economic viability over time.

## 6. SCOPE AND ELIGIBLE PROJECT TYPES

# CULTURE + CLIMATE

The competition invites design-led proposals that strengthen Al Ain's potential for resilient long-term tourism while adding a thoughtful new layer to the site's cultural, spatial and environmental identity.

01

Heritage-linked visitor, research or community infrastructure

02

Climate-responsive architectural pavilion, interpretive centre or learning space

03

Adaptive reuse or contemporary addition to existing built elements where appropriate

04

Public-realm and landscape intervention that improves shade, movement, comfort and interpretation

05

Archaeological interpretation route, viewing structure, threshold, gathering space or site narrative system

06

Small urban or landscape connector that clarifies arrival, orientation and visitor experience

Large district-scale masterplans, purely strategic policy proposals and submissions that do not resolve the official site spatially are not suitable for this edition.



## 7. PARTICIPANT CATEGORIES AND ELIGIBILITY

# WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

### **A** Students

Undergraduate and postgraduate students are eligible to participate.

### **B** Professionals and emerging professionals

Open to professionals and emerging professionals from related design disciplines.

### ELIGIBLE DISCIPLINES

- Architecture
- Architectural engineering
- Urban design and planning
- Landscape architecture
- Interior design
- Engineering
- Sustainability and allied fields

All participants must be graduates of, or currently enrolled in, a university or higher education institution located in the UAE. Proof of enrollment or graduation may be required.

## 8. SUBMISSION REQUIREMENTS

# WHAT TO SUBMIT

### 1 Four A2 boards

Landscape-oriented presentation boards presenting drawings, diagrams, visualizations and explanatory text.

### 2 Preview image

One project preview image suitable for website and publicity use.

### 3 Project statement

Up to 400 words explaining the concept, official site response and design approach.

### 4 Language

Written content should be in English unless the official platform provides additional instructions.

### 5 Anonymous boards

Do not include participant names, logos, emails, university marks or other identifying information.

### 6 Upload details

Final file format, size limit, naming convention and upload link will be confirmed on the official website.

**No video files are required unless announced separately by the organizer.**



## 9. RECOMMENDED SUBMISSION CONTENT

# CLEAR DESIGN STORY

### 1 Design innovation and contextual heritage

Show how the proposal reinterprets Al Ain's identity without superficial mimicry.

### 2 Economic impact and civic engagement

Demonstrate sustainable tourism value, civic life and inclusive public access.

### 3 Environmental responsiveness and sustainability

Address desert climate through passive design, shade, comfort and resource efficiency.

### 4 Presentation and communication

Communicate a coherent concept through high-quality drawings, diagrams and text.

The best submissions should connect concept, site logic, climate response, visitor experience and buildable spatial strategy into one coherent proposal.

10. EVALUATION CRITERIA

# HOW THE JURY WILL ASSESS

| Criterion                                       | What the jury will look for                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Design innovation and contextual heritage       | Responsiveness to the site's specificities and heritage, ability to reinterpret Al Ain's identity without superficial mimicry, and clarity of the formal architectural approach and spatial organization.                                 |
| Economic impact and civic engagement            | Support sustainable tourism, cultural authenticity, and local economic resilience; contribution to public life through meaningful civic spaces; and provision of inclusive, barrier-free environments for diverse residents and visitors. |
| Environmental responsiveness and sustainability | Effectiveness in addressing desert climatic conditions through passive design and microclimatic adaptation, integration of resource-efficient ecological systems, and alignment with municipal development frameworks.                    |
| Presentation and communication                  | Ability to compellingly communicate complex ideas through high-quality visual and textual representation, maintain conceptual consistency, and clearly convey user engagement and experiential richness.                                  |

11. PRIZES

# PRIZE FUND

# AED 320,000

Prize payment procedures, tax implications and documentation requirements will follow UAEU and organizer policies and will be communicated to winners.

Main prizes

| Category                               | 1st        | 2nd        | 3rd        |
|----------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Students (UG + PG)                     | AED 40,000 | AED 30,000 | AED 20,000 |
| Professionals / Emerging Professionals | AED 80,000 | AED 60,000 | AED 30,000 |

Additional awards

Research & Innovation Excellence Awards: 3 awards, AED 10,000 each

Special Recognition Awards: 3 awards, AED 10,000 each



## 12. COMPETITION SCHEDULE

# KEY DATES

|   |                            |                                                      |
|---|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | LAUNCH                     | July 2026                                            |
| 2 | FREE REGISTRATION PERIOD   | July to September 2026                               |
| 3 | SUBMISSION DEADLINE        | Early October 2026 - exact date/time to be announced |
| 4 | JURY EVALUATION            | October 2026                                         |
| 5 | AWARDS EXHIBITION CEREMONY | 11 November 2026                                     |

The exact submission deadline and time zone should be checked on the official website. Public updates published on the official competition page supersede earlier draft dates.

**13. FREE REGISTRATION + 14. JURY AND EVALUATION PROCESS**

# REGISTRATION + JURY

## FREE REGISTRATION

**There are no registration fees for this competition.  
Participation is free.**

Participants must still complete the online registration form in order to receive a participant code, official updates and submission/upload instructions.

Registering free of charge does not reduce the responsibility to meet the brief, deadline, anonymity rules and submission requirements.

## JURY PROCESS

A jury of qualified experts will evaluate eligible submissions according to the published criteria. Jury names, profiles and affiliations will be announced on the official website once confirmed.

**Participants must not contact jury members directly. This may compromise fairness and may lead to disqualification.**

## 15-16. PUBLICITY, AWARDS EXHIBITION, CONDUCT AND TERMS

# PUBLICITY + TERMS

## Publicity and awards exhibition

Winning and selected projects may be presented through UAEU channels, competition media, exhibition materials, websites, social media, academic events and related publicity.

Participants should ensure that all images, models, AI-generated elements, maps, diagrams and third-party materials are legally usable and properly credited where applicable.

## Participant conduct and terms

- Submissions must be original and must not infringe third-party rights.
- Participants retain authorship while granting publication permission for competition, exhibition, education and promotion.
- The organizer may request editable files, high-resolution images or author details after judging.
- Incomplete, late, non-anonymous, non-compliant or inappropriate submissions may be rejected.



17-18. CONTACT AND Q&A + OFFICIAL ASSETS

# CONTACT + ASSETS

## Official questions

All questions should be submitted through the official competition contact channel listed on the website. Public clarifications should be published for all participants to ensure equal access to information.

**DESERTBYDESIGN@UAEU.AC.AE**

Use the official website for registration, deadlines, upload instructions and public updates.

## Official images and visual assets

**site\_official\_aerial\_archaeology.jpg**

Primary official site image and fixed-site explanation

**al\_ain\_aerial\_context.jpg**

Regional context, desert setting and Al Ain urban fabric

**al\_ain\_oasis\_unesco\_buffer.jpg**

Oasis, heritage landscape and buffer-zone context

**hero\_desert\_alain.jpg**

Website hero section only; keep rules as live HTML text