Al Ain Architectural Guidelines
Introduction

The plan for Al Ain is based on the idea of a “city in the oasis”. This over-arching concept should find its way into the design of individual buildings in the city, as well as their adjacent open spaces. The purpose of this document is to provide explicit design direction towards the achievement of this goal.

Al Ain has a history of development patterns, building types, construction materials, textures and colours particular to its region. The design guidelines presented in this document, for both new and existing buildings, are inspired by this cultural history. At the same time, it is important to avoid the literal adaptation of traditional styles and features applied at the scale of the downtown. Equally important, westernised, “high-tech” solutions that are out of context with the existing fabric, should be avoided. The urban design objective is to discover inventive, distinctive and contemporary architectural solutions that feel of this place and time.

Finally, the guidelines are meant to provide direction to all those involved in the design, development and approval process. They are descriptive of an architectural attitude and are not meant to be strictly prescriptive. As such, they are able to adapt to changing priorities and viewpoints over time.
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1.0 Building Typology

There are several building configurations in Al Ain that inform these guidelines. It is recommended that the maximum building height of G+4 (five storeys), or 20 metres, remain as the highest allowable form for general development in the city. Other building types will range from one story in height up to this maximum. The exceptions to the maximum height limit will be communications towers and the minarets of the mosques.

There is also a gradient of building types based on location in the fabric of the city. For example, buildings fronting the main city streets will be the most densely developed sites with the tallest buildings. Within the centre of the city blocks and buildings will be developed at a lesser scale. The outlying residential blocks will be the lowest density and scale in Al Ain.
1.1 Buildings G+4

Height
The highest buildings in Al Ain are located along the frontages of the main city streets. They generally contain retail at grade and office and/or residential in the floors above. These buildings shall be a maximum of G+4 (five storeys) and twenty (20) metres in height.

Frontage
G+4 buildings should be built to the frontage property line to provide a strong definition of the street space.

Heights
The ground floor should be articulated by recessing it into the building form to clearly identify the retail space as the public part of the building at street level.
1.2 Buildings G+2 and G+3

**Location**
These building types are located within the interior fabric of downtown blocks, surrounded by the G+4 main street frontages. They are primarily for residential use within the downtown area.

**Residential-at-grade**
Where residential is located at grade, a minimum three (3) metre deep zone should be provided between the building and the public realm to provide for unit privacy.

**Heights**
The maximum height of G+2 (three storey) buildings will be twelve (12) metres, and the G+3 (four storey) buildings will be fifteen (15) metres.

**Use**
These buildings may contain ground level retail, or may be occupied by residential use at grade.
1.3 Buildings G+1

Use
The G+1 (two storey) building type is primarily for residential ‘villa’ use and is located outside of the downtown area.

Size
These buildings are located on residential plots ranging from 30m x 30m to 60m x 60m in size.

Distribution
More than one building may be considered for each plot. The maximum height for G+1 buildings is twelve (12) metres.
2.0 Façade Treatment

Al Ain currently lacks coherence in its expression as a city. Greater effort is required to find a distinctive architectural vocabulary that is responsive to the climate of the region and achieves greater sustainability for the betterment of future generations. The shape of windows and the type and detailing of materials will lead to a more memorable city.

2.1 Wall Penetration

A relatively high degree of solidity, with windows that are punched into the wall, is more climatically appropriate. The recommended extent of window area is a maximum of thirty per cent (30%) of the wall surface for residential use and forty-five per cent (45%) for office use. Ground floors may be up to one hundred per cent (100%) window glass area, if shaded.

2.2 Contrasting Expression

Both vertical and horizontal expressions are appropriate for the façades of Al Ain buildings. These contrasts may be incorporated in the same façade by layering elements like sunshades and screens over a punched wall.
2.3 An Expressed Ground Floor

The ground floor of mixed-use buildings should be expressed through increased floor-to-floor height, a recessed storefront line and shading through a colonnade, trellis canopy or fabric awning. The tradition of cantilevering the upper floors of buildings beyond the ground floor is not encouraged.

2.4 Retail Diversity

The existing pattern of four (4) metre wide storefronts should be continued in new developments at ground level.

2.5 Building Separation

The traditional three (3) metre separation between buildings should be reconsidered to allow for the over-building of these spaces with upper floor levels. The potential for pedestrian access through to block interiors should be retained at the ground floor. Where existing gaps are present between buildings, they should be screened above the ground floor to hide the mechanical equipment typically installed in these spaces. Any infill development in these spaces should be recessed a minimum of one (1) metre from the main street façade of the building.
3.0 Response to Climate

It is essential that a higher degree of comfort be achieved in the public domain. Buildings should provide shading to the ground level through design features. Continuous solar shading is required at the ground floor of all retail frontages.

3.1 Colonnade

The ground floor of both existing and new buildings should consider a covered, shaded space utilising a colonnade, or gallery space, built into the ground floor along primary frontages. These public spaces should be a minimum of three (3) metres wide and five (5) metres high. Colonnades are particularly recommended in retail areas.

3.2 Canopy

A horizontal canopy may be applied to façades of buildings, or supported on free-standing structures, to create shade at ground level. The dimensions of a canopy should be a minimum of three (3) metres wide and three (3) metres above ground.

3.3 Brise-Soleil

Sun shading may be achieved at both ground and upper floor levels using a brise-soleil device cantilevered from the façade. The recommended width of these devices is one-third the height of the wall it is shading.

3.4 Screens

Window areas may be shaded through the use of screens, either fixed or movable. These devices also add richness to the architectural expression of a building.

3.5 Natural Shading

Trees should be used whenever possible to shade sidewalk and storefront areas.
4.0 Materials

Several materials have been suggested under the topic of colour. There are other criteria that will also affect the selection of an appropriate material palette for Al Ain.

4.1 Texture

Surfaces that have texture such as concrete, plaster and wood finishes are more vibrant under sunlight. Flat, shiny surfaces are to be avoided.

4.2 Surface Area

Large surface areas with punched windows are indigenous to the Al Ain region. Therefore, materials that create monolithic surfaces are appropriate such as concrete and stone.

4.3 Play of Light

In addition to using shading devices to block or diffuse light, these elements should also be considered for their play of light on background surfaces.

4.4 Glazing

Large glass areas in walls is inconsistent with the locale and its environmental influences. Reflective, mirrored glass is to be avoided. Clear glass will work effectively if properly shaded.
Colour 5.0

The city of Al Ain has emerged from the ground and its traditional personality reflects the soil on which it was built. To tie the city together as a cohesive whole, a carefully considered colour palette should be applied to both existing and new buildings.

5.1 A Monochromatic Palette

A colour palette that is principally monochromatic should apply to all buildings. Base colours that are off-white, black, charcoal and brown are appropriate. Pure white, primary colours and other earth tones like pink and orange, should be avoided, as they are inconsistent with the recommended base colour palette.

5.2 Material Colour

Materials should be selected that express the base colour, such as stone, concrete and cementitious renders. Complementary materials include metals, natural wood and synthetic materials, appropriately scaled and detailed.

5.3 Accent Colour

A limited selection of colours that provide accent to the base palette will add diversity and interest to the city. These colours should not be primary but a subtle variation of pure colours that are softer with a higher grey content.
6.0 Patterns and Features

The detailing of the building structure and skin can create patterning and architectural features that will enrich the architecture of Al Ain.

6.1 Geometry

An abstract, geometrical vocabulary that is random and organic is an appropriate design approach for the patterning of buildings. This strategy is inherited from the palm frond construction of nomadic cultures.

6.2 Screens

The use of screens is encouraged as a feature of façade design. The textures and shadowing resulting from screens enriches the image of a building. Wood, plastic, metal and concrete are appropriate materials for the construction of screens.

6.3 Rhythm

Structural grids, column spacing and the placement and proportion of windows should be considered in terms of the rhythms created in the façade design. In general, a vertical expression is preferred for buildings.

6.4 Recesses

Recesses, some of them subtle, some of them deep, should be utilised in façade designs for both cooling and to dramatise the expression of a building. Vertical recesses in the building skin will articulate and break down the length of buildings. Walls should express the thickness of construction. Arches should be avoided as they are not indigenous to this area.
7.0 Signage

Signs add diversity and interest to the life of a city. However, the scale, location, number and design of signs in the current situation often dominate buildings and streets and create “visual pollution”.

7.1 Location

Pedestrian-oriented signs should be located within colonnades using blade signs, perpendicular to the face of the building storefront. Street-oriented signs should be either fascia signs, or perpendicular blade signs, located above the height of the storefront.

7.2 Number

Ground floor businesses should be limited to two signs: one at the scale of the pedestrian and one related to the open street.

7.3 Design

Plastic face sign boxes, the dominant existing sign type in Al Ain, is not recommended for ongoing use in the city. Creatively carved, cast, etched or painted signs are preferred. Symbol signs are encouraged as they generally identify the actual product that is for sale in the store.

7.4 Size

Pedestrian-oriented, within colonnades:
Blade signs: maximum 2.0 m wide x 0.4m high

Street-oriented, on the building face:
Fascia signs: maximum 4.0m wide x 0.8m high
Blade signs: maximum 2.0m wide x 1.2m high

7.5 Clearance

Signs should be located above all areas occupied by people at a minimum height clearance of two and one-half (2 1/2) metres above ground or floor level.

7.6 Illumination

It is recommended that plastic sign boxes, with back-lighted, fluorescent lamp sources, be discontinued as a signage type in Al Ain. Front-illuminated installations, using warm-coloured light sources, as well as signs formed from individual cut-out letters or symbols, with halo back-lighting, are preferred designs. New sign types may evolve in the future with the increased use of LED lamp sources.
8.0 Sustainability

Encouraging sustainable development is an integral part of planning for the economic, social, and environmental success of Al Ain. Building and landscape design should demonstrate a commitment towards environmental performance and stewardship. The overarching criterion for the sustainability of buildings is that they be climate-responsive. This means responding to temperature, sun, wind, energy sources and water efficiency. As advocated by the UPC Estidama’s Programme.

8.1 Environmental Sustainability

Building designs should include the current best practices in environmental and energy performance. These best practices include, but are not limited to:

- Sustainable building techniques, including higher levels of building insulation, water use efficiency through low-flow fixtures, locally-manufactured products and materials and recycled and “healthy” materials and finishes;
- Alternative sustainable energy features such as low energy appliances;
- Mechanical systems installed to anticipate future connections to a new, central energy system for Al Ain;
- The opacity of building walls balanced, with modest glass areas, recessed or shaded;
- Sustainable roofing technology;
- Collection and re-use of rain water;
- Landscape techniques that minimise maintenance requirements and reduce harmful fertiliser, herbicide and pesticide use;
- Planting of drought tolerant species and native indigenous plantings, in both the public and private realm, to minimise water usage;
- Energy efficient lighting; and,
- Alternative transportation choices and implementation of a Transportation Demand Management (TDM) programme.
8.2 Economic Sustainability

- A variety of housing types and sizes allow for a residential population with a diversity of incomes to purchase or rent homes;

- Integrating uses both horizontally and vertically, providing a variety of neighbourhood services, adding population and demand and encouraging connectivity between commercial enterprise and residential use to support community and economic vitality;

- Businesses aligned to form a continuous, interesting streetscape where each business supports the other in a vibrant communal zone; and

- A diverse community with a locally-housed workforce.

8.3 Social Sustainability

- Individual projects should include amenity spaces for the residents, related to a communal space for outdoor activity, or to offer an attractive view;

- Public outdoor spaces including opportunities for play, gathering, recreation, reflection and social interaction;

- Neighbourhood amenities provided through the land use mix, open spaces and sun-protected areas to allow for community events;

- A full mix of land uses to contribute to the creation of a "complete community";

- A diversity of housing types and sizes to allow residents the opportunity to "age in place"; and

- Design for safety by designing buildings and landscapes to deter crime and promote safety through casual observation and community interaction.
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