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Supplied Picture
DWTC becomes a destination by itself - 30 years later.

DWTC: Building a dream

When the Dubai government decided to build an exhibition facility and a tower in the 1970s, no one knew how the sector would shape up to contribute to the future economy of this one-time fishing settlement.

They did not know where to develop the facility in the first place and where to start.

So, when the late Shaikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, then Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, announced his intention to build

what would then be the tallest building in the Middle East, the reaction was one of pure incredulity.

Building a 39-storey tower was a tall order for Dubai then.

Many people asked "Why? Why a building of such grandeur for Dubai?" and "Why in Za'abeel?" - which at the time was in the middle of the desert.

Post independence, Dubai was still a sleepy town, graduating from a fishing settlement to a mere trading outpost - trying to cash in on the first oil boom and a thriving trade. By the mid-1970s, electronics and home appliances had replaced spices and other commodities in trade.

However, sophisticated business sectors such as exhibitions, conferences and event management were way too far from the radar of the business community and officials - except for one person - the late Shaikh Rashid.

Sceptics debated the odd choice of location on the sandy strip of desert along the Abu Dhabi highway, quite removed from the busy Dubai Creek. Clearly Shaikh Rashid's vision stretched beyond the obvious.

His response was, "Why not? Why not create a new catalyst for Dubai's expansion? Why not build the foundations of what would evolve into the centre for global business in the region?"

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1974: Work begins

In September 1974, work commenced on the Dubai World Trade Centre (DWTC) complex, one that would eventually include a tower, hotels, exhibition halls and serviced apartment blocks.

The tower itself was a brilliant expression of structural ingenuity, then-modern engineering and traditional Islamic architecture.

Five years later, on February 26, 1979, the Dubai World Trade Centre was opened. A new chapter in the emirate's history began to unfold.

"When the Trade Centre opened in 1979 I organised the first show, which was Middle East Construction that coincided with the Queen's inauguration of the Centre," David Domoney, president of the Arab Lab Group, who organised the first exhibition at the Trade Centre, said.

"When we did the show at the Trade Centre, we created a large-domed permanent tent with iron girders covered with canvas and large ceiling fans to cool the area.

"Hall One at that time also existed and is where the current stock exchange now sits, but for the construction show we required larger space.

"Originally, we used to do split shifts - starting the exhibition at 10am and then went on to 1pm, then started again at 5pm to 9pm to suit the local schedule. Over the years all exhibitions began to run through the day starting at around 10am through 6 7pm in the evening."

In 1981, the first Gulf Information Technology Exhibition (Gitex) took place in Hall No 1 - which currently houses the Dubai Financial Market - with 46 exhibitors and 3,038 participants.

Two years later, Hall 2 was built with a capacity of approximately 1,500.

30 years on

Today, exactly 30 years later, the scene is totally different. What started as a dream and vision in the early 1970s, has now become a major player in the emirate's economy.

Over the years, the DWTC has been the region's nexus for regional and international business networking. The complex has undergone numerous expansions to its facilities and offerings aimed at making Dubai "the" 21st century destination for corporate meetings, incentives, conventions and exhibitions.

Today, the Dubai World Trade Centre complex includes the original Trade Centre Tower, nine additional exhibition halls, ten conference halls and 19 meeting rooms housed in the adjacent Dubai International Convention and Exhibition Centre (DICEC), part of the DWTC.

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It can accommodate more than 6,500 delegates in just one of its multipurpose halls. The complex also boasts a 13-storey Convention Tower, two on-site business hotels, and the Dubai International Hotel Apartments, all within walking distance.

Gitex welcomed an impressive 129,884 visitors and the consumer show at Airport Expo, Gitex Shopper, attracted over 132,000 buyers last year. Gulfood retained its status as the premier event for the food and hospitality sector, with a 32 per cent growth in show space, taking up over 60,000 square metres in 2008 and continuing that trend in 2009.

"In 2008, we welcomed 1.1 million visitors to exhibitions, conventions and conferences at our venues, a further 10 per cent increase from the previous year and a validation of the continued growth and sustainability for the region's events industry," Helal Saeed Khalfan Al Marri, Chief Executive of the Dubai World Trade Centre, says.

Dh800m impact

At a rate of \$200 spend per visitor, this translates to a whopping \$220 million (Dh800 million) direct impact on the emirate's economy, the GDP of which last year was estimated to have reached \$54 billion (Dh200 billion).

The DWTC was created as a platform for international business to begin and evolve. It aimed to be the destination to deliver "better experiences" to people from every country and network, to explore trade opportunities and grow their business.

Handsome reward

Shaikh Rashid's foresight in selecting this site paid off handsomely as this was a pivotal step towards creating today's Manhattan-style urban skyscraper corridor of Shaikh Zayed Road - a welcome relief for congestion in Dubai's commercial centre. The tower, a centrepiece of the Dh100 banknote, soon became one of the most recognised structures in the region.

"We are commencing work on the extension of our venue very shortly to now cover 1 million square feet of exhibition space, as announced by our Chairman - clearly an indication of our forecast growth in business. This project will be completed by the end of the 2009," Al Marri says.

He said the world-class facility contributes to the emirate's economy handsomely.

"Ensuring that Dubai remains a hub for exhibitions and trade events despite prevailing global economic conditions is a long-term government strategy. We are working to sustain our target of 1 to 1.5 per cent contribution to Dubai's GDP on par with global benchmarks such as Singapore and Hong Kong in the events and exhibitions sector," Al Marri says.

Economic climate

How will Dubai's exhibition sector weather the economic storm? How is the sector performing?

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This year will no doubt pose significant challenges as economies, industries and businesses all over the world are facing the impact of the recession. In this context, no sector is likely to be immune, Al Marri admits. The events sector will naturally also feel the impact to some degree.

"But with this sector specifically, the value-add is on a tangible level, as it provides a platform for face-to-face networking and extends the potential to penetrate wider markets, leading to enhanced opportunities for business growth," he says.

No other medium offers the same opportunities to meet with customers in an open forum, to showcase new products and innovations and to create new business opportunities.

In addition, businesses are looking to leverage this opportunity to expand their industry knowledge, through stimulating debate and conferences with industry pioneers and hence the quality and depth of content around the shows is becoming increasingly critical.

This region still represents growth across many sectors and structurally the economies are robust with ongoing development plans

"Consequently, in times of global economic challenges and financial instability, it is even more vital for corporations world-wide to continue to engage and interact: The business meetings, conferences and exhibitions held at DWTC will remain the platform for this networking and will, in turn, stimulate opportunities that bring long-term economic benefits not only to Dubai, but to the wider Middle East region. We are a catalyst and a gateway to the wider region," Al Marri adds.

What's in store for the future? Imaginations are usually bound by human limitations. Well, when it comes to Dubai, even imagination seems to become unlimited.

Expansion plans

"As I am sure you are aware, DWTC has been working on building supporting infrastructure for the Meetings, Incentives, Conference and Exhibitions (MICE) sector with our two destination developments - Dubai Trade Centre Jebel Ali anchored on a state-of-the art exhibition centre; adjacent to the upcoming Al Maktoum Airport and the Dubai Trade Centre District, a business/lifestyle destination in the heart of Dubai's central business district," Al Marri says, explaining the future areas of expansion.

"We are keen on ensuring that both projects pick up pace once we have more stability in the global economy and are better positioned to assess master planning adjustments and accordingly cater to both industry and client demands.

"That said, we are moving forward prudently as mentioned earlier, towards achieving our strategic targets within our core MICE business. To this end we have just recently announced the expansion to our existing DICEC venue.

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"The extension to our current venue will provide a large increase in covered exhibition space providing 1m square feet in overall exhibition space. Our Chairman, Shaikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai and Minister of Finance, announced the commencement of this expansion plan at the Gulfood opening earlier this week - the facility will be built next to Halls 1-4 at the DICEC with the most flexible spatial design to accommodate shows, events and weddings of various sizes. This will be completed this year.

"This will be another confirmation of the fact that Dubai retains its 30 year leadership in the sector and remains the "largest" hosting platform for exhibitions in the region.