

Snøhetta-Ras Al-Khaimah Negotiations over the Design of an Icon:
Discussion Guide for “The Sand Castle: Building a City in the Desert of Ras al-Khaimah” (film)

I. Background Information

In mid-summer 2006, the Norwegian architecture firm Snøhetta was invited by Crown Prince Saud bin Saqr of Ras Al-Khaimah to participate in a design competition for a new capital city. Sheikh Saud envisioned a city that would support a population of 500,000 people on 10 square kilometers with zero emissions and other environmentally friendly features. He expected to complete construction in 15-20 years. As one of his advisors put it, the Crown Prince wanted a “beautiful” city—one that would draw people to Ras Al-Khaimah.

Snøhetta AS was a group of 120 professionals in architecture, landscape architecture, and interior design. Founded in 1989, the firm won the first major design competition that it entered, for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, and thereafter gained international acclaim for striking designs and innovative use of materials. While most of the firm’s projects during the 1990s were in Norway, one third of its 33 projects in 2002 originated outside of the country. In the Middle East, Snøhetta won the 2000 design competition for the Sheik Zayed Knowledge Center in Abu Dhabi and completed the new library in Egypt in 2001.

When Sheikh Saud’s representatives approached Snøhetta in 2006, the firm was 3 years into supervising construction of the Norwegian Opera House (an 8-year project originally scheduled for completion in 2008) and deeply involved in designs for the World Trade Center Memorial in New York City. Snøhetta was also just about to enter the design competition for an Aramco-sponsored cultural center in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. And yet, the Ras Al-Khaimah project represented the firm’s biggest commercial opportunity since its founding. (Building the new city would cost billions of dollars.)

Snøhetta’s total revenue for 2005 was approximately NOK 62.5 million (US\$9.3 million). At this point in its evolution, the firm was led by two of its multiple founders: Norwegian Kjetil Thorsen, based at the main office in Oslo, and American Craig Dykers, who worked out of a smaller office in New York City.

Ras Al-Khaimah (RAK) was located in the northernmost corner of the United Arab Emirates on a promontory separating the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. The smallest of the seven emirates, it had a population of 300,000. RAK had no major oil deposits, so its government concentrated on developing an industrial sector. Pioneer Cement, which was established in the 1970s, became the UAE’s largest cement producer. RAK Ceramics was founded in 1991 and within 10 years, grew into one of the world’s largest ceramics manufacturers, with exports to over 130 countries. Then in 2005, the government set up Ras Al-Khaimah Investment Authority (RAKIA) to attract foreign firms to the emirate’s free trade and industrial zones.

This guide was written by Stephen E. Weiss, Associate Professor of Policy and International Business, York University, Schulich School of Business. It is intended to provide a basis for class discussion, not serve as a complete factual record or assessment of the actual events. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Kjetil Thorsen and Elin Helgeland at Snøhetta and James McKellar, Tamara Abi Saab and Kathrine Varn at Schulich. Any errors in the document are solely the author’s responsibility. (orig. Nov. 10, 2010) rev. Oct. 2012)

All of these enterprises contributed to the long-term plan of Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler Sheikh Saud bin Saqr al Qasimi. The fourth son of RAK Ruler Sheikh Saqr bin Mohammad al-Qassimi, Sheikh Saud had been educated in Lebanon and the USA, where he earned an MBA at the University of Michigan. Since 1979, he had held various government positions, and in June 2003, he was named Crown Prince. He intended to develop the emirate into a regional hub for industry, manufacturing, knowledge and tourism. The new city lay at the heart of this broad vision.

The advisor to the Crown Prince on the new-city project—and on many others—was Dr. Khater Massaad. The Lebanese-born Massaad, who held a doctorate in geophysics from the University of Lausanne, moved to RAK in the mid-1980s to test minerals. By 2006, he held multiple positions in the emirate: CEO of RAKIA; Executive Chairman of RAK’s development authority/property developer, RAKEEN; CEO of RAK Ceramics; Chairman of Pioneer Cement; and more. He was Snøhetta’s principal contact in RAK.

Unlike a public design competition with a priori specifications and explicit guidelines, the RAK competition was rather open-ended and directed toward a single, individual client: Sheikh Saud. Any architectural competition was expensive. According to Kjetil Thorsen, firms typically spent at least \$200,000 just to participate, and winning was a low-probability event. Even 2 wins out of 10 competitions was considered a good success ratio.

Thorsen and Partner Robert Greenwood led the Snøhetta team that worked on the proposal for Sheikh Saud and his representative, Dr. Massaad. The team began in Oslo by studying a wide range of subjects including the history and culture of the region. Then they organized a week-long, public workshop in RAK at which they sought local input for architectural designs. No one showed up. Ultimately, the team’s challenge was to find—or create—a design concept acceptable to their client. Massaad wanted something “genius, [a] new concept with something very unique and not too expensive.”

II. The Negotiations

Snøhetta-RAK discussions and negotiations about a design took place over several months, from June 2006 to January 2007. Nearly all meetings were held in RAK and specifically, in the conference room at RAK Ceramics. Typically, two teams of 3 to 4 people participated, and the meetings lasted a brief 20 to 25 minutes. (For participants’ names and roles, see below “Exhibit 1. Player Map.”)

Four main negotiations took place during this period. Parts of each negotiation were filmed by a Norwegian film crew that was in the process of shooting a year-long, authorized documentary about Snøhetta. When the RAK invitation arrived at Snøhetta, the film company sought and received permission from Massaad to continue filming in RAK. “The Sand Castle” includes video segments from each of the main negotiations.

III. Questions for Discussions about Film Scenes

The four lettered sets of questions below pertain to excerpts from “The Sand Castle.” (The teaching note for this case designates the excerpts.) For each set, you (or your instructor) may play the video excerpt then discuss the corresponding questions. They should be addressed in order. Sets B, C and D will make more sense to you after you have discussed prior sets, but they are all listed below for your convenience. Exhibit 1 may be used for reference during video viewing.

(Note: Set A does not entail a Snøhetta-RAK negotiation, and Set C relates to more than one negotiation.)

A. Developing the Concept of a “Beautiful” City

1. What is Snøhetta’s mandate? [Discuss this before showing the video.]
2. What do the architects think is Massaad’s—and the Crown Prince’s—vision of beauty?
3. What does Snøhetta reveal about their understanding of their client’s interests?
4. What is Snøhetta’s basic concept for the design, and how did they conceive it?

B. Presenting the Design for the New City and Interpreting the Client’s Reaction

1. What’s your general sense of this client-architect relationship?
2. What verbal and nonverbal signals from Massaad are most revealing about his attitude toward the design of the new city and toward Snøhetta as a potential partner?
3. To what extent do the parties’ respective cultures seem to influence their behaviors and relationships in this meeting?
4. If you were Thorsen, would you continue to try to win the business (the design contract) from Massaad and the Crown Prince?

C. Different Visions of an “Icon” (Convention Center): Maneuvering within the Architect-Client Relationship

1. Should an architect try to shape a client’s aesthetic sensibility?
2. How does Snøhetta influence—or “negotiate”—Massaad’s vision of beauty and the “iconic?”
3. (a) What communications from Massaad are encouraging for Snøhetta? (b) What is discouraging?

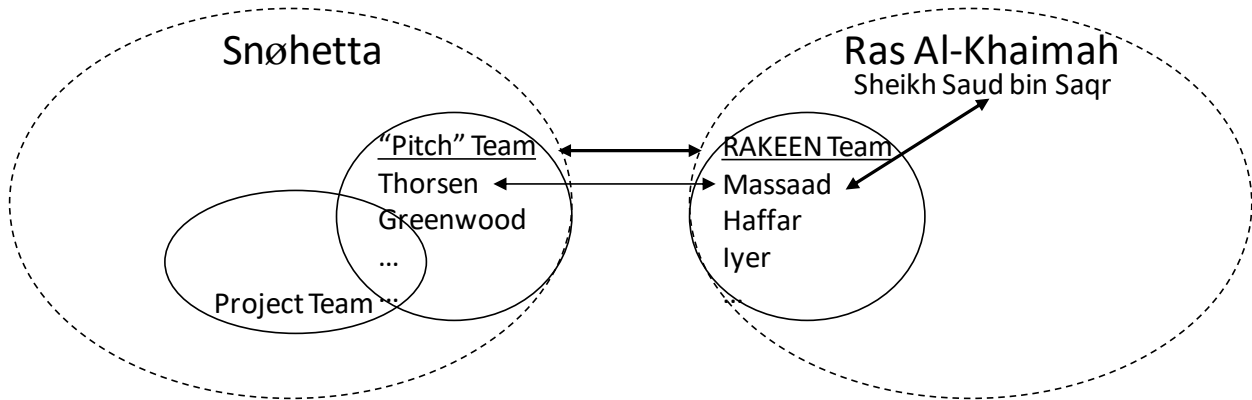
D. Changes in the Snøhetta-Massaad Relationship

1. What key differences do you notice between the communications of the Snøhetta principals and Massaad in this meeting and their communications in the first meeting (Clip 1)?
2. How optimistic are you about the capacity of the architects and the client to work together effectively in the future?

General Lessons about Negotiation

1. Why did Snøhetta and RAK reach an agreement on a convention center design?
2. What general negotiation concepts are illustrated in “The Sand Castle?”
3. What major lessons does this film suggest for effective negotiation behavior?

Exhibit 1. Party Map from Snøhetta's Perspective



Snøhetta

"Pitch" Team

Kjetil Thorsen

Robert Greenwood

—
—

Project Team in Oslo

Thomas Fagernes
(or Tom Holtmann?)

Irvin Larsen?

James Dodson

Co-Founder, Senior Partner & Director

Partner & Director

Project Manager, Senior Architect

Landscape ____ not in the video?
Architect

Ras Al-Khaimah (RAK)

Sheikh Saud bin Saqr

Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler

RAKEEN Team

Dr. Khater Massaad

Imad Haffar

Raman Iyer

not pictured in the video:?

Shidar (sp?) ____

Yahia (sp?) ____

Advisor to the Crown Prince & Exec. Chm, RAKEEN

COO, RAKEEN

General Manager, RAKIA

finance, ____
project manager, ____