From Visitors to Co-Creators:

How Saudi Youth Are Shaping the Future of Heritage

A White Paper by Asaan, Misk Heritage Museum, and the Misk Global Forum 2025.





Foreword

Saudi Arabia is undergoing the most profound cultural transformation in its modern history. Heritage is no longer seen as a static inheritance, but as a living fabric that is lived, shared and continually renewed. At the heart of this shift stands Asaan, Misk Heritage Museum, a subsidiary of the Mohammed bin Salman Foundation, Misk. Asaan embodies the vision of Her Royal Highness Princess Sara bint Mashhour bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, whose ambition is to build a cultural institution that carries Saudi identity while engaging the next generation in shaping its future.

This white paper brings together national research, regional co-creation, and a landmark design-thinking challenge with emerging cultural leaders at the Misk Global Forum 2025. It presents an integrated, evidence-led and youth-driven vision for the future of museums in the Kingdom, grounded in a deep understanding of the transformations underway in the cultural landscape.

Crucially, this work shows that how people connect to heritage is shaped less by who they are demographically, and more by what role culture plays in their lives. Values, motivations and cultural confidence determine whether people feel invited, excluded or inspired. This distinction becomes critical as Saudi Arabia's cultural landscape expands and audiences have more choice than ever.

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1. Introduction: A Cultural Moment of Possibility

Saudi youth do not treat heritage as a memory of the past, but as a vibrant part of their everyday lives. It is present in the details of daily living: the flavours of food, the rhythm of dialects, the fragrance of familiar scents, the presence of poetry, styles of dress, the rituals of place, and family traditions renewed across generations. Yet the museum sector, despite its growth, has yet to catch up with this living presence of heritage in people's lives.

Our national study revealed a deeply telling paradox:
85% believe heritage is central to their identity
88% fear it is being eroded, lost or forgotten
84% want to engage and contribute, not just receive
Only 34% have ever visited a museum

These figures do not point to a gap in interest, but to a gap in experience itself: a gap between what heritage means to people and how it is presented to them.

The evidence clearly shows that the connection to heritage is strong and alive, but it has yet to find its translation in institutions that reflect the way it is actually lived. In the Saudi context, heritage is not simply material for display; it is an experience that is felt and practised, celebratory in character, shaped by living social interaction, and passed seamlessly between generations.

It is therefore not enough for museums to borrow ready-made international models. They must redefine themselves from the local cultural reality outwards: museums that grow out of everyday life and embrace the distinctiveness of the Saudi experience rather than forcing it into a mould.

This white paper argues that the next generation of Saudi museums must be designed around how Saudis actually live their heritage: as an experience that is social, sensory, tied to place, and rooted in the rituals of family and community.

1.2 Methodology & Approach

This work is built on an integrative approach that brings together several layers of insight, within a research programme that combines quantitative and qualitative methods to reach a deeper understanding of the cultural landscape:

1. National Heritage Audience Study

- A comprehensive national survey of 2,530 respondents, ensuring broad representation across all segments of society.
- Specialist interviews with leading Saudi heritage scholars, adding interpretive and analytical depth to the findings.

2. Regional Co-Creation

- 120 participants across co-creation workshops in Riyadh, Jeddah, Ha'il, Abha and Dammam.
- Sessions engaged cultural leaders, community elders, creatives, youth and educators to explore lived heritage practices and barriers to engagement.
- Cultural, linguistic and regional validation of the findings.

3. Youth Design-Thinking Challenge at the Misk Global Forum 2025

Delivered in partnership with Asaan and the Misk Global Forum, facilitated by:

- Debbie Spence, Asaan (lead facilitator).
- Dalal Majed, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University (co-facilitator).
- Supported by Noor Shazli, Research Director at Asaan, and the Asaan team.

4. Human-Centred Design Backbone

The work was anchored in the Double Diamond framework of innovation (Discover, Define, Develop, Deliver), a tool that structures the path of thinking and ensures the move from understanding to application. This framework made it possible to balance authenticity, genuine participation and actionable outputs.

2.2 Methodology & Approach

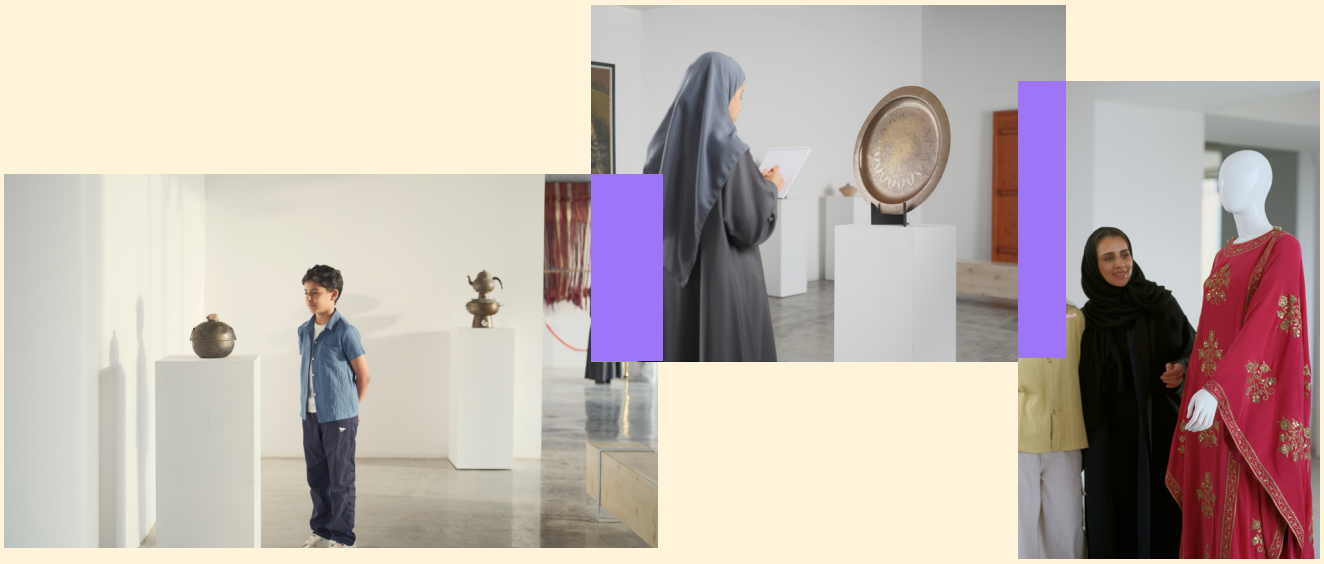
5. Understanding Audiences Beyond Demographics

The analysis did not stop at demographic indicators; it focused on deeper cultural motivations: why do people engage with heritage? What do they seek from it? And what constitutes real value for them? This motivational lens made it possible to translate the findings into actionable design and programming decisions, rather than settling for descriptive population profiles.

6. Grounded in Saudi Expertise and Heritage Governance

Throughout the process, subject matter experts guided the methodology and validated its choices, ensuring alignment with the Saudi context rather than replicating research models that do not reflect local realities. Their guidance helped avoid research duplication, respect cultural protocols, and adopt methods that open the way for genuine community participation. From this standpoint, the work was designed not simply to gather data, but to build a participatory foundation to which stakeholders contribute and in which their voices are reflected at every stage.

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3. National Insights: How Saudis Experience Heritage Today

This chapter draws on evidence from three connected strands of work:
a nationally representative survey (2,530 respondents), qualitative interviews with Saudi heritage experts, and in-person co-creation workshops held across five regions of the Kingdom Riyadh, Jeddah, Ha'il, Abha, and Dammam.

Taken together, these inputs allow us to move beyond isolated perspectives and build a credible national picture of how heritage is understood, valued and experienced in Saudi Arabia today.

Across all three strands, a consistent pattern emerged: heritage in Saudi Arabia is not primarily encountered through institutions or objects. Instead, it is experienced as something lived, practised and shared within everyday life.

Heritage as lived practice, not institutional experience

Participants repeatedly described heritage as present in family gatherings, food rituals, dialect and poetry, the scent of oud and incense, seasonal practices, clothing, outdoor traditions and majlis storytelling. These were not framed as informal or secondary expressions of culture; they were described as the primary sites in which heritage is formed and renewed.

Heritage was recognised not through formal interpretation, but through memory, repetition and embodied practice learned over time, within families and communities, rather than acquired through solitary visits or textual explanation.

As one young participant put it:
"Heritage isn't in institutions... it's in food, scent, gatherings — the things we grew up with."

This distinction is critical. It suggests that for many Saudis, heritage is not something to be *visited*, but something to be *inhabited*. Meaning is produced through participation rather than observation.

Heritage as intangible and sensory (national finding)

Findings from the national Insight Report (pp. 4–7) confirm that the strongest cultural connections expressed by respondents are overwhelmingly intangible in nature. Participants repeatedly referenced sensory and relational triggers smell, sound, taste, gesture, rhythm and language rather than artefacts or visual display alone.

Scent, in particular, surfaced consistently across the research as a powerful carrier of memory and identity. Oud, incense and firewood (حطب) were described as markers of belonging and continuity, anchoring cultural meaning in the body rather than in text or objects.

This pattern appeared across regions and methods, allowing us to state with confidence that immersive sensory experience is a national characteristic of how heritage is remembered and transmitted. It also helps explain why museums that prioritise visual interpretation alone can feel incomplete: they capture only a narrow slice of how heritage is actually held and passed on.

Heritage as relational and intergenerational

Heritage was also described, consistently, as relational. Cultural knowledge is reinforced through social bonds rather than individual learning: grandparents teaching grandchildren, families cooking together, neighbours sharing seasonal rituals.

Across both survey responses and workshop discussions, families (multigenerational) emerged as the most active cultural audience in the Kingdom. Parents expressed a strong desire for their children to develop pride, roots and a sense of belonging, but also articulated a need for spaces that feel joyful, interactive and welcoming rather than formal or didactic.

This reinforces a key national insight from the work: heritage transmission in Saudi Arabia is not primarily institutional. It is intergenerational, informal and socially embedded and institutions have the opportunity to work with this reality.

Regional identity as lived difference within a national frame

Regional diversity surfaced strongly in the co-creation workshops held in Riyadh, Jeddah, Ha'il, Abha and Dammam. Participants spoke with clarity about distinctions between regions – dialects, customs, flavours, rhythms of life and ways of gathering – and expressed an expectation that museums about heritage should reflect this richness rather than flatten it.

Crucially, regional identity was not framed as oppositional to national identity. Instead, participants consistently described regional culture as the means through which national heritage is actually experienced: specific, local and rooted in place.

A Saudi approach to heritage must be plural and regionally grounded, without fragmenting the national story.

Between pride and anxiety: a rooted sense of identity in a time of transformation

Attachment to heritage was emotionally charged across the research. Participants expressed deep pride in their roots alongside a parallel anxiety about cultural dilution as lifestyles modernise.

This tension was not framed as resistance to change, but as a concern about continuity: what do we keep, and how do we pass it on to the generations to come? From an anthropological perspective, this indicates that heritage is functioning as a source of cultural confidence (a rooted sense of connection to identity) in a period of rapid transformation: a way of remaining anchored while moving forward.

The institutional disconnect

Despite the richness of lived cultural practice described above, many participants struggled to see this reality reflected in museums and cultural institutions. There remains scepticism about whether a museum can feel "truly Saudi" (Insight Report, p.6).

Museums were commonly described as "formal", "cold" or "classroom-like", and often perceived as spaces designed for experts rather than families or young people. **Youth in particular articulated a sense of distance:**

> ***"Beautiful buildings... but they feel distant. They don't feel like us."***

This is not a rejection of museums as a concept. It is a reflection of misalignment between how heritage is lived and how it is currently represented.

What this evidence allows us to say nationally

Because these insights recur across quantitative data, expert interviews and co-creation workshops in multiple regions, they form a credible national picture rather than a set of local anecdotes.

Taken together, the evidence shows that heritage in Saudi Arabia today is:

- **Lived rather than visited**
- **Intangible rather than object-led**
- **Sensory rather than primarily visual**
- **Relational rather than solitary**
- **Regionally expressed, nationally shared**
- **Emotionally charged and future-facing rather than nostalgic**

These insights provide the foundation for the arguments that follow in this white paper: why museums must evolve, why participation matters, and why a Saudi national heritage approach must start with people, not institutions.

Evidence in Action: From National Insight to Youth-Led Design

What the evidence showed

National research revealed a consistent pattern: heritage in Saudi Arabia is lived, sensory, social and shared across generations. Cultural pride is high, but formal museum visitation remains limited, and many people struggle to see their lived experience of heritage reflected in institutions.

How it was tested

These insights were taken directly into a youth design-thinking challenge at the Misk Global Forum 2025, delivered with Asaan, Misk Heritage Museum. Participants worked with real data, personas and verbatim excerpts from the national study, and were asked to design practical responses as cultural decision-makers.

What emerged
Without being prompted, young participants developed concepts that mirrored the national findings:

- Sensory, hands-on experiences
- Intergenerational and family-based learning
- Regionally specific voices and practices
- Dynamic, changing programmes
- Spaces designed for participation rather than observation

Why this matters
The alignment between national insight and youth-generated ideas confirms that the evidence is not abstract. When grounded in how heritage is actually lived, it translates naturally into culturally resonant, future-ready solutions.

4. The Case for Change: Toward a New Future for Saudi Museums

The evidence from this study points to a clear conclusion: the challenge facing Saudi museums is not a lack of cultural connection, but a mismatch between how heritage is lived and how it is currently represented.

Across the research, Saudis consistently described their deepest engagement with heritage as social, embodied and shared. Cultural meaning is created through gatherings, rituals, food, storytelling and seasonal practices, experienced together rather than alone. Yet many museums still default to quiet, individualised modes of observation. To connect more deeply with audiences, museums must design for collective experience, not silent consumption.

This matters because Saudi cultural life is inherently dynamic. Heritage is not fixed or frozen; it shifts with the seasons, celebrations and rhythms of everyday life. Static displays struggle to reflect this vitality. Museums that feel alive through rotating content, live programming and changing activations are far better aligned with how culture is actually experienced.

The research also makes clear that young Saudis do not want to be passive recipients of culture. With 84% expressing a desire to participate rather than simply observe, the expectation is not to be entertained, but to contribute. This requires co-creation to be embedded into institutional structures, rather than treated as occasional outreach or consultation.

Families emerge as the strongest and most active cultural audience. Parents and caregivers play a central role in transmitting pride, belonging and cultural confidence to the next generation, yet they need environments that work across ages and abilities. Museums that succeed will treat multigenerational learning not as an add-on, but as a core audience strategy.

Regional identity is equally critical. Saudi Arabia's regions differ not only in surface characteristics such as dialect or cuisine, but in deeply held customs, memories and sensory cultures. Audiences expect these distinctions to be visible and respected. Homogenised national narratives risk flattening the very richness museums are meant to celebrate.

At the same time, museums remain unfamiliar spaces for many. Only 34% of Saudis have visited a museum, and many of those experiences took place outside the Kingdom. For a sector still forming its relationship with the public, accessibility, orientation, clarity and a sense of welcome are not secondary concerns; they are fundamental design priorities.

The research also reinforces that scent, sound, taste and movement are not decorative elements. In Saudi Arabia, they are heritage. Limiting interpretation to the visual alone underrepresents the forms through which cultural memory is most powerfully held and shared.

Taken together, these insights point to an issue that runs deeper than exhibition design alone. How people connect with heritage is shaped far more by values, motivations and cultural confidence than by age, gender or region. Traditional demographic definitions describe populations, but they do little to explain behaviour or guide meaningful design choices.

This research shows that two visitors of the same age and from the same region may seek entirely different things from a museum: reflection and perspective, expression and participation, social connection or shared learning. Designing for one assumed audience and expecting others to follow is how institutions lose relevance.

To respond effectively, museums must move from demographic targeting to understanding audiences through cultural motivation: the role heritage plays in people's lives. These motivations cut across demographic groups and provide a far clearer foundation for design, programming and evaluation.

This shift has profound implications for how success is measured. In a cultural landscape where people have increasing choice over how and where they engage with heritage, museums need a clear reason for existing and a clear set of outcomes they are working to deliver. Moving beyond counting visitors towards understanding impact allows institutions to demonstrate their value more meaningfully.

For example, experiences that support learning and perspective can be evaluated through the reflection and new insight they generate. Experiences that speak to expression and community belonging can be measured through contribution and shared experience. Success is demonstrated through repeat visitation and through visitors becoming advocates who carry the experience forward. In this way, cultural impact, not simply attendance, becomes the measure.

In light of all this, the future direction for Saudi museums becomes clear. Start with people, not objects. Design for warmth, movement, memory and sensory connection. Honour regional nuance. Create spaces where audiences feel at home and genuinely invited to shape the experience. Above all, recognise that heritage in Saudi Arabia is lived, dynamic and social and that the museums which thrive will be those that reflect this reality in form, content and spirit.

Eight Design Principles for the Future of Saudi Museums

1. **Design the experience as a shared act of participation**

   Heritage in Saudi Arabia is social and embodied. Museums should prioritise collective, participatory experiences over silent, individual observation.

2. **Build for renewal, not permanence**

   Saudi cultural life is dynamic and seasonal. Museums must feel alive through rotating content, live programming and adaptable spaces.

3. **Embed co-creation**

   Young Saudis see heritage as a living material, open to being shaped. They want to contribute to its evolution and draw on it as inspiration for their own expression. This requires participation to be hard-wired into institutional models, moving beyond one-off initiatives to sustained structures for co-creation.

4. **Intergenerational design is non-negotiable**

   Families are the strongest driver of cultural engagement. Museums should support multigenerational learning as a core audience strategy.

5. **Reflect regional identity with intent**

   Regional diversity is fundamental to Saudi identity. Museums must avoid homogenised narratives and actively surface regional voices, dialects and practices.

6. **Create welcoming, accessible first experiences**

   For many, museums remain unfamiliar spaces. Clear orientation, accessibility and cultural hospitality should shape the visitor's first experience.

7. Treat sensory experience as core content

Scent, sound, taste and movement are not enhancements — they are heritage itself and should be central to interpretation and design.

8. Understand audiences through cultural motivation, not demographics

Values, motivations and cultural confidence shape engagement more than age or gender. Museums should design and evaluate experiences around these motivations and the outcomes they seek to deliver.



5. The Misk Global Forum 2025 Youth Challenge: Reimagining Heritage Through Design Thinking

In a Kingdom transforming as rapidly as Saudi Arabia, understanding audiences is the starting point, not the endpoint. Real progress is not achieved simply by studying audiences, but by bringing them into the design process itself. As cultural choices multiply, museums can no longer be shaped apart from the people they exist for. This is especially true for young Saudis, whose motivations, values and cultural confidence will define the next era of national identity. That is why the next phase of this work moved beyond insight into participation: a design-thinking challenge at the Misk Global Forum that invited emerging cultural leaders to turn evidence into ideas, and ideas into the first outlines of a new, youth-driven vision for the future of heritage.

During the Misk Global Forum 2025, Asaan, Misk Heritage Museum, convened a group of emerging cultural leaders in Space 180° – the Forum's hub for experimentation and innovation.





Purpose

To translate national insights into practical design solutions and empower youth as active contributors to cultural decision-making.

Participants analysed Asaan's audience insights, interrogated real personas, and used the Double Diamond to structure their thinking.

Participants were provided with a concise case study summarising the central challenges uncovered in Asaan's research:

- Low museum visitation (34%).
- The prominence of lived, intangible heritage.
- The growing demand for sensory and social experiences.
- The need for museums to reflect regional identities and the role of the family.

They were asked to step into the role of cultural consultants and to:

- Identify the core problem facing the museum.
- Define who the institution should prioritise and why.
- Develop one insight-led concept.
- Present how their idea would improve the visitor experience and strengthen cultural connection.

Grounding Co-Creation in Evidence

The design-thinking challenge was intentionally rooted in evidence, not assumptions. Before ideation began, participants were aligned around a shared set of insights drawn from Asaan's national research into cultural participation and intangible heritage in Saudi Arabia.

These insights revealed a clear pattern: formal museum visitation remains limited (34%), while cultural meaning is most strongly formed through lived, social and sensory experiences within families, regions and everyday rituals. Heritage, for many young Saudis, is not something observed at a distance, but something practised, shared and felt.

This evidence shaped the session in three practical ways.

First, it grounded ambition in reality. Participants worked with real personas and verbatim excerpts, ensuring ideas responded to how culture is actually experienced today.

Second, it framed heritage as relational. Concepts were tested against questions of connection: who is this for, who experiences it together, and how does it strengthen bonds between people, place and memory?

Third, it kept the focus future-facing. Using the Double Diamond, participants were challenged to translate insight into propositions that could evolve with changing identities, regional pride and family dynamics rather than fixed displays or didactic narratives.

The result was a shift in tone and intent. Ideas moved quickly from critique to possibility, reframing museums not as repositories of knowledge but as living spaces of participation, expression and belonging.

As one participant put it:
"Museums feel like classrooms. People want them to feel like homes."

Another added:
"Give me a place where I can touch, make, taste and play. That's when people feel connected."

6. What Young People Created: Ideas with Real Strategic Weight

Despite the limited time and the session's fast pace, participants developed concepts that were grounded, feasible and culturally resonant.

A Museum You Can Touch

For children aged 8–10:

- Craft rooms
- Traditional dress-up
- Cooking lab
- Story corners using regional dialects
- Sensory play and hands-on exploration

"Kids learn with their hands. If they can't touch anything, they'll switch off."

Heritage Kitchen Nights

A live, intergenerational activation featuring:

- Grandmothers passing on knowledge alongside young chefs
- Tasting stations
- Storytelling woven through cooking
- Seasonal food traditions
- Regional recipe rotations

"Heritage lives in our everyday life. Bring that into the museum."

Behind-the-Scenes Conservation Studio

A glass-fronted, open-access conservation lab showcasing real restoration work.

Youth wanted first-hand connection to experts:

"Let us meet the people behind the objects — I want to hear their stories."

A Living Museum, Continually Renewed

Participants proposed:

- Monthly mini-exhibitions
- Youth-led programmes
- Regional residencies
- Live programming instead of static galleries

"When we walk in Old Jeddah at night, we feel our history in the air museums should feel like that."



A Space for Expressing Regional Diversity

A space celebrating dialects, customs and oral memory. "Each region has its own flavour let us hear it, taste it, speak it."



The concepts developed by young participants clearly reflect the diversity of cultural motivations that drive engagement with heritage. Hands-on, practice-based experiences and youth-led programmes express a relationship built on discovery and experimentation; family kitchens and shared learning respond to motivations of expression and belonging; and conservation studios and storytelling spaces reflect a need for enrichment and deeper perspective.



These are not passing trends, but enduring cultural needs that cut across demographic groups – and they form the foundation for a deeper understanding of how to design heritage experiences with real impact.

7. What These Voices Tell Us: Insights & Implications

The youth ideas surfaced seven strategic imperatives that should guide the future of Saudi cultural institutions.

1. Heritage should be lived and experienced, not simply observed.
Static display models must give way to sensory, social and participatory experiences that place the visitor at the heart of the experience.

2. Hospitality is not a detail – it is the foundation of the experience.
The visitor's first moments inside the museum should be defined by warmth, simplicity and cultural familiarity, rather than formality or dry instruction.
One participant remarked:
"I want to walk in and feel Saudi hospitality immediately not rules, not signs, but warmth."

3. Design for shared experience, not individual observation.
Heritage learning should be intergenerational, built on interaction and play – not an isolated, individual experience.

4. Young people do not want to receive culture – they want to shape it.
They seek to be part of making meaning: contributing to the design of exhibitions, events and interpretation, rather than settling for the role of spectator.

5. Regional diversity is non-negotiable.
Audiences expect their dialect, rituals and memories to be authentically represented. Ignoring this diversity weakens connection rather than strengthening it.

6. Museums need continuous vitality.
Regular renewal, seasonal connection and live programming are essential if museums are to remain relevant to people's lived experience.

7. People come before objects.
True value lies not in objects alone, but in those who carry them and bring them to life: craftspeople, experts, elders and storytellers. They give the experience an authenticity that no static display can achieve.

Together, these imperatives express more than the preferences of a single generation. They reveal a deeper shift in how the role of cultural institutions is understood in a society changing at speed without losing its connection to its roots.

8. Recommendations for Museums and Heritage Institutions

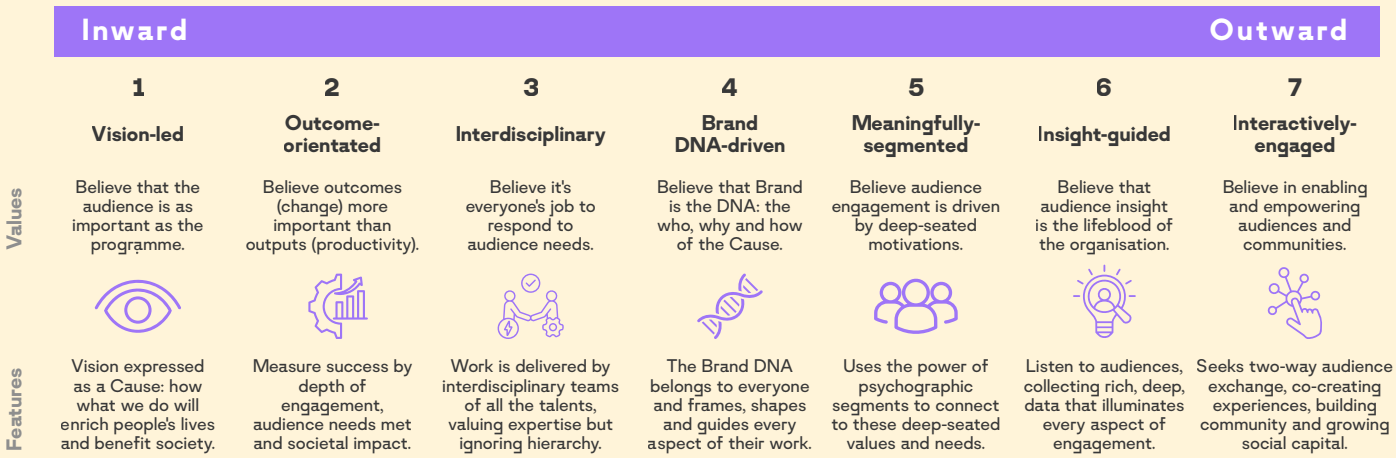
As Saudi Arabia's cultural landscape expands at unprecedented speed, institutions need clear, practical frameworks that help them stay connected to their audiences, sharpen their clarity of purpose, and sustain their impact over time.

The 7 Pillars of Audience Focus framework offers a structured way to do this. It helps organisations like Asaan answer fundamental questions: why do they exist? Who do they exist for? What value do they create? What experience do they offer? What capabilities do they need? And what impact do they seek to deliver? In doing so, the focus moves beyond programming and footfall towards a clear institutional identity, meaningful outcomes, and a lasting cultural impact that deepens participation over the long term.

The recommendations that follow draw directly from this framework and from the voices of potential Saudi audiences across the Kingdom. Together, they outline a roadmap for building museums that are vision-led and audience-focused, culturally grounded and capable of contributing meaningfully to Vision 2030 and the decades beyond.

Each recommendation that follows assumes clarity about which cultural motivations an institution is prioritising. Not every museum needs to serve all audiences equally, but every museum must be intentional about who it exists for and the outcomes it seeks to deliver.

The 7 Pillars of Audience-focus



Recommendations for Action

Knowledge alone does not create change unless it is translated into action.
The evidence from this study, and the voices of young Saudis, point clearly to an opportunity for museums. What matters now is how institutions turn these insights into practice.

Below are practical steps that heritage organisations across the Kingdom can begin applying immediately. They are practical, achievable and aligned with national ambitions for a sector that is dynamic, meaningful, vision-led and audience-focused.

1. Reframe museums as social, communal cultural hubs.
Shift from silent galleries to multi-sensory, social and participatory spaces that foster interaction.

2. Design with – not for – youth and communities.
Establish standing advisory groups of young people, families, experts and cultural practitioners from across the regions.

3. Celebrate regional plurality.
Integrate dialects, regional aesthetics, local practices and cultural narratives into galleries, programming and interpretation.

4. Integrate intangible heritage as core content.
Food, music, dance, scent, oral history, craft and everyday rituals should be treated as primary content.

5. Create meaningful roles for elders.
Saudi elders are holders of memory, expertise and perspective. Museums should offer structured ways for them to teach, narrate and co-create.

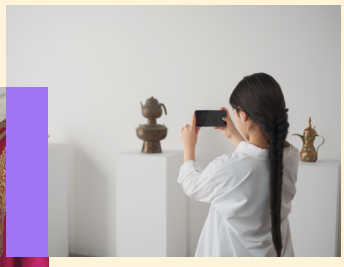
6. Build flexible, adaptive spaces.
Design spaces that can be reconfigured for festivals, pop-ups, live demonstrations and seasonal shifts.

7. Make family-first design non-negotiable.
Provide rest areas, play spaces and sensory interpretation that support multigenerational visits.

8. Prototype early, test often.
Use rapid pilots and limited-time activations as low-risk ways to test audience response before scaling.

9. Train cultural workers in human-centred design.
Equip teams with the tools and mindset needed to design experiences with people, not simply deliver to them.

Taken together, these actions form a practical blueprint for museums that want to stay relevant in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. They demand less in the way of complex resources than in clarity of direction, genuine intent and a sincere commitment to audiences. If adopted, they will help build heritage institutions that feel authentically Saudi, deeply connected to communities, and capable of delivering the outcomes that matter most: pride, belonging, identity and cultural participation.





9. Conclusion: A Future Written Together

Saudi Arabia is building one of the most dynamic cultural landscapes in the world. As new museums, cultural districts and heritage destinations emerge across the Kingdom, the question is no longer whether people will come but how might we make those places feel meaningful, memorable and distinctly Saudi.

The young people who shaped this work have been clear:
heritage is something we do, feel, share and shape, not something we observe from a distance.

For anyone creating a heritage experience in Saudi Arabia, there are critical design principles:

- Design for people, not for objects.
- Design for participation, not passive viewing.
- Design for lived heritage - sensory, social, regional and rooted in intergenerational life.

This moment of rapid cultural expansion is a historic opportunity for an entire generation. **With ever more choices before audiences, every museum must be able to articulate:**

- its distinct purpose,
- the outcomes it exists to deliver, and
- the difference it hopes to make in people's lives.

That requires understanding audiences by values and motivations and evaluating experiences by their real impact. Pride, belonging, identity, curiosity, confidence, connection – these are the measures by which value is judged, and they will determine whether a museum becomes a living part of the cultural fabric of the Kingdom.

The ideas generated by young Saudis at the Misk Global Forum 2025 show what is possible when institutions design with people rather than for them. Their concepts are not simply recommendations, they are a preview of the museums the next generation expects and will champion.

Heritage in Saudi Arabia has always been lived, shared and passed forward with care. The museum of the future must honour that not as a slogan, but as its operating principle.

The future of heritage is collaborative.
The future of museums is dynamic and sensorial.
And the future is already being shaped by the youth of Saudi Arabia, ready to build cultural spaces worthy of the society they are helping to shape.

The big shift in the narrative

From visitors to co-creators

This reframes how we speak about culture:

Old framing	New framing
Attendance	Participation
Education	Belonging
Awareness	Agency
Access	Invitation
Content	Contribution

The future of Saudi culture is not passive. It is built on active participation. It is participatory.

10. Acknowledgements

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Asaan, Misk Heritage Museum

Asaan Asaan contributed to the design of the audience research methodology, the generation of insight, and the strategic frameworks underpinning this work. Asaan has extensive experience working across Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf with museums, heritage sites and cultural institutions, supporting national and regional organisations to understand their audiences, build cultural participation and design experiences with lasting impact. This depth of regional practice ensured the research was grounded in Saudi realities and translated evidence into practical, culturally relevant insight.

Co-Creation in Practice: Insights from International Museum Day 2026

From Research to Community Engagement

This white paper began from a central premise: the future of museums in the Kingdom cannot be shaped by data alone, but by engaging the community in interpreting that evidence, testing it, and translating it into actionable insight.

In that spirit, Asaan, Misk Heritage Museum, convened an interactive co-creation workshop as part of its celebration of International Museum Day 2026, bringing together members of the community with an interest in heritage alongside specialists, researchers and practitioners from across the cultural, heritage and museum sectors. The workshop set out to explore how far the findings of the national research are reflected in the reality of museums today, and to open a space for collective dialogue on the future of cultural experiences in the Kingdom.

Despite the diversity of participants' backgrounds and disciplines, a striking alignment emerged between the discussions in the room and the findings of the national study. The outputs did not simply confirm earlier insights; they extended them, turning them into practical directions that can help develop the Kingdom's museum and cultural sector.

What did the discussions confirm? What were the key recommendations?

The conversations and contributions across the tables revealed a set of recurring patterns that surfaced in different forms, yet pointed to clear, shared directions.

First, participants affirmed that the most impactful museum is not one that simply presents knowledge, but one that allows people to live it and take part in shaping it. Calls were repeatedly made for more interactive, sensory and social experiences that make the visitor part of the experience rather than merely its recipient.

Second, the discussions stressed the importance of shifting the focus from objects to people and storytelling. A clear need emerged to make room for storytellers, craftspeople, elders and community members to contribute to presenting and transmitting heritage, as an authentic part of the cultural content itself.

Third, the groups underlined the importance of building sustained relationships with the community that extend beyond a single visit. Ideas such as advisory councils, membership and loyalty programmes, and regular workshops emerged as tools for strengthening belonging and turning the museum into an enduring community space.

Fourth, there were repeated calls to represent the Kingdom's cultural and regional diversity more broadly and inclusively, by building partnerships with local initiatives and private museums and by amplifying the voices and practices associated with the Kingdom's different regions.

Fifth, the groups agreed that children, young people and families must sit at the heart of designing future experiences, and that the most powerful cultural learning happens through participation and shared experience across generations.

Finally, participants emphasised that co-creation should not be practised as a one-off activity or a seasonal initiative, but as a continuous operating model that enables the community to contribute to planning, design, evaluation and the making of cultural content.

What do these voices add?

If the national study showed how Saudis live their heritage today, the International Museum Day 2026 interactive workshop revealed how specialists and practitioners envision the future of the cultural institutions that will carry that heritage forward.

The outputs confirm that the way forward for museums in the Kingdom is not simply more content or larger spaces, but institutions that are more open to the community, more capable of listening to it, and more committed to engaging it as a genuine partner in shaping the cultural experience.

In this sense, the workshop stands as a practical extension of an idea that runs through this entire white paper:

Heritage in Saudi Arabia is lived more than it is visited – and the most powerful cultural future is one shaped with people, not simply for them.

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