

Transformative Dialogues at the UK Parliament and Davos on Shaping Inclusive Financial Ecosystems

Oscar Wendel Editor-at-Large of MEA Finance, hosted three days of discussions in the House of Lords and the House of Commons in the UK Houses of Parliament on January 13 – 15, focused on exploring the intersection of technology and the design of banking infrastructure enabling financial inclusion. The following week, he led a roundtable alongside the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos



Roundtable at the House of Lords

Shaping the Future of Financial Inclusion: Connectivity and AI as Pillars of Personalised Financial Solutions

Samuel Burke of Fortune Magazine moderated the opening roundtable by noting the unprecedented opportunity to democratise finance through emerging technologies. Elisabeth MacDonald, CEO at Small Business Financial Exchange demonstrated AI's transformative potential for small businesses by enabling nuanced risk assessments based on alternative data. She further provided compelling examples of AI's potential to personalise credit for small businesses; by analysing alternative data—such as delivery patterns and supply chain activity—AI can create more nuanced risk assessments, enabling lenders to extend credit to businesses traditionally excluded from financial systems. Anu Jain, CEO of Nexus Cognitive, highlighted that “data preparation is the foundation of AI success,” underscoring the need for ethical and secure data sourcing and how inherent bias in AI models traditionally affects minority groups and can thus perpetuate their inability to move out of low-income brackets.

Tokenisation and Trust: A New Era for Global Finance

The roundtable on **Financial Accessibility, Tokenisation and the Role of Trust in Advancing Inclusion** expanded on these themes by exploring

how tokenisation and decentralised finance (DeFi) can reshape the global financial landscape. The session featured Dr. Simran Chana of Cambridge Frontier Technologies Lab, who offered insights on bridging technological and ethical dimensions of financial innovation.

Dr. Simran framed tokenisation as a double-edged sword. While it offers opportunities to unlock liquidity—particularly in resource-constrained regions—he warned against its misuse. “If we tokenise assets like natural resources without proper regulation,” he cautioned, “we risk selling our future for short-term gains.” This perspective is especially pertinent to cases in Africa, where governments have tokenised national debt tied to resources like gold to attract foreign investment.

Bridging the Digital Divide with Trust and Regulation

Connectivity emerged as a critical enabler of financial inclusion. Samer Bishay, Founder & CEO of Karrier One, presented a practical solution with his company's deployment of community-owned radio nodes. “Connectivity without borders,” Bishay explained, “empowers the unbanked to access financial services using blockchain technologies where Depin (decentralised physical infrastructure) is becoming key to distributing de-fi solutions.

Dr. Simran and Lia Müller Peña, Co-founder of Bitgpt.network and Intuitively.ai, stressed the importance of trust in advancing financial inclusion. Dr. Simran compared financial systems to healthcare, where rigorous testing ensures patient safety. “We need similar standards in financial systems,” he argued, calling for evidence-based policymaking and transparency in tokenisation efforts. He further pointed out that crypto is a single-point-of-failure topology like medicine. Müller Peña added it is the responsibility of the blockchain community to make the jargon-heavy discourse more accessible to end-users to support adoption.



Discussion Panel at Davos

One of the most compelling themes across both roundtables was the intersection of technology and accessibility. While AI and blockchain offer transformative potential, their success hinges on addressing foundational issues like internet connectivity and energy access.

Samer Bishay's description of Karrier One's decentralised connectivity model exemplified how telecommunications can bridge critical divides. By empowering communities to own and operate telecom nodes, his solution creates a shared economy that enhances financial inclusion and connectivity. However, the participants also acknowledged the barriers to adoption. Müller Peña noted that many people lack the technical literacy to use blockchain or AI systems. She advocated for user-friendly designs, comparing the current state of blockchain to the early days of personal computing. “We need a ChatGPT moment for blockchain,” she remarked, emphasising the need for intuitive, accessible tools.

Dubai and DMCC Take Center Stage at Davos

Oscar Wendel moderated the panel in Davos that explored Dubai's strengths in attracting capital and tech startups to unlock growth. The participants included Dr. Lisa Cameron, a former MP in the UK Parliament, Pablos Holman, a VC and

inventor who built the first spaceships at Blue Origin for Jeff Bezos and the world's smallest PC and 3D printers at Makerbot, Kristina Lucrezia Cornèr, Global Head of Strategy at Exponential Science and Alessia Baumgartner, VP of Ecosystems.

Key Takeaways from the House of Lords and House of Commons Roundtables Included the Following Recommendations:

- 1. Connectivity as a Priority**
Investments in telecommunications infrastructure are critical for implementing AI and blockchain solutions in underserved regions.
- 2. Data Sovereignty and Security**
Protecting sensitive data while leveraging AI for actionable insights must be prioritised by enterprises and governments alike.
- 3. Tokenisation with Caution**
Robust regulation is needed to ensure tokenisation benefits society rather than concentrating wealth.
- 4. Simplifying User Experiences**
Financial technologies must prioritise usability, particularly for populations excluded from formal banking systems.
- 5. Ethical Frameworks for AI**
Responsible AI deployment should address systemic biases and unintended consequences. ♦

Designing for Inclusive Futures: Policy Reflections on AI and Accessibility from the Global Stratalogues Roundtables

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Executive Summary

The Global Stratalogues Roundtables, held at the UK Houses of Parliament, convened international leaders across government, technology, academia, and civil society to explore critical intersections between artificial intelligence (AI), accessibility, and inclusive infrastructure. Discussions centered on the ethical deployment of AI, the role of inclusive design in digital systems, and strategies for embedding accessibility from the outset of technological innovation. The roundtables produced clear consensus: accessibility must no longer be treated as an ancillary goal, but as a foundational principle guiding the governance and application of AI systems. This briefing outlines key insights and policy recommendations derived from the proceedings, with specific emphasis on scalable solutions for governments, institutions, and technology providers.

Context and Problem Definition

The accelerated deployment of AI across public and private domains has outpaced existing regulatory and design frameworks, resulting in systemic exclusions for persons with disabilities and digitally underserved populations. Despite the increasing recognition of digital rights and the importance of inclusive systems, most AI infrastructure—spanning education, finance, health, and urban mobility—remains inaccessible to individuals whose identities fall outside of majority data representation.

Emerging challenges include algorithmic bias, opaque decision-making, exclusionary data practices, and the absence of participatory design mechanisms. The problem is not one of technological incapacity, but of governance structures that fail to mandate inclusion, ethical audit, and accountability in AI development. Inaccessible AI not only deepens the digital divide, but exacerbates pre-existing inequalities across education, income, and mobility.

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In Scaramucci's world, the Trump administration is like an entire buffet table—a mixture of promising business policies and disappointing setbacks that perfectly captures the volatile nature of the former president and the crypto industry. As traditional finance and digital assets continue their complex dance, one thing's certain—the story is far from over.



The fireside chat was preceded by **Global Stratalogues**, led by **Oscar Wendel**, hosting a panel that explored Dubai's strengths in attracting capital and tech startups to unlock growth. **Kristina Lucrezia Cornèr**, **Global Head of Strategy at Exponential Science**, highlighted Dubai's strengths in building trust and transparency across academia, government, and startups. She urges stakeholders to create collaborative frameworks and recommends leveraging Dubai's rapid innovation to tackle systemic issues in the global financial ecosystem.

Dr. Lisa Cameron, a former MP in the UK Parliament, added insight from her work as the chair of the UK's Cryptocurrency & Digital Assets group. She pointed out how regulatory frameworks in traditional financial centers balance investor protection and innovation. She highlighted that Dubai could maintain its edge by proactively addressing upcoming regulatory shifts, especially as the U.S. and other regions adopt more crypto-friendly policies.

Pablos Holman, a VC and inventor who built the first spaceships at Blue Origin for Jeff Bezos and the world's smallest PC and 3D printers at Makerbot, added a global perspective on how regulation and innovation intertwine, stressing that in some tech hubs, rigid regulations have hindered innovation. "While Dubai's flexible and forward-thinking frameworks stand in stark contrast. This adaptability, Holman argued, has allowed Dubai to thrive as a global innovation hub." **Alessia Baumgartner**, **VP of Ecosystems at DWF Labs**, emphasized the role of sustainability and investor confidence, noting how Dubai's ecosystem attracts capital investment through its regulatory clarity and commitment to innovation.

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Henk Jan Hoogendoorn · 1st

Chief of Financial Services Sector at Qatar Financial Centre (QFC) Autho...

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Qatar's Inaugural **#DigitalAssets** Policy RoundTable organized by **Global Stralogues Oscar Wendel Qatar Financial Centre (QFC) Authority Maha Al-Saadi Global Blockchain Business Council (GBBC) Sandra Ro** along the sidelines of the **Qatar Economic Forum** brought excellent expert panels and speeches with strong opinions and experience in **#regulatoryaffairs** and implementation of **#use** cases. **#tokenization** is not a goal, it has to make sense. Thanks MC : **Mohammed Al Merekhi** and moderators Maha Al-Saadi and **Arjun Vir Singh** and all the experts **Giovanni Everduin Heinz Konzett Shaun Swan Zane Suren** 🚀 **Michal Gromek** Patrick Tan **Saloi Benbaha Jorge Carrasco Troitiño Bashir Kazour** @Qatar Financial Centre Regulatory Authority (QFCRA) **#tokenization #crypto #realworldassets**
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As the global race to tokenize assets accelerates—projected to hit \$16 trillion by 2030—Qatar is positioning itself not just as a participant, but as a potential architect of tomorrow's financial infrastructure. The **Inaugural Digital Assets Policy Roundtable** hosted by the **Qatar Financial Centre** in partnership with **Global Stratalogues** and **Global Blockchain Business Council (GBBC)**, alongside the Qatar Economic Forum, industry experts gathered to discuss how to navigate the maze of conflicting regulations.

Maha Al-Saadi, Head of Regulatory Affairs at QFC and moderator of the roundtable, underscored the policy imperative. "Regulatory clarity is not a luxury—it's a prerequisite for scalable tokenization," she said. "Our goal is to bridge global standards with local implementation to ensure digital assets can operate within a trusted and secure environment."



Speakers at the Inaugural Digital Assets Policy Roundtable hosted by Qatar Financial Centre alongside Qatar Economic Forum. From Left: Patrick Tan (HELIX), Zane Suren (Zodia Custody), Shaun Swan (QFCRA), Mohammel Al-Merekhi (QFC), Heinz Konzett (Lichtenstein), Henk J. Hoogendoorn (QFC), Arjun Vir Singh (ADL), Saloi Benbaha (XDC Network), Giovanni Everduin (CBI), Sandra Ro (GBBC), Jorge Carrasco (FTI), Tanvi Singh (GBBC), Michal Gromek (Global Coalition to Fight Financial Crime), Maha Al-Saadi (QFC), Oscar Wendel (Global Stratalogues), Bashir Kazour (Taurus)

In the opening remarks, **Henk J. Hoogendoorn**, Chief Financial Sector Officer at **Qatar Financial Centre**, said, "We are not here to talk about crypto. We are here to talk about digital assets—real-world tokenization, and the infrastructure that makes it work."

The distinction was deliberate. Held in partnership with **Global Stratalogues** and GBBC on the sidelines of the Qatar Economic Forum, the inaugural QFC Digital Asset Policy Roundtable signaled Doha's strategic intent: to move beyond the hype of cryptocurrency toward the institutional frameworks and regulatory clarity needed to make tokenization viable at scale.

"We're not afraid to regulate," Hoogendoorn added. "But we want to make sure we regulate the right things, in the right way, with the right partners." This pragmatic tone set the stage for a series of nuanced conversations among international regulators, innovators, and policymakers on the real-world challenges and opportunities of tokenized finance.

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Henk J. Hoogendoorn, Chief Financial Sector Officer at Qatar Financial Centre

Among the voices around the table, one perspective cut through the complexity with remarkable clarity. **Shaun Swan, Director of Policy at the Qatar Financial Centre Regulatory Authority** brought a grounded lens to the thorny issues puncturing a popular misconception. "If you go back 12 years, there was no fragmentation because there was simply no regulation," he pointed out. Those were the wild west days, when pioneering jurisdictions like Singapore and the UAE stepped into the void with the first serious attempts at crypto frameworks.

Fast-forward to today, and we're living through what Swan calls a tale of two trends. On the surface, regulations are starting to look more alike—similar language, comparable goals, shared buzzwords. Dig deeper, though, and the picture gets messier.

"There's still differentiation between legal frameworks and legal definitions," Swan explained. "So while we're seeing convergence in headline regulation, once you get into the details, fragmentation remains."

It's like different cities all deciding they need traffic lights, but then disagreeing on whether 'red' means 'stop' or 'go'.

The good news is that international bodies are stepping up their efforts. Organizations such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) have been publishing guidelines aimed at establishing some semblance of global standards.

Swan welcomes these efforts, but he's not putting out the champagne just yet. "Standards are being published, but they're often pitched at a high level," he noted. "And once you start getting into the weeds of legislation—how to implement those standards—you still see fragmentation."

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Riyadh "Riyadh Daily"

Saudi Pavilion at Biennale Architettura hosts Global Stratalogues Delegation

In the shadow of Venice's ancient palazzos, an unlikely group gathered recently to discuss how can money build better cities for everyone? The three-day Global Stratalogues, organized in partnership with Venice Tech Hub and featuring a high-level delegation from the Gulf, Europe, South Korea, the US, and South America, was hosted by the Architecture and Design Commission, Ministry of Culture, of Saudi Arabia at the Saudi Pavilion at the Biennale Architettura.

It showcased the transformation of Najdi architecture in central Riyadh, as well as the link between heritage and contemporary urban life. Their mission? To reimagine how capital flows can create more inclusive, sustainable cities and healthy societies. Dr. Talal Al Harbi arranged the visit to the world's most iconic architecture exhibition. He is the accessibility expert for Saudi Arabia's Giga Projects, part of the team designing cities for the 2030 World Expo and the FIFA World Cup.

Al Harbi said: "We are building for future generations that will demand flexibility, dignity, and participation at every level." His vision aligned with the forum's core theme: that design—whether financial, urban, or digital—must be inclusive by default. The core premise of the opening roundtable was on impact finance, health, and accessibility, led by Giselle Alers of the Global Economic Sustainable Development Commission (GESDC) and Jacqueline Winstanley, CEO of Universal Inclusion.

Together, they challenged a fundamental assumption about finance: that making money and making a positive impact are separate goals. "We can't continue seeing impact as a subset; it is the overarching frame for how we should think about investment," declared Giselle Alers.

This new approach measures success beyond simple returns, factoring in job creation, environmental stewardship, and whether investments improve people's lives. However, participants weren't discussing charity — they were discussing profitable business models that happen to do good. The Venice gathering will build on the publication of the landmark Policy Briefing titled "Designing for Inclusive Futures: Policy Reflections on AI and Accessibility."

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The Saudi Central Bank (SAMA) has decided to raise its repo rate by 0.25 percent from 1.00 to 1.25 percent and the reverse repo rate by 0.25 percent from 0.5 to 0.75 percent.

Policy rate adjustments are consistent with SAMA's objectives of maintaining monetary stability and supporting the

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The paper, authored by Dr. Rukiya Deetjen-Ruiz of Zayed University and co-authored by Oscar Wendel, Founder of Global Stratalogues, synthesizes the key findings from the high-level roundtables. It distills insights from the UK Parliament sessions held in January and served as a springboard for both the Global Stratalogues edition in Venice and the Inaugural Policy Roundtable hosted by the Qatar Financial Centre alongside the Qatar Economic Forum.

In Venice, contributions from thought leaders such as AI World Alliance founder Ilya Churakov helped shape the final recommendations, building on the momentum of a three-day forum that bridged institutions, disciplines, and geographies. "Venice reminded us that inclusion is not only technical. Just as AI must reflect our values, cities must reflect our shared humanity."

On the sidelines of the event, a rooftop concert was organized. The summit's closing night brought an unexpected full-circle moment. Saxophonist Scott Page returned to Venice 36 years after his performance with Pink Floyd at their legendary floating concert that drew 300,000 spectators to St. Mark's Square. This time, the intimate rooftop performance at Palazzo Pissani captured the spirit of the week, bringing together seemingly different worlds.

Page's saxophone blended with Forieri's jazz as the sun set over Venice's historic canals — a reminder that the best innovations often come from unexpected collaborations, and tradition and innovation work best when they harmonize. In conclusion, it is important to mention that the Global Stratalogues will take place in Riyadh on December 16-17, 2025, and continue building on these discussions.

Along with the publication of actionable policy recommendations and the commitment to provide both the inspiration and the practical framework needed to make that translation possible, these ideas are translated to the boardrooms and city halls where real change occurs. Oscar Wendel reflected: "The future of cities depends not only on how we build, but on how we connect across time, geography, and imagination."



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The Gulf's New Silk Road: IMEC and the Future of Resilient Trade

Vision Golfe Summit hosted by France's Ministry of Economy with GCC leaders and French officials outlining how infrastructure and policy will redraw Eurasian connectivity

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From Left: Oscar Wendel (Global Stratalogues), Cédric Virgilio, Turki Alsabih (SAPTCO), Gérard Mestrallet (IMEC), Hamed Mehdipour (ANKAA), Hervé Martel (GPM), Abdulla Al Ashram (Emirates Post), showed how France and the Gulf are not just adapting, but leading a new trade architecture built on redundancy, intelligence, and trust.

In an era defined by geopolitical volatility, supply chain fragility, and growing competition over global influence, trade is no longer just about throughput. It is increasingly about trust, resilience, and strategic autonomy. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is emerging as a bold answer to these shifts—a 21st-century initiative designed to reroute goods, data, and energy through a smarter, more diversified infrastructure network.

Conceived as a multimodal corridor linking India to Europe via the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean, IMEC combines maritime routes, overland rail and road, clean energy pathways, and digital infrastructure. It has been jointly endorsed by leaders from India, the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the EU as a new commercial artery that also serves broader geostrategic goals.

This vision came into sharp focus at the *Vision Golfe Summit* in Paris, held under the patronage of President Emmanuel Macron and co-hosted with Global Stratalogues. the summit's flagship, "*Routes of Growth: Expanding Transport Connections Between France and the GCC*", brought together French and Gulf leaders to explore how IMEC is being operationalized on the ground and at sea, from port modernization to data integration.



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A Corridor of Resilience: Rerouting Trade Amid Geopolitical Uncertainty

"This is not just a trade corridor—it's a strategy for growth, peace, and resilience," said Gérard Mestrallet, Special Envoy for IMEC on behalf of the French President. While IMEC's original blueprint consists of a three-part route—sea from Mumbai to the Gulf, overland across Arabia, then sea to Europe—the region's fast-changing security environment, particularly following the Gaza conflict in late 2023, has prompted calls for built-in adaptability.

"We must not conceive of IMEC as a passive straight line," Mestrallet emphasized. "It needs to be resilient, dynamic, and ready to reroute when disruptions occur." Alternative ports such as Alexandria and Beirut are being considered to augment European connectivity. In France, Marseille has emerged as a pivotal anchor point.

The Grand Port Maritime de Marseille (GPMM) is undergoing a structural reinvention. Once known for petrochemicals and steel, the port is now investing in container capacity, sustainable logistics zones, and multimodal rail and river connections. "We are shifting from oil and gas to green energy and digital infrastructure," said Hervé Martel, Chairman of GPMM.

Two new submarine cable stations will soon make Marseille Europe's fifth-largest data port. The facility is also preparing for next-generation fuels—hydrogen, ammonia, and synthetic fuels—using retrofitted pipeline infrastructure. "This is not just a transition—it's a complete redefinition of our economic role," Martel noted.

Interoperability as Infrastructure

One of the corridor's core innovations lies not in concrete, but in code. As global trade evolves, logistics hubs must act less like toll booths and more like integrated platforms. "The corridor is an opportunity to diversify and synchronize," said Cédric Viriglio, Director of International and European Affairs at Haropa Port.

He emphasized the role of data sharing: "If ports collaborate—on arrivals, cargo types, delays—we improve speed and reliability across the chain. We're moving from transactional infrastructure to strategic systems."

This digital transformation is particularly evident across the Gulf. Traditionally seen as transit zones, GCC countries are now becoming logistics innovation hubs. Trade corridors are no longer just about transport—they're about trust, data, and integration," said **Abdulla Al Ashram**, Senior Advisor to Emirates Post Group's board and its longest-serving former CEO.

With over 25 ports, 50 airports, and 15,000 km of highways, the **GCC** stands as IMEC's natural logistics backbone. "The GCC has always been the bridge between East and West," said Al Ashram. "This isn't new—it's our historic role. What's new is the scale, the speed, and the intelligence required."

He emphasized the importance of the last mile: "You can have world-class ports, but if you don't solve the last mile, the customer experience fails. Consumers want it now—not tomorrow. That requires digitization, security, and real-time tracking."

Last-mile delivery is a key focus. Emirates Post's 7X initiative is deploying digital and sustainable logistics solutions across the UAE, ensuring that consumer expectations for speed and security are met. "IMEC gives us the framework—but we have to engineer the flow," Al Ashram concluded.

On the other end of the corridor, Oman is piloting what might be called the 'first mile' of digital trade. Hamed Mehdipoor, Co-founder and Chief Innovation Officer at Ankaa, is developing systems that track carbon emissions, temperature, customs clearance, and predictive delays using AI and blockchain.

"A trade corridor must be more than a highway—it must be a sensing network," he said. "Only then is it future-proof."

Strategic Alignment and National Vision

Nowhere is the integration of national strategy with corridor vision more pronounced than in Saudi Arabia. According to Turki Alsubaihi, CEO of Public Transportation at SAPTCO, the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and the goals of



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How IMEC is redefining trade across the Gulf, Europe and India

As global trade routes face mounting challenges, the Gulf is positioning itself at the centre of a new corridor connecting India and Europe through innovation and infrastructure

by Ryan Harmon | July 04, 2025 11:04 AM GST

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A new era of global connectivity is emerging as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) transitions from concept to implementation. Announced in 2023 by leaders from India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the EU, IMEC is designed as a resilient, multimodal trade route linking Mumbai to Europe via the Gulf, blending physical infrastructure with digital innovation.

At the recent [Vision Golfe Summit](#) in Paris, hosted by France's Ministry of Economy, French and GCC officials shared the evolving strategy behind this ambitious project. The corridor will encompass maritime routes, overland logistics, and a final sea leg to southern Europe, with strategic waypoints such as Saudi Arabia and France playing pivotal roles.

Redundancy and resilience by design

With geopolitical tensions and chokepoints like the Red Sea and Suez Canal under pressure, IMEC planners are embedding redundancy from the outset.

Saudi Arabia's infrastructure boom is a central component of this effort.

The Kingdom's 75,000-kilometre road network, expanding rail lines, and logistics hubs such as NEOM's Oxagon are being positioned as the corridor's industrial backbone.

The Land Bridge rail project connecting the Arabian Gulf to the Red Sea is set to be a key overland component, offering an alternative to vulnerable maritime chokepoints.

France's role as European gateway

Marseille is being positioned as IMEC's European entry point.

The Grand Port Maritime de Marseille is undergoing a significant transformation, with increased container capacity, green logistics zones, and next-gen energy handling facilities.

Submarine cable landings and digital integration are also making the port a hub not just for goods, but for data.

Smart trade for a new era

Beyond physical infrastructure, IMEC is becoming a testbed for digital trade innovation.

GCC countries are investing in AI, blockchain, and IoT tools that enable real-time tracking, customs transparency, and emissions monitoring.

Oman's [Ankaa](#) project, for example, is piloting AI-powered tools to optimise customs and delivery flows.

Emirates Post's [7X](#) initiative is similarly reshaping last-mile delivery in the UAE with smart routing and carbon tracking.

IMEC is a structural rethink of how trade is done. It's a response to global fragmentation, and a glimpse of how the Gulf can lead in logistics, energy, and digital governance. With countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and France driving its progress, IMEC is setting the stage for a more predictable, interoperable, and tech-forward future of global commerce.



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Riyadh (Riyadh Daily)

Global Award presented to Dr. Talal Alharbi in the UK Parliament

Global Stratalogues is delighted to announce Dr. Talal Alharbi and Heather Mills as the recipients of its Global Stratalogues Award to honor and recognize their groundbreaking work and unwavering dedication to advancing accessibility and fostering inclusivity on a global scale. Dr. Talal Alharbi was honored for his pivotal work advancing accessibility in Saudi Arabia.

The awards were presented at the closing dinner of the Global Stratalogues, which concluded three impactful days of discussions in the House of Lords and the House of Commons in the UK Houses of Parliament recently. The discussions focused on exploring the intersection of technology and design to enhance human potential and city infrastructure to improve inclusivity.

Together, these awards highlighted the far-reaching importance of accessibility across sectors and regions. Lord Erroll, who presented the awards, emphasized their global significance: "Dr. Talal Alharbi and Heather Mills are

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respected leader, HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince, and Prime Minister, whose visionary initiatives under Vision 2030 have paved the way for endless possibilities and progress."

TV



"Heather Mills, a renowned advocate and philanthropist, has made an indelible mark on the world through her tireless efforts to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. Her journey, shaped by her personal experiences, has inspired a global movement for equality, accessibility, and empowerment. Heather Mills epitomizes the transformative power of leadership and resilience," said Oscar Wendel, Chairman of Global Stratalogues. "Her contributions have set new benchmarks for what is possible in creating a world that values and includes individuals of all abilities."

Heather commented: "I am hugely honored to be recognised by Global Stratalogues and the exceptional work that Oscar Wendel and his team do in driving a more inclusive and sustainable future. It is crucial that we continue to make disability and disabled people visible in a world where far too many people have a story to tell of fighting to belong. I hope this award helps to continue the progress made in accepting, acknowledging, and representing



Technology and Design Strengthening the Fabric of Business, Industry and Society

The recent Global Stratalogues, hosted by *MEA Finance*, convened industry leaders to explore the transformative potential offered by the synergy between AI, telecom, finance and tokenisation. The discussions highlighted the importance of responsible design and regulatory oversight to harness these advancements for inclusive progress so no one is left behind

C onvergence of Telecom and Finance Enabling Financial Inclusion

The first panel addressed how telecommunications expand access to financial services, particularly in regions with limited banking infrastructure. **Samer Bishay, Founder and CEO of Karrier One** stated, "We're building the largest decentralised telecom network using Web3 and blockchain technologies to bridge the digital divide, helping to connect the unconnected and bank the unbanked."

Jawad Abbassi, Head of MENA for GSMA, highlighted the success of mobile wallets in underserved areas, remarking, "In 2024, over five billion people globally will be cellular users, and mobile wallets have revolutionised access to financial services in areas where traditional banking remains inaccessible." AI is also seen as a game-changer in advancing telecom-banking services.

A recurring theme was the importance of regulatory frameworks to protect consumers and preserve industry integrity. **Bryan Stirewalt, MENA Financial Services Regulatory Leader, EY**, commented on the evolving regulatory landscape: "The traditional model of regulating institutions may need to evolve into regulating the services themselves. We're witnessing a landscape where financial services can increasingly operate outside traditional banking models." However, **Andrew Cover from MEA Finance** brought a different perspective, pointing out that for many, traditional banking services remain satisfactory. "Who's leading this?" Cover questioned, reflecting on whether telecom-banking services are truly driven by consumer needs or the tech industry's push for profit. He remarked, "I just don't want to be embarrassed when I present my card at the checkout," underscoring the importance of reliable, straightforward service over flashy, feature-rich options.

Oscar Wendel, of Global Stratalogues, highlighted: "What consumers want is efficiency and accessibility. Transactions shouldn't cost anything. This convergence is about making services more efficient and cutting out intermediaries that drive up costs."

Abdullah Al Ashram, CEO of 7x, underlined the need for adaptability in the rapidly shifting landscape of telecom and finance: "What's relevant to the market today might not work tomorrow. Post-COVID, we've seen how fast things can change. We must stay adaptable, focusing on innovation, regulation and

WE BELIEVE THAT ISSUING STABLECOINS IN A REGULATED MANNER IS KEY TO BRINGING CUSTOMER PROTECTION, ESPECIALLY FOR PAYMENTS AND TRADE FINANCE USE CASES

- Charlotte Nedir, SEO of Paxos

policies to truly meet the evolving needs of payment, logistics and telecom."

Tokenisation in Finance—A Path to Broader Access

The second panel focused on tokenisation's potential to democratise finance, enabling fractional ownership and increasing asset liquidity. Moderator John Lillywhite highlighted tokenisation's ability to broaden access: "Tokenisation allows us to merge this new emerging infrastructure with existing legacy financial instruments, making high-value assets accessible to a broader base."

Claudia Abbas, Co-Founder of C9Tech underscored tokenisation's relevance in economies like Brazil, where inflation drives demand for alternative assets: "Tokenisation offers a way for people to hold digital assets securely and with greater autonomy."

Charlotte Nedir, SEO of Paxos, provided a perspective on stablecoins' role in financial stability, especially in trade finance. "We believe that issuing stablecoins in a regulated manner is key to bringing customer protection, especially for payments and trade finance use cases," she stated. Nedir emphasised that well-regulated stablecoins could provide transparency and security, ensuring consumers feel confident about digital currency usage.

Gabrielle Inzirillo, Head of Ecosystem Development at Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) pointed to the UAE's balanced regulatory approach to protect the environment and ensure trust, "But we also need to consider use

cases that solve real-world problems." Inzirillo highlighted how tokenisation supports real-world applications like remittances and trade finance, especially in regions where blockchain technology can stabilise financial channels. The proliferation of mobile payments brings a new level of visibility to transaction monitoring with more data on trends, risk assessment and even KYC, which keeps the banking sector safer for everyone.

The panel also explored practical applications of tokenisation, from Brazil's social coins that allow government benefits distribution without fees, to Bitpanda's security tokens for commodities. **Walid Benothman, Managing Director of BitPanda**, described Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs) as a "game-changer" for cross-border trade by enabling real-time, peer-to-peer transactions between central banks.

AI and Accessibility—Building an Inclusive Environment

The third panel addressed AI's potential to create accessible environments in both digital and physical spaces. **Uthman Ali, Global Chief Responsible AI Officer at BP**, stressed AI's capacity to bridge accessibility gaps but cautioned about current biases. Ali discussed brain-computer interfaces as transformative for individuals with disabilities, highlighting, "Imagine being able to control a computer with just your thoughts. For people with paralysis, this could be revolutionary, but we must approach neuroethics with the same pace as these advancements."



★ **Dr. Rukiya Deetjen Ruiz, Editorial Board of PriMera Scientific Publications**, echoed these sentiments describing how AI can “equalise the human experience for people of determination by creating personalised learning environments. **Aaron McDaid, Principal at Design Confidence**, spoke about AI’s role in embedding accessibility from the outset in architecture: “The future of design is universal, and AI is helping us ensure accessibility is embedded into design from the beginning.” **Dr. Marwan Al Zarouni, CEO of AI for Dubai Economy and Tourism**, discussed Dubai’s approach to accessible tourism, with initiatives like Braille guides and voice-activated elevators, positioning Dubai as “a global standard for accessible tourism.”

Ethics and Regulation: The Key to Responsible Innovation Ethics emerged as a crucial element, with panelists stressing the importance of balancing technological advancement with ethical considerations. Ali cautioned, “AI ethics failures often come from unintended consequences, especially when we don’t consider the full scope of its impact.” Dr. Rukiya stressed the importance of data privacy when using AI to serve vulnerable populations: “We must be very careful with how we use AI to gather data, especially when serving people with cognitive disabilities.”

Inzirillo echoed the need for responsible regulation: “Our role is to ensure that innovation serves a purpose and that consumers are safe.” While

regulation should adapt to support emerging technologies, it must ensure ethical and responsible usage.

Anu Jain, CEO of Nexus Cognitive and former lead of IBM’s Watson program expanded on regulation’s role in building public trust. “A collaborative approach with clear regulatory guidelines will create a safer environment for both consumers and innovators.” Jain pointed to the importance of transparency and consumer protection to foster trust in new technologies.

The panels underscored the collective need for cross-sector collaboration to harness technology—whether in finance, telecom or accessibility—in ways that promote inclusivity and responsibility. As tokenisation democratises financial access, telecom and banking converge to expand inclusivity and AI enhances accessibility, the event emphasised the regulator’s role in safeguarding innovation. Oscar Wendel concluded that technology’s societal impact relies on a shared commitment: “To ensure these innovations create efficiencies, drive inclusivity and remove barriers, we must work together. ♦

“ TO ENSURE THESE INNOVATIONS CREATE EFFICIENCIES, DRIVE INCLUSIVITY AND REMOVE BARRIERS, WE MUST WORK TOGETHER ”

– Oscar Wendel, Global Stratalogues

Keith Dart: Visionary Insights on Construction, Innovation, and Social Impact

A construction industry leader shares his journey, innovations in technology, and commitment to addressing societal challenges at the Global Stratalogues Dinner in Dubai.

A recent Global Stratalogues Dinner brought together influential thought leaders for an exclusive evening of discourse. The spotlight was on Keith Dart, Founder and CEO of MAK Consulting, a construction industry veteran with 28 years of experience. Moderated by journalist Tala Issa, the event explored Dart's transformative career, groundbreaking achievements, and ventures into social impact.

Through an engaging on-stage interview and a dynamic audience Q&A, Dart demonstrated his innovative approach to construction, his passion for implementing advanced technologies, and his commitment to addressing societal challenges.

A Career Rooted in Innovation and Impact

Dart's career is defined by extraordinary achievements, including his integral role in Elon Musk's Boring Company projects. He discussed the success of the Las Vegas Convention Center Loop, a \$47 million project that started as a bold proof-of-concept funded by Musk himself. Its success led to further tunneling initiatives connecting key locations such as the Convention Center and the airport.

When asked about replicating such projects in Dubai, Dart highlighted the role of local soil conditions. Sharing examples from tunneling projects in Seattle and Italy, he emphasized how factors like sandy soils or solid rock dictate project feasibility. Dart expressed optimism about Dubai's potential for adopting similar innovations, provided environmental and technological considerations are addressed.



Keith Dart, Founder & CEO of MAK Consulting (middle), with Tala Michel Issa, Journalist and Podcaster

Overcoming Resistance to Change in Construction

A recurring theme in Dart's talk was the industry's hesitation in adopting new

technologies, like self-consolidating concrete (SCC). Developed in Japan in the 1980s, SCC reduces water usage while improving strength and workability. However, it took over two decades for



Keith Dart emphasized that embracing innovation is crucial in construction, highlighting that entrenched practices often hinder the adoption of new technologies like self-consolidating concrete, which improves efficiency, reduces labor, and strengthens structures.



Guests at the Global Stratalogues Dinner, held at the Neera Private Member's Club, Dubai Habtoor City

this breakthrough to gain acceptance in the U.S.

"In construction, people often say, 'We've always done it this way,'" Dart explained, pointing to entrenched practices as a key barrier. Despite initial costs, SCC has revolutionized construction by enhancing efficiency, reducing labor requirements, and producing stronger structures. Dart emphasized that embracing innovation is critical for long-term success.

Addressing Global Challenges Through Social Impact

Dart's entrepreneurial journey extends beyond construction to address pressing societal issues. Inspired by his personal experiences as an adoptive and foster parent, he launched WashedByWater.org. This initiative reconnects families—especially those in foster care or affected by incarceration—through transformative experiences in calming environments.

"Water heals, water cleanses, water gives life," Dart said, explaining the ethos behind the organization, which operates in partnership with groups in the U.S. and Mexico.

Highlighting systemic challenges, Dart also criticized the U.S. prison system's lack of rehabilitation programs. He champions initiatives like God Behind Bars, which provide inmates with education, job training, and family support, helping them reintegrate into society. By combining his professional expertise with social impact ventures, Dart exemplifies how infrastructure and community building go hand in hand.

Global Perspectives and Lessons Learned

The audience Q&A revealed Dart's insights into the productivity challenges facing construction. Studies rank the industry as one of the least efficient globally, second

only to agriculture. Dart attributed this gap to reliance on outdated methods, even in regions like the U.S. and the Middle East, where technology adoption is uneven.

Pointing to Toronto's early adoption of gasket technology in the 1990s, Dart illustrated how small, cost-effective innovations can have long-term benefits. "The key is to foster conversations like this," he said, emphasizing the role of collaboration in overcoming inefficiencies.

A Vision for Dubai and Beyond

Dart praised Dubai's rapid development, calling its achievements over the past decade "unparalleled." He sees vast opportunities to apply sustainable construction practices and infrastructure planning expertise to the region.

Outlining his goals in Dubai, Dart highlighted relationship-building and knowledge-sharing as priorities. He offered to connect local developers with his network of experts, noting, "If I don't have the answers, someone in my network does."

Self-Accountability: A Guiding Principle

Dart concluded the session with a compelling message on self-accountability. "Look at the three fingers pointing back at you," he said, urging attendees to reflect on their roles in solving challenges. "When you see something that needs fixing, ask yourself, 'What can I do about it?'"

Whether discussing the intricacies of tunneling, the challenges of implementing technology, or the power of social impact, Dart inspired the audience with his expertise, empathy, and entrepreneurial spirit.

About the Global Stratalogues

The Global Stratalogues is an exclusive series of high-level, non-commercial roundtables and dinners uniting policymakers, private sector leaders, and academics in think-tank settings. These gatherings bring together the world's most innovative minds to explore groundbreaking research, leverage cutting-edge technology, and shape policy for a better future.

To Watch the event Highlights Video: <https://youtu.be/EynlPUGMf74>

Leveraging AI and Design for a Competitive Edge in Accessibility

Exploring how AI and universal design principles can drive innovation, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility in both digital and physical spaces for a diverse global population.

Optimising Design and AI to Gain a Competitive Edge with Accessibility and Inclusivity

The inaugural Global Stratalogues was held in Dubai in partnership with MEA Business. The overriding theme was the role of AI in augmenting human abilities and improving our living environments, while considering the dual nature of AI as both a tool for empowerment and a source of ethical dilemmas. How can a level playing field be ensured rather than technology deepening existing inequalities? The panel's discussions laid the groundwork for future conversations about how AI and technology can be leveraged to create a more inclusive world where accessibility is a right, not a privilege.

Uthman Ali, Chief Responsible AI Officer of BP, highlighted how AI can improve the living conditions of people with disabilities and special needs or, as referred to in the UAE, 'people of determination'. A key concern is algorithmic bias in AI technologies. Digital assistants are impacted by something as simple as poor-quality headsets or a diverse accent, which can lead to misinterpretation. Facial recognition systems often discriminate against people with darker skin tones or disabilities because of inherent biases in training data. To truly achieve accessibility, Uthman argued that AI tools must adapt to the needs of all users, including those in wheelchairs or people with speech impediments.



Leaders at Global Stratalogues explore AI and design, paving the way for an inclusive digital and physical world.

From left: Andrew Whitworth, PhD, Former Policy Director of Ripple, Anu Jain, CEO, Nexus Cognitive (Led the Watson program at IBM as General Manager of Media & Entertainment), Aaron Mc Daid, Principal, Design Confidence, Uthman Ali, Global Chief Responsible AI Officer, BP, Dr. Marwan Al Zarouni, CEO of AI, Dubai Economy and Tourism, Dr. Rukiya Deetjen Ruiz, Learning Disabilities Expert and Special Olympics UAE organizer, Yahya Jan, President & Design Director, NORR Group (Architect of World's Tallest Hotel, Ciel Tower), Oscar Wendel, Chairman, Global Stratalogues

The development of AI must prioritise inclusivity from the outset. "The most interesting thing to me," he said, "is the ethics of brain-computer interfaces (BCIs)," which have the potential to restore communication for people with disabilities, but which also raise deep ethical concerns about control, consent, and privacy.

Brain-Computer Interfaces: A Game-Changer or Ethical Minefield?

BCIs such as Elon Musk's Neuralink offer revolutionary potential for people with locked-in syndromes or disabilities that impair communication. Uthman explained that these devices could allow people to type or speak simply by thinking, a breakthrough

“The most interesting thing to me,” said Uthman Ali, Chief Responsible AI Officer of BP, “is the ethics of brain-computer interfaces (BCIs),” which have the potential to restore communication for people with disabilities, but which also raise deep ethical concerns about control, consent, and privacy.



From Left: Oscar Wendel (Global Stratalogues), Aaron Mc Daid (Design Confidence), Dr. Talal Alharbi (Accessibility Expert on Giga Projects), Peter Stephenson (Hydrock)

in accessibility technology. However, this raises profound ethical questions, especially as the line between humans and machines blurs. BCIs could also exacerbate inequalities if they shift from accessibility tools to cognitive enhancers, giving those who can afford them a distinct advantage. The first country to regulate BCIs, Chile, introduced the Neuroprotection Bill, establishing the right to mental

augmentation and free will in the age of brain implants. This legislation aims to safeguard individuals from manipulation or coercion through such devices, a critical issue as technology advances.

AI and Tourism: Making Cities Accessible for All

Dr. Marwan Al Zarouni, CEO of AI for Dubai's Economy and Tourism

Department, noted Dubai's push for inclusivity extends into everyday interactions, from voice-activated elevators to multilingual and accessible staff. This approach illustrates how universal design, when integrated into urban planning, can make a city like Dubai more welcoming to all. “You'll see even on the airplane, the materials ... entertainment for the blind, content for the hearing impaired,” Dr. Marwan said. Dubai's inclusive infrastructure extends to voice-activated elevators, Braille signage, and staff trained to assist people with various needs, making the city a model of accessible urban design.

The Unique Opportunity of Giga Projects

Dr. Talal Alharbi, Accessibility Expert for Giga Projects, said in preparation for Expo 2030 and the World Cup 2034, the focus on accessibility is a priority. “Our commitment is to provide seamless accessibility that not only meets but exceeds global standards. We are learning from international best practices to create a memorable experience for everyone, from the moment they leave home to the time they return. With full support from our leadership, we are working tirelessly to ensure that these events set a new benchmark in accessibility.”

About Global Stratalogues:

Global Stratalogues fosters industry collaboration and knowledge-sharing by hosting experts from diverse fields to address challenges. By engaging leaders in meaningful conversations to explore innovative technology and design solutions, Global Stratalogues aims to drive progress toward accessibility and equality in urban and digital environments. The next session, which will include dinners, roundtables, and workshops, will take place at the House of Lords in the UK Parliament from January 13 to 15.

Inclusive design key to urban future

Accessibility and inclusion play a crucial role in the urban transformation under way in Saudi Arabia, says Dr Talal Alharbi, an accessibility expert for giga projects. At the recent Global Stratalogues roundtables on accessible design, he provided his insights on the kingdom's commitment to inclusivity and the challenges involved.

SAUDI ARABIA'S giga projects are not just about grand infrastructure; they're about creating a world that can be experienced by all. To achieve this goal, these transformational urban projects are being designed to ensure accessibility and inclusion right from their planning stages, said Dr Talal Alharbi, an accessibility expert for giga projects.

At the Global Stratalogues inaugural roundtables on accessible design last month in Dubai, Dr Alharbi shared his thoughts on how these principles are reshaping the nation's ambitious urban developments, particularly in anticipation of global events like the Expo 2030 and World Cup 2034. His insights highlight Saudi Arabia's commitment to inclusivity, the initiatives being taken to ensure everyone – including people of all ages and degrees of physical abilities – feels welcome and accommodated, and the practical challenges in implementing its plans.

Dr Alharbi stressed the need to consider

accessibility at the earliest planning stages, following a structured process through the Design Management Office (DMO), which guides the giga projects from the initial vision to detailed execution.

"We start to think about accessibility from the vision at high levels of management. We deal with the best consultants in the world, ensuring that accessibility is a primary consideration from the very beginning, allowing teams to integrate it seamlessly into the project and avoiding last-minute adjustments or compromises that often fall short of the intended inclusivity," he stated.

This commitment to accessibility aligns with Saudi Arabia's broader goals under Vision 2030, which explicitly mandates enabling people with disabilities. Dr Alharbi noted that accessibility is no longer

an option: "It's not a choice anymore. I mean, it's a very clear vision that enables people with disabilities."

With events like the 2030 Expo and the 2034 World Cup on the horizon, Saudi Arabia is increasingly prioritising accessible infrastructure. He elaborated that the focus extends to the entire visitor experience, from when people leave their homes to when they return. The aim is for each guest, regardless of his or her ability, to easily navigate the country, promoting positive experiences and setting a high standard for accessibility in global tourism.

A challenge Dr Alharbi pointed to is the general shortage of qualified consultants in accessibility. "This is a new sector, and we really need more consultants, more experts, to be in this field," he stressed.



Dr Alharbi... we need more experts in this field.

This scarcity of expertise often results in a gap between intended accessibility and actual implementation. In response, Saudi Arabia sovereign wealth fund Public Investment Fund (PIF) has taken steps to include individuals with disabilities in project teams, ensuring that accessibility needs are represented by those who benefit most from these accommodations. "We think including

people with disabilities in the project from the early stage will help the designers and project managers think about accessibility. This will make the project managers and the designers think about this every time they see those employees around," explained Dr Alharbi, a wheelchair user whose perspective provides crucial insights.

This approach adds valuable perspective, helping designers and managers develop spaces that serve everyone's needs.

Reflecting on his personal experiences, Dr Alharbi also highlighted the cultural aspect of accessibility in Saudi Arabia. He pointed out that, traditionally, families might hesitate to be open about a disability, fearing that it could impact family reputation. "There is a cultural issue in this. I always say to people with disabilities you have to go out to the street to let others know what you are facing. People should accept those with disabilities in the community."

In his view, awareness and visibility are vital to fostering understanding and acceptance within society which, in turn,

encourages decision-makers to prioritise accessibility initiatives.

Dr Alharbi believes accessibility benefits everyone, not just those with disabilities. "Accessibility is for all. Now, if you go anywhere and find a smooth ramp and stairs, everyone goes to the ramp, not the stairs," he noted.

These benefits extend beyond convenience, contributing to safer, more inclusive environments where people of all ages and abilities feel comfortable. This mindset aligns with his definition of accessibility, which he described as being able to participate fully and independently in society.

"The main issue of accessibility is inclusion," Dr Alharbi said. "We make things accessible for the disabled to include them in the community. For a place to be accessible, I should be able to arrive, park, and enter without help."

Saudi Arabia's legislation is beginning to support these aims. Dr Alharbi noted that the Saudi Building Code now mandates accessibility, with stricter enforcement anticipated in the coming years. "In Saudi Arabia, it's now mandated by law that new buildings must be accessible. There are issues in implementation, but we're progressing," he said.

However, enforcement remains a challenge, as some supervisors overseeing projects may lack the necessary background in accessibility requirements, resulting in partial or incorrect implementations. The PIF addresses these challenges by setting its own standards and collaborating with the municipality to ensure compliance in public and private developments.

Drawing from international best practices, Dr Alharbi sees value in adopting models from other countries to enforce compliance and ensure quality. "We can discuss the Australian model for accessibility and raise it to the ministry," he suggested, referencing Australia's independent accessibility certification process. By exploring successful global models, he believes that Saudi Arabia can develop its own framework for regulatory compliance that encourages accountability throughout the design and construction process.

Despite the challenges, Dr Alharbi is optimistic about Saudi Arabia's progress in accessibility. He reflected on his journey, from living independently in the UK, where accessible infrastructure was readily available, to returning to Saudi Arabia and

experiencing new obstacles.

He observes a significant shift in the last decade, particularly in major cities like Riyadh, where new public spaces and infrastructure increasingly prioritise accessibility. The Riyadh Metro, for instance, incorporates features that make it easier for all users to navigate the city. "When I came back from the UK in 2011, I started to feel I am disabled," he recalled. "But now things are different, and we can see much improvement."

Saudi Arabia's ambition is to build an

inclusive environment that welcomes everyone. For Dr Alharbi, the goal is compliance and creating a society where accessibility and inclusion are standard, seamless aspects of everyday life.

In his view, accessibility is not just about laws or ramps; it's about independence, inclusion, and being a full part of society. Through thoughtful planning, cultural awareness, and legal support, Dr Alharbi and his colleagues at the PIF are setting a strong foundation for a more inclusive Saudi Arabia. ■



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THE HIDDEN VALUE OF ACCESSIBLE DESIGN



The concept of accessible design in real estate and urban planning has gained considerable traction as industry professionals and policymakers begin to recognise its profound impact on building safety and overall quality of life. **Oscar Wendel**, Chairman, Global Stratalogues, shares more

The recent Global Stratalogues' roundtables on accessible design, which took place in Dubai, shed light on accessible design. They explored how accessibility influences property value, financing, long-term sustainability and building safety in the UAE and GCC. The session brought together industry leaders from diverse fields, including real estate, banking and fire safety, to discuss how accessible design can unlock hidden value in the real estate sector.

Accessible design is not only a legal requirement in the Middle East but also a strategic imperative for enhancing building and fire safety. By prioritising accessibility, real estate developers and property owners can create environments that are safer, more inclusive and ultimately more valuable.

Accessibility, often associated with inclusivity, plays a crucial role in enhancing building safety and security. By designing spaces that are easy to navigate for everyone, including people with disabilities, we inadvertently improve safety protocols and create a space that can expedite evacuations during emergencies. Additionally, by accommodating diverse user needs, we strengthen overall security measures, making spaces safer for all.

Well-designed buildings with accessible features, such as ramps, elevators and clear signage, facilitate easy evacuation in emergency situations. In the event of a fire, accessible pathways and clear escape routes can significantly reduce the risk of injury or loss of life. Additionally, accessible features like

wider doorways and lower countertops can improve the efficiency of firefighting operations, allowing emergency responders to reach and assist individuals with disabilities more effectively.

Talking at the roundtable, Aaron McDaid, a Middle East leader in Design Confidence, said: "You can't just design to comply; you've got to figure out how to get people out of a building in emergency situations. We looked at areas that would be safe for people with disabilities in the fire stairs. These areas would have communication systems to connect with the fire control room."

The growing demand for accessible design

As Dubai's demographic shifts, accessible design is critical to attracting high-

net-worth individuals and retirees, groups increasingly focused on ease of access and quality communal facilities. Villa communities, for example, are increasingly prioritising accessible features to accommodate older residents and retirees seeking more comfortable, accessible living environments. This demographic shift towards long-term residency has boosted interest in accessible designs, especially in high-demand communities. Developments that integrate accessibility, such as Town Square, are serving as models for creating inclusive communities that accommodate families, seniors and people with disabilities alike.

Retrofitting older properties for accessibility

One of the crucial points underscored by the panelists at the roundtable was the importance of retrofitting older properties to meet contemporary accessibility standards, especially as newer regional Giga projects set benchmarks for accessible and sustainable design. Retrofitting these older buildings is a financial investment and a way to secure long-term value as demand for inclusive living spaces grows. While new developments incorporate accessibility by design, older buildings often require extensive modifications. Retrofitting older properties will be crucial to remain competitive, especially in an evolving landscape where accessible spaces are increasingly valued.

Leveraging AI to enhance accessibility

The discussions explored how advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance accessibility and improve urban planning. AI technology allows developers to monitor comfort levels and behaviour patterns in real-time, enabling developers to identify and address accessibility needs more effectively. By analysing data from security cameras and sensors, developers can pinpoint areas lacking accessibility and implement timely changes to improve the user experience. This data-driven approach allows city planners and developers to simulate and predict the effects of accessibility decisions, enabling them to adapt spaces to meet users' needs better.

AI applications, such as those used in Dubai Mall, where visitor satisfaction is gauged through facial expressions and



Above: Maryan Haidar, Accessibility Consultant; Mark Painter, Principal, Design Confidence; and Oscar Wende, Global Stratalogues

movement patterns, are examples of how technology can improve user experience. By allowing real-time adjustments based on visitor feedback, AI is helping developers design inclusive and comfortable spaces for all users.

Competitive edge through accessibility and quality design

In an increasingly competitive market, accessibility is seen as a significant advantage. Accessible spaces benefit those with specific needs and enhance the overall experience for all users. Accessibility considerations are becoming points of differentiation in the property market as more buyers and renters prioritise inclusive and high-quality spaces. Accessible and inclusive designs align with a growing market demand for spaces that provide comfort, security and ease of use.

Developers and consultants are encouraged to go beyond government-mandated accessibility standards, viewing these requirements as a starting point rather than an endpoint. Stakeholders in the real estate sector are beginning to see accessibility as a factor that enhances brand reputation, with accessible

properties seen as more desirable and ultimately more valuable. This approach aligns with a broader vision of creating welcoming, inclusive spaces that offer an improved quality of life for residents.

Accessibility as a long-term investment

Ultimately the roundtable concluded that accessibility should be viewed not as an expense but as an investment in property value and quality of life. In today's evolving market, incorporating accessibility meets more than just a niche need; it represents a future-oriented approach where buildings cater to everyone, ensuring spaces are usable, safe and welcoming. This commitment to accessible design is poised to shape the future of real estate in Dubai and enhance urban life across the GCC.

Accessible design offers tangible benefits, from attracting a wider audience to maintaining long-term value and fostering inclusive communities. As the real estate market evolves, accessible design is increasingly being recognised as a core aspect of property value, contributing to a more sustainable and inclusive future. ■

Saturday, November 16, 2024



Thu, 07 Nov 2024

Events

Giga projects lead the way in accessible cities: Global Stratalogues

DUBAI

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From left: Oscar Wendel, Aaron Mc Daid and Dr Talal Alharbi

Saudi Arabia's ambitious giga projects took center stage at the inaugural Global Stratalogues roundtable event held in Dubai last month (October 11 to 16), sparking discussions on how cutting-edge design and artificial intelligence (AI) are shaping a new era of accessibility and inclusion in urban development.

The series of high-level, closed-door roundtables featured influential industry leaders focusing on the potential of technology and design to enhance the user experience by improving accessibility in the built environment. Discussions covered ethics, design, policy, and practical applications, revealing profound shifts in attitudes toward integrating AI to enable more inclusive societies.

The opening roundtable highlighted Saudi Arabia's giga projects as leading the way in creating futuristic, sustainable cities. A key component is the prioritisation of accessibility and inclusivity.

The panellists pointed out that accessibility is a core component of making sure that projects provide the right experience and design for accessibility should take into account all people of ages and physical abilities.

As cities grow and new urban projects take shape, the need for accessible design is more important than ever. Dr Talal Alharbi, an accessibility expert for giga projects, stressed that accessibility is not just about meeting regulatory requirements, but creating environments where all people, including those with disabilities, can navigate independently. "Accessibility is for all. When you design an accessible environment, everyone benefits. Even in a building, people will choose a smooth ramp over stairs," he said.

For Dr Alharbi, accessibility is fundamental to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which aims to create inclusive cities for all, regardless of physical ability. "We are thinking about accessibility and inclusion not just for visitors but for employees and everyone involved in Vision 2030. Accessibility is no longer a choice. It's an integral part of our vision."

The importance of incorporating accessibility early in the design process was also highlighted. "We start thinking about accessibility from the very early pre-concept, concept and design stage. When we engage consultants early, we find that they can sort out issues and deliver what we're looking for," noted Dr Alharbi.

Integrating best practices

Oscar Wendel, Chairman of the Global Stratalogues, opened the discussion by reflecting on the scale and ambition of Saudi Arabia's giga projects, comparing them to Dubai's monumental achievements. However, these projects also require thoughtful planning for long-term sustainability and inclusivity. Wendel noted: "When designing ambitious projects that have never been done before, you have to take your thinking beyond the codes."

Aaron McDaid, Middle East Leader at Design Confidence, a leading building regulatory and engineering services consultant to the construction industry, echoed that while codes and standards provide a foundation, true innovation in accessibility comes from considering users' specific needs. "When designing ambitious projects, it is all about understanding the regional challenges and the fact that we have many diverse nationalities and cultures."

According to McDaid, a key advantage of Saudi Arabia's giga projects is that they are being built from scratch. This presents a unique opportunity to integrate accessibility rather than retrofitting buildings later. "The giga projects allow for this to be embedded into the design philosophy," he explained. "This forward-thinking approach ensures compliance and enhances the overall experience for all users, particularly those with disabilities."

Dr Alharbi explained how accessible design creates societal and economic benefits. "Studies show that accessible buildings have more visitors and better economic returns than those that are not accessible. If you start thinking about accessibility from the blueprint, it costs nothing, but retrofitting later can be very expensive."

Addressing cultural and social barriers

Despite these promising developments, cultural and societal barriers still exist. Dr Alharbi pointed out that in some parts of the region, there is still a stigma associated with disability, which can hinder progress toward true inclusivity. "There is a cultural issue when it comes to disability in our region. Often, families hide their disabled members, thinking it will affect their reputation. To create real change, people with disabilities need to be visible and part of the community."

However, he also noted that awareness is growing, along with decision-makers' willingness to support accessibility initiatives and shift the narrative around accessibility in the region.

Importance of regulation and enforcement

A major theme throughout the discussion was the role of regulation in ensuring that accessibility remains a priority in urban development. McDaid discussed how regulatory regimes can enforce accessibility standards: Regulatory approvals have pushed the level of compliance higher. For example, in projects like Expo 2020, best practice guidelines were developed by studying various international standards, which were applied not only across the event's public realm but also numerous pavilions, he stated.

However, enforcing these regulations remains a challenge. Dr Alharbi highlighted the shortage of accessibility consultants in the region. More experts need to be trained, especially as current consultants often lack the necessary expertise to address all aspects of accessibility.

Holistic approach to accessibility

A key takeaway from the roundtable was the need for a holistic approach to accessibility and considering the overall user experience, from transportation to the building itself. "It is about keeping a couple of different solutions to try to achieve the ultimate goal," McDaid said. For example, ensuring that parking for people with disabilities is close to the entrance or that public areas are shaded to mitigate the region's high temperatures are small details that can significantly enhance the overall user experience.

Furthermore, the inclusion of people with disabilities in the design process itself is critical. As Dr Alharbi pointed out: "If you hire people with disabilities, you will start to think about accessibility."

Building cities for the future

As Saudi Arabia continues with its giga projects, accessibility and inclusion must remain at the forefront of the conversation. By incorporating best practices from around the world and thinking beyond compliance, these new developments have the potential to set a global standard for inclusive urban design.

Peter Stephenson, Director at Hydrock, multidisciplinary engineering design consultancy, noted: "The whole key is the user experience. It is critical for the branding of giga projects." By ensuring that cities are accessible to all, Saudi Arabia is not only fulfilling its Vision 2030, but also creating spaces that will stand as a testament to human achievement for generations to come, he added

Global Stratalogues fosters industry collaboration and knowledge-sharing through a series of forums and roundtable discussions. The platform hosts events like the Accessibility Design Roundtables, which gather experts from diverse fields - including real estate, architecture, finance, and corporate leadership - to address pressing issues in accessible design and inclusive spaces. The forum highlights challenges, and explore innovative solutions for creating inclusive environments by engaging leaders in meaningful conversations to drive progress toward more accessible and equitable urban spaces globally. -TradeArabia News Service.

TARIFF TSUNAMI:

Decoding America's Trade Reset for Middle Eastern Financial Strategy

Are we looking at the end of globalisation or a recalibration of global trade that will enhance it? **Oscar Wendel** Editor-At-Large, *MEA-Finance*, contends that those who anticipate the coming shifts and develop strategies to navigate an increasingly complex trade environment will be at an advantage

For Middle Eastern financial institutions that have prospered by facilitating global capital flows, America's tariff-centered trade strategy represents both a challenge and an opportunity within a rebalanced international economic architecture.

Predicting the nature and extent of America's ongoing restructuring of global trade dynamics is complex, but it will undoubtedly have profound implications for Middle Eastern financial institutions and investors. Sovereign wealth funds, banks and investors who have traditionally allocated significant capital to U.S. markets need to pay close attention.

Nicolas Michelin, Managing Partner of Alagan Partners, a Dubai-based corporate geopolitics advisory, characterises the American approach as classic Trumpian negotiation tactics: "He promises you hell so that he doesn't have to deliver it." This strategy creates deliberate uncertainty—imposing tariffs, suspending them, reimposing them—



■ Oscar Wendel, Editor-At-Large, MEA-Finance

to force countries into a binary choice: access to the American consumer market or maintaining China-centered supply chains. The initial policy established a baseline 10% tariff on "everything from everywhere" with additional "reciprocal tariffs" on countries perceived as taking unfair advantage of the United States. The formula used has little economic rationale, suggesting the policy is more geopolitical than economic, with China as the primary target.

Trump's tariffs are commonly seen as protectionist, yet proponents argue that he is not a protectionist or an isolationist. His objective in the tariff negotiations is the opposite: to break down trade barriers, create a fairer and more competitive global economy and promote global capitalism through free market activity. The immediate response to the tariff announcements, where more than 75 countries reportedly expressed interest in negotiating new trade arrangements with the U.S., supports this.

Meanwhile, Ray Dalio, founder of Bridgewater Associates, warns that if this is not handled well, the outcome could be "worse than a recession." Dalio identifies five concurrent forces reshaping the global economy: monetary cycles involving credit and debt, internal political conflict, shifting global power dynamics, technological change and natural disasters—a rare historical convergence with profound implications for global financial stability.

Proponents of the current approach argue that comparisons to the Great

Depression are a misunderstanding of both history and current policy. They point to research by economists like Milton Friedman, who attributed the Depression primarily to misguided monetary policy rather than trade restrictions. It was the Federal Reserve's tight monetary policy—raising interest rates to 6% in an economy with zero inflation—that transformed a market correction into a severe depression. Furthermore, artificially inflating wages and prices through government-sanctioned cartels prolonged the recession. In contrast, the current administration's approach combines tariffs with domestic deregulation, tax reduction and government spending cuts—policies diametrically opposed to those implemented during the Depression.

Michelon warns that Middle Eastern financial institutions should be aware of China's counter-strategies: "China has many other weapons at its disposal, such as their willingness to heavily manipulate their currency... They hold a sizable chunk of U.S. debt, which they are starting to get rid of, gradually replacing with non-U.S. dollar-dominated assets and gold. That's a financial equivalent of the nuclear weapon." This currency manipulation strategy appears to be underway, with the yuan devaluing more rapidly than the dollar. For Gulf states with dollar-pegged currencies, this currency battle creates complex risks for trade financing, investment returns and purchasing power.

The U.S. has taken the position that tariffs are sophisticated financial instruments serving multiple functions: revenue generation, leverage in negotiations and economic realignment. With projected annual revenues between \$300 billion and \$600 billion, compared to just \$35 billion under previous frameworks, these tariffs represent a substantial fiscal shift that will affect U.S. Treasury markets, where many Gulf institutions hold significant positions. Despite concerns, initial data from the 20% China tariffs showed a modest 0.7% rise in U.S. price levels. Economic

models suggest that in a 10% tariff scenario, producers absorb 4%, currency adjustments handle another 4%, and consumers bear only 2% of the cost. The tariff strategy appears to aim at "re-industrialising America" by leveraging the country's strengths in entrepreneurship and innovation. America has been the leader and main beneficiary of capitalism, and its innovation and entrepreneurship underpin it. By creating more equitable global trade conditions under the threat of imposing tariffs, American businesses

America, for Africa, for Central Asia." The current trade tensions serve as a "wake-up call" that the established international trade architecture—"basically China as the main producer and the US as the main buyer"—has become unsustainable. This reconfiguration creates space for Middle Eastern economies to position themselves as alternative trade partners, production hubs and financial intermediaries."

Several strategic considerations emerge for banks, investment houses and sovereign funds across the Middle East.

THIS RECONFIGURATION CREATES SPACE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN ECONOMIES TO POSITION THEMSELVES AS ALTERNATIVE TRADE PARTNERS, PRODUCTION HUBS AND FINANCIAL INTERMEDIARIES

and international trade will benefit in the long run rather than relying on tariffs that lead to economic contraction.

If the tariff regime succeeds in strengthening the dollar's fundamentals, it will have direct implications for Gulf currencies pegged to the US dollar. However, Dalio's concern about a potential "breakdown of the dollar's role as a store of wealth" introduces significant long-term risk factors. China's gradual divestment from U.S. debt instruments amplifies this risk. Financial institutions throughout the Middle East should closely monitor these currency dynamics, as they will impact a range of factors, including remittance costs, trade financing terms and investment returns.

While Michelin acknowledges that "everybody is losing" in the immediate term, he sees significant long-term opportunity for regions outside the U.S.-China binary: "There is an opportunity for all countries in the world that are not U.S. and China—for the Middle East, the GCC, for Europe, for Southeast Asia, for Latin

Trade finance operations may need realignment as global supply chains adjust. Currency hedging strategies will require revision in anticipation of potential fluctuations in the dollar. Portfolio allocations should be recalibrated to account for the potential outperformance of U.S. industrial sectors over multinational corporations. Islamic banking institutions may experience increased demand for Shariah-compliant trade finance products as companies seek diverse financing sources to manage the complexities of cross-border trade. Sukuk issuances tied to infrastructure development in reshoring initiatives could attract significant investor interest.

The arguments over whether the current tariff policies are a protectionist measure or a strategic leverage toward a more open global trading system are neither black nor white and will not be settled anytime soon. However, they will significantly influence how financial institutions throughout the Middle East position themselves for the future. ♦

Decoding America's Trade Reset For Middle Eastern Financial Strategy

by Oscar Wendel

For the Gulf, this is not a time to hedge in silence. It is a moment to craft forward-leaning strategies: deepen intra-regional trade, enhance domestic production capacity, invest in digital and green infrastructure, and assert financial independence in a contested global system.

The End Of A Global Consensus: The Beginning Of Strategic Sovereignty

Is globalisation unravelling, or is it being reengineered into a more reciprocal and resilient system? For Middle Eastern financial institutions that have flourished in a world of open capital markets, America's increasingly assertive trade reset—built around tariffs, reshoring, and bilateral leverage—represents a pivotal shift. This transition, while disruptive, also presents an opportunity. As the global economy pivots from decades of liberal interdependence toward strategic nationalism, those who anticipate and adapt early will find themselves not at the margins of power, but squarely at its crossroads.

Donald Trump's trade doctrine, whether implemented during his presidency or lingering through his influence, must be understood as more than populist rhetoric. It is realist policy in action. At its core is a desire to reframe globalisation from a moral imperative to a strategic transaction. Trump's characterization of "rip-off trade" with partners like Canada, the EU, and China was not just political theatre. It tapped into long-standing economic grievances—chief among them the offshoring of American industry and the hollowing out of domestic value chains.

Take Canada's \$63 billion trade surplus with the United States. What had long been tolerated as the cost of alliance became, in Trump's framing, a liability—a sign that even friends were benefiting from American largesse. As political tides shift across the Western world, these kinds of trade imbalances are no longer politically tenable. Populism is not the cause but the consequence of a system that many feel no longer serves national interests.

Trump's now-famous line, "they don't have anything we can't do ourselves", crystallizes the new orthodoxy: economic sovereignty must take precedence over liberal interdependence. This is not a retreat into isolationism, but a strategic reordering and a move toward national fortification. For the United States, it means reviving core industries: energy, automotive, fertilizers, and semiconductors. For others, like China, it means hedging against American exposure through "dual circulation." For the Gulf, it demands a reassessment of financial posture and a recalibration of risk.

From Interdependence To Regional Anchors: The Middle East As Strategic Bridge

The post-Cold War promise of seamless global integration is receding. What is emerging in its place is not deglobalisation per se, but a form of "deglobalisation", one that is regional, selective, and shaped by sovereign interests. Middle Eastern economies are uniquely positioned to thrive in this environment, but only if they proactively transition from passive beneficiaries to strategic intermediaries.

Global integration is not disappearing; it is being restructured. The new order will be built not on multilateral orthodoxy, but on a mosaic of regional alliances, diversified trade corridors, and bilateral agreements. This evolution offers Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations a rare chance to step into a more prominent role: not just as energy exporters or financial centres, but as geopolitical and logistical bridges connecting reshoring Western powers with rising Asian economies.

Dubai, Riyadh, and Doha have already begun to capitalize on this shift. Sovereign wealth funds are aligning investment strategies with long-term infrastructure priorities. Regional supply chains are being fortified. Regulatory regimes are being updated to attract new categories of capital. These are not cosmetic adjustments, they are the foundation of a new economic model based on resilience over reliance.

Deglobalisation, contrary to its most alarmist interpretations, is not about building walls. It is about recalibrating dependencies. As Trump's treatment of Canada demonstrated, allies are no longer immune from scrutiny. The new logic of trade is not ideological, it is transactional. In this landscape, the Middle East can no longer afford to define its role by historic patterns or inherited alignments. It must stake out new ground.

Financial Architecture In A Fractured Global Order

As the global order fragments, the financial terrain is shifting just as dramatically. The competition is no longer only for goods and services, but also for monetary influence. China's slow but steady pivot away from American debt, coupled with a growing preference for gold and non-dollar assets, poses real implications for dollar-pegged Gulf currencies and American-denominated investment portfolios.

This dynamic marks the early stages of what could evolve into a *"Financial Cold War."* As America leverages tariffs and sanctions to achieve policy outcomes, others are increasingly using currency diversification and alternative settlements to assert independence. In this unfolding contest, Gulf financial institutions must remain agile.

Banks operating in dollar-pegged economies need to update their hedging frameworks to reflect the volatility of the yuan-dollar relationship. Shariah-compliant instruments, particularly those linked to long-term infrastructure or sustainability goals, may offer a hedge against market volatility and shifting geopolitical pressures.

On the portfolio side, sovereign wealth funds should consider greater exposure to American domestic-facing industries poised to benefit from reshoring, including logistics, critical materials, and clean energy manufacturing. At the same time, they must reassess the risk tied to multinationals whose operations remain heavily reliant on outdated global supply chains.

Trade finance also requires an overhaul. As cross-border flows become more politicized and regionally defined, traditional instruments may no longer suffice. Diversified, localized alternatives, including those rooted in Islamic finance, will safeguard liquidity and maintain trade facilitation in increasingly fractured markets.

Nicolas Michelon of Alagan Partners observes that this is a *"wake-up call."* The old model of China as the factory, America as the consumer, and the rest of the world as a conduit is fading. The *"tariff tsunami"* is not merely a response to political discontent. It is a structural correction that reorders global trade based on reciprocity rather than assumed obligation. As Trump put it, *"We just want to be treated the way you are."* That sentiment now defines the diplomatic logic of economic engagement.

For the Gulf, this is not a time to hedge in silence. It is a moment to craft forward-leaning strategies: deepen intra-regional trade, enhance domestic production capacity, invest in digital and green infrastructure, and assert financial independence in a contested global system. It is not about replacing one hegemon with another, it is about ensuring strategic flexibility in a world that is increasingly about choice, not constraint.

As the rules of the global game are rewritten, the Middle East must decide whether to observe from the sidelines or help redraw the map. 



“Global integration is not disappearing; it is being restructured. The new order will be built not on multilateral orthodoxy, but on a mosaic of regional alliances, diversified trade corridors, and bilateral agreements.”

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