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A new workshop offers a chance to construct a pavilion from a homegrown sustainable material – date palm leaves



Aware of the pressing need for sustainable construction methods in less developed economies, London-based architect Sandra Piesik is leading workshops in Europe to spread her knowledge of palm leaf architecture – an ancient craft that is on the verge of extinction.

Taking place over a period of two weeks this September, the next workshop will bring together over 10 volunteers from various walks of life to construct a palm leaf pavilion at the Domaine de Boisbuchet estate in south-west France.

This initiative, hosted in partnership with the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority, will work towards designing a prototype of the pavilion using date palm leaves, otherwise known as arish, to serve countries where food is wasted due to a lack of proper storage facilities.

Piesik has been studying arish architecture for over four years, working to find a contemporary function for the indigenous material, which has been used in the Middle East for over 7,000 years. After moving to Dubai in 2004, her interest in Middle Eastern culture led her to study the architectural tradition. 'I wanted to see how people living in the UAE responded to extreme weather. I found that people who used palm leaves to construct buildings were the leaders of technological innovation in

their day.' Surprisingly strong, the structures were able to withstand the harsh weather conditions of the country. 'The use of arish needs to be revived in order to introduce it to the mainstream construction industry,' explains Piesik, who runs a design and research consultancy firm dedicated to cultural continuity in the face of globalisation.

The proposed pavilion, to be completed during the workshop, will stand at a height of roughly four metres. Once it is constructed, it will be used as a 'testing ground', to measure its viability as a potential food shelter in developing countries in North Africa. 'The structure we plan to construct could form a shelter for food in poorer countries, and the lessons learnt from this workshop will further advance our research and the development of date palm leaf use,' says the architect.

Cultural sustainability is a crucial element of the project for Piesik. The volunteers are encouraged to have a 'hands-on' approach to building the structure. 'Working with indigenous materials such as palm leaves is great fun. Participants peel, cut, bind and soak the materials directly. This is the same technique that previous generations have used to construct arish buildings. It's a cultural continuation of something that existed in the region for many years.'