

Creating pathways between sustainability and longevity

Opportunities in the
United Arab Emirates

Through conversation, research, and imagination, Soma Mater and SYPartners explore the influences that are shaping communities in the UAE, asking ourselves, our colleagues, and our partners:

"Together, how do we imagine and build the future we want to leave behind?"

SYPartners

For more than 30 years, SYPartners has worked side-by-side with the world's most influential organizations, teams, and leaders to help envision and build bold new futures.

As we expand our practice in the Middle East, we partner with visionaries across policy, culture, and community to create sustainable and purposeful growth through collaboration.

S O M A M A T E R

SOMA MATER aims to create radical transparency across every aspect of the UAE food system through education and awareness. Driven by data and a community-first approach, SOMA MATER facilitates conversations that support its three central pillars:

- Empowering Local Producers
- Supporting Sustainable Importers
- Informing Critical Policy Makers

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Introduction

1. 2024 will be the continuation of the "Year of Sustainability", building on the success of last year's theme and reaffirming the nation's commitment to fostering a sustainable and prosperous future for all.

The UN's Climate Conference, COP28, marked a major milestone in the UAE's journey. The event brought together global advocates and experts in pursuit of collective climate action. In doing so, the UAE led the Parties in establishing a new era of climate action realised through announced pledges, contributions, and new initiatives. As the nation embarks upon its next phase of sustainability, one marked by local contributions and national achievements, we—business leaders, designers, policymakers, artists, researchers, and scientists—endeavour to reimagine the future (WAM).¹

Imagining a future we want to live in, even if we never see it, gives us the courage to advocate for future generations.

2. Over 50 years of research in psychology, economics, and neuroscience reveals that humans consistently discount long-term gains and losses, preferring near-term gains instead.

While humans are not naturally inclined to make decisions on extended time horizons, *societal* responsibility pushes us to think beyond our own lifetimes, considering intergenerational needs beyond the horizon (Ann NY Acad Sci)². This future-oriented mindset is inherent to the culture of the UAE. In a harsh geographical environment, where a sense of preservation was critical, communities operated from a shared mindset. They used only what was needed, and nothing more.³

3. **Lest We Forget**, supported by the Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, documents Emirati vernacular cultural memory by conducting oral histories and other types of research. Interviewee and elder Matra Al Mansoori speaks about her community's generations-long relationship with sustainability saying, "We wouldn't finish the resource we find like wood and water [while traveling the desert], we would keep some for those who will travel in the same route after us."

Today, designing with an intergenerational mindset requires us to consider the forces that are shaping the next generation of communities. To do so, we reach outside our silos of knowledge, embracing new streams of understanding and collaboration that allow us to explore the new and unknown paths that lie ahead.

A multifaceted approach to sustainability

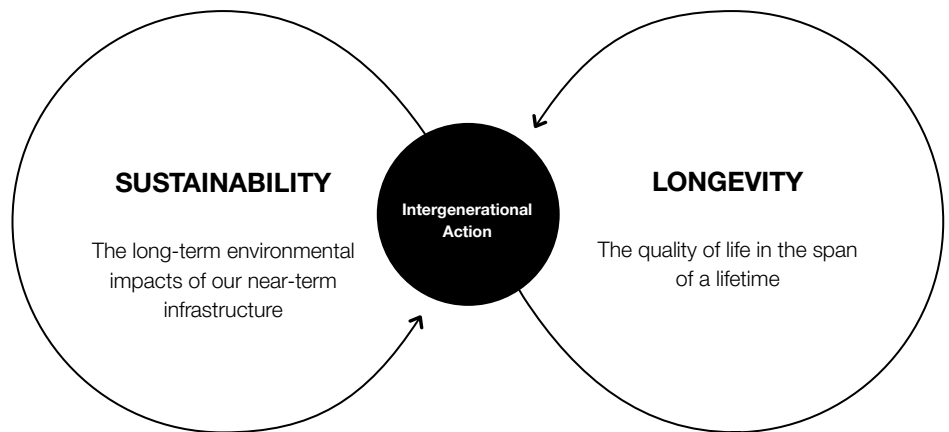
As we explore the evolving concept of “sustainability”, we acknowledge that we collectively work with many definitions, formal and not, that can vary based on any number of influences such as industry, sector, or region. While the UN more broadly defines it as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, the Sustainable Development Goals, which have become a foundation of countless ESG frameworks in place today, are not inclusive of explicit language around intergenerational justice. Across organisations and businesses today, we find “sustainability” most often used in association with technical innovations, net-zero policies, and quantifiable measures of success.

To better understand the possible futures, we examine the major changes that impact sustainability. While sustainability cuts through all global shifts, such as AI and feminism, we find that **longevity offers the most insight into the values, lifestyle, and environments that will support sustainable systems.** In its simplest expression, longevity is used interchangeably with increased life expectancy. And many research streams are examining the substantial impact that an aging population will have on existing structures such as health care and food, in the UAE and beyond (PwC).⁴ At the same time, we see a new cohort of pharma and biomedical initiatives spring up aiming to tackle this problem. Together, they make up the rising “longevity economy”. Initiatives underway in the UAE demonstrate the commitment to extending the lives of the population. The Arab Future Health Summit, which took place in February 2024 in Dubai, aimed to “reveal remarkable breakthroughs in the field of reverse aging and longevity” (Arab Health).⁵ We view these movements as a springboard to envisioning a multifaceted approach to longevity. **Sustainability asks us to consider the long-term environmental impacts of our near-term infrastructure. Longevity emphasizes the quality of life in the span of a lifetime.**

4. By 2025, people over the age of 50 are expected to make up almost one in five of the GCC population, up from one in seven in 2020.

5. The Arab Future Health Summit was hosted in collaboration with Pure Health, Dr Sulaiman Al Habib Medical Group, NEOM, BD, and pwc.

Longevity × Sustainability

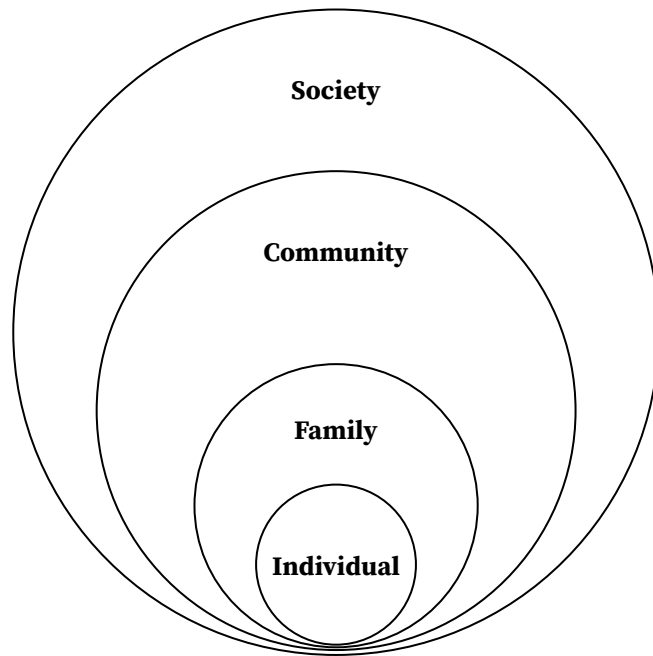


“We are very focused on youth culturally...and we are also an aging society. It’s a great creative challenge to work with.”

— Rie Nørregaard

In a recent conversation, Alyaa Al Mulla, Academic Advisory at University of Oxford and founder of Longevity Think Tank, highlighted the need for proactive health solutions. When considering aging populations, we must remember that aging is a lifelong process. Therefore, decisions throughout our life—where we live, what we eat, where we work, and how we get around—all contribute to a life well lived.

If we want a future where a life well-lived is defined by health, well-being, and collective progress, we need to activate all facets of a healthy ecosystem through imagination and implementation now. Examining the links between longevity and sustainability ensures that we consider how technical advancements in pharma and medicine are met with values that link individuals to families to communities to society.



The transformation of the UAE over the last 50 years has been achieved through **the collective efforts of individuals, families, communities, and societies—and the exponential impact of their collaboration.** This is shown in the UAE’s rapid growth in GDP and social advancement, as well as the dual focus on individual prosperity and societal sustainability in the energy transition.

As we look to the next 50, we bring forth the values of multigenerational respect, natural preservation, and communal living that put *people, and our fellow species*, at the centre of our story.

Facets of longevity

What we can learn from disciplines within science and design

6. The Danish Twin Study established that only about 20 percent of how long the average person lives is dictated by genes, while about 80 percent is influenced by lifestyle and environment.

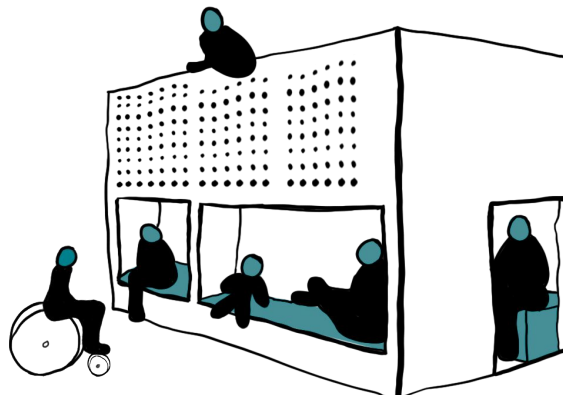
Throughout recent history, longevity has become a muse of scientists, architects, and designers. From theory to practise, different initiatives have uncovered the aspects of life that contribute to long and healthy lives, reinforcing the idea that holistic approaches to health have more influence than do genetics alone (Hum Genet).⁶ We explored a few inspirational bodies of work to gather foundational insights into successful systems of longevity and sustainability.

Thank you to the visionaries and many contributors to **Blue Zones Project, Paiono Institute, and Victor Pineda Foundation** for inspiring us.

Disciplines across science and design (such as ecology, environmental science, anthropology, medicine, and urban design, among others) reveal many facets of longevity to explore. **We begin with five facets that inform a longevity-oriented mindset:**

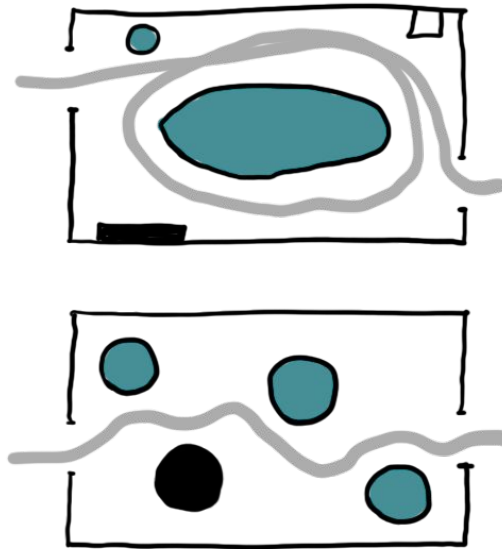
- **Usability**

Design environments and narratives that are accessible to people at every stage of life, as needs, abilities, and preferences change throughout one's life cycle.



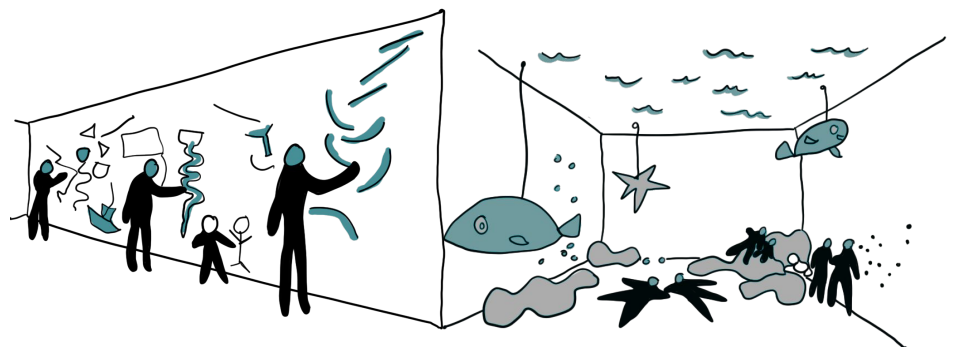
- **Circulation**

Create easy-to-navigate spaces and interfaces that also encourage discovery, serendipity, and connection between people and the environment.



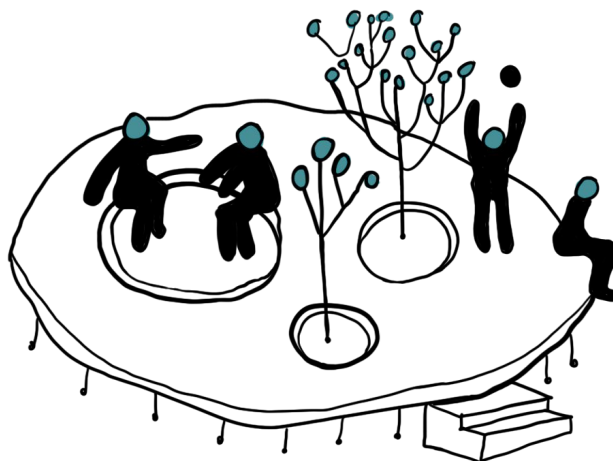
- **Connection**

Develop spaces that can transform to meet the unmet needs of the community and that inspire intergenerational social interaction, contribution, and joy.



● Vitality

Plan and design with features that build holistic well-being into cultures and organisations, including local-scale access to the outdoors, healthy food, and health care services.



● Resilience

Build with sustainable materials and practises, combined with circular and multifunctional design, that enable a space to be adaptable and reimagined throughout its lifetime and beyond.

“If you have sustainability and longevity, then you really have the harmony of human life and the environment. They are intertwined”.

— Dr. Majid Sultan Al Qassimi

Creating pathways between sustainability and longevity

What this means for the UAE

Leaders of today hold the responsibility of creating space within organizations; to accommodate the many facets of a life well-lived **both in work we do and the cultures we create.** In our endeavor to reimagine “the ways things have always been done” we see opportunities to spark new schools of thought that define the protocols of designing for sustainability and longevity.

Leaders have the opportunity to supercharge their efforts by creating pathways between the different silos of individuality, family, community, and society. Collectively, we can begin to establish goals and frameworks that allow us to do more together than we could do apart.

Mapping
the current state
of the ecosystem

—————
Crafting a narrative
that connects
sustainability and longevity

—————
Promoting
a continued
culture of care

● Mapping the current state of the ecosystem

Creating a shared view of the ecosystem allows us to more effectively activate the organisations within it. As leaders across many sectors and functions, it is human nature to forge ahead relying largely on the knowledge and expertise we’re familiar with. By co-creating a shared vision of the ecosystem, we aim to better understand the blind spots that create biases in our work. In this scenario, we are considering the functions and futures of each silo—individuality, family, community, and society—and the links that connect them all.

***“Nobody is talking about the culture of the organization.
We only talk about the vision.”***

— Dr. Cyril Toma

- **Crafting a narrative that connects sustainability and longevity**

Storytelling allows us to put the heritage values that guide the nation's development at the forefront of our goal. Crafting a narrative requires us to consider this goal through the lens of different perspectives—the individual, family, community, and society—identifying the elements of language and expression that unite all silos.

“If we don’t talk about the ‘human’, what’s the point of achieving success in the other areas like sustainability, food security, and AI?”

— Alyaa Al Mulla

- **Promoting a continued culture of care**

Designing a culture of care ensures that the individuals of an organisation feel equipped and empowered to act on behalf of the greater system. As leaders, it is essential that we make space for voices to be shared and heard. As designers, it requires us to co-design environments and processes that account for the dynamic needs of an organisation.

Conclusion

The journey towards a sustainable and long-lived future is one that requires collective action and imaginative collaboration.

By pooling our resources, knowledge, and creativity, we can forge new pathways that not only address the challenges of today but also pave the way for a healthier, more resilient, and vibrant future for generations to come.

Together, let us create a legacy that embodies the values of multigenerational respect, natural preservation, and communal well-being, ensuring a thriving future for all.

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