

Press Release**Villa Hegra completes its first university exchange program in architecture between Saudi Arabia and France with the “AIUla Studio” exhibition.**

Villa Hegra has just concluded an academic partnership between Saudi Arabia and France, representing an innovative initiative in the field of architecture. This exchange program, which brought together 30 students from the College of Architecture and Design at Prince Sultan University (Riyadh), Paris-Malaquais School of Architecture – PSL and ENSA Paris Val-de-Seine, and, coordinated by the Patrimed association, ended with the “AIUla Studio” exhibition at the Paris Malaquais Architecture Gallery, which was inaugurated on February 14, 2025. This marks Villa Hegra’s first event in France.

Since October 2024, students have been working on collective projects focused on the urban development of AIUla, Saudi Arabia, particularly on the future site of Villa Hegra. The collaboration began with an immersive workshop in AIUla, offering participants an in-depth exploration of the region’s natural, historical, and urban environments, such as AIUla's Old Town, its archaeological sites, and iconic architectural landmarks including the Maraya concert hall. This experience provided participants with valuable insights to advance their projects. While on-site, students engaged with local experts, discovering the initiatives lead by the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU).

Promoting Cross-Cultural Dialogue Through Architecture

Divided into five selected Saudi-French teams, students developed a range of projects, from enhancing historic urban heritage to designing new social housing models, as well as reinterpreting public spaces and managing water resources.

The professors’ expertise in South-North dynamics and inclusive cities contributed to enriching students’ reflections on AIUla's architectural and urban challenges, allowing them to deliver creative and context-responsive proposals.

The implementation of the program relied on the expertise and support of the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) and the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA), and the academic coordination of the French association Patrimed, known for organizing exchange programs between France and Arabic-speaking countries.

A Final Exhibition Crowned by a Distinguished Jury



Credit: Make it Live – Christophe Pelletier

The final exhibition “AIUla Studio”, showcasing the results of students’ projects, was inaugurated on February 14, 2025, at the Paris-Malaquais Architecture Gallery. It is curated by Meriem Chabani, an architect, urban planner, and associate lecturer at the Paris-Malaquais School of Architecture – PSL.

The exhibition opening featured an award ceremony presided by a jury panel of renowned professionals:

- **Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal**, founders of the architecture firm Lacaton & Vassal, winners of the 2021 Pritzker Prize, and designers of Villa Hegra’s building;
- **Etienne Tricaud**, Director of Architecture and Urban Planning, AFALULA;
- **Sara Ghani**, Design Space AIUla Lead, RCU.

The winning students were awarded the opportunity to take part in an architecture residency at Villa Hegra in 2026.

A Success for Saudi-French Cooperation

Bringing together architecture schools from France and Saudi Arabia, this innovative exchange program stands as a strong testament to the relationship between the two countries and their mutual commitment to academic cooperation. During the inauguration, Ferial Fodil, CEO of Villa Hegra, stated: *"This university exchange in the field of architecture between Saudi Arabia and France, carried out with Villa Hegra’s valued partners (Malaquais– PSL, Val-de-Seine, and PSU) and with the support of Patrimed, is at the heart of Villa Hegra’s mission. Bridging student communities from both countries, the program marks a key milestone in strengthening the Saudi-French relationship through education and architectural culture."*

About Villa Hegra

Villa Hegra is a cultural institution born from the friendship between Saudi Arabia and France. Dedicated to promoting cross-cultural cooperation, it supports contemporary creation, particularly in visual arts, cinema, and performing arts. As an open space for creativity and education, Villa Hegra encourages connections between the AIUla community and international audiences, creating opportunities for expression and dialogue.

Starting in 2025, Villa Hegra will host its cultural programming activities at a temporary site in the heart of AIUla.