

The City of Earth

An Interview with Gerard “Jerry” J. Inzerillo, Group Chief Executive Officer, Diriyah Company

EDITORS’ NOTE Jerry Inzerillo is a globally celebrated visionary in the hospitality and tourism industry, with a deep aptitude for positioning strategies and iconic developments. In June 2018, Inzerillo was appointed by His Royal Highness The Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to be the founding CEO of the newly created Diriyah Gate Development Authority, (diriyah.sa), a \$63.2 billion project aimed at restoring and reimagining the



Jerry Inzerillo

ancestral home of the original Saudi state. In this role, he is charged with developing and implementing a master plan to turn its 14 square miles of development area into one of the world’s greatest gathering places, encompassing world-class cultural, entertainment, retail, hospitality, educational, religious, office and residential assets, with the UNESCO World Heritage site of At-Turaif as its center-point. When complete, the development will add 27 billion Saudi riyals to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s GDP, attract 27 million visitors, and employ more than 55,000 people. Inzerillo also serves as Vice Chairman of the Forbes Travel Guide. He previously served as President and CEO of IMG Artists, a leader in artist management, performing arts and lifestyle events planning, from 2012 to 2014. From 1991 to 2011, Inzerillo was President of Kerzner Entertainment Group, where he raised the profile of its properties in South Africa, the Bahamas, Dubai, Morocco, Mauritius, Mexico, the Maldives, as well as conceptualized and positioned the start-up of its One&Only and Atlantis brands. He oversaw the launches of The Lost City at Sun City in South Africa, Atlantis in the Bahamas and Atlantis, Dubai. From 1991 to 1996, Inzerillo served as COO of Sun City, the South African resort complex built by Sol Kerzner. While in South Africa, he enjoyed a close personal friendship with President Nelson Mandela and, in 1994, coordinated major portions of his Presidential inauguration in South Africa. In 1987, he was the founding President and CEO of Morgans Hotel Group, later rebranded as Ian Schrager Hotels. While there, he conceptualized and opened Morgans, Royalton and Paramount in New York; the Delano in Miami Beach; and Mondrian in L.A. Inzerillo has long been involved with philanthropy, especially with respect to children, education and HIV/AIDS. He was honored with a Knighthood by the

Knights of Malta in Rome, Italy, in 1996. Inzerillo is a founding advisory board member of the Clinton AIDS initiative. In recognition of his leadership and empathetic outreach to the tourism community during the COVID-19 pandemic, he was awarded the prestigious HOTELS magazine “Corporate Hotelier of the World Award” as well as the “Tourism for Peace Award” by the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations.

Will you discuss the vision for Diriyah and provide an overview of the project?

Diriyah is the City of Earth. Its mudbrick Najdi architecture is a jewel in the cultural crown of Arabia. It tells the story and charts the journey of Saudi Arabia’s three centuries of history. The historic efforts of the House of Al Saud made Diriyah a renowned gathering place at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. Now, Diriyah Company is driving forward the incredible Diriyah masterplan to transform the city into a gathering place for the world.

Diriyah’s place as the heart of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is unparalleled. The vision for its future is simple: it will be the premier destination to live, work, visit, shop, dine, and to celebrate the wonders of the Kingdom’s rich heritage and culture.

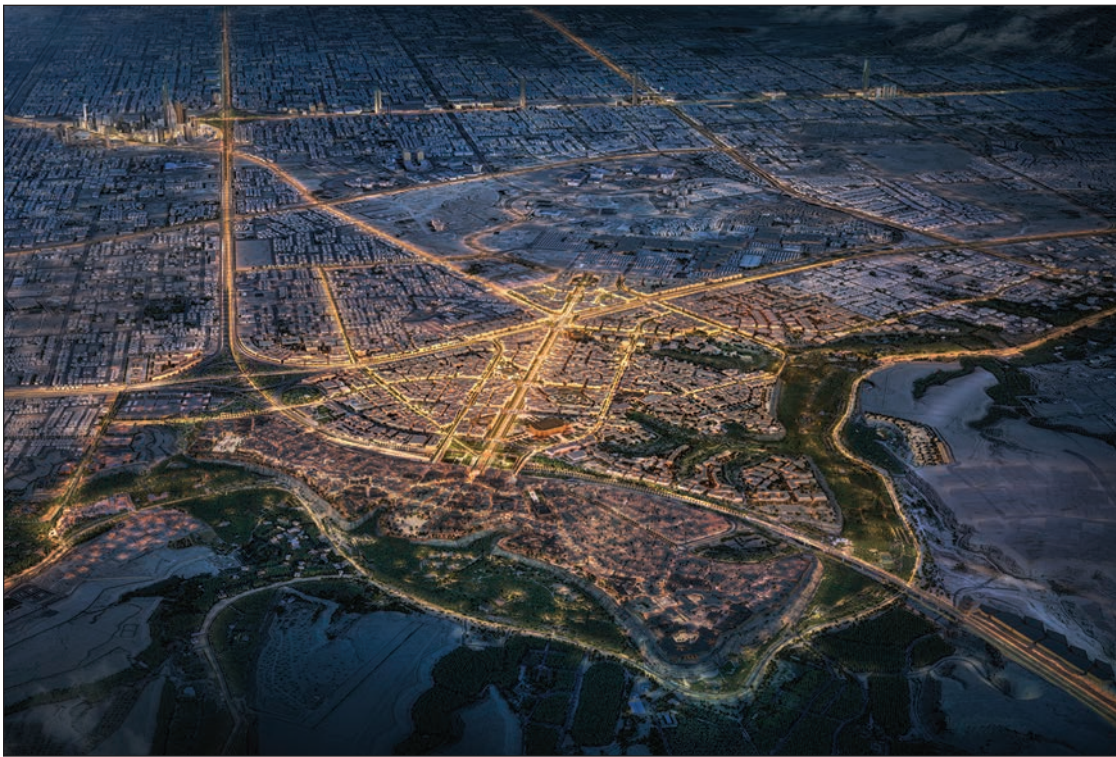
To achieve this, we have embarked on a mammoth 14 square kilometer development. First and foremost, our work is protecting and celebrating the distinctive character, culture, and traditions of Diriyah. In a wider national and international context, we are forging a new city that will create 55,000 jobs for the Saudi economy and we are aiming to attract 27 million visitors a year by 2030. Both of these missions align with key pillars of the Vision 2030 program and as the first of its giga-projects to open physical assets, we are lighting the way.

How important is it to balance the need to provide a modern feel and current offerings while maintaining the history and heritage that is such a special part of the Diriyah story?

Diriyah will never look or feel like a “futuristic” city. It is the root of Saudi Arabia’s modern society and the foundation of its uniqueness and



Salwa Palace, At-Turaif UNESCO World Heritage site



Diriyah City

value to both The Kingdom and the world is its authentic and storied architecture and landscape. For us then, there was never a question of trying to change Diriyah. Our work was, is, and always will be to enhance the lifestyle offering of the city.

In this mission we are guided by Diriyah and the lifespans and life cycles of its natural environment. We have pioneered a “Wise City” approach that takes the guiding principles of life in Diriyah across the centuries and blends this with modern lifestyle improvements. For example, today most cities are enormous, and their services and assets – whether shops, hospitals, schools, restaurants or entertainment venues – are spread out requiring massive amounts of travel for residents. We are breaking from this mold of the modern-metropolis and are returning to the roots of how we have lived for millennia – the walkable city. We are creating self-sufficient districts and zones that will provide a quality of life that takes the best amenities and connectivity of the modern-world and combines it with human-scale, outdoor living. Think everything in reach by a short walk, no need to drive or take a train, embracing the gorgeous natural environment with its year-round temperate climate – this is blending modernity with heritage.

Our emphasis on traditional beauty and aesthetics creates a sense of place and authenticity with traditional Najdi Architecture. Design cues, materials and visual elements respect the heritage of Saudi Arabia providing a unique visitor and resident experience that is based on tradition, but modified and interpreted for contemporary living.

This is how the next chapter of Diriyah’s long story will be told – embracing the lessons of the past and intertwining the best of what we have on offer today, and tomorrow.

What do you see as the historic significance of the redevelopment of Diriyah?

Diriyah is the historical heart of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The birthplace of the First Saudi State and ancestral home of the House of Al Saud, for three centuries the city has been the cultural epicenter of The Kingdom. The roots of modern Saudi society, customs and traditions can be traced here and now Vision 2030 is opening it to the world.

How often can you oversee the development of a city that tells such a rich history of homegrown resilience and spirit, but also a tale

of leadership, vision, and progress? It is a once in a lifetime opportunity that is hugely significant for not just those working on the project, but for all of Saudi Arabia. Diriyah embodies the heart of the nation and is a witness to its history.

So intertwined in this development and the historical tale of kinship, perseverance, and growth that has defined the city and The Kingdom for over 300 years is a symbol of Saudi national pride, identity, and unity. That makes this development of seismic significance, and we are all honored to be a part of it.

Will you highlight the current state of the project and discuss some of the venues that are already open to visitors?

Today, Diriyah is open and welcoming visitors from all corners of the world. We have already opened two of Saudi Arabia’s most incredible cultural and culinary destinations.

First is the At-Turaif district, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that forms the heart of Diriyah, which opened to the public in December 2022. Organic since its inception and hand-built from the mud surrounding Diriyah, it is the living embodiment of a three centuries-long story of humanity. It is a symbol of Saudi identity and was a cradle of civilization for cultures across the Arabian Peninsula.

Saudi Arabia’s premier cultural offering Bujairi Terrace opened at Diriyah in December 2022 and is Saudi Arabia’s most exquisite culinary offering. It brings together restaurants with culinary styles from all over the world, alongside the best examples of local Saudi cuisine, creating a true center for cultural exchange. Food lovers will be entranced by the depth of its offering, from its four Michelin-starred restaurants to the Saudi brands offering incredible local cultural tastes including MAIZ, which offers authentic Saudi food from each of the Kingdom’s 13 provinces for a true journey



Bujairi Terrace at night



Bujairi Terrace

across the delights of Arabia TAKYA, the first Saudi-owned fine dining restaurant serving Saudi cuisine. These sit alongside international brands such as Angelina, Sarabeth's, Villa Mamas, and Hakkasan that collectively make Bujairi Terrace one of the most expansive and varied curated culinary offerings in the world.

Diriyah has also been host to some incredible cultural events. Saudi Arabia's first Contemporary Art Biennale was held in Diriyah's Jax district featuring works from over 60 international and 27 Saudi artists. The Jax district also hosted the Saudi Design Festival, a three-week event showcasing the talent of local Saudi designers through deep-dive discussions and design-thinking workshops. And of course, we can't forget Formula E which brought the sporting world to discover our magnificent landscapes and offerings.

So, we already have a lot to offer, and we are still only just getting started.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia aims to attract 100 million visitors per year by 2030. How will Diriyah support the government to achieve this ambitious goal?

Diriyah aims to attract 27 million visitors by 2030. We are transforming the historical site of Diriyah into a global hub for culture, heritage, and tourism that will attract cultural talent, inquisitive tourists, and investors.

As one of the first giga-projects to open to the public with At-Turaif, Bujairi Terrace and the myriad events we have already hosted, Diriyah really is the catalyst of Vision 2030, and is critical to the Vision's success pledge to raise tourism's contribution to the Kingdom's GDP from its current 3.2 percent to 10 percent by the end of the decade.

In terms of tourism and hospitality, the Diriyah Company is set to be a global player, having announced 38 global brands who will join

Diriyah's world class hospitality offering, including the Ritz-Carlton, Rosewood, Six Senses, and others. These prestigious hotels and resorts will complement the Kingdom's rich culture and heritage and the Diriyah Company is immensely proud to have attracted such iconic brands to the destination.

Diriyah has hosted large-scale sporting events, from Formula E to boxing title fights to tennis championships. Do you see Diriyah as a leading global sporting event destination?

Diriyah has already hosted some incredible international events as you alluded to just now.

From Formula E to boxing matches to the Diriyah Tennis Cup and Diriyah Equestrian Festival, we have established the city as a magnificent host for the sporting world.

As part of the transformative Vision 2030 strategy, the Diriyah masterplan is delivering assets that are perfectly placed to hosting global sports events, but these are not even our greatest assets. It is the natural environment of Wadi Hanifah, Diriyah and our proximity to Riyadh that makes us a world-leading sporting event destination.

At just 15 minutes from the center of the capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with the connectivity of the superb King Khalid International Airport and the city's myriad world-renowned hotels, all combined with Diriyah's heritage and hospitality offerings, whether At-Turaif or Bujairi Terrace, athletes, visitors and residents can expect an unrivalled experience.

And all of this is only the beginning – with so many more assets yet to open, from an abundant collection of the world's most renowned luxury hotels to international retail and entertainment venues, and an incredible list of future events, Diriyah's sporting credentials will only get better.

How important has it been to engage the private sector and business leaders in the Diriyah project?

In the Kingdom, the owners of luxury hotels and major assets have traditionally been public entities like the Public Investment Fund or the Ministry of Finance. Looking to the longer-term, Diriyah offers Saudi business owners the opportunity to invest directly in hotel and asset ownership in order to facilitate a more diverse ownership of brands.

The government has signaled that it wants to empower the private sector so what we will see is an increasing number of public-private



Daily life in At-Turaif can be experienced through a series of immersive theatrical performances

partnerships between the two sectors to move away from a small group of public owners.

Diriyah as a PIF-portfolio company is playing a key part in this and, as the development progresses, it will fuel further public-private sector partnerships across our portfolio.

Will you discuss the strength and talent of Diriyah Company's workforce and how critical the Diriyah team is to the success of the project?

Diriyah is a family. I always say "One Family, One Diriyah" which perfectly encapsulates our approach to our workforce. We recently reached 30 million man-hours across all our developments, and we are only just at the beginning.

Almost 86 percent of Diriyah Company's staff are Saudi, with 14 percent being Diriyah locals. This is crucial as first and foremost Diriyah is for Saudis. When we think of gender, 36 percent of our staff are women, 16 percent of whom hold management roles within the Diriyah Company. Female empowerment in the Kingdom is a core pillar of the Vision 2030 strategy and forms a key component of our work.

Development on the scale of Diriyah requires talent – attracting the best talent requires a good workplace. Diriyah ranked in Top 10 Best Places to Work in Saudi Arabia in 2022 after being recognized for the second year in a row and in September 2022, Diriyah was also named the best place to work in Asia. This is a reflection of the incredible, supportive and people-centered work environment we have created.

From the Company's senior leadership to the most junior staff member, there is an immense sense of pride in the Diriyah project. This is the largest and most important project many of us will ever work on and each one of us is a guardian of Diriyah's historical and cultural legacy. All of us know the significance of this project and we are all working hard to see its completion.



Bujairi Terrace

How do you focus your efforts leading the redevelopment of Diriyah?

As Group CEO of Diriyah Company, my role is to drive forward our development plans and deliver on the ambitious targets set by the Board of Directors. As a PIF-portfolio company, we are overseeing a \$63.2 billion investment pipeline and have already opened some of the first Vision 2030 giga-project physical assets in the Kingdom.

There is a huge amount still to be done and with the incredibly talented and skilled team we have formed at the Company, we are well on the

way to delivering this outstanding project. I can't wait for what more there is to come.

You have been a leader in the hospitality industry throughout your career and have been involved in some of the most dynamic projects around the world. What made the opportunity to lead the Diriyah project so special for you?

This is a really easy question to answer. Simply, how often do you get the opportunity to work on developing the birthplace of a nation? Diriyah is the ancestral home of the Al Saud family and at At-Turaif the First Saudi State was founded. For 300 years Diriyah has been a witness to and site of history, culture and heritage. Through our work, we are returning it to its past prestige as a gathering place for the world.

To be a part of something so treasured by the Saudi people and so crucial to the roots of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a true honor and privilege.

What do you want people who may not be familiar with Diriyah to know about this historic location?

Diriyah is the fabled ancient mud-brick city of story books and fairy tales. Just outside of the capital, Riyadh, it is the historical heart of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, birthplace of the First Saudi State and ancestral home of the House of Al Saud. The city has been the cultural epicenter of Saudi Arabia since its inception and is where the roots of modern Saudi society, customs and traditions can be traced.

Now, as Vision 2030 is opening Diriyah to the world, all those who wish to immerse themselves in authentic Saudi culture should make the centuries-old journey to Saudi Arabia's latest destination and see where the modern Kingdom was born. I am so proud of the work that Diriyah Company is doing, and I cannot wait to welcome the world to Diriyah. ●



Bab Samban Hotel