

Gateway to Petra

Location: Ma'an, Jordan

Client: Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities

Dates: 2003

Size: 3,000sqm (GIA)

Anticipated construction cost: £12M



Imagine the thrill of discovering a lost city.

We designed a building to feel unfamiliar – not like other buildings. It uses an abstraction of the real experience of the landscape as its cue, rather than any architectural style: it owes more to the rock shelters, the wadis, the surprise views, clefts and cool caves found in the Petra park. The visitor travels through this sequence and it is the experience of their journey that organises the spaces of the building.

In walking through Petra ourselves we tried to understand the needs of visitors on an excursion into the Archaeological Park in the hot, dry weather.

The site at Wadi Musa is characterised by the impressive rock formations that define its western edge and skyline, but existing scattered buildings interrupt the simplicity of the rocky outcrops.

The building design is flexible for the needs of the individual user. On arrival, visitors descend between stone walls on a route aligned on the Petra Gate axis and arrive dramatically into a sweeping oval entrance bowl, or amphitheatre. With only the distant horizon of sky, mountains and foliage visible from within this space, it cuts out the clutter and commerce of the surrounding scene.

When facilities need to be closed out of normal hours, or at certain times of the year, the building can act as a simple gateway. For those with limited time, there is a 'fast track' exhibition, housed within the thickness of the walls along the path edge. For visitors who have more time to explore, galleries leading off the 'fast track' ramp focus on the history and archaeology of the site, allowing more profound study before or after their visit to Petra.

The galleries wrap around a garden that displays the plants the Nabataeans cultivated, including frankincense and myrrh trees, from which incense is derived. The trade of this key element, used in religious ritual throughout the classical world, formed the foundation of the Nabataean's great wealth.

The path then leads into a top-lit route that bypasses an existing road and delivers visitors out into the landscape of the Park to begin their exploration. The visitor building therefore, acts as a threshold between two places; the route into the building and out to the ancient world.