

2026: The Digital Design Language of Riyadh.

A Kingdom Lens on How States Communicate Trust, Power, and Legitimacy Through Software.





Design as Institutional Language.

Executive Thesis

States do not announce how they govern.
They reveal it.

They reveal how difficult it is to complete a task. In how errors are handled. In whether systems explain themselves or hide behind procedure. In whether a citizen feels guided or suspected, welcomed or tolerated, confident or hesitant. Over time, these moments accumulate into something far more consequential than satisfaction scores: belief.

In the last decade, the primary interface between citizens and institutions has quietly shifted. It is no longer the counter, the office, or even the law itself. It is software. Forms, portals, notifications, workflows, automated decisions, and invisible defaults have become the place where authority is experienced most frequently and most viscerally.

This shift has profound implications. It means that governance is no longer felt only through policy or enforcement, but through interaction. Power is no longer encountered only through rules, but through flows. Legitimacy is no longer argued; it is sensed.



This paper argues that **digital design has become a language of the state**. Not design as aesthetics. Not design as creativity. But design as the grammar through which institutions express intent, responsibility, and respect.

Over time, this language determines whether institutions move as a system or as fragments.

Saudi Arabia is uniquely positioned at this moment. Few states are transforming at this scale, with this degree of central intent, and with the opportunity to shape institutional behavior deliberately rather than reactively. Within that transformation, Riyadh occupies a distinct role. It is where the Kingdom's ambitions meet lived reality. Where global expectations encounter local legitimacy. Where coherence, or the lack of it, becomes immediately visible.

The question this paper explores is not what Riyadh should look like. It is what Riyadh should feel like to navigate, and what that feeling teaches people about the Kingdom itself.

2026 matters not because of a date on a calendar, but because decisions made now are becoming hard to reverse. Acceleration compresses reflection. Automation freezes assumptions. Fragmentation compounds quietly. By the time dissatisfaction becomes visible, the underlying design language has already taught millions how to behave.

This is not a paper about interfaces.

It is a paper about how states behave once they become software.

The arguments presented here have been informed by recent closed-door discussions among practitioners designing and governing systems at scale in Riyadh, alongside global research and comparative analysis.



Note on Sources and Perspective.

This paper is informed by a closed-door roundtable convened in Riyadh on 28th December, 2025, bringing together senior design, digital, and institutional leaders working across government, public-sector platforms, regulated industries, and enterprise systems.

The discussion was intentionally off the record and exploratory in nature. Its purpose was not to reach consensus, but to surface lived experience, tensions, and judgment formed through designing and governing systems at scale within the Kingdom.

Insights from the roundtable have been treated as signal rather than conclusion. They are used in this paper not as authoritative answers, but as contextual grounding, stress-testing broader arguments drawn from global research, institutional theory, and comparative state practice.

No individual comments are attributed. The value of the roundtable lies not in any single perspective, but in the convergence and divergence observed across the room.

When the State Became an Interface.

Most governments still speak as if governance happens through laws, policies, and institutions. In practice, it increasingly happens through screens.

The modern citizen does not encounter the state as a coherent entity. They encounter it as moments: applying, updating, correcting, waiting, appealing, moving, paying, registering, renewing. Each moment is mediated by a system. Each system encodes assumptions. Together, these moments form a narrative about what the state expects, tolerates, and prioritizes.

The interface has become the most frequently used branch of the state.



This is the critical shift many leaders underestimate. When interaction becomes the primary site of governance, design decisions become political decisions, even when they appear neutral. A form that demands repetition signals mistrust. A workflow that cannot be corrected signals rigidity. A notification that threatens rather than guides signals authority without care.

None of these signals are debated in parliament. None are announced in strategy documents. Yet they shape behavior more reliably than rhetoric ever could.

Historically, legitimacy rested on ideology, performance, or enforcement. In digital states, legitimacy increasingly rests on procedural experience. Citizens may not agree with every rule, but they will tolerate rules they can understand, navigate, and recover from. They resist systems that feel arbitrary, hostile, or opaque.

This is why trust in digital government does not collapse suddenly. It erodes gradually, through small frictions that accumulate. Re-entering the same information. Downloading a new application for every step. Unclear status updates. Irreversible actions without explanation. Each instance teaches the citizen something: about who holds power, and how much their time and attention are valued.

The most important implication of this shift is also the least comfortable: **design is no longer downstream of policy**. It is where policy becomes real. The interface is not an implementation detail; it is the place where governance is interpreted.

Once this is understood, a second insight follows naturally. Improving “UX” is insufficient. Optimizing flows without questioning intent simply accelerates the wrong behavior. What is required instead is a shared design language that reflects institutional values consistently, across agencies, sectors, and journeys.

This is not a design team problem. It is a statecraft problem.



Legitimacy Is Now Procedural.

In the digital era, people rarely ask whether a state is legitimate. They ask whether it is understandable.

This distinction matters. Legitimacy today is less about agreement and more about confidence. Confidence that one knows what to do next. Confidence that mistakes are survivable. Confidence that the system is not trying to trap, confuse, or exhaust. Where that confidence exists, compliance rises. Where it does not, workarounds flourish.

Procedural legitimacy is built through repetition. A citizen who repeatedly encounters clarity begins to trust intent. A citizen who repeatedly encounters friction begins to assume indifference or suspicion, even if none was intended. Over time, these assumptions harden into behavior.

This dynamic is especially pronounced in rapidly transforming states. When change is constant, citizens rely more heavily on systems to orient themselves. They look for signals of stability, predictability, and fairness. Design language becomes the medium through which those signals are sent.

Consider how tone operates in this context. A warning-heavy system teaches caution and avoidance. A guidance-oriented system teaches engagement. Neither is inherently wrong. But each produces a different relationship between institution and public. Choosing between them is not a stylistic decision. It is a governance choice.

The same applies to friction. Some friction protects. Some friction educates. But much friction simply accumulates because no one owns the journey end to end. Fragmentation becomes the default, and citizens pay the integration cost. Over time, fragmentation is experienced not as complexity, but as neglect.

This is why digital maturity cannot be measured solely by feature count or automation rates. A highly automated system that leaves users uncertain is less mature than a slower system that builds confidence. Speed without legibility undermines legitimacy.

At this point, many governments reach for technology as the answer. More automation. More intelligence. More prediction. But acceleration magnifies whatever logic is already embedded. If the underlying design language is incoherent, technology makes the incoherence faster and harder to undo.



Legitimacy Is Now Procedural.

The real question, therefore, is not how advanced a system is, but what kind of relationship it is training people to have with authority.

This is the threshold Riyadh is approaching. As the city becomes denser with services, platforms, and institutional touchpoints, the cumulative experience begins to speak louder than any single initiative. The design language emerging today will define how power feels tomorrow.

The remainder of this paper examines what that language could become, and what is at stake if it is left to emerge by accident rather than by intent.

Design as Institutional Language.

Once governance is experienced primarily through software, design stops being a craft and becomes a language. Not a language of persuasion, but a language of behavior.

Every institution already speaks this language, whether it intends to or not. It speaks through what it asks first, what it remembers, what it forgets, what it allows to be undone, and what it treats as final. These choices form a grammar. Over time, that grammar becomes predictable. Predictability becomes expectation. Expectation becomes belief.

This is the moment where most organizations misunderstand design. They continue to treat it as something layered on top of decisions that have already been made. But in digital systems, the decision is the interaction. A policy that allows flexibility but is implemented rigidly is not experienced as flexible. A service that claims empathy but punishes small mistakes is not experienced as humane.

Design, in this sense, is not how an institution presents itself. It is how an institution behaves when rules meet reality.

This is why design neutrality is a myth. There is no neutral flow. There is no neutral default. Every system encodes a theory of human behavior. Some systems assume competence and good intent. Others assume error and abuse. Some systems guide. Others warn. Some invite participation. Others tolerate it.



These assumptions matter because they scale. A single designer's choice might affect thousands. An institutional pattern affects millions. Over time, design language becomes a form of governance that operates quietly, without speeches or decrees, but with remarkable consistency.

The most consequential design languages share a common trait: they reduce the need for interpretation. They make it easy to understand what is expected, what is possible, and what will happen next. They do not require the user to become an expert in institutional logic in order to succeed.

This is where many digital transformations fail. They digitize complexity instead of dissolving it. They automate procedures without questioning whether those procedures still serve the public. The result is efficiency without clarity, speed without confidence.

A mature design language does the opposite. It absorbs institutional complexity so that citizens do not have to. It does not simplify reality, but it makes reality navigable. In doing so, it performs a subtle but powerful function: it preserves authority while reducing fear.

That is the threshold Riyadh is approaching. The question is no longer whether the city will be digitally sophisticated. It already is. The question is whether its growing digital surface area will speak in a coherent institutional voice, or fragment into a collection of well-built but disconnected systems.



The Kingdom Context:

Designing at Civilizational Scale.

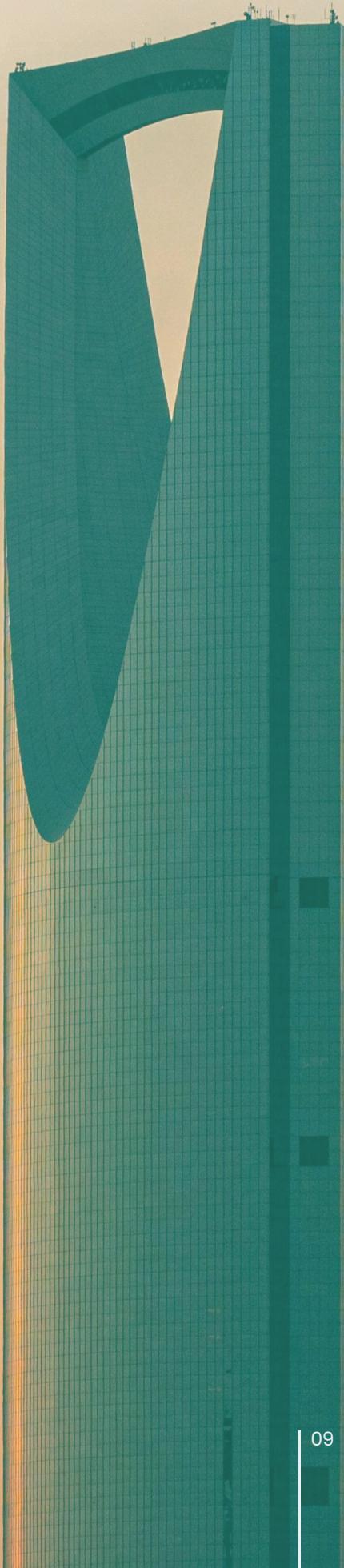
To understand why this question matters so deeply in Saudi Arabia, one must first understand what makes the Kingdom structurally different from most states navigating digital transformation.

Saudi Arabia is not modernizing from a position of institutional collapse. It is not improvising under fiscal constraint. Nor is it inheriting fragmented authority across weak centers. Instead, it is undergoing deliberate, centrally articulated transformation while retaining deep sources of cultural and historical legitimacy.

This combination is rare.

Most digital government literature assumes one of two conditions: either a state is rebuilding trust after erosion, or it is digitizing to improve efficiency within mature but stagnant systems. Saudi Arabia fits neither pattern cleanly. Its transformation is not reactive. It is intentional. And intention changes the role design must play.

When transformation is intentional, design becomes a tool of direction, not correction.





In such contexts, design is not primarily about persuasion. The Kingdom does not need to convince citizens of its right to act. Its challenge is different. It must ensure that transformation does not outpace understanding. That modernization does not create distance. That scale does not dilute hospitality.

This is where many imported models fall short. Western digital state frameworks often assume low trust and adversarial relationships between citizen and institution. Their design languages are defensive by default. They optimize for auditability, legal shielding, and risk minimization. These logics are not wrong, but they are incomplete when applied wholesale.

Saudi Arabia's institutional posture has historically emphasized protection, continuity, and stewardship. These values do not disappear in digital form. They must be translated.

Translation is harder than adoption.

It requires leaders to ask not "what works elsewhere," but "what behavior does this teach here?" A process that feels reassuring in one context may feel cold in another. A tone that signals seriousness in one culture may signal suspicion in another.

This is not a call for softness. Authority matters. Rules matter. Consequences matter. But so does proportionality. So does the explanation. So does the ability to recover.

At a civilizational scale, design language becomes the medium through which a state signals how it understands its people. Does it see them as exceptions to be managed, or participants to be guided? Does it design for the most compliant case, or for the most human one?

These questions are not abstract. They surface daily in residency systems, investment portals, healthcare access, mobility platforms, and public communications. Each answer compounds.

Saudi Arabia has the rare opportunity to answer them deliberately.



Riyadh as the Interface City.

Every state has a place where its abstractions become tangible. For Saudi Arabia, that place is increasingly Riyadh.

Riyadh is not merely the administrative capital. It is the convergence point where governance, economy, mobility, investment, tourism, and daily life intersect. It is where citizens, residents, and visitors encounter the Kingdom's systems in rapid succession, often for the first time.

In this sense, Riyadh functions as an interface city.

An interface city is not defined by skyline or density alone. It is defined by decision frequency. By how many institutional touchpoints a person encounters in a short period of time. By how often they must interpret rules, adapt to systems, and navigate transitions.

In interface cities, perception of the system is formed through cumulative neural patterning, not conscious evaluation.



In Riyadh, a single journey may involve an airline, an airport authority, immigration, transport systems, payment infrastructure, accommodation platforms, and government services, all within hours. Each system may work well in isolation. Together, they form a narrative.

That narrative is what people remember.

If the systems speak different languages, users experience friction not as complexity, but as incoherence. They begin to feel that progress is conditional, that success depends on insider knowledge, that mistakes are costly. Over time, this erodes confidence, even when individual services perform well.

Conversely, when systems feel aligned, users infer coordination. They feel that someone has thought about the journey as a whole. This feeling produces trust far more reliably than any statement of intent.

Riyadh's global role intensifies this dynamic. As the city attracts headquarters, talent, capital, and events, it becomes a point of comparison. People do not compare individual apps. They compare experiences. They compare how quickly they can orient themselves, how safely they can act, how clearly they can understand what is expected.

This is why Riyadh's digital design language will matter beyond its borders. It will shape how the Kingdom is understood as an operating environment. Not in press releases, but in lived moments.

The risk is not failure. The risk is fragmentation at scale. Well-built systems that do not speak to each other. Efficient processes that do not acknowledge context. Authority that is clear, but not legible.

The opportunity, however, is significant. If Riyadh articulates a coherent design language rooted in confidence, clarity, and hospitality, it can demonstrate a model of digital governance that is neither imported nor improvised, but distinctly its own.

The pages that follow examine what such a language might require, and why getting it right now matters more than adding features later.



Power, Tone, and the Confidence Gap.

Power in digital systems is rarely explicit. It is implied.

It is implied through tone, sequencing, defaults, and the degree to which a system allows a user to recover from error. These signals accumulate into what can be called a confidence gap: the distance between what an institution believes it is offering and how safe a person feels engaging with it.

This gap is not evenly distributed. It is felt most acutely by those navigating systems for the first time, those operating across languages, those transitioning between statuses, and those with limited institutional literacy. In rapidly scaling cities like Riyadh, these groups are not marginal. They are central.

When confidence is high, users move forward even when rules are strict. They comply because they understand. When confidence is low, even simple systems provoke hesitation. Users delay, seek intermediaries, or abandon official channels altogether.

This dynamic explains a paradox observed repeatedly across digital states: systems become more advanced, yet informal workarounds persist. The issue is not capability. It is legibility.

Tone plays a decisive role here. A system that communicates exclusively through warnings teaches avoidance. A system that explains consequences teaches responsibility. Neither approach removes authority, but they distribute it differently. One centralizes control. The other builds shared understanding.

This distinction is critical for public and regulated services. Authority must be preserved, but intimidation is not the only way to preserve it. In fact, intimidation often backfires, producing defensive behavior rather than compliance. Mature systems understand this and use restraint deliberately.

Friction follows the same logic. Not all friction is harmful. Some friction protects against error. Some friction signals seriousness. But friction that exists only because no one owns the journey becomes punitive by accident. Over time, citizens internalize this punishment, even when none was intended.

The result is a widening confidence gap. Institutions believe they are being clear. Users feel they are being tested.



Riyadh's challenge is not to eliminate authority, but to recalibrate how it is expressed. As systems multiply and accelerate, the margin for misinterpretation shrinks. Design language becomes the primary way to close the confidence gap before it hardens into disengagement.

This is not a matter of being "user-friendly." It is a matter of governing at scale without alienation.

Legible vs Illegible States.

Most global comparisons of governments rely on outdated axes. Democratic versus authoritarian. Centralized versus federal. Rich versus poor. Digitized versus analog.

These distinctions miss a more consequential divide that is now emerging.

The states that function best in the digital era are not necessarily the most liberal, the most advanced, or the most automated. They are the most legible.

A legible state is one whose systems can be understood without insider knowledge. Where processes are predictable. Where responsibilities are clear. Where consequences are explained before they are enforced. Where progress can be tracked. Where mistakes do not immediately escalate into failure.

An illegible state may be technologically sophisticated, but it is cognitively exhausting. It requires constant interpretation. It rewards familiarity over fairness. It creates dependence on intermediaries. Over time, it teaches citizens to work around it rather than with it.



Legibility is not simplicity. It does not mean removing complexity. It means absorbing complexity institutionally so that individuals do not have to carry it themselves.

This distinction matters because legibility compounds. Each coherent experience reinforces trust in the next. Each fragmented experience erodes it. Over time, legibility becomes a form of soft power, shaping how states are perceived by citizens, investors, and visitors alike.

Riyadh stands at this fork.

As a rapidly scaling hub, it can either become a dense cluster of advanced but disconnected systems, or it can become a legible environment where complexity is felt as coordination rather than confusion. The difference will not be determined by technology budgets or design talent alone. It will be determined by whether legibility is treated as a leadership priority.

This reframing has implications beyond Saudi Arabia. If Riyadh succeeds in building legibility at scale, it offers a model for states that are modernizing without surrendering authority, and globalizing without diluting identity.

The alternative is not collapse. It is something subtler and more dangerous: quiet disengagement. When systems become hard to read, people comply minimally, trust conditionally, and participate reluctantly.

By 2026, the dividing line will be clear. Not between digital and non-digital states, but between those that can be understood and those that cannot.

The next pages examine what Riyadh's emerging design language must prioritize if it is to stand firmly on the legible side of that divide.



Why 2026 Is the Inflection Point?



Every system has moments where decisions quietly become irreversible. Not because alternatives disappear overnight, but because scale hardens assumptions faster than reflection can catch up.

For Riyadh, 2026 marks such a moment.

By then, the density of digital touchpoints will cross a threshold. More services will be automated. More decisions will be mediated. More journeys will span institutions without visible seams. At that point, the design language in place will no longer be experimental. It will be infrastructural.

This matters because acceleration changes the nature of error. In slower systems, poor design can be corrected through human intervention. In fast systems, poor design compounds before it is noticed. Automation does not merely speed up outcomes. It **freezes judgment**.

Once interaction density crosses a threshold, correction requires disproportionate cognitive and institutional effort.

This is the paradox of modern governance. The more efficient a system becomes, the less forgiving it is of flawed assumptions. Defaults turn into destinies. Edge cases become casualties. What once required discretion becomes mandatory behavior.

2026 is therefore not a deadline. It is an exposure point.

By then, Riyadh's digital ecosystem will be sufficiently mature that its design language will be legible to outsiders. Patterns will be recognizable. Tone will be consistent or contradictory. Trust will either feel earned or conditional. The city will begin teaching people, implicitly, how power works here.



This is also when comparison intensifies. As Riyadh competes with global hubs for talent, capital, and attention, it will not be compared feature by feature. It will be compared experientially. How easy is it to orient oneself? How predictable are interactions? How safe does it feel to act without intermediaries?

The danger is not that systems fail. The danger is that they succeed without coherence. Fragmented success produces the illusion of progress while quietly increasing cognitive load. People comply, but cautiously. They participate, but reluctantly. They trust, but provisionally.

The opportunity, however, is significant. If legibility is treated as a strategic priority now, Riyadh can enter its next phase with a design language that absorbs complexity instead of exporting it. A language that scales authority without amplifying fear. A language that allows automation without erasing accountability.

In this sense, 2026 is less about technology readiness and more about **institutional self-awareness**. The question is not whether Riyadh will be advanced. It will be. The question is whether it will be understandable.

The Emerging Design Language.

What follows are not guidelines, templates, or best practices. They are principles in the original sense: foundational positions that shape judgment across contexts.

They are written to be held by leaders, not implemented by teams.

Authority without intimidation:

Systems must be firm without being hostile. Seriousness should be conveyed through clarity, not threat. When authority relies on fear, it produces compliance without confidence. When it relies on understanding, it produces cooperation.

Hospitality as institutional behavior:

Hospitality is not a visual motif. It is the discipline of anticipating needs, reducing uncertainty, and guiding people through complexity without diminishing their agency. In digital systems, hospitality is expressed through tone, sequencing, and forgiveness.

Clarity before efficiency:

Speed that confuses erodes trust. A slower system that explains itself builds confidence that compounds over time. Efficiency should follow clarity, not precede it.

Consistency as a form of respect:

When systems behave consistently, they reduce the cognitive burden on the public. Inconsistency forces people to relearn rules repeatedly, signaling that their time and attention are expendable. Coherence is not sameness; it is recognizability.



Confidence as a measurable outcome:

Success is not only completion. It is the feeling that one can proceed without fear of hidden consequences. Systems should be evaluated on whether users know what happens next, how to correct mistakes, and where responsibility lies.

Complexity absorbed, not exported:

Institutional complexity is inevitable. Cognitive burden should not be. The role of design language is to absorb complexity within the system so that individuals can act without mastering bureaucracy.

Arabic-first, globally legible:

Language is not a translation layer. It is an organizing logic. Arabic-first design must be treated as architecture, while global legibility must be treated as inclusion. One without the other produces either exclusion or dilution.

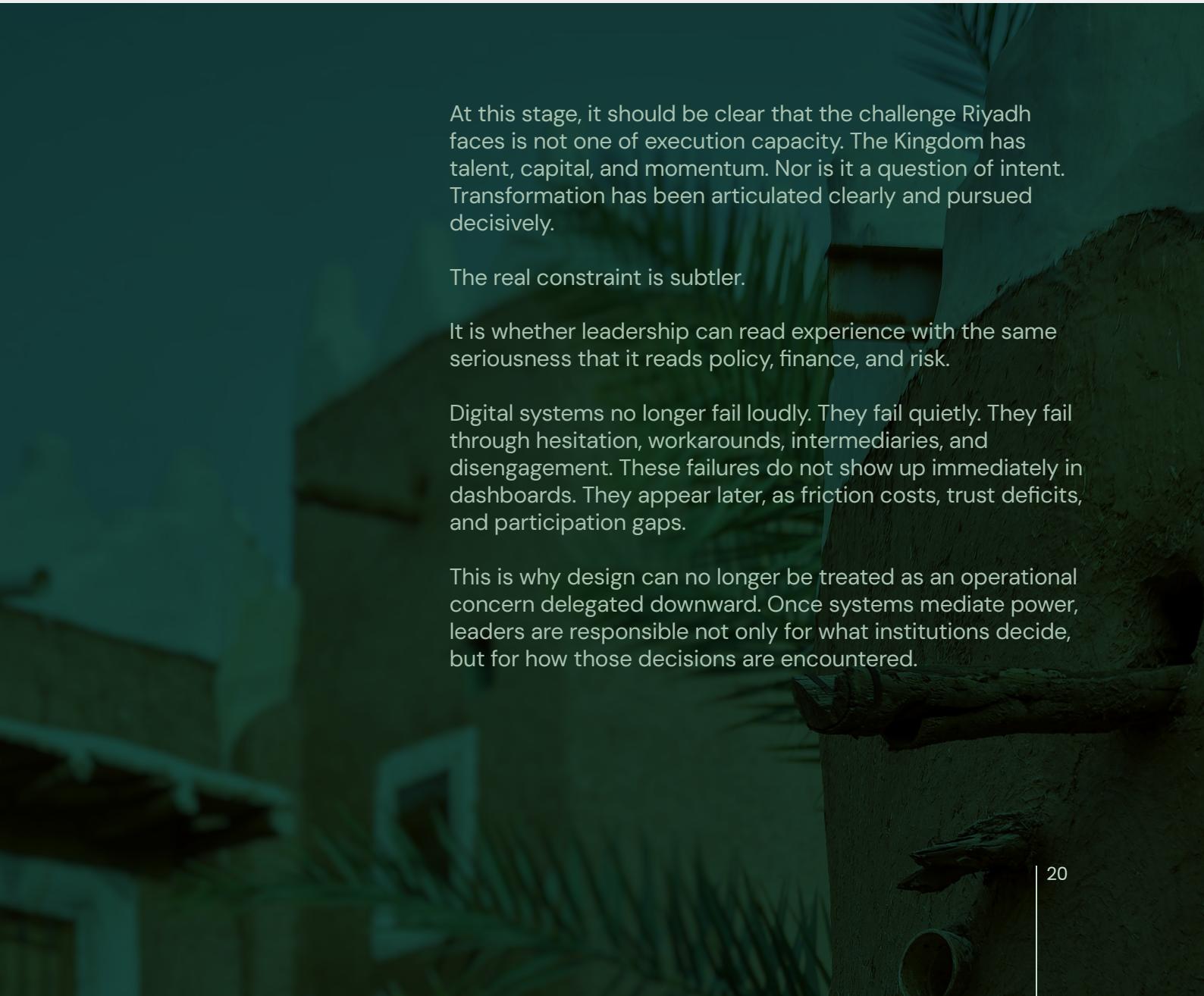
Taken together, these principles describe a design language that does not seek attention, but earns trust. They do not promise perfection. They promise intelligibility.

They also impose a quiet demand on leadership. Principles only hold if leaders recognize when they are being violated. This requires a form of literacy that cannot be delegated entirely to specialists.

The final page of this paper turns to that question directly.



The Leadership Question.



At this stage, it should be clear that the challenge Riyadh faces is not one of execution capacity. The Kingdom has talent, capital, and momentum. Nor is it a question of intent. Transformation has been articulated clearly and pursued decisively.

The real constraint is subtler.

It is whether leadership can read experience with the same seriousness that it reads policy, finance, and risk.

Digital systems no longer fail loudly. They fail quietly. They fail through hesitation, workarounds, intermediaries, and disengagement. These failures do not show up immediately in dashboards. They appear later, as friction costs, trust deficits, and participation gaps.

This is why design can no longer be treated as an operational concern delegated downward. Once systems mediate power, leaders are responsible not only for what institutions decide, but for how those decisions are encountered.



Design literacy at the leadership level does not mean knowing tools, terminology, or methods. It means being able to judge when a system feels coercive rather than authoritative, confusing rather than complex, efficient rather than humane. It means sensing when consistency is breaking down, when tone is misaligned, and when speed is outrunning understanding.

In practical terms, this requires a shift in how decisions are made.

Leaders must ask different questions:

- What behavior does this system teach over time?
- Where does it assume institutional knowledge that the public does not have?
- What happens when a person makes an honest mistake?
- How does authority feel at the moment it is exercised?

These questions are rarely raised in steering committees, yet they determine outcomes more reliably than feature lists or delivery timelines.

The temptation, especially in periods of rapid progress, is to treat experience as something that can be corrected later. This assumption is increasingly false. Once systems scale, they shape expectations. Expectations harden into norms. Norms become difficult to reverse without loss of credibility.

Riyadh's opportunity lies in recognizing this early enough to act deliberately. Leadership that can read experience is leadership that can govern complexity without alienation. Leadership that cannot risks building systems that function perfectly while being quietly resisted.

This is not a warning. It is an observation drawn from the trajectory of every digitally mature state.



Closing Reflection.

Infrastructure builds cities.

Policy builds states.

But experience builds belief.

As Saudi Arabia continues its transformation, belief will not be shaped primarily by announcements or rankings. It will be shaped by how people move through systems, how clearly they understand what is expected of them, and how confidently they can act without fear of unintended consequences.

Riyadh stands at the center of this shift. As the Kingdom's interface to the world and to itself, the city will increasingly be judged not by what it promises, but by how it behaves in moments that matter. Arrival. Registration. Correction. Progress. Resolution.

The digital design language that emerges over the next few years will quietly answer a set of enduring questions:

- Does authority here feel arbitrary or grounded?
- Does complexity feel intentional or accidental?
- Does modernization feel inclusive or conditional?
- Does progress feel navigable or overwhelming?

These answers will not be written in strategy documents. They will be inferred through use.

The most successful states of the next decade will not be those with the most advanced technology. They will be those whose systems can be understood without explanation, trusted without intermediaries, and navigated without fear.



Riyadh has the opportunity to become such a place. Not by copying models or accelerating indiscriminately, but by articulating a design language that reflects clarity, confidence, and care at scale.

The question is not whether the Kingdom will continue to transform. It will.

The question is whether, in doing so, it will teach people how to trust what they encounter.

That lesson, once learned, is difficult to unlearn.

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We also thank the partners and collaborators who supported the convening of the roundtable and the development of this paper.

While perspectives from the discussion informed this work, the analysis and conclusions presented here remain independent and are offered in the spirit of contributing to a broader, ongoing conversation about the future of design and governance in the Kingdom.

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