



# BREAKING GROUND

Kirkland & Ellis partner James Clark is building a global construction practice in Riyadh

By Aishah Hussain

Photography by Ajith Narendra

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"If you want to be the best construction practice in the world at the moment, you have to be in Saudi Arabia," he tells me when we speak. "The pipeline, together with the scale, the complexity, and the commitment to delivering those projects does not exist anywhere else in the world right now and won't for a period of time."



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#### RIYADH AT THE CENTRE OF MAJOR CONSTRUCTION MANDATES

Riyadh, in particular, is emerging as "the global centre of construction project development", according to Clark, who relocated from Abu Dhabi to Saudi Arabia's capital in October 2023 to establish the firm's global construction practice.

In just over two years, the practice has secured major mandates, most recently advising the King Salman Park Foundation on the development and construction of the SAR 3.8 billion (US\$1 billion) King Salman Park project underway in Riyadh, which is being delivered in phases over the coming years. "The opportunity has been incredible and demonstrates exactly why we as a firm have committed regional leadership and our projects practice on the ground in Riyadh," says Clark. "It is impressive to see the project move from concept to commencement, and

hopefully to operation, so quickly."

Clark and his team, which includes associate Aurelia Russo, won Construction Team of the Year for this ongoing project at the inaugural Law Middle East Awards, held in November 2025. "Our recognition was truly humbling," reflects Clark. "It means a lot to us that the work we have put into establishing ourselves in the Kingdom, and in a new practice area globally for our firm, has had such a positive impact."

"One of the reasons why it is so exciting to be involved in these projects is that they are not just building an asset, they are building economies, cities, and communities, which require master planning, allowing us to strategise for delivery and integrate value across the entire project," he continues. "Every time you go to visit a client, the project is different to the last time you were there, because the rate of delivery is incredible."

"Everything we do in the construction and projects space is tangible in a way that very few white-collar jobs are," he adds. "I have been fortunate to work in Australia, Asia, Europe, the US, and the Middle East, and the projects you are involved in help change people's lives."

#### A GLOBAL CAREER

It was this idea of being involved in building something visible and lasting that drew Clark to construction law.

He was born in London and educated in Australia, Singapore, and Jakarta. He trained and qualified as a lawyer in Melbourne, and after a decade practising in Australia and Singapore, settled in the Middle East—first in Abu Dhabi and now in Riyadh. He says his professional ethos was shaped by an upbringing in elite sporting environments. While studying law and commerce at the University of Melbourne, he also worked in cooking schools and restaurant kitchens.

He trained at Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer (then Freehills), where he qualified in the firm's construction and projects team and worked on some of Australia's biggest and highest profile infrastructure projects. Moves to Clifford Chance in Singapore and King & Spalding in Abu Dhabi followed, where he broadened his experience in renewable energy and giga-projects, before Kirkland & Ellis offered him the opportunity to build something entirely new: a global construction and projects practice from its newly launched Riyadh office and regional headquarters.

## 2023

The year James Clark established Kirkland & Ellis' global construction practice

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"When you start something from scratch, you have a real opportunity to determine your values and priorities on day one," says Clark. "Our focus is to deliver top-tier service on the most complex projects, and build the world's most elite construction practice."

Kirkland & Ellis has long been strong across project finance, energy, infrastructure, and real estate, with a focus on the front-end of projects, according to Clark. The addition of a construction and project practice enables the firm to advise across the entire lifecycle of a project.





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#### THE EVOLVING ROLE OF LAWYERS

In the realm of construction, the role of lawyers extends far beyond traditional legal counsel. "You are not just a lawyer; you are a project manager," says Clark, who has been involved in some of the world's most complex construction projects, including a \$4 billion ammonia plant in Louisiana. "It is a hands-on, practical area of law demanding 360-degree vision. No project team solely wants a piece of legal advice, they want you to be commercial, align with their drivers, and work as a seamless extension of their own team."

"We are service providers," he continues. "We are sometimes the smartest people in the room, but we are never the most important people in the room. We are there to serve, and the pinnacle of what we do is client service."

Being an all-rounder is more critical in construction law than in almost any other field, he says. Beyond legal knowledge, construction lawyers must understand the technical aspects of the build, its commercial drivers, funding structures, and risk allocation.

"You have a GC or a CEO looking at you and saying, 'we have come to you because we want to do this incredibly ambitious project', and so you are not just providing legal advice, you are advising on the entire project, from operation through to execution, commissioning, testing, operating, and handover," he says.

This depth of involvement makes collaboration essential. "I can never do them alone," says Clark, who advises developers, sponsors, and lenders on the delivery of major projects. "You will always need specialists from other areas."

#### OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Clark observes a growing pivot towards digital infrastructure across global construction projects. "The drive for cities to become smarter and more efficient is universal," he says. "The development of regulations—both in Saudi Arabia and globally—around data sovereignty makes this particularly complex." The infrastructure required to power data centres is another fast-growing area in Saudi Arabia, he notes.

Saudi Arabia's giga-projects are unique because they are not upgrading existing infrastructure but building entirely new smart cities from scratch, backed by a clear vision

and billions of dollars. "Digital infrastructure was not a phrase used five years ago," says Clark. "Now you are embarking on a ten-year construction project with the ambition of it being the smartest in this space."

Looking ahead, Clark says the Kingdom is moving from a period of planning and reprioritisation into implementation, particularly as preparations accelerate for Expo 2030 and the 2034 World Cup.

He also anticipates an uptick in disputes as projects progress—a consequence of their scale and volume. This will come hand in hand with the newly established regulatory frameworks which he says will be interpreted and tested for the first time, along with the institutions implementing them.

Where a single contractor might once have delivered an entire project in-house, Clark explains that today's mega-developments—driven by scale, complexity, compressed timelines, and sustained supply chain pressure—are far more disaggregated, with delivery spread across multiple contractors.

#### BUILDING A CONSTRUCTION PRACTICE

For law firms looking to build construction practices in the Kingdom, Clark—who will be speaking at *Law Middle East's* 2026 Construction Conference, taking place on January 22, 2026 at The H Dubai—emphasises the importance of familiarity with local rules and regulatory requirements.

"The importance of a committed presence on the ground cannot be overstated. People often assume that because this is how they did it in, say, the UAE, it will be the same here, or that it is equally as impactful to do regional deals whilst sitting elsewhere—but that is not always the case," he cautions. "Be aware of local requirements, and do not assume they will be the same elsewhere. This is especially the case for projects with a huge degree of complexity and national importance and a huge dollar figure based on them being successful."

As Saudi Arabia's giga-projects move from vision to reality, construction lawyers play an increasingly central role in project delivery. For James Clark, building a global construction practice from Riyadh means being deeply embedded in developments that are reshaping cities for years to come. **LAW**

## SAR 3.8B

Kirkland & Ellis is advising on the SAR 3.8 billion King Salman Park project in Riyadh