

# UNFAIR

BRIGHT LIGHTS  
*Abu Dhabi*

ARABIAN  
*Renaissance*

LUNCH WITH  
*Alaïa*

THE END OF  
*Minimalism*

SHAKIRA'S  
*Hip Comeback*

# TALENT ISSUE

## 5 UNFAIR DESIGNERS

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BAH 3 BHD  
EGY 25 EGP  
EUR 8,50 EUR  
KW 2,50 KWD  
LB 5,000 LBP  
MOR 50 DHS  
QA 30 QAR  
TUN 7,50 TND  
UAE 30 AED  
UK 5 GBP



# *Designing* UNDER THE INFLUENCE

THE GLORY OF CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EASTERN ARCHITECTURE  
OFTEN GOES TO THE INTERNATIONAL STAR-ARCHITECT SET  
BUT WE'VE FOUND A FEW LOCAL DESIGNERS THAT SHOW SOME METTLE.

// by Alexander Aubry



**I**n the last decade the Middle East has become a testing ground for architectural projects on a grand scale. In the Gulf region in particular, billions have been poured into entire new cities, museums, and mega-hotel projects conceived by some of the most recognized star-architects: names like Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, and I.M. Pei.

But lost in the shadow of this construction is a new generation of Arab architects, some of whom find themselves excluded from the choicest and most visible projects in favor of Western firms. The prevailing assumption amongst major clients and developers seems to be that foreign expertise is better.

Things may be improving. Hashim Sarkis, director of the Aga Khan Program at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, maintains an architecture practice both in Boston and in his native Lebanon. "In general, larger projects tended to go to international firms because the local firms were not big enough to handle them but the situation is changing as Middle Eastern firms are growing and becoming more capable."

Sarkis believes that challenges still remain for native architects working in the region. "I consider my practice international because I get to work in different countries. When I am hired in Beirut, sometimes it is as an international architect and other times as a local one," he admits. "Not all the biases against local architects have disappeared. Biases remain in large development projects where the association with international names is important for the developers. There is a sense among some clients who go after international architects that they are getting something different," he added.

At a time when contemporary Arab culture seems to be going through an identity crisis—fixated on issues of heritage and history and still searching for a distinctive identity in a shrinking world—architecture in the Middle East tends to receive little recognition beyond

traditional or historical design, leaving many Arab architects to feel as if they are bound to history as their principal point of reference.

One of Hashim Sarkis' latest commissions is a public library topped by a rooftop café located in Hamra, one of Beirut's most vibrant and diverse neighborhoods. To accommodate the small site, Sarkis lined the book stacks along a crisscrossing ramp that serves as the library's main circulation path. The series of ramps are in turn mirrored on the building's façade. Made of pigmented concrete, the building's exterior "belongs to a tradition of libraries that turn their blind surfaces into murals," explains the architect.

But can Sarkis' library, devoid of Moorish arches and meshrabiyehs, be considered an example of Middle Eastern architecture? "Yes," insists Sarkis. "It is consciously attempting to move away from the dead ends of East versus West and tradition versus modernity. It is Middle Eastern insofar as it is trying to challenge what constitutes Middle Eastern architecture today."

#### CONTEXT DRIVEN DESIGN

Nabil Gholam is another Lebanese architect who is actively reshaping a new architectural vocabulary in the region after founding NG Architecture and Design in 1994. Although issues of identity and history are present in his work, he tends to approach them from an ecological angle, responding to the specific conditions of a site.

Although Gholam has created several large-scale buildings, one of his most compelling projects to date is the F House, a family residence in the pine-covered foothills overlooking Beirut. The house is an antithesis of the monolithic stone mansions that dot the mountains surrounding the city, resulting in a new interpretation of the modern Mediterranean home. Instead of turning its back on nature, the building hugs the ground to blend in with its surrounding environment. Tapping Lebanon's architectural legacy, Gholam relied on the traditional skills

of masons to craft local sandstone and travertine into bisecting horizontal planes that form the house's exterior walls.

Traditionally it is a building's interior that houses its architectural richness. In the case of the F House, that spatial richness has less to do with ornamentation than a seamless flow of indoor and outdoor spaces, which frame magnificent views of the surrounding pine forests and glittering Mediterranean beyond.

#### REDEFINING PRIVATE & PUBLIC SPACE

In 2002, Sahel Al-Hiyari, a young Jordanian architect and painter, was chosen to participate in the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. Al-Hiyari was selected by Pritzker Prize winning architect Álvaro Siza, who became his mentor. Today the Jordanian architect maintains a small practice in his native Amman, where he produces innovative work that references the architectural heritage of a previous era without falling into the realm of caricature.

Although he has designed a pair of apartment towers in Kuwait City and a private resort in a former Byzantine church, it is one of his smaller projects, a psychologist's private clinic and living quarters in West Amman, that best captures his thoughtful approach to design.

Budgetary constraints pushed Al-Hiyari to produce innovative design solutions for this particular project. Instead of tearing down an existing 1950s residential addition and starting anew, he renovated the structure by employing local materials and construction techniques in unusual ways. The exterior was finished in cement mixed with steel particles. The particles eventually rusted, forming a patina on the building's skin and producing the pigmentation and texture that would normally be applied afterwards.

Al-Hiyari also employed a system of sliding raw steel panels along the building's façade that not only provide shade and seclusion, but double as security with the ability to be padlocked when the clinic is not

in use. The screens demonstrate Al-Hiyari's knack for taking traditional architectural forms—in this case, the meshrabiye—and reinterpreting them to meet modern needs.

#### NEW GULF MODERNISM

Much of the Gulf's architectural heritage was destroyed during the building boom years of the 70s and 80s. But on the island kingdom of Bahrain a movement has been taking shape to not only restore what's left of its historical architecture, but also yank it firmly into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

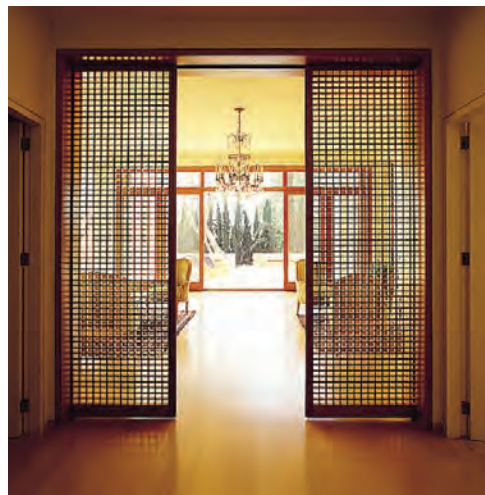
In old Muharraq, known for its historic 19<sup>th</sup> century mansions and wind towers, traditional buildings are being made relevant to a new generation by converting them into cultural centers, libraries, small museums, and cafés. Although such rare examples of architectural adaptive reuse can be found in other parts of the Middle East, what makes Bahrain unique is the sheer number of such projects.

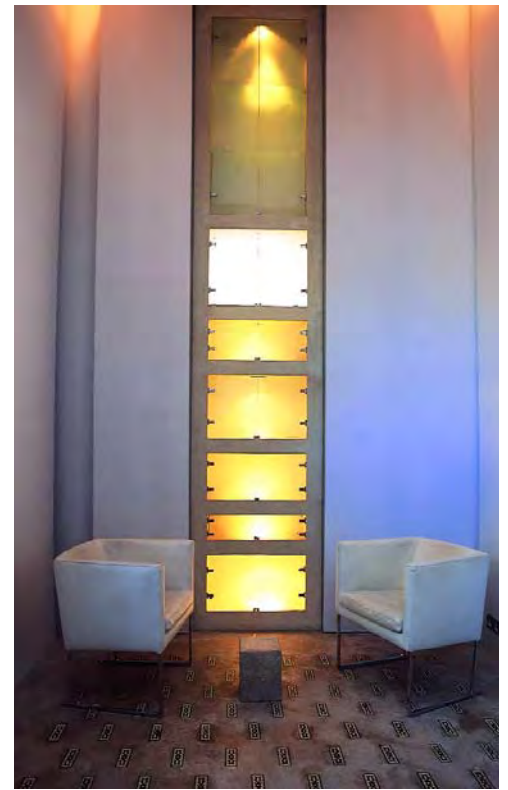
Driving this innovative approach to culture building is Sheikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa, Bahrain's Minister of Culture. She commissioned Bahraini architect Ahmed Bushiri of Gulf House Engineering and local interior designer Janan Habib to transform these historic buildings into dynamic spaces that have revitalized a once sleepy neighborhood.

### ***Bushiri & Habib created a series of interiors where the past rubs shoulders with the 21<sup>st</sup> century***

While Bushiri went about renovating the exterior facades to their original condition, inside he and Habib created a series of interiors where the past rubs shoulders with today. One of the most stunning examples of their collaboration is the Abdulla Al Zayed Press Heritage House, the 120 year-old home of the man behind Bahrain's first magazine. Overlooking the house's former courtyard is a spectacular three-story brass wall that glistens under an arching skylight which insulates the open areas of the house from excessive heat, while painstakingly restored rooms have been fitted out by Habib with modern furnishings and light fixtures. Of note, in the upstairs research library is a rare hand-painted wood ceiling, one of the few examples of its kind to have survived in the Gulf.

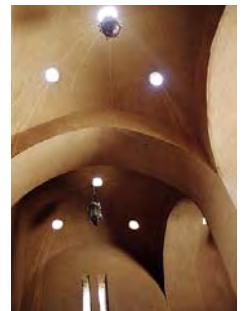
Such small-scale, innovative projects are tangible examples of how a new generation of Middle Eastern designers addresses the complexities of living in the Arab world today, redefining contemporary architecture in the region.





## HASSAN FATHY

The late Egyptian architect espoused modern regional architecture based on local materials and techniques. Dismissed as a traditionalist during his lifetime, he has since been rediscovered by a new generation of Arab designers. Today his few built projects are pilgrimage sites for modernists from around the world.



*Previous page:  
F House, Nabil Gholam*

*Opposite page:  
Inside the F House Gholam breaks down  
delineations between public and private with  
a series of seamless spaces*

*Top left:  
Detail of Hiyari's sliding steel grill sunscreens,  
a reinterpretation of the traditional  
Meshrabiyyeh*

*Top right:  
Hiyari achieves different lighting effects in the  
consultation room with sliding wall panels in  
front of the windows*

*Left:  
The Abdulla Al Zayed Press Heritage House,  
where Bushiri covered the house's traditional  
courtyard with an arching skylight*