

EXECUTIVE HEALTH • DUBAI IN INDIA • LEBANON MICROFINANCE

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INTELLIGENT DESIGN
RETHINKING THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT

Lebanon: LL 6,000 - Bahrain: BD2 - Egypt: EP20 - Jordan: JD5 - Iraq: IQ5 - Kuwait: KD2 - Oman: OR2 - Qatar: QR20 - Saudi Arabia: SR20 - Syria: SJ200 - UAE: DH200 - Morocco: DM30 - Tunisia: TD5.5

Nabil Gholam Head of Nabil Gholam Architecture and Planning

Top designer talks about regional trends in office architecture



E What is the current state of office architecture?

I have worked on a variety of very large and complex projects in Europe. I came to Lebanon in 1994, when the country was an architectural backwater after the war, with apartments being converted to working spaces, with no science or knowledge. Anybody who did any decent floors that had some light and space thought they were doing a fantastic office building. There were a couple of office buildings in Solidere, like Atrium and An-Nahar. These are rather ordinary working spaces that don't exploit all the po-

tential of the sort of working machine that you can develop when you do an office space, where people can be very effective.

It is obvious that for productivity and the simple human fact that you are going to spend most of your living time inside a box, it might as well offer you certain things. In terms of comfort and architectural spatial delight, where things happen, it is not banal, it is rooted to the place where you are and it works well environmentally.

There is also the intelligence aspect that has been overdone and sometimes makes you miss the more straightforward solutions. What you want are good spaces that are very functional and circulate very well, have a good elevator and consume as little energy as possible.

"SOLIDERE SHIFTED DEVELOPMENT TO RESIDENCES ONLY TO REALIZE THAT THERE MAY BE A SHORTAGE OF OFFICE THE MOMENT DEMAND RESURGES"

In Beirut, however, we've had little chance to do offices as not many thriving businesses are looking to relocate to Lebanon, especially right now. In the last years, Solidere shifted a lot of its development to residences only to realize that there may be a shortage of offices the moment demand resurges.

Bank Audi is an example of a

Q&A

good office building in Beirut. But compared to the advanced state of the office world, in Lebanon we are far behind. There are interesting office buildings in Dubai and Qatar, but most are commercially driven and there the temptation of the builder and developer is to make something straightforward that sells quickly and yields maximum profit. Sometimes perks that significantly increase work quality can add a bit of cost and require a special design effort. The business culture in the Middle East has not yet fully supported this, but it will come. At the moment we deal with very speculative and very commercially orientated offices.

E What are the key aspects in office design to maximize staff output?

The key design aspects can vary depending on whether it is a speculative office, which will be rented to a variety of companies, or a headquarters or dedicated to one or a group of companies. In the first case, you have to find the highest common denominator and think about efficiency so no space is wasted. Then there is "sexability," which

is to make it a bit sexy and a pleasurable place to be. It becomes a lot more focused when dealing with a headquarters because you know the company quite well, you can research, interview and brainstorm with them until you find what they need and then customize it. But then one day they are going to want to sell this building and move else-

where, making it necessary to go back to a more generic floor plan from a highly customized one. There needs to be a balance of the customized, spectacular and the more generic that can adapt to everyone.

Some essential factors in designing an office are universal: Light, air and moving in the space. The architect can control this. For example, the underground car park is a space that is often forgotten. Now, the elevator might be third rate but we make the experience of coming into the parking nice by lighting the car park, diverting all the mechanical aspects in a very organized manner and so it does not overwhelm you. Technical things do have their own beauty and can be organized in a way to be displayable.

Office architecture must be done in the most straightforward no-nonsense way. It should be made to serve you, not impose on you. This is how I see architecture in general. It can really contribute in serving a more modest, more humble role. This means that it has a listening capability when you design it.

Over the last 20 years, most people have been moving towards open offices and now there is a tendency to be careful about privacy. However, there is only a certain amount of

"OFFICE ARCHITECTURE MUST BE DONE IN THE MOST STRAIGHTFORWARD WAY"

privacy you can give to the employees so that they don't spend all day on Facebook. Yet, if you make it too public there are certain business aspects that suffer. The ability to work in an open space has to be acquired. Sometimes you do need privacy for business matters. Thus, the open spaces have to be carefully designed.

Then there is the light aspect. It is nice to have natural light but direct sun light can be a problem, so the screening, the intelligent skin of the building is very important. Also,



Merit Corporation GMA-CGM headquarters in Beirut

noise is important, so you need absorbent surfaces. Architecture is about the environment around you, the non-reflective surfaces on the walls, floor and ceiling. These are factors that are not often thought of but for me they are primary and add to quality of life. Then there are the electro-mechanical systems, heating and cooling. If you don't achieve the right temperature you get all sort of funny reactions.

The next stage is the more poetic aspect of architecture, the more enchanting aspect of being in a place. You can bring in things that can relax and make life in the office more comfortable. Right now we are designing an office space in Barcelona that is only five stories and the client wants very large floor plates, of 4,000 square meters, which is 6 tennis fields, and the client demands to come up with something very spe-



The Waqf Foch in the Beirut Central District

cial. He cannot articulate what that special thing is, as most often people cannot. So we have to think and create a working environment that can relate to Barcelona.

The other aspect that is important in the office is what are the facilities offered to the employees, not only the meeting rooms and lounges but things such as daycare, gyms and restaurants. The cafeteria is very important: If you have great food, the employee won't leave the office. Like architecture, food can be done well or poorly.

E How has technology changed the way offices are currently designed?

When it comes to technology it can assist to a certain degree in automating things and simplifying your

life in theory but sometimes technology can backfire and make your life more complicated. I believe in common sense and am not a great fan of systems that control everything. What happens when the system needs maintenance? You come to Lebanon, you install the system, it breaks down, the client does not want to pay for the maintenance, they have an argument with the tenants, and thus, after two years half of the blinds are not working. But it is all relative. There are other examples, some funny and some worrying. You can have a badge that tells the receptionist where you are, but are you entitled to a certain degree of privacy in the office? Technically, the company you work for can see where you are in the office. But things like this I find

a bit dubious. I need technology to get the temperature right, to make sure the comfort is right, to make sure the kind of glass we are using will diminish the need for energy. But I do not want to be a slave of the technology we are using and have to wrestle with it all the time.

Now things are going wireless and this is changing the design of the office because before the cabling was an important factor and now you can do without some of it. Another technological development is that now people can work from home, which means they don't need as much space in the office so you have "hot desking" and you just come into the office and plug in or with wireless you don't even plug in. Conference calls and video confer-

encing have meant that you need small, quiet rooms.

The most fundamental thing is that the technology does not change very much. I think the question is: Have you designed intelligently and carefully? There is good architecture with technology and there is bad architecture without technology. There is good design where people are thoughtful and move out of the ba-

that it should be reserved to very particular cases and clients. More and more, I feel there is some interest to reintroducing solids. The problem is that if you go with a large building or a tower, the solids fight your views. As you want more views, you want more glass and then you end up caught.

We have been using local materials since we were established 14

"I FIND THAT SOME OF THE RICHNESS OF EUROPE COMES FROM THE LAYERS AND LAYERS OF URBAN LIFE STRATIFIED IN THE GIVEN CITY CENTER"

nal, boring thing that we are pushed into, by having to design very quickly to build very quickly for people who are living very quickly. Like everything, the technology is just one more factor that an intelligent decision making process can harness and get something out of. It is not that it changes any of the fundamentals. You take in stride the technology, whether it be an elevator or a very complex system with sensors and you try to use it with common sense thinking about what it is going to cost, how is it going to serve, how is it going to be maintained, what is the point in having it, what it is going to cost and if the answers are positive, you implement it intelligently. Architecture is a decision making process and everything is a variable in the equation.

E Is there any move away from glass and steel construction and are local materials used more?

Well, we are a bit tired with the luggage that you have to take with you every time you work with glass and steel. It's an easy way out for architects, although not when you want to do a very good building. In terms of our buildings, we do have a few that are completely glass but they are usually built with a pretty sophisticated skin: they have double skins with many layers, with shutters and screens that make the best out of the glass exposure. But I think

years ago and we insist on using local material as much as we can. A project that we are doing in Faqra digs the stone out of the land across the street, which is owned by the client. When it comes to wood, as Lebanon does not produce wood we have to import. But you would be surprised how things fit and integrate when you use local material. When they are done intelligently they just belong.

E Will the Gulf move to more suitable materials for the climate?

I think that the tendency should go there. It's hard to say because there is so much money and so much excess money. Every extreme is allowed these days and it is actually encouraged to show off. People become more thoughtful in moments of need and when you have to manage the resources. I am not optimistic in the immediate term but may be in the medium and long-term.

E What is more desirable, single or mix-use offices?

There is a tendency to say mix-use is the solution. In New York, for instance, they found that Wall Street was deserted at night and a sinister, scary, dead neighborhood. So you create synergy by mixing, not necessarily in the same building but the neighborhood, which is beneficial in a hot climate like Dubai. Mixed use buildings often do not mix elevators

and stairs so everyone can live without feeling the pressure of having other kinds of tenants in the building. You can also do neighborhoods that are closely knit together with single use. When you want to brand certain areas like Internet City and group certain uses and certain type of tenants for marketing reasons and practicality because of location, you then have to create with them the support and the services that go from parking to food, shopping, pharmacies, whatever is needed, to allow such a population of workers to have a minimum feeling of comfort and humanity instead of making them feel they are in work camps. In this sense mix-use helps. But it is not necessarily always the answer, and it is not a question you can answer with yes or no. It depends on what, where and what sort of thing.

E What is your opinion of the development of office parks?

One must always remember that they make money. There is demand and a good or average developer can put five office parks and put the perks in there. It doesn't necessarily make a great environment but it is not always an urban failure either. It depends how well it is done, how pleasant it is. It appears that when you get to a certain scale, when you employ 30,000 people, you need around you another captive market of consultants and suppliers, so all those operate in the region. Naturally then it is very polarized and very "officey". Thus, it depends on what type of company you are and your size.

My preference is a mix-use environment. I find that some of the richness of Europe comes from the layers and layers of urban life stratified in the given city center. You want to be in Berlin, Barcelona, London, Paris, New York. When you go down in the street it is vibrant with life, there are lots of choices. If you are in an office park, great! You get to go back to your wife in the evening if you are lucky and commute for two hours. Sexy it is not. ■