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Stars by design

Architectural talent conquers the globe



Mall in Jeddah by Dolly Debs

Star architects are usually thought to be international and high-profile architects who are hired to give their distinctive touch to a city landscape. But why look abroad, when we seem perfectly capable of fostering our very own first-class architects? Offering quality services at competitive rates, a number of Lebanese architects have managed to establish a solid business for clients abroad, especially in the Arabian Gulf region. They have become stars in their own right. They collaborate in some cases with branded foreign houses. They win awards and are able to compete with both the high-end names from Europe or with the cost-cutting alternatives from Southeast Asia. With a narrow home market and a booming Gulf next door, looking for business abroad has been a natural choice for many local architects. "It is partially out of interest, partially as a risk spreading strategy," said *Nabil Gholam*, the principal of award-winning NG Architecture.

From day one, it has been a primary objective of Gholam's firm to look for business beyond the borders. "When I established the business in 1994, there was a danger of suffocating on the intellectual level because of the similarities of the local projects in a market that is very small. Today it is more varied. However, your clients are still usually from the region, and usually they have the same short-term commercial interest. There are not many civic works such as museums and cultural projects. In that respect it is a monotonous market," said Gholam, whose work abroad make up approximately 50 percent of his business. Clients are primarily in the Gulf region, but also elsewhere such as China, Russia and Spain. Gholam's ties to Europe remain strong, after his having spent several years as senior partner and head of international projects for Ricardo Bofills of Spain. NG Architecture operates through a satellite office in Spain and from a local office in Istanbul.

TARGET MARKET: GCC

Gholam doesn't even regard the Gulf market as real export. On several occasions he has been encouraged to open an office in Dubai or Bahrain, but he believes that he can service the Gulf market from his office in Beirut. "It is sort of a cousin market. If you have sharper skills, you will be immediately adopted. As a Lebanese you have a partial knowledge of local habits, language, and culture, certainly more developed than somebody arriving from the U.S. or Europe," he said. *Samir Khairallah*, who has long serviced clients abroad, and founder of SKP Architects, said: "The Lebanese are both rooted and open. We have both sides: The Middle East and the proximity to Arab clients on the one hand, and we are open to the West on the other hand." Activities for foreign clients at SKP Architects constitute between 20 and 40 percent of its business. The Gulf region remains a primary market.

COMPETITION: FEES AND QUALITY

Fees and quality of services are not standardized. It depends on expertise and scope of services. *Khairallah* said: "You may



Hotel with Batimat signature in Qatar

find European architects with outstanding names and track records and their fees reflect that, just as you have Lebanese architects with good names and fees accordingly. You may find other Europeans who are more competitive on fees." In that sense competition is both local and international. *Mohamad Arayssi*, an architect at Batimat, said: "If you compare bulk to bulk, Lebanese architects have an advantage in building technology. For example, when working with new types of glass or elevators our fees are still less than other international architects. The clients get a good package." He said: "Some of the international architects have a certain expertise or a name that clients ask for. It is like buying a Mercedes Coupé. The client buys a brand with certain qualities attached to it". In that case, the fee is a secondary aspect. But fees are still an important aspect. *Khairallah* said: "An intelligent developer will always seek to get the right architectural design for the commissioned project. In the process, costs

With a narrow home market and a booming Gulf next door, it has been a natural choice for Lebanese architects to go abroad



Beach and health club by Samir Khairallah in Kuwait

will be minimized so that way fees always becomes a central issue. It is inherent to pricing designs.

LOWER-PRICED COMPETITORS FROM THE GULF

It is sometimes difficult for the Lebanese architects to keep up with the low costs that are available in the Gulf region. Dolly Debs, winner of best female architect in Lebanon 2001 and the architect for ABC Ashrafieh, said: "We are competitive on fees compared to international architects,

but not compared to local Arabs, who hire inexpensive engineers from India and Pakistan, who are paid much less than Lebanese engineers." Her office executes both residential and commercial projects, of which approximately 20 percent are in the Gulf area. Some Lebanese architects do outsourcing to less expensive areas to become more competitive. "Lebanese companies may get the project in Dubai, design it in Beirut, and execute parts of it with the help of Egyptian companies, where fees are very low," said Arayssi.



Gholam leaves his fingerprints in Damman

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Batimat, however chooses to remain an office of six architects and keep all the work done in-house. Arayssi said: "We service our clients. Here costs become less important. It is more a matter of confidence." Batimat recently completed a \$110 million hotel project in Doha, Qatar - La Cigale - which will soon be open to the public. This project grew from a \$10 million catering market into a 240-room hotel complex. Batimat handled both architecture and interior design, which

basically means everything from designing the building complex to choosing door handles and cutlery in the restaurant. Batimat obtained the hotel project through word-of-mouth, as a previous client recommended them, which is essential for Lebanese architects to gain success in the Gulf. Debs prepared a project on Lulu Island in Bahrain for one of her Lebanese clients as well as Byblos Bank's headquarters in Khartoum, Sudan, a 13-floor, 14,000 m² project, which is going into the construction phase. Most of Debs's work, both in Lebanon and abroad, is acquired either through previous clients or by word-of-mouth.

ONE PROJECT LEADS TO ANOTHER

For Batimat, the La Cigale hotel project in Doha, which has been on a very fast three-year track, is the first of its kind. Arayssi believes that this project will lead to others of the same type. He said: "We are targeting another hotel complex. That is why we invest more than our scope and put in more of our time. I think that we have established a certain level." Batimat was invited to compete against two other firms for an office and residential complex in Doha. This

project is valued at around \$100 million. Batimat was invited to participate in the competition on account of the track record that it has established in Doha. Architects hope that one project will lead to another. Khairallah of SKP Architects said: "As a general rule you do not want to specialize. However, a successful project in a specific field will hopefully bring another one along. That way you obtain better opportunities within a field and build a track record." SKP Architects recently worked on St. Georges Hospital, and Khairallah believes that this should help the company to obtain another hospital project.

TO BID OR NOT TO BID

"I prefer to give priority to already existing clients than to go into bidding," said Debs. NG Architecture also works mostly through direct contact and does very little bidding. Gholam said: "I think a competition is not always the best way to serve the client. You have to pull the rabbit out of the hat. You have only limited contact with the client, the questions and answers are very dry, and you cannot have a one-on-one dialogue. We need that contact in our profession. In a competition you bet on something rather than knowing something. That is why we

prefer to stay out of it." He added: "It is odd to take more risks and dedicate time for a competition when you have to keep the office in flow." Last year NG Architecture won an international competition for a laboratory project at AUB. Arayssi of Batimat said that competitions constituted both an opportunity as well as an exercise. Batimat is participating in a competition in China in joint venture with a young French company. Arayssi said: "The objective is to train ourselves just to keep up to a certain design level and to see new ideas. It is not money making, it is money spending. Hopefully, that can trigger other commercial projects that will make money. It is sort of a business card."

COOPERATION WITH FOREIGN ARCHITECTS

Since 1992, SKP Architects has been cooperating on health clubs and hospitality projects with UK-based Syntax. "It is a synergy for both parties in terms of marketing and exposure, and in terms of

resource reliance," said Khairallah. While SKP has made an exclusive arrangement with a foreign partner, other architectural firms prefer to cooperate with foreign architects on a project-by-project, non-exclusive basis. Clients in this country sometimes want an international name attached to their project, and they invite foreign architects to participate. Foreign firms may team up with a local architect for a single project, as was the case with Axel Schultz from Germany, who teamed up with Batimat to work on the Lebanese Canadian Bank headquarters in Martyrs' Square. Arayssi said: "It has been a very good experience to work with Axel Schultz, especially for technical reason, and if there are other opportunities in the future, he will be our first choice."

LEBANESE ARCHITECTS NO LONGER NEED A FOREIGN CACHET

In general, Lebanese architects prefer to cooperate with foreign firms on a case-by-case basis. Gholam said: "Rarely can you find foreign partners that can fulfill all of your needs for different projects. It is all about finding the right tool for the right job. If you have a job of a certain nature and you are happy with your partners, then you always

go back to the same ones." NG Architecture maintains a loose network of associates whom it can call upon for different types of projects. It appears that there are few advantages in establishing exclusive arrangements with foreign architects, whether in foreign markets or at home.

In any case, Lebanese architects do not need to establish such relationships, because they do very well on their own. They may not yet have acquired the status of full-blooded international stars, but some local architects seem to have acquired quite a good reputation and may be on their way to the Sunset boulevard.

Local architects cooperate with foreign firms on a case-by-case basis

Reported by Britt Warming

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SELECTED FOREIGN PROJECTS UNDERTAKEN BY LOCAL ARCHITECTS

Project name	Location	Architect	Size
La Cigale Hotel	Doha, Qatar	Batimat	
Byblos Bank Headquarter	Khartoum, Sudan	Dolly Debs	14,000 m ²
Shopping Mall	Jeddah, Saudi Arabia	Dolly Debs	
Kempinski 5 Star Hotel	Aquaba, Jordan	NG Architecture	24,000 m ² + 15,400 m ² basement
Doha souks	Doha, Qatar	NG Architecture	27,000 m ² + 32,000 m ² basement
Doha Gardens	Damman, Saudi Arabia	NG Architecture	40,000 m ²
Doha Oasis, the Eclipse	Doha, Qatar	NG Architecture	140,000 m ²
Housing complex	Taef, Saudi Arabia	Pierre Khoury	36,000 m ²
Rainbow Town complex	Port Harcourt, Nigeria	Pierre Khoury	115,000 m ²
Lekki Residential complex	Lekki, Nigeria	Pierre Khoury	24,275 m ²
Eko Hotel Expo	Lagos, Nigeria	Pierre Khoury	44,500 m ²