NABIL GHOLAM

ARCHITECTURE OF THE SERENE SOUL

words Hadi khatib

Maintaining a complex duality and living in a parallax world are sources of inspiration for Nabil Gholam, a world renowned architect whose projects are very much the imprint of a serene spirit in search for mischievous non-conformity.

Cairo Eastown

“NG ARCHITECTS GOES BY THE PHILOSOPHY THAT ARCHITECTURE IS A HUMAN ENDEAVOR AND THUS SHOULD BE PEOPLE-FOCUSED. A PROJECT IS NOT WHAT CAN BE BUILT BUT RATHER THE LIVES IT FACILITATES”

Stepping into Nabil Gholam's architectural office in Beirut, you can very easily fall into the misconception of typicality derived from visiting a successful business owner. Shelves of various books on architecture adorn a wall behind his desk. There's a desktop, laptop, and other IT paraphernalia that usually litter a CEO's desk, and the feel of confidence exuding from the person in charge of a large operation. But the similarities stop here. The man I met was not dressed up in a suit or otherwise, but rather in very comfortable trousers and tieless collarless shirt. The room is mahogany free and lacking the exotic collection of prized furnishings and rugs. They're all replaced by a simple arrangement of seashells and of everyday articles you would find in anyone's home, except with a masterful stroke that deliver a relaxing feel of space. I lack such simplicity and seldom see such an exhibition of effortlessness because in reality, simplicity and space are complex issues which Gholam has mastered, though he admits none of it.

Gholam is the embodiment of paradox, something he associated with Lebanon (see word association box), the country he hails from. He is up front yet dreamy-eyed, experienced but in a constant state of discovery, successful but modest enough to call himself names like silly, mischievous, and a gypsy, with a boastful claim that he often associates better with the underprivileged crowd. "Part of my persona wishes to also respond in our work to others who are less fortunate. I feel that those people can be more genuine, more sincere, less tainted, and more interesting than the better off," Gholam revealed. Normally, he won't do work for free, because the client will not take his designs seriously. "When you charge a fee, they tend to listen better. But I like to help those whose lives are more difficult than others, and are unable to pay the price of good designs," Gholam says.

Gholam is sometimes approached by regular people with no financial means, who naively ask him to design their homes. "Someone once came to me saying he heard I was a good architect, and asked that I design for free his family home on a plot of land in the countryside, not knowing that what he was asking of me would normally cost him substantial fees. But I went along with it in a clandestine fashion on the condition that I stay updated with the construction process." Gholam wants to spend more time and effort contributing interesting designs to the less fortunate because, as he said, "They are not getting their rights. I am talking about low cost designs that reflect simplicity while delivering a solution. I do it probably

for my soul to be more comfortable, however I will continue to take on fancier jobs that allow me to subsidize such efforts."

Gholam has yet to make himself a name as a philanthropist architect but is a man very much sought after for his architectural genius and distinguished designs dealing with upscale and complex projects, locally, regionally, and worldwide. Founded in 1994 by Nabil Gholam, and following years of living and working in France, Spain, China, and the United States completing a wide range of projects in over 20 countries, Nabil Gholam Architects grew from a one man operation led by Gholam to a firm enjoying a multicultural mix of 50+ architects working at two headquarters in Beirut and Spain. Gholam's signature designs are marked with tranquility, playfulness and a feel of discovery that only a harmonious combination of sometimes conflicting elements can produce (see list of projects box).

Nabil Gholam Architects goes by the philosophy that architecture is a human endeavor and thus should be people-focused, where each project is important not for what can be built but rather the lives it facilitates. This concept is integrated with the social and environmental impact of the project, today and tomorrow. These humane and ecological ideals however are often met with the human factor. "What infuriates me is duplicity, when the client, having already signed a contract, tries to find a shortcut. The architect is the broker trying to satisfy both the client and the contractor and often battles rage not over opinion differences but because someone is trying to shortcut the design or building process from the end user," Gholam said in frustration. He claims the legal apparatuses in our part of the world are not very precise in comparison to the UK, for example, where the legal documents pertaining to a specific project are professionally written to take into account every detail at every stage, leaving nothing to speculation. "Someone here might say, 'I will get you the best marble in Europe there is', and that's not specific enough because that marble might be from an East European country, or it might originate in China and be distributed from within Europe," Gholam explained.

Gholam the architect is inseparable from Gholam the person. He says that the way people use the building rather than the building itself is what should matter, whereas the architect's work is defined by a marketing factor when he/she is promoting creative project designs and ideas. "I play the person and I sell the project but I don't play the persona of

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GHOLAM IS THE EMBODIMENT OF PARADOX, SOMETHING HE ASSOCIATED WITH LEBANON, THE COUNTRY HE HAILS FROM

the architect, like a doctor, engineer, plumber, or other people in their own professions do. I find it charming that architects might prefer to dress say in black using it as a dress code, but I am a relatively pragmatic person. I do whatever my whimsy personality tells me to do," Gholam explained. Anything conservative is an object for destruction for Gholam. "I am a closet non-conformist. I tend to do whatever makes me feel good, whatever suits the flight of my imagination and not what others might expect out of me. I do not abide by the restraints that people perhaps inadvertently try to impose on society," Gholam said.

From that perspective, we get an insight into Gholam's architectural work. He is not attached to his award winning designs but rather to the functionality and elegance of the building or project. "If you're in the hands of an architect, you are just as helpless as when you are in the hands of a surgeon or a dentist, and therefore the architect should have a true sense of sympathy towards the client and not wreck it. I am tired of architects trying to teach people a lesson about the way they should experience comfort, especially when designing hospitals, public buildings, even apartments and hotels," Gholam said. He added that the design of a hotel for example should be like a cocoon where people feel safe, comfortable and provided for, but that the relationship with the client or the occupant should be consensual and not based on the shock effect that many architects go for.

When it comes to the aesthetic value of a development, Gholam said that attention should be drawn to certain architectural wizardry not through classic ornamentation but a slight of hand; the magic is revealed when and where you least expect it. Based on the environment where the project is, Gholam extracts the essence of the culture and interprets it in the design accordingly, but he doesn't idolize his work because he says it will affect his panoramic view of how things are and the way he'd like his designs to be. "I am not a fetishist when it comes to my buildings but architecture needs to have some degree of detachment and perhaps a sense of humor," Gholam said. He added, "I need to deliver a fantastically perfect design yet I want to challenge it. I am inspired by serenity, simplicity, timelessness, pertinence, and abstraction, which is what in some instances differentiates me from other architects, but I am mischievous because sometimes I like to shake the serenity a bit in order to shed light on other aspects I would like people to appreciate."

Gholam is perhaps the world's best unknown scavenger of creative ideas. "Over time I developed a confused cultural identity having been around so many different people and cultures," Gholam offered. The first of these took place in his mind on a particular trip to Italy when he was seven. "I am passionate about many things, but when my parents took us on a trip to Italy, I suspect that I was very awed by it, especially Italian art/architecture through its different periods. It must

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Riyadh mixed used development

have left a big impression on me until today, especially my day walking in Pompeii," Gholam said. He worked in photography for many years, and evidence of this are found in his personal portfolio of images where normal shapes suddenly take on a soul of their own. He is influenced by food and music and keeps a keen eye on the hidden engines that drive the world. Though an urban person, Gholam together with his wife, artist Ana Corbero, turned a mini-farm near Seville into his newest Spanish headquarters, working with a small team of 7-9 architects. "There, I am discovering things like a little kid does. It looks like a plane view of the Beqaa where the clouds more often than not are level with the farm and so you feel as if you are flying. It will take getting used to the farm noises and views of a donkey taking a stroll while I design a skyscraper," Gholam quipped.

On a typical day, Gholam manages a spectrum of activities in two parallel worlds. "I handle my daily activities, which are different in Lebanon than in Spain. I am constantly on the go, travelling. I just moved my office from Barcelona where I worked for many years, to Seville where the influence of Andalusia is very much evident," Gholam said. This presents another evidence of the non-conformist persona, since the move to Seville is seemingly bizarre because all the main architects are based in Barcelona. "I have been living off and on in one city or another. This complicates life and the lives of people around me. But my being stationed in both Barcelona and Beirut has created this interesting parallax, where my life was bouncing between two parallel planes that have many things in common: the Phoenician, Roman, Arab background, cultural roots, and the Mediterranean most of all," Gholam said. He recently found sketches and drawings of a young Gholam living in New York and Spain. "I was always unconsciously sketching a plane and a travel plan from Paris to New York, Paris to Beirut, etc. I have preserved that duality throughout my life, perhaps going with the idea that the grass is always greener on the other side, but not anymore. After 35 years, I am a bit more aware, more in control and looking for a comfortable equilibrium," Gholam said. Today, Gholam's anchor in life is the Mediterranean. "It is interesting to live and experience the culture in Paris, Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere, but my inspiration comes from the Med," Gholam asserted. He is an architect influenced by and attracted to spaces, especially ones found in Mediterranean churches, cathedrals, and mosques like the Córdoba or in Morocco, temples and monuments like the Ziggurats, as well as other landscapes, Mediterranean smells, olives, Thyme, music, ancient or primitive architecture, grottos, underground dwellings, and gardens. He is also architecturally very influenced by different religions. "I was raised as a Christian, but I have read a bit about Buddhism, Islam, and other religious disciplines and quite simply I have trust in the universal good," Gholam said. He believes that every expression of architecture has a

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component of religion in it, with the greatest influences for him coming from monasteries and madrassas. "I am greatly fascinated by the verticality of Gothic cathedrals, the cascading domes of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, and the horizontality of spaces in prayer areas, where one can meditate and get inspired," Gholam affirmed.

Despite his love affair with the Mediterranean, Gholam developed a "profound anger over what's taking place in Lebanon," which he now calls "frustrating" because of its chronic short- and long-term instability. "Beirut has the capacity to absorb quality architectural superstructures, but I am not sure that we have the proper infrastructure, roads, and traffic conditions to complete the picture," Gholam claimed. He said typical 3-5 story buildings in the Ashrafieh district of Beirut are disappearing, whereas smaller dwellings with gardens have already become almost extinct. "You see shocking building developments taking place, which some people are fighting, and I am supporting such actions. I have declined high rise building projects because they jeopardize the cultural integrity of their neighborhoods, and create eyesores. But I am a bit reluctant to reject every project because, unfortunately, some other architect, without disrespecting anyone, takes the job and might somehow end up botching it," Gholam said. So now, if something is offered to Gholam, he has conditions in the contract that in a way or another help protect the cultural legacy and blend it with the modern. "I try to iron out my ego and do my part to contribute to the preservation of what I consider a cultural heritage about to get extinct. These huge buildings that we see around us are flawed and the help of the regulatory authorities is restricted, because the laws in some cases are not adequate enough," Gholam said.

Gholam's mistrust of skyscraper projects does not stem from his ignorance of them. On the contrary, he is a polished professional in that field. "I do urban planning work and I have studied high-rise buildings in New York. I lived on the 50th floor for many years to experience what living in a skyscraper is," Gholam stated. In addition to potentially disturbing the homogenous congruity of a cityscape, skyscrapers present a host of complexities within the structure itself. "For example, I believe any super tall high-rise like Bourj Khalifa is a difficult challenge and can be exposed to complex architectural/engineering dilemmas that may not be so obvious on the outside. In some cases, the people worked under duress of time and financial crisis, but I am not sure if that was cause enough to compromise on the project itself. But every project of this magnitude or complexity is likely to leave by its nature a compromise in design that might affect the end-user, and the same applies to our projects" he said.

Gholam has led a life of architectural and personal discovery and developed a fingerprint philosophy that is being transcended through his personal and team designs. And perhaps a genre is what will differentiate the classic from the atypical architecture, but one advice he offers new and ambitious graduates in this field is strangely unrelated to a design tip or talent capacity, but rather to character: "Be passionate. Be resilient."

WORD ASSOCIATION WITH NABIL GHOLAM

I asked Nabil Gholam to associate certain words with a word that he feels is suitable, and below are the results:

ORIGINAL WORD	ASSOCIATED WORD
Light	Space
Water	Thirst
Shade	Comfort
Green	Water
Concrete	Flexibility/Freedom
Landscape	Fundamental
Lebanon	Paradox

A BRIEF LISTING OF NABIL GHOLAM PROJECTS

URBAN PLANNING PROJECTS

Tilal Jeddah, Jeddah, KSA
Martyr's Square International Competition- BCD, Beirut, Lebanon
Al Fanar City, Dammam, KSA
Doha Gardens, Al Khobar, KSA

HIGH RISE PROJECTS

Sky Gate, Beirut Lebanon
Platinum Tower, BCD, Beirut, Lebanon
Park City, Moscow, Russia
Harbour Tower, Beirut, Lebanon
Icon Tower, Beirut, Lebanon

MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Saifi 178, BCD Beirut
Riyadh Mixed use development, Riyadh, KSA
Doha Oasis: the Ellipse, Doha, Qatar
Minsk Plaza, Minsk Byelorussia

HOTEL PROJECTS

Four Seasons Hotel, Pearl Island, Qatar
Kempinski Hotel, Aqaba and Dead Sea, Jordan
Aleppo Hotel Club and Leisure Park, Aleppo, Syria

OFFICE, COMMERCIAL, & INSTITUTIONAL PROJECTS

AUB IOEC Engineering Lab, Beirut, Lebanon
Merit Corporation/ CMA-CGM headquarters, Beirut, Lebanon
WAQF Foch Office Building, BCD, Beirut, Lebanon
Doha Souks, Doha, Qatar

RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS & PRIVATE RESIDENCES

Cairo Eastown, Cairo, Egypt
Saifi Square, Beirut, Lebanon
Foch 94, Beirut, Lebanon
Saifi Village II, Beirut, Lebanon
Z House, Muscat, Oman
H House, Cairo, Egypt
AZ House, Adma, Lebanon