

BEYOND

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BLOOMING PROMISE

DISCERNING BY DESIGN

Big kahuna of architecture Galal Mahmoud on the small impact on the environment



Photos GALAL
MAHMOUD
ARCHITECTS

– For GALAL MAHMOUD, green architecture is first and foremost a matter of common sense, not just elaborate certifications, he exclusively tells *Beyond*.

With Egyptian parents, a Lebanese childhood, and 20 years spent studying and working in France, it takes no stretch of the imagination to understand why Galal Mahmoud has a cosmopolitan outlook on life.

From the beginning, Mahmoud started out big, taking on heavyweight clients such as Lancel. He went on to enjoy an enviable portfolio in France, where his originality opened many a door for him in the U.S. and Europe. Upon returning by chance to Lebanon 15 years ago, Mahmoud's business would continue to soar, going on to establish his architecture and interior design firm Galal Mahmoud Architects with partners Randa Chahine, Anwar el Hajj, and Elie Waked. In addition to its Beirut headquarters, GMA has established presence in Abu Dhabi and is commissioned across the Middle East and the world.

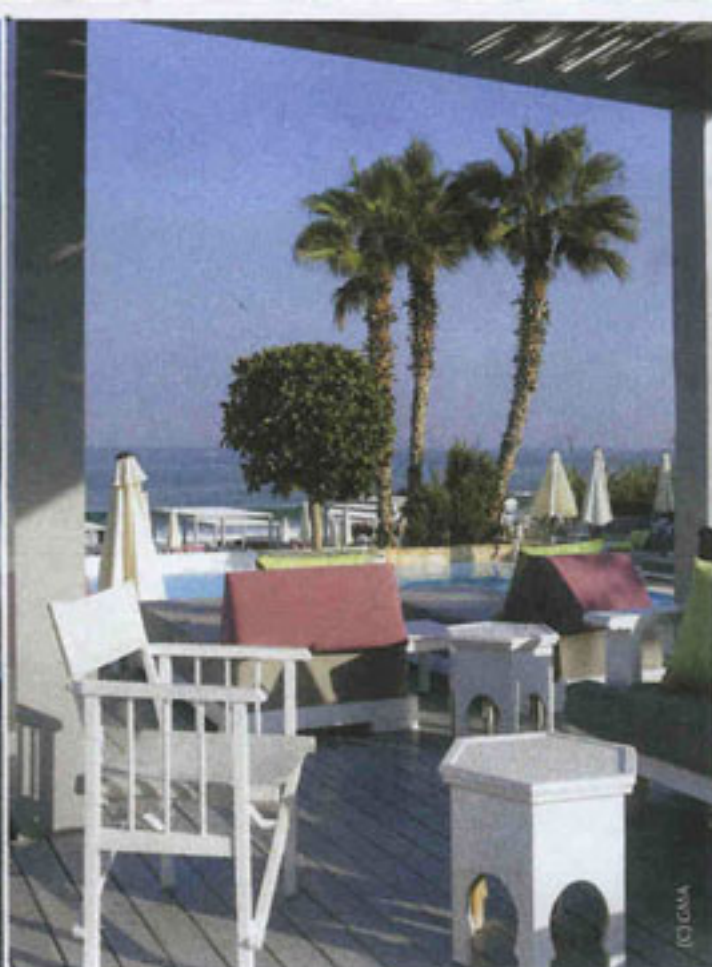
Restaurants, hotels, corporate, residential, and retail – GMA has done it all. But as the sea and mountains occupy a special place in Mahmoud's heart, his infatuation with resorts is untamable. Examples include the award winning Bamboo Bay Beach Resort in Jiyeh in 2002 and Edde Sands Beach Resort in Byblos in 2003 – both of which were extra cautious about the environment when greenness was not yet in fashion. Amber Valley Hotel Resort and Spa in Jordan pushed the envelope. The project, which scooped the Arabian Property Awards in two categories, was designed to reflect its surroundings historically and environmentally with five star tents and Bedouin settlements done in a modern mood using locally sourced materials.

Mahmoud is also socially conscious. For cancer child patients for the NGO Toufoula, he designed a Dream Room that was shaped like a mother's belly or egg. "You have to give

back," Mahmoud says. "I don't want to just write a check to an association. I want to see the results. It took us time to design that room because we spent a lot of time understanding the needs of the child who is going through a horrible experience." Arriving at such an understanding is essential, argues Mahmoud, because to him, "architecture is about happiness." He says, "If you don't have happiness in architecture, you're not an architect. This is my biggest social responsibility and this is why I have knots in my stomach every time I do a project because I want to make sure I not only do something nice but also something that will work and will create a positive impact on the people who will be using it."

BEYOND—The green and sustainable trend is gathering pace in Lebanon. Some think it is overrated in architecture and that green certificates are a hoax. Others do not. Where do you stand on the green trend and what is sustainability to you?

GALAL MAHMOUD—We as a firm do architecture and interior design. We sell holistic living spaces or experiences. This experience is taking all its input from the direct environment it



is being implemented in. The only time I had been exposed to a LEED-certified project was when working on a resort in Fujairah, UAE around two years ago. Here, we were working as an interior designer with a huge American architecture firm. We were encouraged to take the certified course. So we sent someone from the office to take the course, and he showed the office all the facts he learned to be a LEED-certified architect. The whole concept is about common sense really. I personally believe that architects and designers have gone into such a crazy ego trip that they completely forgot about common sense and being sensitive to the environment they work in. **You are not an environmental architect just because you have a certain certificate. It takes much more than that.** I was lucky to be brought up in a context where I was always very sensitive to what's happening around me. Of course, when you are like that, you will be sensitive to climate, sun, to the nature around you, to wellbeing without saying it or thinking about it.

I have always lived in an environment immediately exposed to the sea. This by itself makes you respectful to the

environment and sensitive to what's happening around you. So my approach was, is, and always will be work within the environment you are in and be very subtle and discreet about what you're doing. You are producing a space that is supposed to create positive feelings, happiness, and wellbeing. You do that by not forcing a design because you think this is the right design and forget about all the rest. I'm marginal in the way I work in the sense that I don't get much influenced by what's going around and I do my own thing and I try to be completely integrated.

B-And to be integrated that entails using local materials.

GM-Of course. When we built Edde Sands we did not import any materials. We used stones from old homes. The logs were brought in from nursery in the Bekaa Valley. We didn't cut trees. And the bamboo trees we used smelled lovely, leaving the air smelling fresh. You want to be contextual. I'm not going to bring an LA villa and put it on the coast of Lebanon. Whenever I do a project somewhere, the first thing I do is understand the environment I'm working in, as well as the culture, history, architecture, climate,

sun, winds, and try to use all these elements to make what they call today an environmentally friendly project. During the first part of any project, I embrace fully the area or region I am working on in every aspect, climate, geography, materials. I use local materials. I'm not going to use on an island stainless steel and glass just because I want it done that way because such a move will have repercussions. I use common sense. I double the thickness of the wall to maintain heat inside, and I put pebbles on the roof.

B-Although you don't use it as a selling point, you do have a number of eco-friendly projects.

GM-Yes, Moulay Yaacoub, a village close to Fez in Morocco, is a fully environmentally friendly project, for example. Moulay Yaacoub has natural sulfurous water with healing powers, and it is a Moroccan destination. This traditional mountainous village that lives from this water element has urbanized itself in the wrong way. It lost its identity. I was commissioned by the Moroccan government to make this into an international destination while preserving the character of the place, help the people understand



the environment they are working in, and benefit from it. We will have integrated hotels without obstructing any views.

Within the village, we will help small hotel owners optimize these hotels, where foreigners will come and stay in these houses and rent a room in a very traditional and original environment. We will develop a specification book for every villager to show him how to renovate his house, how to finance it, and who will help him do that.

The other part is the artisanat around the treatments (water). We will create a workshop to let them produce their own soaps, towels, loofas, all accessories needed for the treatment to sell visitors. So there will be a small industry of craftsmanship within the village that is related to the project itself. This will promote sustainability, which is much more than using solar panels. It is a whole way of thinking of avoiding imports, getting people to live from what they have, and this brings back the traditional character of the village.

The main environmental item in the project is the riverbed in the valley, which is now being used for sewage. With engineers, we will revive the riverbed by recycling

all the used waters through environmentally friendly filtering systems to reinitiate the water inside the riverbed. Once you have the water there, the façade overlooking it becomes positive. Then we can have a promenade and street and instead of the entire village being concentrated in one area around the bath, it will spread everywhere. Plus the houses will be reoriented where they should have been for sun exposure and wind ventilation. It is a big master planning project that is part of Morocco's development plan and it will hopefully be complete in five years. Although it is a fully environmentally friendly project, I didn't start by thinking I want to make an environmentally friendly project. I started by thinking about the problems and how we can make this into an international destination while restoring the authentic character and lifestyle of that region.

B-What other similar projects do you have in the works?

GM-Part of our OBeach brand, we're doing a large resort in Egypt in the Dahab region south of Sharm el Sheikh, and it is a very windy area. It will be all bungalows on a hill. Visually, from the sea, you won't see the resort once built. It will blend in completely with the environment.

Even the paint we're using is the same color as the mountain.

All the bungalows will have sea views while protecting the terraces from the wind and also to get maximum sunshine late in the day. In that slope project we are using a lot of solar panels, and they will be done in a way so you don't see them. Also will be using wind turbines. Excavation is starting this spring. We're also working now on a beachfront resort in Damour, Lebanon where we will have a completely green resort down to the smallest details, including sunlight, recycling, native plant species... We will be using a lot of recycled materials such as old telephone poles and stones from old houses, and build rooftop gardens.

B-So you always integrate green in your work?

GM-Of course, for the type of architecture we do, without greenery it is like a naked body. You can have a beautiful naked body, but it needs to be dressed up. Greenery is not only visual. It has also a lot of benefits if you use the right species. When we did Edde Sands, we brought in around 300 palm trees, which were the only imported item. The advantage of the palm tree is that it will protect all the other plants behind it; it filters the wind coming from the sea and the



salt and the plants behind them will grow lush. They also bring freshness, absorb humidity, invite birds, and create shade. We did this years ago, when no one was talking about the environment.

B-Where do you feel are the regions most suited for these projects?

GM-They can be implemented everywhere because the projects we deal with and work on are naturally environmentally friendly. We are doing a project in the Bekaa Valley for a wine estate where we are doing a resort destination, with 25 bungalows, spa, and pool restaurant within the wine estate. You cannot do something non-eco for a project like this.

B-Do you feel there is genuine attention to the environment?

GM-The clients I am dealing with are sensitive to their environment. If they have a 300,000 square-meter plot of land, they won't ask me – and I would refuse to – do 200 or 400 villas. I will do 20. I will ask to see the business plan and to make sure that we are soft on the environment, where we don't have to cut the whole mountain to build high rises in a place where they don't fit. Lebanon is a country of contrast. You will always find people who have this sensitivity.

Are all the Lebanese environmentally sensitive? No. But I think they will come to understand that it is an urgent matter and needs to be addressed right now, because since Phoenician times we've been cutting trees without planting in their place. The owner of that winery in the Bekaa has planted three and half million trees. So thank God there are some people left doing such things. When I have clients who have a piece of land and want to do a project or villa, the first thing I tell them, start planting now instead of planting when the house is finished.

B-You describe the state of architecture in Lebanon as unorganized chaos, and yet you continue to work here. You have a love-hate relation with Beirut. You call it chaotic but creative. You stay here yet many of your projects are done abroad.

GM-When I came back in 1996, I was here just to visit. I started doing small jobs to keep myself busy. The country was being rebuilt and I thought I'm an architect in France, why shouldn't I take projects here as well. I saw this energy here and things were happening so quickly. We also had so many hopes because we saw that things were going uphill, or so we thought. Now this whole dream is deflating, day by day. There is a

lot of ugliness and chaos that could pollute the creative mind. There is a lot of frustration. But suddenly you take a mountain road, and you find another scene altogether. So there is a positive element in all the mess.

And professionally it has been very positive for me. Ultimately, I don't think there is an ideal place. It is really so easy to make this country beautiful. There are laws but no one sticks to them. For instance, there are only two licensed waterfront resorts on our coastline. All the rest are cheating. It is possible to redesign the Lebanese coast and create a master plan in one month. But the state is inexistent, which is unacceptable.

B-This brings us to the issue of traditional homes and the renovation of old houses.

GM-We don't have to invent the wheel on that one. There are mechanisms that help traditional home owners finance themselves and keep them. But it is tempting to sell it when someone offers you \$45- million for it and no alternative is given to you. It should be an obligation to every citizen to do certain things, such as plant a tree a year. And we're four million. Do the math. ◯

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