

COMMERCIAL

# Interior design

The essential guide for Middle East interior design professionals

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# The human touch

CID SPEAKS TO GALAL MAHMOUD,  
CEO OF GM ARCHITECTS, ABOUT  
CONTEXT, HUMANITY AND DESIGN.



In 1996, Galal Mahmoud returned to Lebanon, after 20 years away. He had spent the previous two decades studying and working in France, but his childhood home was calling him back.

At the time, Lebanon was edging into a period of peace and reconstruction, presenting interesting opportunities for an open-minded, internationally-trained architect and interior designer. Mahmoud founded GM Architects, an architecture and interior design firm eager to contribute to the shaping of a new Lebanon. The Beirut office was also envisaged as a springboard into the rest of the Middle East and by 2005 the company had also established a presence in Abu Dhabi.

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GM Architects was responsible for the interiors of the Park Rotana in Abu Dhabi.

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The Park Rotana is a business hotel with a beach feel.

Over the years, GM Architects has come to specialise in hospitality projects, particularly beachfront resorts. It is Mahmoud's rootlessness that defines his work – in that it has instilled an almost instinctual versatility. Context and humanity are key.

CID met with Mahmoud at the Park Rotana Abu Dhabi, one of his latest projects in the UAE, to find out more about Beirut's unique design language, and the importance of scale, reason and context in design.

**Tell us about your career so far.**

I graduated in architecture, in Paris, and started a business there in 1986. I worked in France for over ten years, doing mainly retail, luxury hotels and

residential projects in Paris, New York, Florida and also South America.

I started moving back to Lebanon, which is where I am from originally, in 1996. Business picked up extremely quickly and I slowly reduced my activities in France. In 2000, I shut down the office in Paris to focus more on Lebanon, always knowing that Lebanon would be a starting point for the rest of the Middle East.

In Lebanon we focused on commercial, restaurant and hospitality projects. The nice thing about Beirut is that it is a showcase for designers. The entire Arab world goes on vacation in Beirut and anything that's new and upcoming, they want in their own countries. So it was a perfect display case for us.

Through our activities in Beirut, we started getting projects elsewhere in the Middle East. It picked up gradually and then with the boom in the UAE, we decided to open an office in Abu Dhabi in 2005 that would cater for the entire UAE, plus other countries in the region. We now cover most of the Middle East, and are starting to grow towards northern Africa, all the way to Spain and Eastern Europe. We've done projects in Turkey, Greece, Egypt and Morocco, and will maybe end up coming back to Europe one day, which I'd ultimately like.

From around five or six years ago, one of our main areas of activity has been hotels but, more specifically, beachfront resorts. I would say that this is the direction that we are taking now. We are



currently working on a five-star resort in Morocco, on the Mediterranean Sea. We also have one coming up on the Red Sea in Egypt and another on the Dead Sea in Jordan, so all very nice locations.

I'm an architect but I've done a lot of interior design. And through the experiences we've had with interior design, I'm now coming back to architecture. That means I'm able to design holistic projects, which is what I want to do.

**How important is that synergy between interior design and architecture?**

Very important, especially in resorts because the experience that you have in resorts is very complete. There's no cut-off line, particularly when the weather's good. The boundaries are not physically embedded. You can open up your room and it almost becomes an outdoor space. And your outdoor pergola can become a semi-indoor space. It all blends together and it becomes very important to combine both and make sure that they speak the same language.

**What are the key trends in hospitality design right now?**

The trend is to go very modern, even for resorts. So, less contextual, more modern, which I have mixed feelings about. Our approach is completely different. Our approach to a resort is that you are working within a very rich environment, so it has to be completely integrated.

The architectural look of the building should be very discreet and blend in



completely. It is not supposed to be a statement. On the contrary, my ideal architecture would be something that disappears completely. It's more about the experience, the escapism, the wellbeing and the privacy. And the use of local culture, local materials and local finishes within a modern vocabulary.

We are not trying to make a statement with the design. The statement is in the guest experience. This is what will dictate the actual design. So we take the context, the environment and the topography, and we layer them with what is our ideal guest experience. This will produce the design. It becomes a synergy of all these elements.

We are not into Mickey Mouse interpretations of Islamic elements. If we use

Islamic elements, it is because we think they add value to the guest experience. But there is no point in using them just to say it is a 'local' building.

**Is that common practice in this region?**

It's been abused. You only have to look at the variety of mashrabiya being used. You have to go back to the origin and function of the mashrabiya, and then use it accordingly. You can't just design a façade, put a mashrabiya on it and say I'm filtering light so I am contextual. We try to be more sensible.

**What is the sensible approach?**

We try to understand the culture and the real use of these traditional architectural elements. And then, if we need them, we

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As with most GM projects, the Park Rotana is full of colour.

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The design is respectful of Rotana's Middle Eastern roots.



will interpret them in a modern way and integrate them into our design.

**Are there successful reinterpretations of traditional vernacular in this market?**

The problem I have here is the size of the projects. They are a bit oversized. They cannot be vernacular because they do not correspond to the scale. They've taken a fort and multiplied it by ten, so suddenly you've lost all your references.

When you go to the Far East and you look at their resorts, they are modern, they are vernacular and they are also beneficial to the guest experience. They are very successful but then their size is much smaller. The largest resort you'll find there is around 150 rooms.

I think you have to come back to a more human scale. We've lost our sense of humanity in this part of the world. Do we need the biggest everything? It brings in a sense of scale and proportion that is completely out of balance.

**Has Lebanon been more successful in creating design that is sensitive to the culture and the location, do you think?**

In Beirut, most of the designers are Lebanese. In the UAE you are dealing with very good designers, but the advantage that we have in Beirut is that it is in our blood. We do not have to research the culture, because we live it and we feel it, instinctually. This is what gives us, as an office, the advantage, even in other countries in the Middle East. We can understand immediately what are the real



cultural values and the real architectural values, because we have been brought up with those elements.

**Have you seen massive change in Beirut since you first opened your office?**

Beirut is what I call unorganised chaos. But it works. I don't know how, but it works. The only thing is we have a major problem with urban planning. The UAE has gone to the other extreme of over planning, whereas in Lebanon we have no planning whatsoever.

We have a lot of problems with the environment. Even though we have a fantastic environment, it is being destroyed gradually. We also have an issue with providing the city with the basic requirements of a city – pavements for

people to walk on, proper streets, green spaces. Everyone is building high rises, which will create a lot of collateral problems, in terms of traffic and pollution. No one is thinking in advance.

But it's an interesting city because it has such an interesting mix of people. The war impacted four generations, who left and went all over the world to study and live and experience. Plus the generations that stayed and lived through the war all had their own experiences.

To live and work during war time is quite something, and it can have a positive impact. The positive is that it has produced people with such a strong will to move forward that you will never find anywhere else in the world.

**How does the country's turbulent history manifest itself in design?**

It manifests itself in the fact that the people that stayed are extremely curious. Unfortunately, they could not travel so instead they tried to learn through whatever means they had available to them. They are extremely aware of what is happening around them.

Plus, each person that left and then came back brought their own experiences with them. So you have this melting pot of people who lived in Italy or Canada or South America or France or the UK or the US.

This variety of cultures has created a fantastic dish, which makes Beirut very interesting. It is chaotic, but so creative at the same time. Give the Lebanese

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The Park Rotana offers plenty of opportunities to see and be seen.



people 10 or 15 years of stability and the country will just bloom. Right now we have cycles of five years, which is a very short amount of time. If you ask an investor to invest \$30 million in a resort in Lebanon, they are going to think twice. They'd prefer to invest in a residential building because they can sell the apartments and be done with it.

**What projects have you been involved with in Lebanon?**

We've done a lot of restaurants. Now we are shifting to hotels. There are a few new hotels coming up, and we also have some renovation projects. We've also created the concept of a day beach resort, which already existed in Lebanon but was very archaic. It was the 1970s model of a concrete pool, a ladder to the sea and a fish restaurant.

We've taken that and developed day beach resorts that are comfortable and well designed and have all kinds of facilities, such as private cabanas, open-air spas, restaurants and so on. This is something that we have specialised in and will try to introduce to the UAE, because it doesn't exist at the moment. Anyone who wants to go to the beach has to pay a hotel \$60 to go and sit on a plastic chair.

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GM Architects also designed the Burj Al Hamam restaurant in Qatar.

**What are the biggest differences between the Lebanese and UAE markets?**

The UAE is a far more bullish market. Things have to be done quickly. The problem we face in the UAE – and it is



a nice problem to have – is that we are not given enough time to really think our projects through, because everyone is in such a rush. It's challenging but at the same time, it makes us more reactive.

In Lebanon, you have more time because the owners are far more personally involved in their projects. They follow up and they want to know what you are doing. Here you are dealing with a board and the board has budgets and administrators and so on. They hire you because they know you are good but sometimes you feel like you are just a commodity, rather than an added value.

You lose control of your projects because of time and budgetary restraints. You can do a fantastic design and then suddenly the project is out of your hands because it's gone out to a contractor and they start cannibalising it. And once it's done you are left feeling a little disappointed. We also have a problem with the quality of the finish because things happen so quickly that even the best contractor doesn't have time to do things properly.

However, at the same time, the market in the UAE is much more bullish, the projects are on a bigger scale, the budgets are bigger than in Lebanon, and the exposure is far greater for us.

**How did you become involved with the Park Rotana project in Abu Dhabi?**

We have a privileged relationship with Rotana and they give us a lot of their properties to design. We started off by

doing a Rotana in Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt and after that, I assume, positive experience, they listed us for this project. And once this got started, we started doing other projects for Rotana.

We've done one in Dubai, we're doing one in Al Ain, we're doing one in Jordan, we're doing another in Abu Dhabi and we're doing one in Salalah. We also currently have projects with Sheraton in Istanbul, Sofitel in Morocco, Crowne Plaza in Beirut, and we are moving into some boutique chains. Le Gray Hotel in Beirut is doing an extension and has asked us to handle the design of rooms, restaurants and meeting rooms. We will be working in collaboration with the designers of the original project.

We are trying to shift to the high end of the market, because we believe that we offer that kind of service. The good thing is that Rotana is also moving up-market so we came in at the right time.

**Tell us about the Park Rotana design.**

The idea was to create a fresh and functional business hotel but at the same time bring in a bit of our creativity and our 'beach' experience. All of our projects are quite colourful. So although the hotel is quite corporate, it also has an element of creativity and a bit of colour and craziness to it.

It is designed to be relaxing, with little splashes of colour that will bring positivity in. The approach is 'see and be seen', so there is a raised platform in the lobby where people can sit and see

