

# InsideOut

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# InsideOut Property

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# Architects Deconstructed

"Dubai is like a train running at high speed - it's created the momentum for the whole region." So says the charismatic Galal Mahmoud, President of GM Architects. He gives us his thought-provoking views on the scene in Dubai and further afield.

*Text: Annie Cudmore, Editor; Photos courtesy of GM Architects*







Above: Edde Sands, an environmentally-friendly day beach resort north of Beirut, was nominated for the Aga Khan Awards

Galal Mahmoud, President and founder of GM Architects, obviously loves his job. From small beginnings in Paris, he has returned to his native Middle East, and now seems set to conquer the region with his cultural and holistic design and architectural ideas rooted in the history of the region.

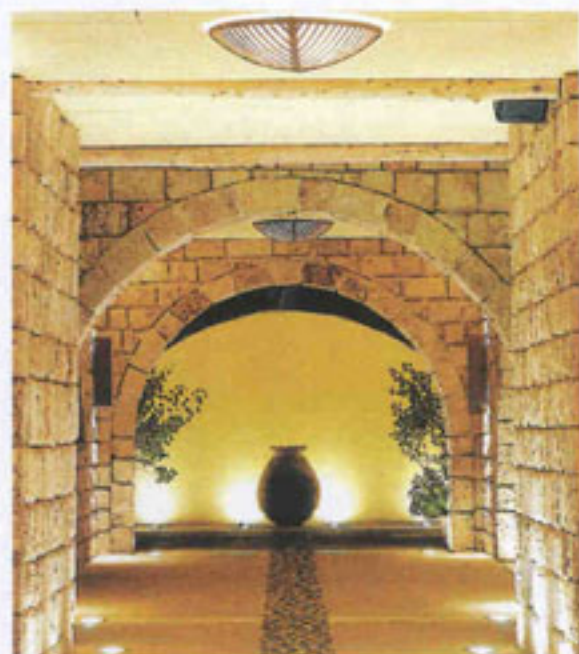
Having left Lebanon early in his career, Mahmoud landed in France, graduating in 1986 and setting up his first practise in his new home, Paris. In his soft French and Arab accent, he takes up his story. "My first nine years were based in Paris. We worked mainly in the commercial sector designing luxury shops as well as doing residential projects. From there I went to the US, designing New York office buildings, then to Miami and South America."

Returning to his home city of Beirut in 1998, he started what he describes as a "tiny little practise" which soon, like Topsy, grew and grew. "Work picked up pace a lot

quicker than I thought because of the projects there – I was aiming to enter the Middle East market because I knew Lebanon was a relatively small market and my experience with large commercial projects might be out of scale."

However, it didn't turn out quite like that. "People who had left Lebanon and lived all over the world came back and brought their own approach, know-how, craft and experience. It was good because of the Lebanese way of doing things – very contemporary, very avant-garde with an interesting mix of styles. This made it a very rich and small environment and very competitive for us designers – we always had to be on the edge." At that time GM Architects were awarded many 'exposed' projects, such as restaurants and the company quickly became well-known.

Mahmoud continues, "We started marketing ourselves in the Middle East, mainly the UAE, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi ☐



“The Phoenicians invented the colour purple, so this is used throughout and even the wall lamps have been decorated with cut-outs of Phoenician letters”

Top and above: Being close to the ruins of Byblos, an ancient Phoenician, Roman and Byzantine city, Edde Sands' design incorporates traditional colours, design elements and materials pertaining to those times







Arabia, with a commercial focus. With residential projects, we focus on individual clients where we have an open dialogue – clients who know us well, who like us and what we do. It has to be a close relationship. To do a house, you must spend time with the client if you want to be ethical.”

This ethical approach is applied to all the projects and developments the company takes on, whether they be residential or commercial. “Our way is to find a challenging and creative guideline that takes us right through the project in terms of design. It will be a holistic approach – complete and cohesive from beginning to end, from the graphics to the architecture, from the interior colours to the furniture. This keeps the identity of the whole thing. We like to be extremely present all the way through!”

A good example of Mahmoud’s holistic ideals is obvious in his Aga Khan Award-nominated project, Edde Sands, a day-beach resort and wellness centre north of Beirut. “Because this resort is near to the ruins of the ancient Byblos – a Phoenician, Roman and Byzantine city – we have integrated all those styles. For example, the Phoenicians invented the colour purple, so this is used throughout and even the wall lamps have been decorated with cut-outs of ☉



**This spread:** GM Architects designs for the Grand Rotana in Egypt incorporate traditional arab elements such as windows, lamps, mosaic and carved wood alongside visually stunning contemporary styles



**This spread:** Mahmoud's Amber Valley project will offer "the complete Levantine experience", with a hotel perched on top of a plateau overlooking bungalows on the slopes and beachside tents, a structured way of living that was traditional in the area



Phoenician letters. It's also an environmentally-friendly project and all the materials used were traditional Lebanese building materials. We used existing stones and recycled materials, as well as local arts and crafts and artisans."

His job sounds like a green history-buff's idea of paradise. "It is a lot of fun," he smiles. "When it becomes boring, it's time to stop!"

So what does this eco-friendly, holistic and ethical architect think of the Dubai scene. Well... "I go to Europe once a month and friends are always asking me what I think. I say it's just moving so fast that I don't even have time to judge any more. I can't give an opinion. Do I like it personally, as an architect? No, I find it too quick. You cannot design a city in a year - it's impossible. In Europe cities took centuries to integrate themselves. If you make any mistake in urban planning you have to live with it for 500 years - get it wrong and you're stuck!

“It's like the Yugoslavian chicken, you know? In Yugoslavia they pump them full of hormones and in two weeks you have a fat old chicken!”





That's what is happening with the road infrastructure in Dubai. Whatever they do – metros, triple highways – it will never be enough. The infrastructure has been outpaced by the number of cars and it's gone too far."

The other comment Mahmoud makes is about attention to detail. "No-one is looking at the details: Where are the beaches,

where's downtown, where's the business district? Before you had all these things, now I don't know where they are – now I'm just lost! Dubai is a wild place. Everyone wants to finish his project and to be so original that there is no coherence in architectural design, so there are funny, weird buildings. When you work at such a fast pace, it will inevitably be a copy and paste process, and you cannot be creative ☹





and ethical to your profession and way of thinking. Even if you are a genius, you need to sit and check that you have got things right. It's like the Yugoslavian chicken, you know? In Yugoslavia they pump them full of hormones and in two weeks you have a fat old chicken!"

However, it's not all bad news and criticism, Mahmoud does admit to having respect for many aspects of the city's phenomenal growth. "Dubai will stay a fantastic experience of energy and will and it's just unbelievable! Because I'm Lebanese, I lived through the 1970s boom there - people made so much money but just spent it on palaces and for personal use. No-one thought of developing their country. And now, here they have the merit of thinking of their countries and developing them and actually they are developing pieces of sand into real metropolises."

Mahmoud patently sees a great future for the whole GCC region, led from the front by the UAE's fastest-growing city. "Dubai is a train that is moving so fast, and whatever I may think of it, it works! Try to find an apartment or a hotel room - it's impossible! So it must be doing well. It's created a momentum for the whole region." ||

**This spread:**  
Jordan's Living Wall, a project designed in association with Sir Norman Foster, will be a multi-use development with an 80-room hotel. Rooms will be a minimum of 50 square metres in size



