



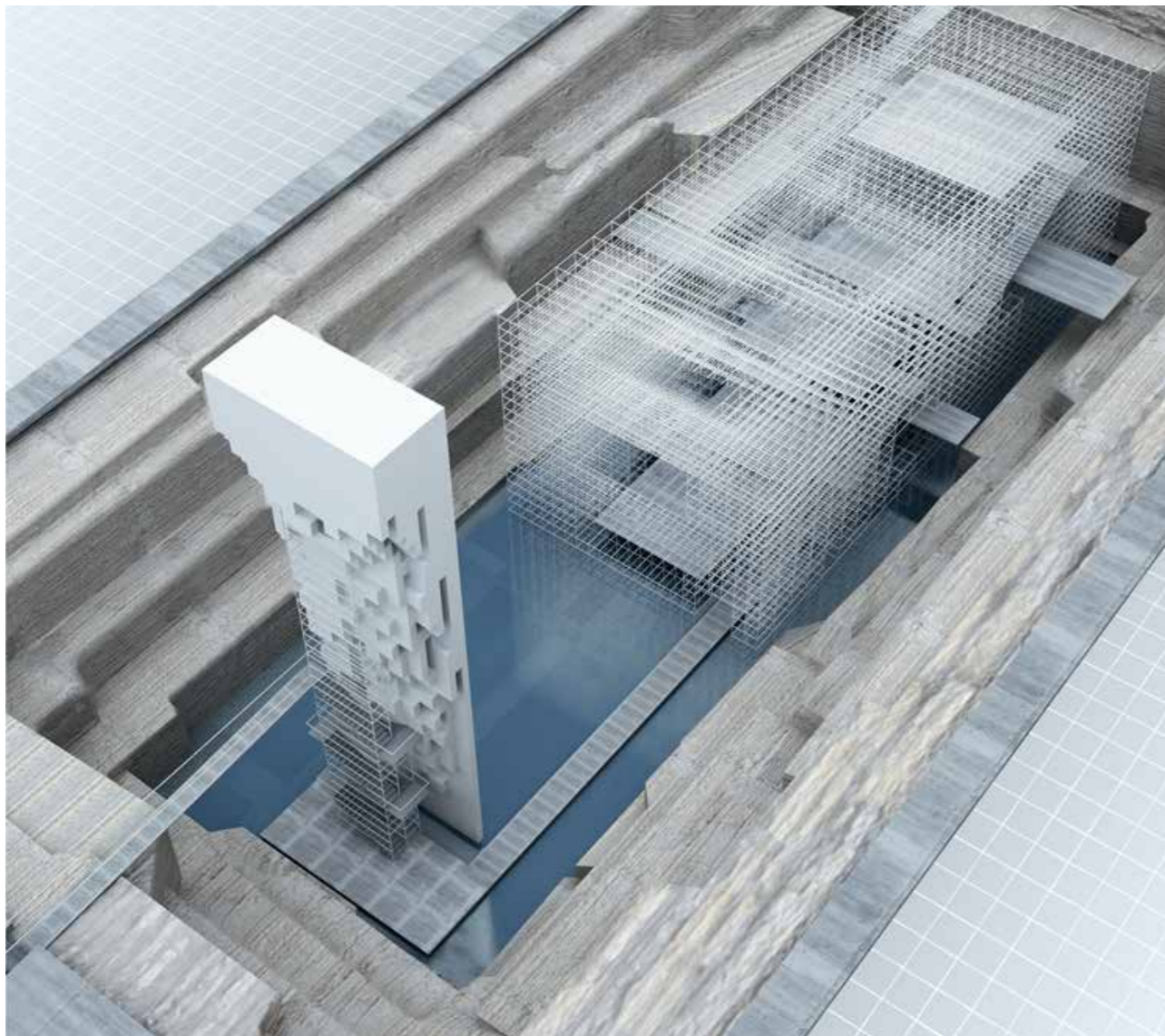
GALAL MAHMOUD

Portrait by Fenton Bailey

THE GREAT SIR RENDER

— *Tapping into the Otherworldly Vision of Galal Mahmoud*

The architecture of Galal Mahmoud is the spitting image of its deft creator, refined yet not conceited, striking but not ostentatious, effortlessly connecting with their milieu all the while emanating an undeniable aura. Immediately commanding respect without having to shout for your attention, both man and his projects are lucidly and eloquently expressive, not at the expense of being too wordy, however.



Museum of Civilizations, Lebanon



Rotana Park Khalifa, UAE

It is generally love at first sketch for Mahmoud's clients given the architect's winning formula of contextual immersion and cohesion of vision across all steps of the project. It is a principle he unwaveringly applied in his latest undertaking, the spellbinding "Museum of Civilizations" unveiled at the "Time Space Existence" Exhibition at the 14th Venice Biennale of Architecture. The concept design has made headlines in international architecture journals and emphasized the bold and progressive layers of Mahmoud's imagination. Curve talks to the man of the moment.

GM Architects is the only independent Lebanese architecture and design firm to be taking part in the ongoing Venice Biennale of Architecture, where you're presenting the ambitious "Museum of Civilizations" project, which responded to the theme of going back to the fundamentals of architecture. How did you interpret this theme and how did the idea surface? Today with globalization and cities that are seeking to market themselves, identities are somehow getting lost and diluted. Because they want to be talked about, cities ask this big shot international architect to build a beautiful building that doesn't relate whatsoever to the context. This creates an environment riddled with international architecture that doesn't fit. It also influences the local community of architects.

Lebanon has been globalized since 5000 years; it's been occupied, crossed into and inhabited by most of the biggest civilizations in the world. These civilizations influenced Lebanese identity. And today Lebanese identity, which once existed and will continue to exist regardless of what happens, is perhaps the result of all these influences. The Lebanese have managed to absorb all these influences while maintaining their own identity. So we thought we'd do a museum of civilizations, seeing as we lack museums in Lebanon while the Lebanese don't know their own history.

Take us on virtual tour through the museum. Beirut is called the city of seven layers. We didn't want to do a building above the ground with rooms referencing each of the seven civilizations, because this won't be impactful on the onlooker. So we decided to create a promenade into an excavation pit, digging a hole of 20 meters deep, which is the seven layers, and 60 meters long, and there you'll see a succession of platforms – each platform corresponding and linked to an archeological stratum. As you go down, you see the strata. So you feel the civilizations that have passed, the cultures that once were, the wars that have been, all in a powerful and impactful way. And this is real history. This I feel is more convincing than going to a beautiful museum with nice objects and explaining the history behind them. You will see the archaeological site firsthand before it has been "unearthed and groomed for the public".

Luxury hotels and upscale resorts are Mahmoud's forte. Seafront destinations are his favorite playground. His blueprints generally draw on the dreamy, having built far and wide across the globe "architecture that is infused with a sense of wellbeing, emotion and mystery," as the seasoned French-Lebanese architect puts it. Relocating from France to Lebanon in 1996, Mahmoud has since been steering the ship at his eponymous GM Architects firm, which in addition to its offices in Beirut and Abu Dhabi, is heavily active worldwide. It is among the few architecture and design companies in the Middle East to be listed with brands as big as Accor, Rotana, Starwood and Rezidor.

Mahmoud credits this success to being consistent, thoroughly convinced by the work he presents and not allowing for certain temptations to cloud his judgments or to make any concessions. "I think in 25 years, not a single client has told me 'I don't like what you've done, show me something else,'" says Mahmoud, in a non- "blow-my-own-trumpet" tone.



Sofitel Tamuda Bay, Morocco

When you get to the bottom of the hole, there's water, referencing the Mediterranean Sea, without which there would be none of this. At the end of the promenade, you walk on a bridge where you will find a gigantic totem that takes you back to the surface. The totem has a series of symbols. When you look at it from the front, it is a perfect white sheet of paper, which is the future as we idealize it. When you look at it from behind, it is deconstructed, as the future is uncertain.

How long did you work on this, and how has the reception been? We had a dedicated team who worked on this for two months. The more I show it the more positive feedback I receive... Even at the Biennale, curators and architects urged me to build this.

Are you considering building it? It is surely buildable. I have consulted archeologists and I have to create sort of a roadmap and talk to international organizations to invest. This project is

not solely for Lebanon after all, but for the whole Mediterranean basin.

Is this your most daunting project yet? Absolutely, but at the same time I was surprised how easy it was to create it. There was nothing standing in the way, because it's our own. This is how we embark on all our projects, doing them as though they're ours.

In this project and as in any other, you followed the approach of "contextual immersion". Elaborate about your credo. I'm by nature very curious. Having traveled since I was a child, this developed in me awareness and sensitivity to culture, sociology, people's behavior... So whenever I go somewhere for a project, I need to understand the country I'm working in. I do my research and whatever needs to be done to blend in and understand the local culture, history and typography, the various aspects of that location. The way I see it,

once you get to the site, the executed project should disappear. You should get the feeling that it's always been there. I don't like to be aggressive; I feel the architecture should blend in. It doesn't mean that I will build something identical to the past. It can be something modern but not forced; I try to be very humble and discrete in how I intervene in the location.

People ask me, 'are you a green architect?' I reply that with this mentality, I am naturally a green architect. It is common sense and understanding of the country you are working in, using the local crafts and materials, even if they aren't advanced. Perhaps you can help the locals develop techniques, taking something that's very traditional and creating something very contemporary. In construction, you have to consider the product's carbon footprint. By getting materials and products from close by locations or locally, this is thinking common sense, "green" and economical.

You markedly stress the importance of the client to any given project, whether in your manifesto or during your public talks, perhaps more so than any other architect we've encountered. Why is that? Because we work on large projects that involve big investments, our responsibility as architects is to create functional projects for the client. I keep telling my team that the client gave us a big bag of money and they want it well spent. Starting from that point, you need to build a trustful relationship with the client... Because we work in a part of the world where clients are mostly businessmen, they can't relate to what we do, so we try to get the client to understand what we're doing. This is where the storytelling comes in, relating the project to the context. We build a story that relates to the region, location, and backdrop and our projects become a choreography of events. So you use a language that the client understands. It is like a book and the client becomes a protagonist... If they like the story, all the components of the project become part of that story and relate to it.



Damour Shores, Lebanon

And this is where you stress the fusion of all the elements of a project, which is integral to your philosophy. Exactly, it's the harmony of elements and the harmony of the project with the environment. This is something I discovered when I started going to the Far East where architecture is very much connected with the environment. There is a continuous flow between outside and inside, the elements, the religion, the way of life... I realized that the Mediterranean culture is similar to this. Any country on the Mediterranean Sea has a nice, comfortable feel. There is a positive feeling and warmth. In a subliminal way, you feel the history behind it. This is something I can capture and understand very quickly.

You appear to be greatly touched by the Far East and the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed...I was always very fond of the sea/nature lifestyle that we have on the Mediterranean. I've always lived by the sea. Being in the Far East has pointed this out to me. Although they are completely different, the two regions are linked by this closeness to the environment and nature.

You're frequently referred to as a luxury resort architect. Is this a spot on description or rather reductionist? It is accurate, because we've been doing quite a few of those and we truly enjoy doing them. Because of this relation with nature and the sea, which is something we control well, we know how to provoke the wow effect on a seafront property through the stories of these experiences. About 10 years ago, we were

commissioned to do a small resort called Bamboo Bay. When I took on that project, everything came in naturally – I knew exactly how I was going to organize it. All my background, experiences, travels were there in the back of my mind, ready for this project. Then came Eddé Sands and other projects in Jordan, Egypt and many other parts of the world followed suit. And we've been doing lots of those since, going more and more into the master planning of those seafront resorts.

Lebanon is not the easiest place in the world to live in. Why do you continue to stay here though have the option to live and work abroad? Despite all its problems and frustrations, Lebanon is home. I wouldn't be able to live in Abu Dhabi. I still find authenticity here. It is enough to keep me here. I've lived in Paris and South of France. I have a French passport and I know amazing people in France. But something keeps pulling me back here.

Share with us some of your recently unveiled projects or those in the pipeline. We have an amazing Sofitel project coming out in Morocco due for completion in 2016. It is a very colorful project. The story behind it is French artists who were influenced by Moroccan arts and crafts in the 20th century, such as Matisse and Picasso. There's also a soon-to-open Meridian hotel in Riyadh, the story of which is built around constellations and stars, in a very interesting, fun way. We've just finished a stunning house in Mykonos, Greece as well.



Mykonos Villas, Greece



Amber Valley, Jordan