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RAJ PATEL

Although new buildings seem to arrive every time you turn a corner in Dubai, creating eighty-storey high-rises in the desert is not as easy as it looks. Senior principal designer at KEO International Consultants Raj Patel tells iQ why the Middle East is an architect's playground

What is architecture all about to you?

Architecture is more than just function. It's about more than just buildings that serve a need. There is a difference between building and architecture. The former is about function, the latter is about spirit. It's about trying to capture the essence of a culture or place or material or light. Potentially, what you create can move civilizations, which is inspiring. I believe that whatever we do, it must have meaning and I try to apply these principals to all of my projects.

Whereabouts are you currently working?

I've designed projects in Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and Bahrain. I think it's important to get around in this region. It's important to avoid being stuck or linked to one particular city. I've got a big project coming up in Abu Dhabi where I'll be building two 80-storey towers, which will be a landmark project for me.

Why do you do it? What keeps you inspired?

I think there's so much to be inspired by in the Middle East. The things that inspire me the most are not buildings, but the subtle things in life that a lot of people don't notice. Things like the patterns of waves in the ocean, the ripples hidden in the sand dunes and the textures of traditional dress. Sometimes it's a bit tedious trying to dig these things out and translate them into architecture although it's worth it when people recognise the cultural connection you're trying to convey. Creating a building with a timeless quality is like listening to a good song on the radio, when it's only later that you realise it's 30 years old. I try to create an experience that will last.

Do you enjoy watching your designs become part of a cityscape?

To a certain extent, when a building is finished, it's a bit anticlimactic for me. It's a low period for me because at that point, everything has been captured. The moment it's built, it ceases to be theory and becomes practice. That first sketch, idea or rendering is what we struggle with; as architects we just hope that they're as consistent as they can be. Plato says that 'perfect' spheres or squares or circles belong to the heavens; they don't belong to us. We try to replicate them, but the moment you achieve it, something is lost. I feel that's true in architecture as well. The conceptual stage is about thoughts, feelings and ideas. Once it's built, it's a commodity. There is a difference between commodity and art.

What do you think of the quality of architecture in the Middle East?

As architects, we're no different than artists. What interests me, doesn't necessarily have to interest other architects. A lot of architects try to replicate past buildings or past styles or sometimes futuristic things. If that's what you really believe in, architecturally, that's fine. If you can sell it, congratulations, there's nothing wrong with that. However, I see a lot of shallow thinking reflected in our cities. You cannot really find a meaningful idea behind some of the buildings here. It's not about having just one type of architecture, there are many styles that fit here. But I think architects carry the responsibility of not being shallow in their thinking. If you're not shallow, it won't reflect in your work; if you are, it's going to show. Throughout the Middle East, unfortunately, a lot of these cities are starting to show.

Because of the rich history in this region, is it easier to work here than in a country with less of a history like the US?

Absolutely. At the same time, however, America offers a history of building type. You can trace the history of skyscrapers back 100 years to the first 12-storey buildings, which were load-bearing and had really thick walls at their base, to the steel buildings of today. In the Middle East, architects have compressed that 100 years into 10 years. It's very exciting. We're progressing. We're taking the lessons we've learned there and applying them here. Now it's time to add that next layer of responsibility, design, attention and care. We know how skyscrapers work here; now let's think about what they look like.

You have created several award-winning designs. What do the awards mean to you?

When I heard we won the International Design Competition for KIA, I didn't feel my heart skip a beat. We work on a lot of projects and sometimes when you feel like you really nailed a design, you find out you didn't get it. And it's more frustrating when you find you who did get it and you don't understand their concept. If you are going to become overly excited about winning something then that means that you will also become overly dejected when you don't win; you can't let that sort of thinking control how you practice as an architect.

Architecturally speaking, what do you think works in this region and what doesn't?

Quite honestly, anything is possible here. Buildings with 45-50 per cent efficiency are possible. In other words, if someone wants a 40-storey tower on a smaller plot where most of the floor plate is core, it's

possible. I see all the architectural possibilities in the world possible here. Things I haven't seen done very well here are subterranean projects. Going below ground makes people, especially women, feel unsafe. Whether they're parking or living, there is a feeling of isolation or claustrophobia attached to these kinds of projects. Also, one of the most difficult challenges in the Middle East is dealing with the sun, U-values and shading coefficients. The sun is not very forgiving and obviously you cannot use clear glass, and architects love to use clear glass.

Where do the worlds of interior design and architecture meet?

They meet at the front door. Both are so specialised that they really should not influence each other too much. I like the notion of collaboration. I believe that if you have a good architect and you bring in a good landscape architect and a good interior designer, not only will they make your building more complete, but they'll bring a dimension that just an architect will probably never reach alone.

What are your plans for the future?

We've got two 80-storey towers on Reem Island in Abu Dhabi along with a host of new projects in Dubai and Doha. My priority is to continue doing quality architecture, and avoid the trap of quantity, which I think is a problem out here. Right now though, if you're an architect, this is the place to be. It has so much potential, it's like an architect's playground.

What would you be doing if you weren't an architect?

I was interested in medicine when I was younger, so I'd like to think I could become a surgeon.

VITAL STATS

Name: Raj Patel

DoB: 28/02/1969

Profession: Architect

Nationality: USA (Indian origin)

His story: Raj was thrown among mechanical pencils and model buildings at the age of five and was inspired by the idea of drawing. After pursuing a Bachelor of Architecture degree at the University of Cincinnati and then a Master's degree at Yale, he decided to move to the Middle East in 2001.

