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Lasting words

Award-winning Saudi Arabian architect Sumaya Dabbagh is delivering architectural solutions in a more personalised spirit by converging two fundamental areas of her life. She has made the transition from designing mega projects like Dubai's interactive educational leisure centre, Children's City, to designing villas and holistic centres.

Text: Lisa Durante
Photo: Antonie Robertson



Sumaya Dabbagh

As the Project Architect for Dubai's Children's City project, what do you make of this emirate's bold plan to transform Dubai into a world-class centre for leisure, tourism and entertainment?

"We are seeing the emergence of a different type of resident, one more rooted in the city and therefore less transient. No longer considered a backwater, Dubai is attracting a more diverse and discerning population with higher expectations of products, services as well as built environment. This will force standards of architectural design to increase, as we are already witnessing. If this is what it takes for Dubai to become more world-class, then it's a positive outcome in the long term. In the short term however, the haste of development is bound to affect the quality of design. Nevertheless, Dubai is a young city and the speed of development is a reflection of its youthful fervour. As the city matures, I am optimistic that quality will become priority and balance will be restored."

As a follower and practitioner of Yoga, would you define yourself as a 'holistic' architect?

"If you take holistic to mean becoming 'whole' then I would say yes. My practice of both yoga and architecture has been developing in parallel over the past

14 years. These two fundamental areas of my life are now converging. This is my new direction. I want to integrate the different aspects of myself to become more 'whole' at every level".

In what ways has your choice of lifestyle influenced your architectural inspiration and the quality of your productivity?

"Yoga taught me how to still the mind from mental clutter and to reflect inwards. This internal quietness has given me the clarity needed to tap into my own intuition and creativity. Translated outwards, into external space or architecture, it is simple clear spaces, without clutter stripped down to essentials. It is authentic architecture, not pretending to be something that it is not. So you don't make a building look like a fort if its not. Even at the level of details and materials, you don't make concrete to look like stone. There is a certain respect to materials that I feel should be maintained".

In your private practice, you have successfully renovated old villas. Do you think that structurally and/or design-wise they have more potential than some of the newer offerings on the market?

"Not particularly. There are plenty of badly as well as well-made old villas and vice versa. In terms of design, it's an enjoyable challenge to have an initial 'fabric' within which to weave a fresh design. Sometimes the simplest interventions can completely transform a space. Nevertheless, building from scratch is also extremely rewarding. I feel fortunate to be in a profession where you are able to see your ideas and sketches materialise into built forms."

Does your interest in Eastern philosophy lead you to believe in design practices such as China's 'Feng Shui' or India's 'Vastu'. Do they have validity in today's architectural scenario?

"I have always been fascinated by the way a building makes you 'feel' when you walk into it. Take the Pantheon in Rome — it really moved me. This is the measure of a timeless building — one that continues to make the same impressions on people after thousands of years. I am not a specialist in either field but I believe that just as there are energies within the body that cause disease once blocked, there are energies in the built environment which should flow and can cause similar 'disease' if blocked. With my yoga practise I have become more aware of these energies and their subtle effects. ■