

*Zena Malek is renowned as a formidable Lebanese architect and 'an outspoken critic of Arab architecture'. Ally Pace speaks to one of the most influential women in the Arab world, and discovers what she hates about Arab architecture, and controversially, what she loves.*

When interviewing Zena Malek, it is clear she is a passionate and driven woman – traits she has needed in order to succeed in a male-dominated profession, in a male-dominated corner of the world.

Born in Lebanon thirty-eight years ago, Malek studied conceptual architecture at renowned institute L'Ecole nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD) in Paris. After graduating in 1993, she moved back to the Middle East and established Z de Z in Lebanon, swiftly followed by Villa22, an architectural consultancy firm, in Kuwait. Over the next ten years she was responsible for a wide array of projects, from residential villas to offices, shops and showrooms.

In 2004, just as the UAE property boom really started to gather pace, Malek relocated to Dubai. For someone with such a profound and outspoken distaste for Arabian architecture – she says that in order to maintain a stable mind in the Arabic world, she has to remove her glasses – you may wonder why she would immerse herself within this 'chaotic Disneyland'. But Malek admits she can on occasion be a fan of Arabian architecture, and cites two extremely different Dubai buildings as examples. Jumeirah Emirates Towers, a landmark on the Dubai horizon since 2001, comes in for particular praise.

"Emirates Towers is a versatile space which interacts with human movement; when a person moves around it, on foot or by car, the angles of the two towers change. The positive space left in between the two towers allows light, shadow and elegance to be revealed," she states. And for Malek, it is all about space. "Architecture is the thoughtful making of space – when architecture works, the space sings."

She also singles out the Bastakiya as a favourite, somewhere authentic which she believes possesses both rhythm and modestly proportioned scale. "It expresses the old social habits of the UAE; we can never reproduce this in a 'New Old Town'. When we do such a thing we turn a city into a 'Disneyland', and only chaos emerges. A kind of cancer occurs and harm is done – but some people call reproduction 'creativity'," she sighs.

Her conviction is unwavering. When pressed to define creativity she argues that inspiration can certainly be taken from existing buildings, but that true art comes from finding or enhancing existing facets rather than just replicating them. "In art as in architecture, our most intelligent and most wonderful creations come about when we draw them out as extensions and enhancements of what exists already. The denial of this point of view is the chief way in which twentieth century development has destroyed the surface of the earth, and specifically our major Arabic cities."

Strong words indeed. But unlike most critics, Malek has the guts to put her money where her mouth is. Upon moving to Dubai she founded her own company, Arabian Concept Development, and rapidly won a series of major projects. These project developers are not faint-hearted, and have allowed Malek the free-rein she demands in order to stamp her personal seal of approval on each development.

Hydra Properties – a major Abu Dhabi based property developer – hired Malek to apply her innovative and invigorating approach to several of its expansive projects: Hydra Office Towers in Dubai's

Business Bay, and the low-rise residential Golf Walk development in Abu Dhabi. Malek clearly enjoys working with Hydra Properties, describing CEO Dr. Sulaiman Al-Fahim as “a visionary person; his capacity for seeing the real estate market from different angles allows him to be a step ahead of the others”.

Malek shares Al-Fahim’s visionary status, for she too sees further than simply structure and aesthetics. Architecture for Malek is as much about experience as anything else, a belief which is fuelling a current Arabian Concept Development hotel design which allows for wide-ranging experiential customisation. Hotels should offer “an experience far beyond a traditional ‘goodnight’ chocolate or the infamous fruit basket,” she laughs. In today’s supposedly consumer-led society, she finds it amazing that hotels don’t differentiate their customer approach. “A hotel may claim to be a business hotel,” she snorts, “and yet if you check-in under five different names and five different professions, you get the same treatment whether you are an investor, an architect or a journalist!”

She is equally dismissive of the current fashion for celebrity-monikered buildings across the region. “What is this crazy trend,” she questions, “where football players, businessmen or fashion designers feel obliged to brand a building with their name as a ‘service’ for humanity, as a ‘life-changing’ development? This is blending, not branding!”

She is more complimentary about celebrity architects as they at least have a recognised and lauded ability when it comes to design. While discussing the Sadiyat Island development, she expresses an interest in the outcome of the three particular museums which are being designed by Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel and Tadao Ando. “To associate buildings with celebrity architects is understandable as they have a good sensitivity to factors such as light and shadow,” she says.

But shouldn’t culture develop organically? Is it counterproductive or limiting to ‘designate’ an area which will be given over to ‘cultural’ activities? Malek agrees. “To build a new neighbourhood with life, today, is our biggest challenge. When building a new neighbourhood, we overlap the dynamic-time factor which usually creates and maintains cohesion. Neighbourhoods usually emerge from a number of individual actions, with no planned arrangements or predefined master plan. When we look at the modern practice of urban development in our Arabic cities, we see some things get overemphasised and others get underemphasised, one gets confused by the multiplicity of aims.”

Many of these issues stem from economic factors, she believes. In her experience, “in any conversation you may have with most real estate developers, questions are answered almost exclusively in economic terms. Will this pay for itself? What can make money here?” Shrugging, she continues, “Of course, the products which are built in answer to these questions are invariably machinelike, abstract and lifeless.”

You can only imagine the reaction someone as headstrong and candid as Malek receives from the real estate industry. Yet it is testament to her innate ability and tenacious attitude that she has not only founded an extremely successful business, but has also been featured as one Arabian Business Magazine’s ‘50 Most Powerful Arabs’ for three years in a row. She may be the *‘enfant terrible’* of the Middle Eastern architecture world, but she has been grudgingly accepted as a permanent – and talented – fixture.

In addition to her aptitude for design, Malek is the brains behind a revolutionary piece of software. Named Sakani, this computer programme enables the customisation of mass-produced housing

configurations. Put simply, this means that an entire housing development can be built with each unit receiving an individual configuration. Considering that many of the residential developments in the UAE feature thousands upon thousands of identically laid out units, this software allows developers – or even end users – to individually customise the layout of their house to their own tastes, ending an era of identikit housing. Sakani is currently in use across a number of Malek's projects, and she describes it as "the end of mass production; the start of mass customisation".

More recently, in 2007, Malek branched out into interior design with a new company, Kaks, which means 'two' in Estonian – very symbolic given she founded the firm with her husband, Andrew Riad Andari. The couple took their experiences as consumers and formed what they refer to as a "minipreneurial" company which deals with real estate, furniture and accessories.

As Creative Director, she is currently working on a residential resort called Sigra Villas in Mount Lebanon. She is proud of the development, calling it "a new approach in real estate, it is not about huge, show-off, non-human projects, but instead it is about the new trend of 'happynomics' or happy economics." She says the project whispers, rather than shouts, and as with most things Malek creates, allows extensive individualisation through Sakani-based customisation.

Further projects in the pipeline include a furniture line from Kaks called Tee&Tee, and a forthcoming accessories line named 'Elekti', aimed specifically at women. Both projects are expected to be launched in the Gulf region within the next 12 months, and the accessories will additionally be available online. Each of the lines are based around her Sakani concept, hence she is again bringing a welcome degree of customisation and more importantly, personalisation, to the customer. Malek is an ardent fan of flexibility, saying "To make a versatile product which can also be customised is a way to fill the old, universal need: 'I have choice' therefore 'I am happy'."

Her 360 degree approach to design puts Malek at the forefront of her field, as she can single-handedly conceptualise a building from the inside out, right down to the smallest finishing touches. And with an abundance of customisable choice available throughout her collection, she certainly has a lot of happy customers.