

The feel-good factory

SAUDI-BORN ARCHITECT SUMAYA DABBAGH COMBINES SOLID MATTER AND LIGHT TO CREATE EMOTION. IDENTITY TALKS TO THE MATERIAL GIRL ABOUT OUR IMMATERIAL WORLD.

Text: Matt Jones

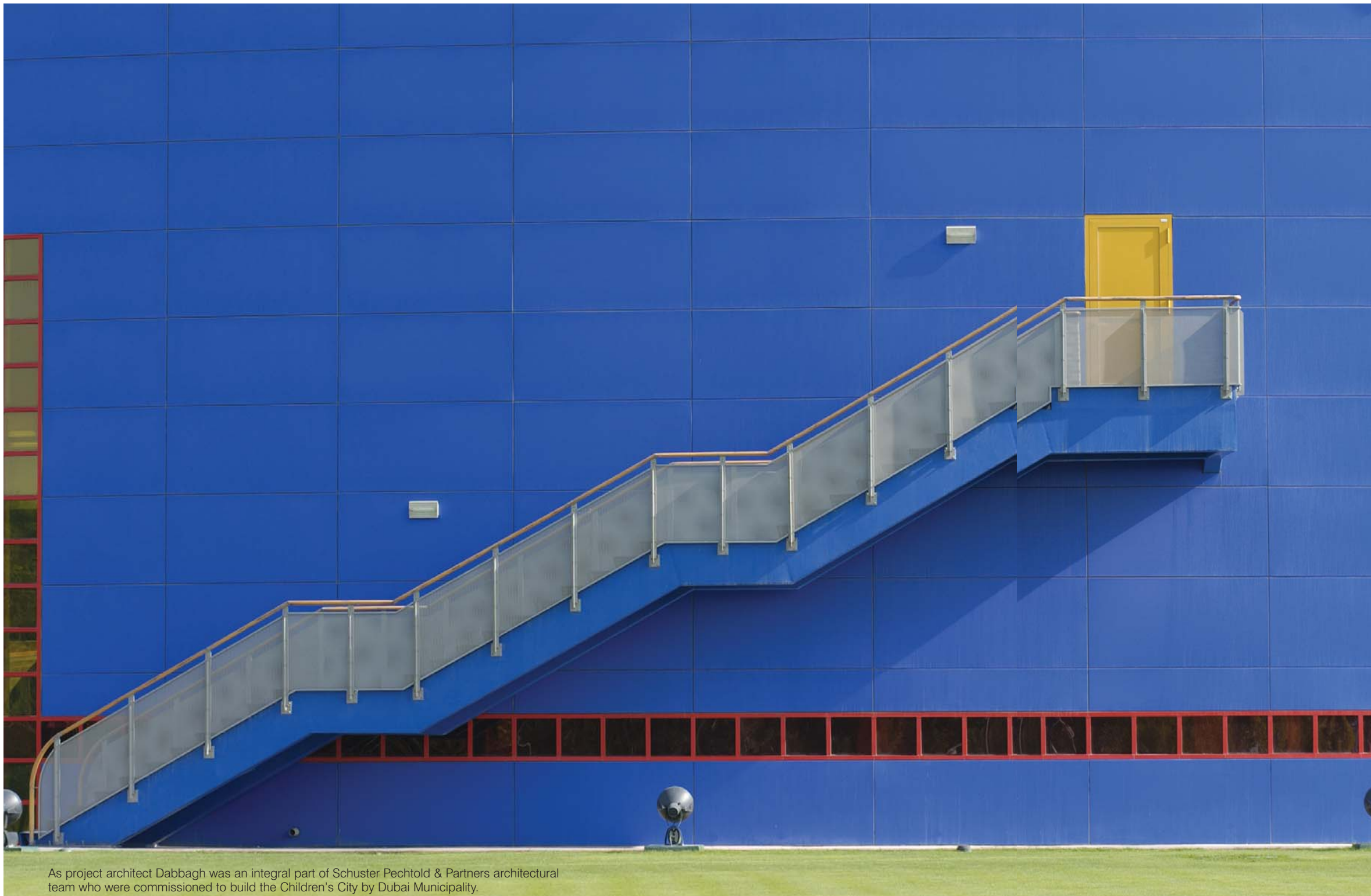
Photography: Karel Kita



Custom built for children the building had to be simple and easy for them to understand.



Saudi-born architect Sumaya Dabbagh

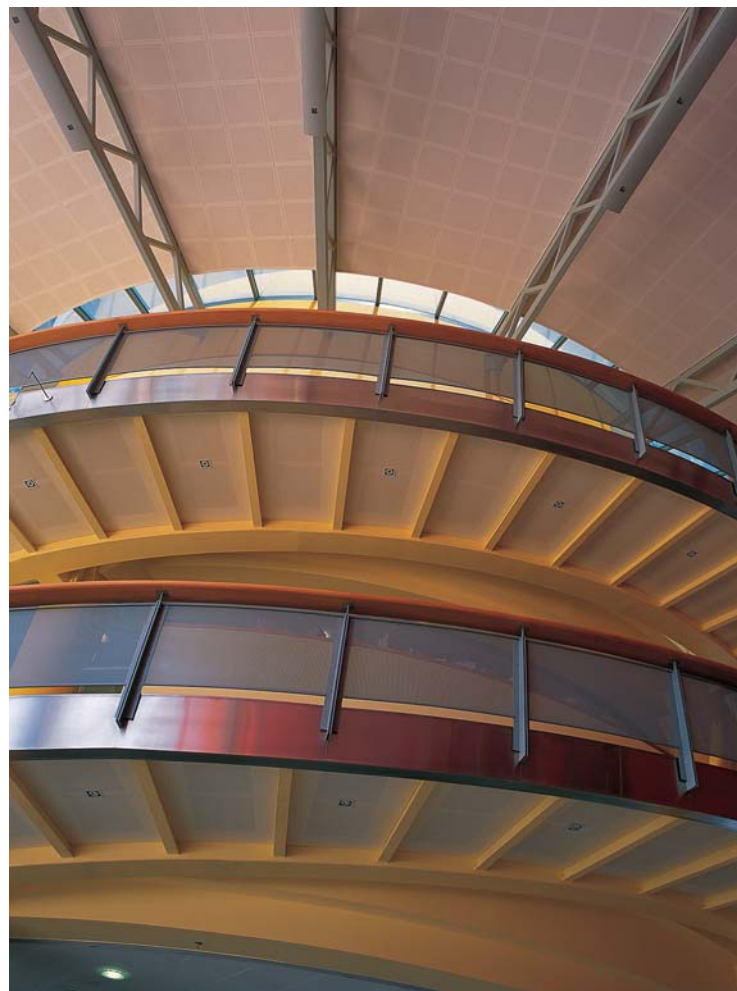
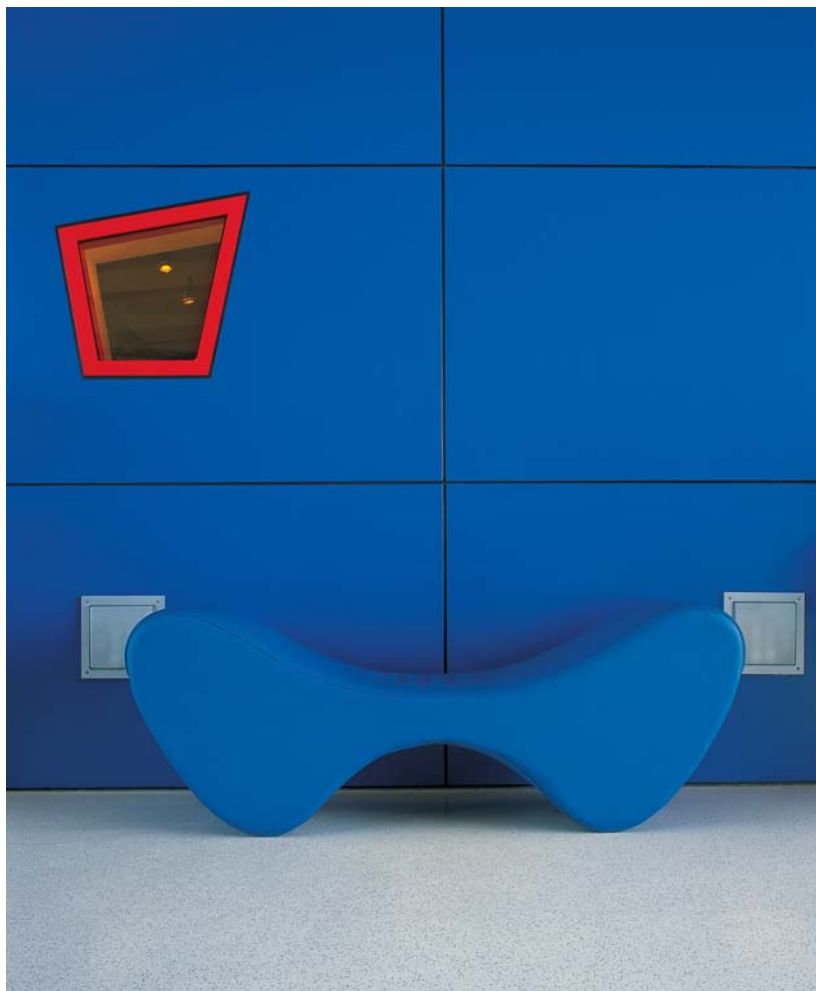


As project architect Dabbagh was an integral part of Schuster Pecholdt & Partners architectural team who were commissioned to build the Children's City by Dubai Municipality.

Sumaya Dabbagh has set out to resolve the unresolved and she's doing it with stone, wood and the latest in advanced technology glass and floor resins.

As an architect, the Saudi-born, English-educated graduate of Bath University works with builder's yard materials to create tangible structures that serve specific functions: as homes, workplaces or venues for entertainment and relaxation.

But chat with the Dubai-based 30-something over a mint tea and it soon becomes clear that there's more to her architecture than meets the eye. What Dabbagh actually sets out to construct with each new project is a magnificent intangible, something that can't be driven past, parked outside, wired, plumbed, lived in or even photographed for this magazine: a monumentally good mood in the building's end user. It might say 'Architect' on her business card, but Sumaya Dabbagh is in the business of lifting our spirits. Indeed, she has made it her life's work.



The cheerful bold coloured Children's City in Dubai's Creekside Park has proved to be a stimulating and intriguing experience for youngsters.

"For me, it's an unresolved issue, how a space can make you feel," says Dabbagh, a Chartered Member of the Royal Institute of British Architects. "I see it as an important part of architecture. There's this intangible element of the built form: yes, you can see it, you can touch it, but how does it make you feel? That's obviously very difficult to work out, but this is my aim – how you get that environment. This is my search. I put a great value on designing for specific solutions, but at the end of the day I'm designing something that should make the end user feel good."

Dabbagh has been 'Designing forms, buildings, creating new environments' in Dubai since she arrived here in 1993. Having emigrated to England with her family at the age of 13, during her teens in Sussex she suppressed her Arab identity to fit in. Her return to the Gulf was, she says, a step towards reclaiming that identity.

"Dubai, the UAE, is very cosmopolitan and rich culturally," says Dabbagh. "The mixture of Arab and European cultures is a perfect one. I am Arab, but obviously I'm influenced by my education and my years in England and Europe. I find that here I can integrate those two parts of myself. I can be myself here. I don't have to pretend to be something else."

For seven of her 11 years in Dubai, Dabbagh was with Schuster Pechtold & Partners (SPP), with whom she worked on what remains her largest landmark project, the 9,000 square metre Children's City in Dubai's Creekside Park, commissioned by Dubai Municipality in 1996 and built between 2000 and 2002.

Although a member of a big team, as project architect involved with Children's City from the first competition design in 1995, Dabbagh was a key player and takes her fair share of the credit for the eye-catchingly cheerful educational and entertainment centre for kids. Typically, how children would feel in the space was, for her, a key consideration.

"That was designed for youngsters obviously, so it has to be simple and easy to understand," she says. "The foyer space has a welcoming feeling, the galleries are very exciting and it's very colourful. The idea of the building blocks is quite simple, like the wooden blocks that kids play with: the blue block is the science block, the red is culture. We tried to make it a stimulating experience for the child. I think it works."

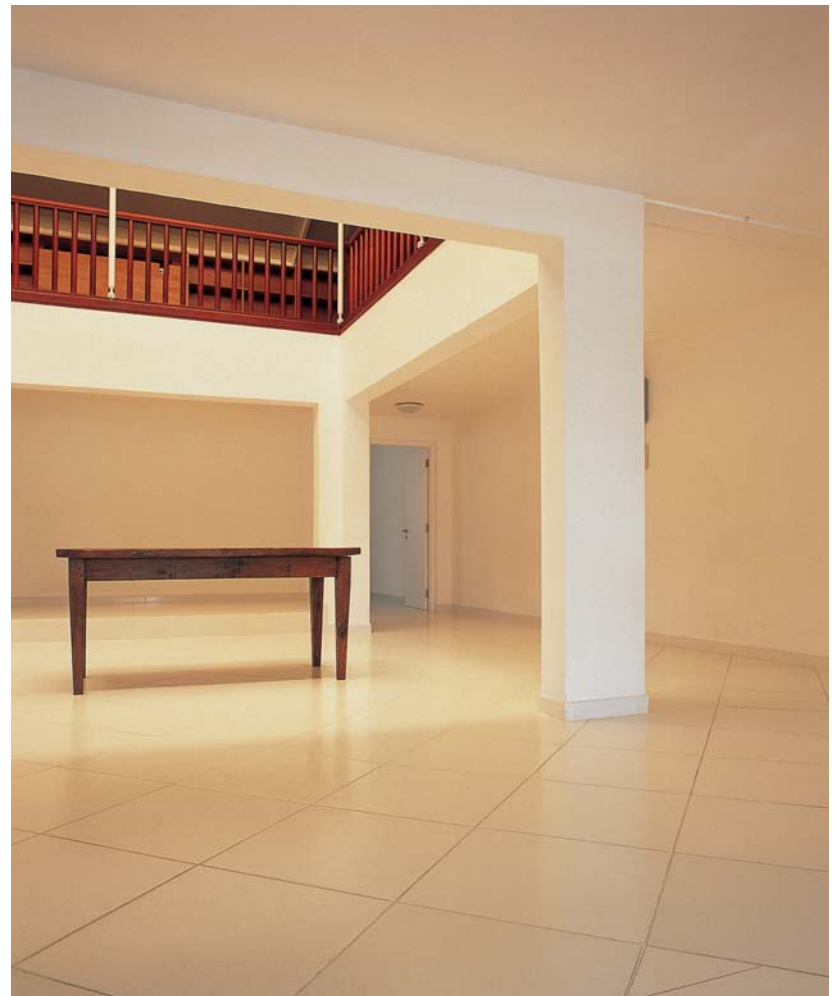
Children's City's interiors were fitted with interactive displays by museum specialists from the UK, but it's the architectural design, both exterior and interior, that communicates the promise of fun inside.

"It's a very bold building in terms of external form and colours, so for kids it's a strong attraction," she says. "They want to know what's going on in there and when they're in, they want to know what's going on in the blue block or the red block."

The Children's City project marked a turning point in Dabbagh's career. Although clearly proud of her work and her time with SPP, she peppers conversation about that period with the words 'bureaucracy', 'red tape', 'compromises' and 'constraints'. When the project was completed, she decided the time had come to strike out in a new direction.

"I felt I was stifled at that point," she admits. "Although we did some very interesting work and it was an amazing opportunity, I just felt I was stifled. My creativity was constrained. I needed to really break out. I'm yet to do more amazing things, but I think that in the past couple of years I've gone through a kind of opening. I feel a lot freer."

Now working independently, Dabbagh regards Children's City as part of "A previous phase in my career. This," she adds, "is the start of a new phase, which I'm excited about. Obviously I've moved to smaller projects, but I'm



really enjoying it as a contrast: dealing directly with the client, making decisions much more quickly, having a much freer dialogue. It has been quite rewarding. I'm lucky to have had clients who have a certain affinity to my way of thinking and design."

So what is Dabbagh's way? Does she regard herself as a modernist? "I aspire more to works of contemporary architects like Alvaro Siza," she says. "He has basically used the language of traditional Portuguese architecture and applied it in a modern way. This is what I aspire to. Traditional modernists don't have this sensitivity towards the context or the locality in which they are building. I put a great emphasis on the context and use that as a starting point for design. I'm not sure how you'd label this approach."

Context, authenticity, timelessness and value engineering are architectural values Dabbagh holds dear. "We're very lucky in this profession," she says. "We start off with sketches and end up with a built form – you create something from nothing, which is extremely rewarding. But architecture is unlike other pure creative fields. It affects the built environment and therefore there's a responsibility to design architecture that's going to have a positive influence on the environment. It's a duty for all architects really, to create an architecture that will enhance people's lives and their environment. It's a fundamental aim for any architect, and that's basically what I'm trying to achieve."

The first solo project Dabbagh embarked on was to enhance the way she was living. "I was in an apartment at the time and was ready to break out into a bigger space," she says. "I really wanted to have my own input in my own environment, so the first step was to design my own place. I really need to express my ideas about space in the space I'm living in, which affects me day to day. So having this space has had a great influence on me."

Dabbagh's airy Jumeirah home was an interior project. "It was a given shell," she says of the pre-existing villa. "What I've done to it is basically make the space flow in a different way, in a contemporary way. I've tried to create



Top left: In her recently renovated home Dabbagh broke with tradition and centred the kitchen cabinets in the middle of her kitchen as opposed to lining them along the walls.

Top right: An enthusiastic Yogi, the architect has allowed for ample space in her galleried living room for practising and teaching yoga.

Above: Locally sourced terracotta pots add a splash of colour to the predominantly white interior, which is surrounded with garden.



Dabbagh has recently finished a project that included creating a minimalist Feng Shui influenced interior for The Haven, a new holistic centre in Jumeirah.

Left: The open plan home allows for work and living space to flow into one. Nooks and niches have been created for displaying sculpture and art without interfering with the openness.

different kinds of spaces. In a home you can have different moods. Sometimes you feel like being enclosed, cosy, and sometimes you want to be open and exposed. It's therefore important to have the variety of spaces to accommodate these moods – the high open spaces, as well as the low spaces close to the ground."

Dabbagh's most recent project was turning another Jumeirah villa into a holistic centre – The Haven. In her quest to create positive feelings in the end user, does she have a trademark design element or material that's common to all projects?

"No, I think each project is unique," she says. "You respond to each situation according to its requirements. You're presented with a problem, basically, and you find solutions. There could be hundreds of ways to approach a design, but you start to narrow down the options by taking into consideration the client's requirements, the site restrictions, the environment, the location and so on. All of these factors eventually lead you to one solution. I find it difficult when a client says, 'Give me some options.' That's not how I work. All of these influences affect your choices and you end up with one solution that is unique to that particular problem, to those particular sets of parameters."

"I enjoy working with natural materials – stone, wood – but I also really enjoy working with modern materials. There are a lot of possibilities in the way the technology of materials is moving, such as glass or resin floor finishes, for example. These may be perfect solutions for certain situations so you have to be very open. I wouldn't limit myself to a palette of set materials."

Dabbagh eases back in her chair and extends a hand into the room we're sitting in, as if to run her fingers through the intangible calm she has created there.

"Having the opportunity to use creativity to create interesting buildings and interesting spaces is a privilege," she says. "I really enjoy what I do." **ID**