

# ARCHITECT

MIDDLE EAST

NEWS, DATA, ANALYSIS AND STRATEGIC INSIGHTS FOR ARCHITECTS IN THE GCC

**Mansion house**  
Surrey style  
comes to Oman

12

**Inspiring sport**  
Qatar's latest  
football project

36

**Design the future**  
Challenge for  
young talent

44

INTERVIEW

## The Rise of an Emirate

Reflections on the growth of Dubai  
since the late 20th century

30

**BURJ AL ARAB**  
ORIGIN OF AN  
ICON

50

**PLUS**

**Social Media**  
The Tweets are in

**Engineering**  
Industry merger







# QUALITY DESIGN IS A MUST FOR SAUDI ARABIA

Architect Sumaya Dabbagh says the fabric of the kingdom's cities must be part of its future

By: Hadi Khatib

**S**o much is being talked about the new Saudi architectural landscape. Glitz and glitter for the most part, painting a new cosmopolitan picture of the Kingdom.

The 1km Kingdom Tower in Jeddah set for completion in 2018 is by far the most iconic development not only in the country but on a global scale.

The Headquarters Business Park in Jeddah, a 50 storey office tower and mixed use development, and the Olaya Towers in downtown Riyadh, one of the more prominent set of buildings to rise in that city's skyline, are defining a new direction and setting the standards for the future.

"This is what happened in Dubai, when the Emirates Towers first came up. The 'feel' of quality of a well-designed, well executed and long lasting project became a reference for people," said Sumaya Dabbagh.

Dabbagh is a Saudi national born in Jeddah and the current Hon Sec of the Gulf Chapter of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) who also runs Dabbagh Architects, her own practice in Dubai. She said: "When a city starts to grow that way, people can start to discern the difference and demand quality."

Dabbagh Architects is a privately held architectural design firm.

With more than 20 years of UAE experience, Dabbagh set up her design office and became fully licensed and registered in the Emirate of Dubai in 2008. The company's mission is to create 'Feel

good, contemporary architecture that has a positive impact on the world.'

Dabbagh said she believes that Jeddah is seeing a lot less quality construction than in Riyadh.

Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial district for example represents a highly important economic boost to the city - not to mention being a prestigious architectural development.

"Wadi Hanifa, which was for years a rubbish dump was cleaned up and transformed into a vast park with flora, fauna, and lakes that attract cool breezes and this brought a dimension of fertility to the city," said Dabbagh.

Wadi Hanifa crosses parts of Riyadh, essentially creating a "pseudo corniche" and runs southeast for 120km before reaching the shifting sands of the Empty Quarter.

"In Riyadh we find the Diplomatic Quarter with very innovative projects that won awards and of course the Riyadh metro which will transform the city. Jeddah, a low rise city, seems to have more private projects with only a handful of developers looking at developing quality," said Dabbagh.

And quality has been missing in Jeddah according to Dabbagh. Poor housing development has been for the most part a source of discontent for renters and/or home owners.

"In Jeddah, land prices are very expensive, so a developer having to pay up for the land and cost of construction tends to build cheaply resulting in very poor quality, and charge really high prices," said Dabbagh.





## JEDDAH SEEMS TO HAVE MORE PRIVATE PROJECTS WITH ONLY A HANDFUL OF DEVELOPERS LOOKING AT DEVELOPING QUALITY"

– SUMAYA DABBAGH



The solution might rest with government-led investments and spending. The \$86bn King Abdullah Economic City, encompassing 173 km<sup>2</sup>, is located along the Red Sea, around 100 km north of Jeddah, close to Mecca and Medina by car and an hour away of all Middle Eastern capital cities by plane. It's only one of six economic and four medical cities that will change the face of the country in the years to come.

And unquestionably, with every high quality development, one is tempted to start from scratch, meaning as if the area's history never existed.

"Construction trends in Saudi Arabia seem to follow those of Dubai where islands of new developments are coming up in places like Burj Khalifa and the area around it, the Marina, JBR, and others," indicated Dabbagh.

"What I find missing is the issue of integrating that development into the fabric of the city. These developments though they enjoy great design, workmanship and master planning, tend to turn their backs on what's around them, and create division rather than integration."

Dabbagh, whose understanding of cultures is essential to her work, believes there is a missed opportunity when one builds a completely new element, and takes little from its context, its locality and orientation.

"Jeddah and other Saudi cities have a very strong history and heritage and if construction can't make a connection with the street and human scale, then we are losing an important aspect of community creation and with it a sense of belonging and what tends to happen is that the old part is neglected and people start moving out.

Dabbagh said it is vital not to forget what or who came before. "Yes, modern construction attracts business and revenues, but what I'd like to see more of is a vision and way to build communities, and make them sustainable socially, culturally and economically.

"Al Balad in old Jeddah was a great example of an integrated, mixed-use development at the height of its time. Without copying it stylistically, we have a lot to learn from the essence of that piece of city fabric, right at our door step, to use in our future cities". ●