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Cultural devotion

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ADVANCING ARCHITECTURE

Sumays Dabbagh, Chair of the RIBA Gulf Chapter, speaks about the importance of improving architectural standards in the Gulf region and the role of the RIBA in supporting the advancement of the industry.

About the author
Sumays Dabbagh is a Saudi Architect educated in the UK with more than 26 years of experience. In 2016, she founded Dabbagh Architects, a privately held architectural design firm, recognised regionally for its contemporary design and quality-driven service. In 2016, Dabbagh became the Honorary Chair of the Steering Committee for the RIBA Gulf Chapter. She has served in the RIBA Gulf chapter since its inception in 2009.

Architecture improves our lives. It creates better buildings and stronger communities and makes better use of the earth’s limited resources. The Royal Institute of British Architects champions excellence in architecture. RIBA education ensures that its members implement the best standards of design. Architecture has a responsibility not only to create good buildings but to ensure the spaces between the buildings that make up our cities.

A tour of many of our Gulf cities can leave the visitor bewildered by the lack of identity as well as quality. There is a disparity between the handful of well-designed buildings and the majority of ordinary buildings that make up a disconcerting urban fabric. Even the better-designed buildings reflect imported or borrowed architecture which may have limited relevance to our context or culture. The quality of the large proportion of buildings ranges from mediocre to poor, not meeting the varying standards of design and construction.

In order to understand how our cities have become what they are, we must reflect on the context of the region and its recent development. Historically, the region has acted as a major trading hub. It is located in a strategic position, at the centre of trade routes between east and west. This attracted, and still attracts, trade, business and people from the region and beyond.

The rich demographics of its population reflect this diversity, with each nationality bringing its particular culture, education and experience. This diversity is also reflected in the profession of architecture, where we can find architects and practices with a wide spectrum of backgrounds, education and standards.

Our modern cities, which had developed during the 60s, 70s and 80s, started to grow exponentially. When well-designed and executed buildings started to appear in our cities during the early 90s, a shift began to appear. Buildings such as the Kingdom Tower and Falakir Tower in Riyadh, North Arabia, and Emirate Towers and Jumeirah Beach Hotel in Dubai, established a benchmark. They demonstrated how a well-designed building could add value to the end users and the developer, as well as the city.

Today, high-quality buildings have become more common in our cities but they still represent a small proportion of our built environment. The large majority reflect designs and construction standards that are primarily commercial in their emphasis on the return on investment rather than quality, sustainability or the impact on the city that is generated by these buildings.

The first phase of development of the last 15 years has attracted more architect and professionals from various corners of the globe further broadening the disparity of standards in the profession as well as cultural relevance in the design. As a result, offerings of architectural services can vary tremendously from one practice to another depending on its background, employer culture and strategy.

In order for us to produce better architecture and improve our built environment and cities, it is imperative that we establish a set of core values for the profession that ensure consistency in standards and quality of design and construction. We must nurture our local talent to build cities that fit our needs, our values and our culture.

As architects and developers, we must recognize and embrace the responsibility inherent in the task of creating our built environment. The Royal Institute of British Architects acknowledges this responsibility. It provides a tightly-regulated profession with high standards of education, and through its strict code of conduct promotes and champions integrity, professionalism, excellence, creativity and innovation.

In recognition of the need to help improve standards in the Gulf, the RIBA, with the support of its Gulf members, established the RIBA Gulf Chapter in 2009. The RIBA has a worldwide reputation built up over more than 175 years. It has vast knowledge and experience to offer the region and is globally recognized as a benchmark for excellence in architecture. Its set of standards, shares knowledge and demonstrates the economic, social and environmental benefits of good architecture.

The RIBA Gulf Chapter’s objectives are to bring awareness to these values and help improve the standards of practice in the Gulf. It has set out to fulfill its objectives from the top down through its diverse members, from the bottom up through education.

Through its members, the Gulf Chapter aims to demonstrate excellence in design and the value that quality can add to our cities. We will work with our members to support them and their continued development through CPD courses, events, forums and discussions.

The RIBA Gulf Chapter has introduced new routes to membership that take into consideration the diversity and backgrounds of architects practising in the region. The chapter offers Part 3 courses as well as a newly launched Membership Eligibility Assessment Panel (MEAP) course. The latter caters for the growing number of local, self-qualified and highly competent architects in practice who do not hold RIBA recognised qualifications.

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