

I was always curious about the way people reacted to spaces created by form," said Sumaya Dabbagh, principal of the award-winning firm Dabbagh Architects. "When I was a child, we used to go up to Ta'if in the mountains on the weekends. Moving between the flatness and openness of Jeddah to the forms created by the jagged hills of Ta'if would excite and inspire me."

Hailing from a Saudi family, Dabbagh moved to the UK at the tender age of 13. There, her interests in art and science were nurtured, she said, and she realised that architecture would satisfy her curiosity and interest in these areas and more. Later, she would attend the University of Bath to study architecture before packing her bags once more and moving to Paris in 1991, where she would test her luck with English-speaking firms.

"I made the decision on a youthful whim - I thought it would be great to experience living in that city for a while. I also wanted to learn French. I knew one architect and through him I was introduced to the larger architectural scene," said Dabbagh. "This friend taught me how to explain my work in French, so I had a script that I had learned by heart, and I walked around Paris visiting architectural practices with my big A0-sized portfolio presenting my work to various practices. It paid off - I was hired by an international American French office, and worked on design competitions for cultural projects."







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Sumaya Dabbagh at work in her firm's Dubaibased office. Photo by Aasiya Jagadeesh

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The Mleiha Archaeological Centre, completed in 2016. The project won two awards and was shortlisted for a WAF award. It was a launching pad of sorts for the practice, as it has now been invited to largescale competitions

"When I look back, I am amazed how courageous I was to do that. That naïve, 'why not' part of me has actually served me in my career and allowed me to follow my instinct and take risks."

Dabbagh lived and worked in Paris for a year before returning to London. After a chance run-in with an old Saudi friend who reintroduced her to elements of her Saudi culture and heritage, Dabbagh decided to visit relatives in the UAE in the early 1990s. The trip proved to be an important step in her life - personally and professionally - and she chose to move to Dubai in 1993.

"Dubai was a great place for me to move to. I loved my time in Paris. It was also very pivotal in my personal journey and search for my own identity. I had found that Parisians were very conformist. Of course, this is a generalisation, but in my experience, that trait was very



limiting for me and I couldn't fully be myself. When I was living in the UK, I had integrated into the society so much so that people didn't ask where I was from, but in Paris, I would be asked that question all the time, and for the first time in a number of years, I would reply that I am from Saudi. This really forced me to examine my identity - where did I belong? Was it in the UK or was it in Saudi? This is part of the reason that I decided to return to the Gulf. I found that I could be myself here - a mixture of two cultures."

Inspired by, and perhaps even comforted by, Dubai's "melting pot", Dabbagh's many influences, interests and layers of experience started to unfold. She began working at Schuster Pechtold & Partners, where Dabbagh would have the opportunity to work on the award-winning Children's City project, after which, she would be appointed project architect. However, after seven years and several projects, Dabbagh felt it was time to pick up again.

"I started to have itchy feet again," Dabbagh added. "I felt that I wanted to do my own thing, so I left the company and took some time off to decide on my next career move. I travelled for a while and then came back and renovated an old family villa and made it into my home."

Between 2002 and 2008, the Saudi architect became a yoga instructor, studied project management and eventually launched her practice Dabbagh Architects. In 2009, she joined RIBA Gulf Chapter as a steering committee member, before slowly rising through the ranks and assuming chair position just two years ago.

Since founding her firm, Dabbagh has delivered a number of projects across the commercial, cultural, educational, hospitality, residential and retail sectors. Her firm's portfolio includes the Al Maktab Building in Dubai, various private residential projects, the Courtyard Marriott in Dubai, and the award-winning Mleiha Archaeological Centre in Sharjah.

Winning a Middle East Architect Award and a Cityscape Award in 2016, as well as being shortlisted for a WAF Award, the Mleiha Archaeological Centre was a launching pad of sorts for Dabbagh Architects - it had been acknowledged as a great exam-

Sumaya Dabbagh on gender

"I'm an architect, I don't believe that gender is relevant. However, when you come from Saudi Arabia, where, during the mid-1980s women were banned from studying architecture, gender, as an architect, becomes relevant. As a result of the ban, which was only lifted around 2009, there are very few women architects from my generation. In fact I only know of one other."

"So for the recently graduated young Saudi female architects, there are no role models. If I can encourage more to go into the profession or show them that women can become successful architects and add value to their cities and communities, then I am privileged to be a role model."



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Written by Rima Alsammarae **Images courtesy of Aasiya Jagadeesh & Dabbagh Architects**

ple of context-driven, contemporary architecture, and it showcased the firm's capabilities on an international stage.

"I think it was just a unique opportunity," said Dabbagh. "It was a great site and the client was very supportive. Understanding the context and the heritage of the site was our starting point. During our first visit, I was impressed by the site and, in particular, the passion of the archaeologist who showed us around. This influenced our approach to insure that the new building would not overshadow the wealth that already existed. but enhance and honour it. So it was an exercise of uncovering the hidden or neglected aspects of the site and allowing the new building to give them space and dignity."

The distinguished Mleiha Archaeological Centre stands in a league of its own - it responds to its site appropriately, complementing it rather than taking away from it. Rich in history and beauty, the project's location informed the architectural language of the visitors' centre, which features circular, sandcoloured forms.

Since delivering the archaeological centre, Dabbagh Architects has been invited to participate in a number of high-profile competitions, and the firm has recently won one, which it's working on at the moment. Another project in the pipeline is a mosque, to be located in Dubai.

Dabbagh is also considering working in Saudi Arabia, and she's been approached multiple times, though she's currently waiting for the right opportunity.

"Apart from our current projects in the UAE, I've been exploring the market in Saudi for the last few years," she said. "I have been there to speak at conferences and to meet architects, students and prospective clients. There's a lot of potential in Saudi and I'd really love to have the chance to work on a project there."