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ULTIMATES AWARD ISSUE

One for the Books



One of the first large-scale global architectural competitions to be launched from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia puts Nabil Gholam Architects at the helm of an ambitious renovation of a public library.

Words: Nadia Michel

When Saudi Arabia's Abdulrahman Al Sudairy Cultural Centre (AACC) recently decided it needed to renovate its ageing library, its solution was nothing less than a large-scale global architectural competition that attracted the interest of 150 applicants.

The Dar Al-Uloom Library in Sakaka, in the northern province of Al Jouf in Saudi Arabia, can be found within a compound that dates back to 1983. It was created by the late Prince Abdul Rahman ibn Ahmad Al-Sudairy, who was coming to the end of 41 years of service as the region's governor, and his hope was that he could expand upon the foundation he had established 20 years prior offering interactive cultural and informative programmes and services that could help the development of the local community. And, in addition to the large public library (which now contains over 155,000 books), he also built a mosque and a research centre (that is a regular meeting spot for archaeologists and researchers) within the same compound. His

namesake foundation would eventually go on to have a large and wide social impact thanks to the establishment of a network of agricultural, social and educational projects.

But 32 years later, it has become time to revamp the place. The current AACC chairman, Faisal bin Abdulrahman Al-Sudairy, says that it was important to the foundation that the design submissions respect their 55-year history and offer an upgrade to the current two-storey library's facilities, not a rebuild. And, in the end, after the pool of applicants was shortlisted to just ten finalists, Nabil Gholam Architects were awarded the first prize.

"We tried to question and rethink the internal layouts and technology to respond to the functional needs of a smart library in today's fast evolving e-world," explains Gholam, whose firm didn't just propose enlarging the current library by 20 per cent (from 3,703 sqm to 4,500 sqm), but also creating a natural canopy of palm trees that could establish a microclimate that stretches across the entire campus.

"The hexagonal grid of the palm grove planting extends the space (geometrically yet naturally) towards the mosque and the city. Yet looking up and from above, the green canopy of palm leaves will look like a calm sea with waves undulating in the wind," Gholam ponders. "Moreover, we are introducing shaded patios and courtyards in the library that will further help cool the temperature," he adds.

Indeed, the structure will have an innovative 'smart skin' that will envelope the library and serve as a protective screen that will increase comfort and natural light.

Gholam is widely known for having a unique and innovative approach, and it has garnered him a lot of attention over the years. (You may recall the story in *Official Bespoke's* issue 57 of a war ravaged home in the mountains of Lebanon that once served as a torture site and detention centre for the occupying Syrian forces. Well it was his firm that converted it into an airy and sustainable home incorporating Corten-steel boxes, modernist circular skylights, a rainwater harvesting system and 1,000 newly planted trees.) Undeniably, Gholam's designs are a shining example of what happens when form meets function.

Bridging together the elements of knowledge, sustainability,



culture and technology, this latest project is an ideal platform for the architect. "Energy efficiency and cultural sensitivity were key parameters to consider in creating technically and economically viable solutions," Gholam says.

We say the Abdulrahman Al Sudairy Cultural Centre made an inspired choice. ☺

