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INTRODUCTION

Our 'Big Story' in this issue is the first example of excellence in residential architecture to appear on the cover of Architecture Plus since its inception. This private dwelling from Beirut demonstrates an international flair while being firmly rooted into the Lebanese context. It reminded me of a time, early in my professional career, when I was asked to judge a children's competition requiring them to illustrate their 'ideal home'. Prizes were to be awarded to the best entries for three age groups: under five, five to 10 and 10 to 15 years. As you can imagine, the task of selecting the three winners was not an easy one and while reviewing the submissions, I had to constantly remind myself that this competition was not about the ability to illustrate well, but that it was about ideas, which were plentiful. Each child had chalked, drawn or painted where he or she would like to ideally live. Each of their perceived habitats innocently reflected their vision of their world. As expected, the younger entries were the most creative and exploratory. One 'home' I vividly recall, by a young budding designer, bore Disney's Mickey Mouse ears, feet and tail. Equally, the older submissions were more restrained and 'normal' as a direct result our development process in the early years. Continuous conditioning from our context and society eventually replaces our creativity with convention.

Battling with whom to award the prizes, I found myself questioning the right to select the winners. By selecting three submissions as the 'best' homes, what impact would it have on the other children? Furthermore, did I have the right to say which child's vision was better than another's, on a subject so personal? After all, their 'homes' were for them, so how could I say which was the best? And by awarding prizes, would it mean that the non-winners were wrong in choosing where they wanted to ideally live their lives? Even in the animal world, birds build their homes in trees, fishes in coral reefs underwater, and rabbits in the cool depths of the ground. Similarly, our habitat reflects who we are. You could say they are an extension of our DNA which leads me to question: when giving shape to our homes, and urban character to our cities, is there a right or wrong? Who decides this? And, does standing behind our beliefs, our vision and our personal identity - that may be different to others' ideas - mean we are in the wrong? After having lived in the Middle East for almost a decade now, its ever-changing skyline never ceases to amaze me. The density of the urban fabric increases while the elevations continue to rise. But this upsurge in development is no longer typical to the Middle East. Across our New World region, from Pakistan to South Africa, cities are changing and in the midst of this rapid urbanisation and they are losing their identity at a similar pace. Mega-projects launched almost on a daily basis across our New World offer little relevance to their environmental context, physical locale or to the people who will live and/or work in them. Gone is the beauty of our unique cultural and religious interpretations manifested into our architecture for centuries. Gone is the architectural order the Greek master builders perfected over many generations. Gone is the hierarchy that injected excitement into our spaces at both macro and micro scale. Sadly, today, the Century City development in Cape Town, South Africa could easily be relocated anywhere across the UAE while similarly, buildings from the new Healthcare City in Dubai could easily be transposed to the recently revitalised downtown Beirut in Lebanon without any changes or modifications.

Yet, ironically, many of our cities are vying for the tourism industry while others are eager to attract long term investors, big or small. But one question: what our cities have to offer that is not available elsewhere. At the scale these are developing, the biggest or the boldest, simply do not work. Somehow, we seem to have forgotten the simple notion of 'unique to place'. After all it is this unspoken connection with a space, place, building or city that encourages people to visit, live or work in them. Looking further a field, cities like Paris and London, after centuries of evolution, still retain their independent charm, posture and identity. One must question how they manage to preserve this. I am quite sure that if these cities had developed like our region is developing today, they would have amalgamated into one big faceless, characterless, urban mass that we seem to be heading into. Perhaps, the problem lies in the old notion of wanting to be seen as affluent. Our region is recognised for its ready dismissal of its architectural skin and replaced by one that is totally alien, yet fulfils others' perception of developed and modern societies. Does this mean we are afraid to stand behind our own personal identity and stake its worth?

In Architecture Plus issue eight, our 'Big Story' was the multi-award winning Al Maha Resort from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The architecture of the development is a clear deviation from the typical skyline of Dubai that has netted it a pool of awards including the Arab Towns and Cities Award in 2005. Yet, it is not the most expensive, the biggest or the tallest project to be built in Dubai. Simply put, Al Maha is self-assured, confident and more importantly, it dares to belong to its context. Our opening article in the View Point section in this issue of Architecture Plus further reinforces the notion of learning from the past to create better urban solutions for the future. We don't encourage a replication of the past but to capture the soul of these places that once gave us our identities. And though the case study is based in Afghanistan, this approach should not be restricted to the redevelopment of war-torn areas but can be applied to new virgin developments that are shaping our New World. As for the children's competition, there were no 'best' homes. All the children were awarded a prize, and thus encouraged to learn and celebrate our differences, from colour, culture and vision. Today, many years on from the competition, the message from the team at Inhouse Creative, the publishers of Architecture Plus, remains the same. It is the unique tapestry of interwoven cultures that makes up our New World. We must be proud of who we are, reach out to educate our vision to others, and embrace our differences without surrendering our soul.

Rashid
RASHID TAQUI

Architecture +

VIEW POINT



Mehdi Sabet, an Afghan American, obtained his Master's Degree in Architecture from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, in 1978. A member of NCARB and AIA and having over 20 years of architectural practice in the United States and the Middle East, he has worked in several international design offices. Throughout his career, in parallel with his professional practice, Mehdi Sabet has always maintained his academic association with numerous universities in Lebanon and USA. Since 1998, he has been a fulltime faculty member at the American University of Sharjah, School of Architecture & Design. Furthermore, as a former member of the board of Directors of the SAE (Afghan Society of Engineers and Architects/ USA) he has been actively involved in the re-construction process in his home country.



Kate Otten Architects is a design driven South African architectural practice. Founded in 1989 by Kate Otten - a well-honoured woman architect in recent years, the works of this practice have won international acclaims. Kate Otten's work is diverse in scale and type - the work deals with developing an architectural language that responds inventively to local conditions of available skills, materials, climate, client user and site. Focussing on a search for an African identity in her architecture, Kate Otten specialises in a tradition of designing that can be best described as 'proudly South



Hideki Yoshimatsu, earned his master's degree in urban engineering from University of Tokyo and in 1987, founded Archipro Architects, a design-oriented studio for architecture and urban planning. The firm has been recognized with numerous awards, publications and exhibitions for quality and excellence in design. Hideki is also professor at Tokai University teaching architectural design, landscape design, and urban theory. He studies a design method involving figure and process, called 'Continuum Method' and conducts research in space using resolution as a parameter.



Ammar Khammash principle designer and founder of the Jordanian consultancy Ammar Khammash Architects was born in 1960 in Amman, Jordan. After graduating from The University of Southwestern Louisiana, he pursued his postgraduate studies at Yarmouk University, Jordan, in the field of Ethno-archaeology. His work has varied between restoration of several historical sites in Jordan, to the design of churches, residential buildings, interior design, and design of external spaces in addition to his environmental and socio-economic projects. In addition to architecture, Ammar Khammash is involved in the visual arts, craft design and writing and has over the years delivered several lectures and participated in international design competitions as well.



Nabil Gholam decided to set up his own practice in Beirut in 1994, after living and working in France, Spain, China and the United States. Founder of NG architecture & planning, his consultancy has today grown into an international multidisciplinary team of architects, planners, designers and consultants with a portfolio comprising of over 200 projects extending from large-scale urban planning to detailed product design. In addition to viewing each project as a new and unique functional and formal challenge, NG aims to inspire its design with an expression of sensual tranquility and delight.



BBP Architects, established in 1987 by Serge Biguzas and David Balestra-Pimpinì, are a medium sized office, with a reputation for providing challenging, innovative contemporary design. The articulation and expression of space remains paramount in design position and attitude and spatial quality, light, attention to detail and creative uses of materials are the foundations of BBP's approach to design.

Mona Yong, senior interior designer at DWP partnership, has over ten years of experience in a wide variety of interior design projects ranging from private residences, through hospitality and restaurant projects, retail outlets, retail banking outlets and Multi National Corporate offices. She is credited with the ability to conceptualise, design and detail anything from a single stand alone cabinet to large complex interiors. Her knowledge of construction methods ensures that her designs are always build to the precise specifications as recorded in the design intent.

Caramel architekten zt gmbh, was co-founded by Günter Katherl, Martin Haller and Ulrich Aspertsberger in 2000. They have till date completed several projects of varying dimensions from Vorarlberg to Vienna. Their most recent commissions have resulted from their continual and successful participation in international competitions. In addition to the realisation of a few large-scale projects, the trio also devotes itself, in particular, to design studies and unconventional single-family dwelling projects.

Friedrich Stiper, completed his studies in visual design in 1987. He has since then worked with several leading architecture offices and finally set up an independent practice in 1994. He has also been a faculty member at a local university since 1995.

Concept i is an international firm, experienced in world-class architecture, interior and specialist design services. Established in 1996, the firm has offices in London, Bangkok and Shanghai. With a portfolio of diverse projects, the team comprises interior designers, architects, graphic designers, landscape architects, thematic designers, lighting specialists and expert technical support. The firm believes in creating built environments serving the human need and blending innovative design strategies with practical solutions. Their prime aspiration is to breathe life and personality into human environments and to create spaces for people to use and enjoy in their daily lives.

Mohammed Mahbub Rahman, finished his B Arch in 1983, and then went onto completing his master's diploma in urban design; thereafter, he obtained his PhD (housing) from Nottingham, UK. He has taught at the Bangladesh Institute of Engineering and Technology, King Faisal University, KSA and The Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. He has to his credit over 50 journal publications, several seminar papers and has worked on more than 50 design projects. He has also been involved with many professional bodies and has even been a nominator for the Aga Khan Awards.

PROJECTS

BIG STORY

IN HOUSE

INTERIORS PLUS



ASSURED DISCRETION

The sloping nature of the land provided many challenges and opportunities to set the residence in harmony with the hill, to harness the rising sea breezes, the views and the open skies, while keeping a flexible layout, at one with the surrounding nature.



PROJECT INFO
CLIENT Confidential
LOCATION Dahr al Sowan, Lebanon
ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNER Nabih Gholam, NG
 Architecture & Planning
INTERIOR DESIGNER Client and Nabih Gholam

TOTAL SITE AREA 12,000 m²
TOTAL BUILT-UP AREA 2,500 m²
BUDGET US\$ 1.9 million
STATUS Complete

The clients, a high profile young Lebanese couple with two children, required a new family residence to live and entertain in. The site, all of 11,000 sq. metres (a wedding present from the parents), on a sumptuous pine covered hilltop, at an altitude of 1,200 metres on Mount Lebanon commanded extraordinary vistas in all directions. At a mere 40 minutes drive from the capital city of Beirut, enjoying year round Mediterranean breezes, this warm dry and easily accessible site (even in winter with the occasional snow) enjoyed relatively cool summers - an ideal haven from the excruciating heat of the Lebanese seaside. Furthermore, the sloping nature of the land provided many challenges and opportunities to set the residence in harmony with the hill, to harness the rising sea breezes, the views and the open skies, while keeping a flexible layout, at one with the surrounding nature.

Rooted in a strong desire to satisfy the end user without making concessions to the integrity of the architecture, the architects developed a position that could best be interpreted as essentialism or the reduction of each aspect of the brief and context to its most poetic and essential quality, before giving it an architectural form. In that sense, they strived to reinterpret the modern Mediterranean house as a dwelling with essential qualities that included an ecological outlook respecting the site and a use of local materials throughout; a simple, legible massing language that contradicted a simple yet rich collection of spatial experiences; a powerful and seamless integration between the inner (architectural) and outer (landscape) realms and a clear delineation of public (social) and private (familial) realms. >>





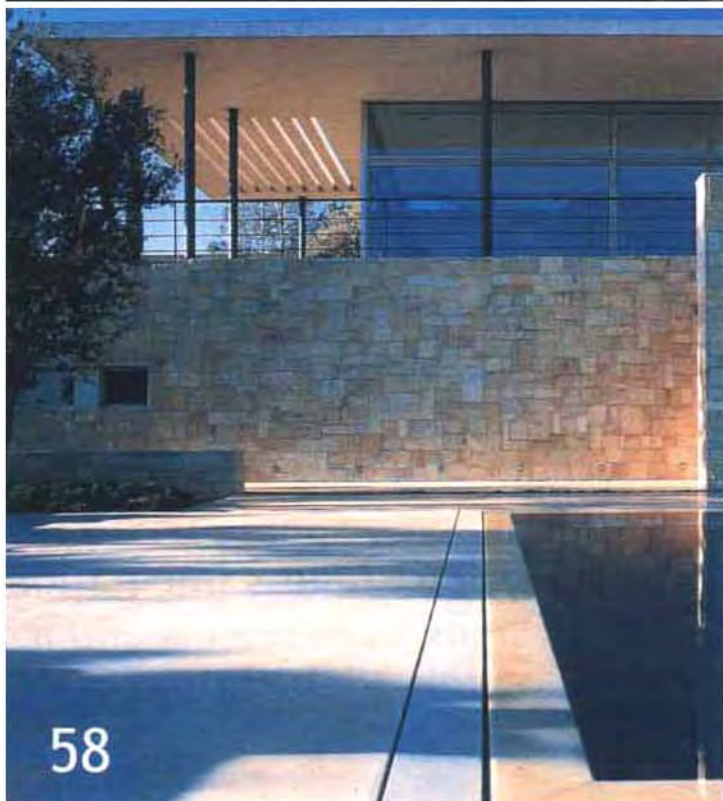
Though the brief itself though was much less clear, the general programme was straightforward. A number of independent bedrooms were required for the family and guests as well as generous indoors and outdoor living, dining and recreation areas that would complement the family's social lifestyle. Additionally, provided within the design were to be the usual amenities including guards and servants quarters, service and mechanical rooms.

While the aim was to have a modern Mediterranean house (not organic, not monolithic), the couple brought two very different stylistic expectations into it. The man of the house had grown up in a family that had adapted to living with expressions of modern architecture since the 1960s, in their family homes in Lebanon, Europe and the USA. He thus had a preference for clean lines and austerity (they owned a house designed by Mallet-Stevens and another by Niemeyer). However, his wife came from a background in the hotel and tourism industry and had a more romantic vision of warm and comfortable luxury that she identified with in vernacular oriental architecture. In addition to these two seemingly contrary visions that risked making the client-architect relationship a real challenge, the clients requested that their house despite the size of the programme, needed to exude a sense of discretion and not act as an unnecessary social statement of wealth. >>

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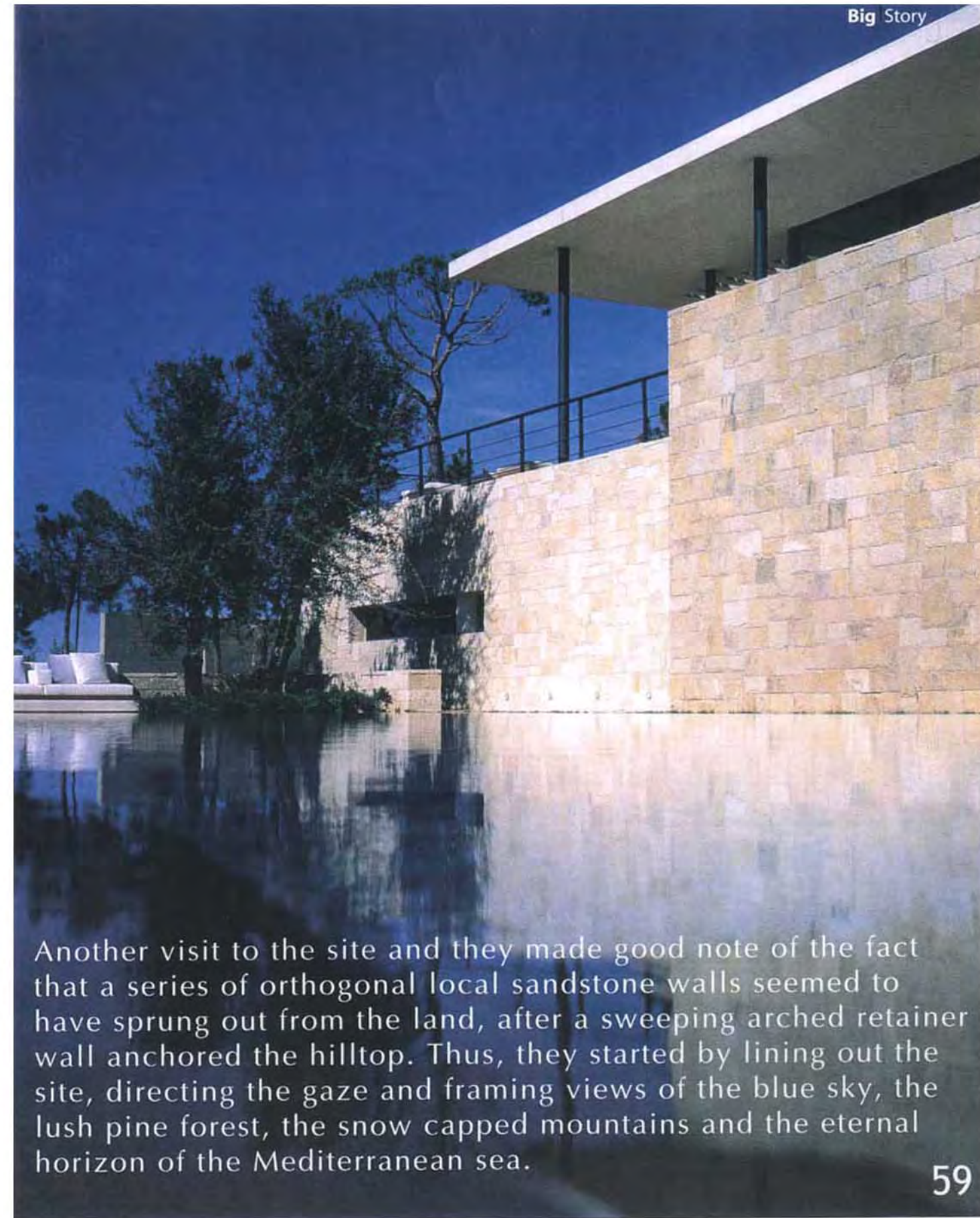
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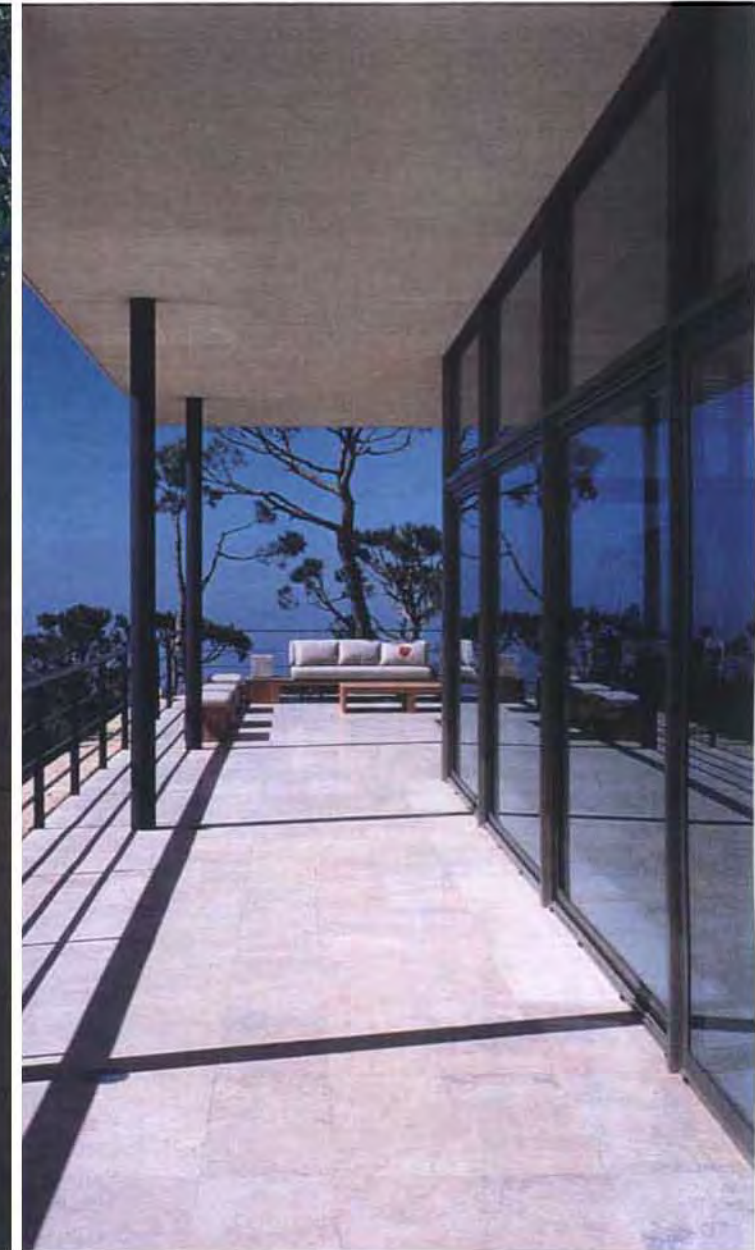
Once at their drawing boards, and several brainstorming sessions later, the designers set to work. Another visit to the site and they made good note of the fact that a series of orthogonal local sandstone walls seemed to have sprung out from the land, after a sweeping arched retainer wall anchored the hilltop. Thus, they started by lining out the site, directing the gaze and framing views of the blue sky, the lush pine forest, the snow capped mountains and the eternal horizon of the Mediterranean sea.

The proposal began to take shape as horizontal planes of crosscut travertine slabs, cool reflecting water ponds and bush hammered white cement cantilevered canopies intersected the walls in dialogue with the sloping land generating the living spaces within the house. Careful orientation and sun shading, planted roofs, crawling greenery and obsessive attention to proportion helped the house to 'sink' considerably into the hill and respect its ecology. Trees were carefully protected and only indigenous species are added.

Today, a rational layering of horizontal joints overlapping the ashlar construction of the main sandstone walls inscribes the house horizontally into the landscape. Thus, effectively, the house forms two facades; two faces offered to the world. The first face is presented to visitors as a mute succession of stonewalls with occasional vertical slits or trees poking over them only hinting at the world beyond. This facade plays 'hide and seek', creating a sense of subtle mystery further enhancing the clients' desire for discretion, while expressing a calm opulence and a safe haven for the family. >>



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Passing through these first layers of filters, the house follows a succession of quiet spaces, mirrored by shallow, open-to-sky reflecting pools, a haven already shielded from the hills around. From within, the views framing the pinewoods and the valleys beyond gradually unveil and broaden out opening eventually into fully interminable vistas onto the sea. Well ventilated and sunlit spaces ceremoniously envelop the house.

As the sleeping rooms are open to the views on the upper floor, the gym, pool house, service and playrooms are located around the courtyards of the semi-enclosed basement. All areas being cross ventilated and capturing the sea breeze rising from the valley was one of the chief concerns of the designers.

The ensuing, fully consensual architectural expression was made possible through sustained enthusiasm garnered in on the clients' confidence and a strict respect of the original budget.

*Text: Nabil Joseph Gholam, Nabil Gholam Architecture & Planning;
Images: Richard Saad, Geraldine Bruneel, Nabil Gholam*

