



Every morning, when Mr. Youssef Haidar enters his fifth-floor office in Gemayze, he acknowledges a crowd of busy and talented young architects. Mr. Haidar, the endowed head architect and owner of Youssef Haidar Architecte DPLG, works out of an enviable space in Rue Gouraud, – Beirut’s bohemian quarter, a road chocker with narrow streets and historic buildings from the French era – an office busy with items from his extensive personal collection of hand painted art, notably pottery. It is his extensive assortment of books and publications, however, which commands his special affection.

He owns a colossal library in his bureau; jam-packed shelves filled with art, philosophy and poetry books. “I love art and poetry books, I recently read a compilation of poetry by Samir al Sayegh and I’m currently perusing an art book entitled Art Océanien,” Haidar said. No architectural books or magazines? Nah. “I never read architectural books or magazines. I don’t go there. If I want to look at architecture, I walk around and look at actual buildings and monuments. Apropos, I’m going to Paris soon for Frank Gehry’s commission for LVMH,” he added.

Speaking of architectural legends, Haidar went on to discuss their views on architecture, particularly debating the practice’s increasingly globalised approach. “Architecture is dying.” He explains. “Frank Gehry recently said that in the world we live in, most of what gets built and designed is awful, and that there is no sense of design or respect for humanity or anything. Just bad buildings and that’s it.” Haidar also mentions Le Corbusier, a Swiss-French architect, designer, painter, urban planner, writer, and one of the pioneers of what is now called modern architecture, who advised not to work as an architect before reaching their forties. He goes on to say that nor Louis Kahn neither Frank Gehry built anything remarkable before they were well into their career.

So what influences and inspires Mr. Haidar exactly? “My influences are more of a melting pot and never come from looking at architectural imagery”. He explains that the life he had in Paris influenced him greatly, and his inspirations today still stem from those memories. “I also get influenced from numerous sources such as nature, light, colours, music and art” which implies some of his strongest inspirations are actually raw, natural elements. In terms of more recent inspirations that still maintain this natural feel, Mr. Haidar discusses a recent trip.



Profile
 Youssef Haidar was born in Baalbeck, Lebanon. He left Lebanon when he was seventeen years old and went to the Beaux-Arts Paris for his undergraduate degree, followed by a postgraduate qualification in the École D’architecture Paris – La Villette, graduating in 1987.
 He resided in Paris for fifteen years. After working in numerous architectural studios in Paris, he established his own practice in 1995 when he moved back to his native Lebanon.



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He talks about the “wonderful trees in Bali”, and “the nature in Bali” itself, providing him with beautifully aesthetic ideas and wonderful inspiration.

“Draw. Draw. Draw” is the personal motto Mr. Haidar goes by. When asked about his signature style, he replies, “Space and light are my signatures. I never repeat myself in any work”. The themes of space, light, nature and colours are recurring ones in the work of Mr. Haidar, and he prides himself on the consistency of these in his projects.

This consistency is reflected in the values of the company itself, as Mr. Haidar explains the beginning of his new venture. “I started in Baalbeck because I usually like to work and live in the same context and environment”. Core values and beliefs play a strong role in the work of Mr. Haidar, for he continues “I wanted to do something for Baalbeck in particular. For me it was important to work for something I believe in, and in this case it’s the city where I was born”.

Mr. Haidar expresses the difficulties he faced at this point in his life, saying “It was tough working there because they don’t have any know-how when it comes to architectural work and its core basis”. The real turning point came to Mr. Haidar after a chance encounter with Mr. Raymond Audi. “I collaborated with him on a project working on the soap museum in Saida, and that was the main starting point of my practice”.

Mr. Haidar credits such encounters with personalities like Mr. Raymond Audi as some of the watershed moments for his practice, and these meetings amongst others helped shape the way in which Mr. Haidar works today. “My work is a continuous chain where I jump from one project to another. I think the last project I’m going to work on will be the most perfect one”.

As for the studio itself, Mr. Haidar separates it from the others by explaining, “My work is the haute couture of architecture. We don’t do Prêt-à-Porter”. When asked what draws him to commissions like the many important cultural projects he has worked on in the past, Mr. Haidar said it is often “Par hazard”, meaning “by mistake” in French, and his interest.



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In the architecture of Lebanon today, Mr. Haidar says “the preservation of traditional buildings in Lebanon is also a very significant development and needs a lot of expertise and a huge effort”. Lebanese architecture along with its rich history are both topics evidently close to Mr. Haidar’s heart, as he continues “Preservation shouldn’t be circumscribed to the outer layers, they should also work on preserving the insides – the totality of it, all the while thinking of development”.

Mr. Haidar’s creativity doesn’t stop there – “I paint. I also paint on pots. I love music, I’m a great admirer of cinema and I adore nature”. We draw our conversation to a close by addressing the young architects of today. What advice would Mr. Haidar give them? “Learn. Learn. Learn”.

