

ARCHITECTURE / RETAIL AND MIXED-USE

WHY THE BEST INTERNATIONAL DESIGNS HAVE LOCAL SENSIBILITIES AT HEART

With over 20 large scale mixed-use and retail developments currently under design and construction across the globe, global architecture firm Design International is one of the key players in the world of international architecture, in particular in the retail sector. With 48 years of award-winning work under its belt, this is hardly surprising, but the firm managed to use the last 5 years, when many other companies were struggling in a climate of worldwide economic difficulties, to not only grow in size, but to redefine its approach to architecture. At the heart of this approach is a strong belief in the human element of architecture, whether this be the way it is created, the social context of a project, or a sensitivity to the individual 'end user' of any building.

Founded in Toronto in 1965, the firm operated initially in the North American market, but soon grew internationally and was one of the first companies that truly worked on a global scale. Today, Design International is headquartered in London, has subsidiary offices in Milan, Cairo, Mumbai, Shanghai and Jakarta, and works across seven integrated divisions: Architecture, Masterplanning, Interior Design, Lighting Design, Landscape Design, Branding and Leasing. Having com-

pleted projects in over 45 countries, Design International is responsible for over 15 million sq m of built world class architecture. With a staff of over 150 people from all corners across the globe, the firm's creative and cultural influences are naturally extremely diverse, but this is encouraged by a philosophy of conscious cross-fertilization, which allows and fosters different viewpoints and creative styles that produce a unique architectural language for each project. CEO and principle architect Davide Padoa describes this language as "one that never stops to evolve and manages to surprise through its always fresh and unexpected results". This ability to adapt and experiment has been one of the firm's greatest assets, in particular over the last few years, when the traditional markets of Europe and North America were struggling. "The new markets of Asia, the Middle East and increasingly also Africa, provide a great playground for architecture, because the business and creative culture is more forward thinking and open to new ideas. We have used this to our own advantage and have taken each individual project as a laboratory for experimentation, with great results," continues Padoa.



Davide Padoa

Casablanca's 75,000 sq m GLA Morocco Mall, which opened in 2011, is a case in point. The project, which is ranked in the top 5 destination malls in the world, was the first shopping centre by developers Groupe Aksal, so their approach was defined by their openness to innovation, rather than preconceived expectations based on previous experiences. Situated on the main beachfront promenade in Casablanca, the project has been recognised internationally for its innovative contemporary design, but what makes it stand out from other shopping malls is the way the local population takes pride in its futuristic design and architecture. "Moroccans really identify with this project and see it as a symbol for a modern, forward



Morocco Mall - VIP Mall

thinking Morocco that wants to play a big role in the world," says Davide Padoa. "I think that it is highly unusual for a shopping mall to play this kind of role for an entire country." The architecture of Morocco Mall is unusual, eye-catching and monumental, yet what makes Design International's approach unique is to combine this kind of architecture with a bespoke local sensibility. "Most people like strong architectural statements, buildings that stand out," Padoa continues, "but for a building to become part of the local commercial and social life it needs to speak to people in their own culture and language." Morocco Mall's success, which opened just two years after the acclaimed Odysseum project, a 130,000 sq m open air shopping and entertainment destination in Montpellier, became one of the milestones in Design International's recent history, and the firm has continued to work on a number of similarly high profile projects since, but rather than just replicating the same formula, each project has its own unique style and approach. This is also reflected in their unique combination of design, tenant mix and experiential activities that DI plans from the very first day of the design process. Mall of Tangier, which is currently under development in Tangier, Morocco will create a landmark building and centrepiece of the redevelopment of the Tangier port area. Rather

than organic shapes and forms, here the architectural language is based on a rational geometry that takes inspiration from the sharp corners and courtyards in Tangier's old Medina. The faceted facades of the project, which mimic an inverted pyramid that has literally been plugged into the ground, are sculpted like a diamond. Davide Padoa says that "this building is a homage to the Guggenheim Museum in New York by Frank Lloyd Wright: it is the first shopping centre with a ramp that connects all levels through a green external boulevard filled with restaurants that spans from ground to the roof and into the building itself. Mall of Tangier aims to maximise the transparency of the mall and to create the first '5D shopping and leisure experience in Africa' with a building that visitors can touch, feel, walk, discover and climb." Visitors will find plenty of restaurants and will enjoy a one of a kind al fresco experience and have the best view of the entire brand new marina and cruise terminal of Tangier, Africa's nearest city to Europe. Contrary to what many may think, size is not all that matters: Design International in cooperation with developer Sidcom in Beirut has launched Centerfalls, the first Designer Resort in Lebanon, where the largest number of restaurants, entertainment and designer outlets are combined in the wealthiest tourist location in the



Mall of Tangier

Country. Each one of the 50 restaurants and 20 luxury brands (with the likes of Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Fendi, Prada, etc.), will feature a staggering view of the bay of Beirut in a first-of-a-kind waterfall environment, which won Design International its most recent prize as Best New Retail & Leisure Architecture in Lebanon with the International Property Awards.

Working in emerging markets did not only have a big impact on Design International's approach to architecture but brought about a more fundamental break with what the firm sees as the traditional approach to property development. When working for an upstart developer in Cairo, Egypt in 2009, the firm started to use its well established connections in the retail and franchise world to introduce a number of potential tenants to the developer, which quickly evolved into a full leasing operation. This ultimately led to the incorporation of DI Leasing in 2010, a sister company of Design International that acts as the leasing agent on a number of high profile projects, with a particular focus on luxury retailing, food streets and global entertainment operators. "Developers in Asia, the Middle East and Africa find this one-stop approach very appealing because design, leasing and management needs are all born at once. It makes perfect sense although I am not aware of any other firm providing this kind of integrated service. We might well be one of the first omni-channel architectural and real-estate leasing firms in the world," continues Davide Padoa.

All in all, the last five years have been both a challenging and a rewarding experience, with new opportunities opening, while consolidating the architecture activities, which continue to be the core service of the firm, evident in the steady stream of project openings. 2012 saw the opening of La Cartiera, a shopping centre in Pompei, Italy, and Rio Shopping, an IKEA anchored mall in Valladolid, Spain. Upcoming openings include Villesse Shopping, another IKEA anchored scheme in Villesse Italy, Nave de Vero, a shopping centre by investor Corio near Venice Italy, the refurbishment of I Gigli in Florence, Grand Littoral and TivoliParc in Marseille, Centerfalls in Beirut, Mall of Guadalajara, the largest mall ever designed in Latin America and several other projects that will see Design International continuing its prolific contribution to creating places where guests shop, dine, learn, relax and entertain themselves.