

matt jones

Interview – The Architect, Jean Nouvel

From *identity* magazine (Motivate Publishing, Dubai), April 2007.

Art Nouvel

Jean Nouvel, the French architect of the acclaimed Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and hero to movie star Brad Pitt, who named his daughter with Angelina Jolie after him, escorts identity on a personal tour of his concept for the first Louvre classical art museum outside France – the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Text: Matt Jones

Jean Nouvel walks past the Guggenheim, takes a curious backward glance at the iconic Performing Arts Centre and arrives at the Louvre. His Louvre.

In January this year, when these models of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi contemporary art museum and the fabulous, futuristic performing arts venue were unveiled at an exhibition in the UAE capital's Emirates Palace Hotel by their respective architects, Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid, their friend and fellow 'starchitect' Nouvel was laid up in his native France with a bad back.

But in March, the former 'enfant terrible' of European architecture, now 61, was well enough to travel to Abu Dhabi to be present at the much anticipated announcement that the "Classical Art Museum" he has designed for the city's new Saadiyat Island Cultural District will, in fact, be the first Louvre museum outside France.

It was a day of political pronouncements – the venture seems to be as much about the development of stronger ties between the French and UAE governments as it is about showcasing classical art to a new audience – and except for one question directed his way during a press conference packed with French media, Nouvel's presence was largely overshadowed by the French Minister for Culture and Communications, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres. Indeed, the first mention of Nouvel in the press release distributed at the event is on page three, a few paragraphs from the end.

But at his model of the Classical Art Museum, now proudly renamed as the Louvre Abu Dhabi, all eyes and camera lenses are on the burly, bald and quietly spoken Nouvel as he explains the main features of the design in an exclusive interview with *identity*.

(more)

matt jones

www.mattjonesfreelancer.com • Registered at Dubai Media City
Journalism • Photojournalism • Travel Writing • Scriptwriting • Copywriting • Press & Public Relations

Art Nouvel/Page 2/...

The distinctive feature of his museum, which will be built on a promontory into the Arabian Gulf and is due to open in 2012, is the shallow, perforated, ‘floating’ dome (or cupola) that almost entirely covers the total floor area of 24,000 square metres. Pointing to a nearby image of the wonderful dappled sunlight effect that will be created in the museum’s plazas and promenades by the numerous holes in the geometric dome, I ask Nouvel if it was the desire to create a light effect that led to the dome design, or the dome design that gave rise to the light effect.

“The main idea is to create a kind of a micro-climate, a kind of island, very close to the coast, and a fragment of the city,” he replies. “What I researched is the pleasure of being in this place – why you would come to this place, and why you would come back often. And you would come back if the climate is perfect.

“If you have an emotional connection with the nature of the light, if you have air flowing through the building, if you have terraces that are in shadow, if you have the option of arriving by boat, and if you have the feeling of not one museum but a collection of museums – because the Louvre Abu Dhabi will have different collections – all this will add to the pleasure of being in this place.

“There will be independent buildings below the cupola for every part of this museum. The areas in which you have the light effects are between these buildings. What is unique is the big panoramic opening onto the sea, because the cupola structure has been designed to be supported by only three points. So the Louvre Abu Dhabi will be a kind of neighbourhood below an umbrella with all this unique light.”

The micro-climate Nouvel is seeking to create with his perforated dome is for a “micro-city” or “museum city”, two descriptions that occur in wall panels displayed at the Emirates Palace exhibition. The way in which the museum’s 8,900 square metres of exhibition space will be broken up into separate buildings is suggestive of “archaeological urbanism”, in which outdoor plazas and promenades become streets linking exhibition spaces.

Think of a section of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Venice or Algiers with a 180 metre diameter dome plonked on top and you get the picture. These historic locations served as Nouvel’s “archaeological city references” during the design process.

(more)

Art Nouvel/Page 3/...

As he explains the light effect in more detail, Nouvel shuffles from the main model of the museum to a smaller model of the dome presented in front of a light box on a wall. “When you’re inside the cupola you will see something like stars in the geometrical structure, or like sunlight through clouds, or sunlight through random vegetation,” he says, pointing at the holes. “And all the spots of light will arrive on the very quiet architecture below.

“Also, you will have the light of the sea, because on the sea you have waves and the waves create a vibration of light. I used this effect in Lucerne [in his Cultural and Congress Centre, 2000], but Lucerne is a little lake. Here we have the sea, so you will have an amplification of that.

“All these parameters are for me important to create something belonging to this place and this culture. It was also interesting to play with the symbol of the white cupola, but in another way, because it’s a very low cupola; the cupola is perforated, not closed totally; and with this cupola we change completely the feeling of what is below.”

Given the protracted, high-level negotiations that led up to the March announcement that the Louvre will be coming to Abu Dhabi (the UAE President and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, His Highness Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and French President Jacques Chirac both issued press statements on the day), did it matter to Nouvel that there was some uncertainty as to who the building would be used by?

“I thought it would be the Louvre because I knew the negotiations were going on and I knew that the French government really wanted to have this agreement,” he says. “But for me that changed nothing. I had a programme to work to and this is a conceptual proposal that is very flexible. I can adapt my project to the desire of the Louvre now and it will be done as part of the same programme.

“I’m very happy because I have a precise client for the use of the museum and I can take the next step, which is to imagine with the curators which kind of objects we could have and to work with them. But the concept is done. Even if we change the proportion of the ‘archaeology’ under the cupola a little bit, we change nothing of the feeling and the nature of the project.”

So is Nouvel saying that aside from the physics of the dome, now the hard work really begins? “Yeah, absolutely, you are right,” he chuckles.

(more)

Art Nouvel/Page 4/...

And now that his Classical Art Museum has been revealed as a Louvre, will any of the elements underneath the dome incorporate references to the famous former palace on the River Seine, or use the Parisian home of the Mona Lisa as a starting point for a local interpretation? Nouvel shakes his head. “No, because it is important that architecture belongs to a place. This museum has to belong to Abu Dhabi – to its climate; to its cultural references also.”

Nouvel’s friendship with movie star (and architecture enthusiast) Brad Pitt and the naming of Pitt’s child with Angelina Jolie after him (Shiloh Nouvel Jolie-Pitt) has brought the architect’s name to the attention of gossip columnists and the readers of *Hello!* magazine, but among students of architecture he is perhaps best known for the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

The most talked about feature of this Paris landmark, built between 1981 and 1987, are the multiple photo-electric cells in the glass façade that open and close to control the flow of daylight into the building, much like the aperture of a camera or the lens of a human eye. Two decades on, does Nouvel regard this Islamic art-influenced building as his calling card to clients in the Middle East?

“Yes, yes, absolutely,” he says. “I’m working in Doha now. I built a big tower there and I have worked on different programmes in Qatar. The Arab World Institute was 20 years ago now – it will be the 20th anniversary at the end of this year. Like my design for Abu Dhabi, it also features geometry and light, but that was on a Parisian building, a European building. I want this building to be an ‘Abu Dhabian’ building.”

One last question, about the nickname Nouvel shared with the likes of Will Alsop and Massimiliano Fuksas in the 1980s and ’90s. Did he appreciate being labeled as one of the ‘enfants terribles’ of contemporary architecture?

“I never gave myself this nickname,” he says. “Journalists and other people gave it to me because I didn’t do the same thing other people were doing and because very often I had strong opinions.”

Could he suggest a more appropriate nickname for himself today? “I cannot,” he laughs. “In myself, I don’t feel I’ve changed, but I’m not a kid now.” And with that Jean Nouvel is ushered away from his Louvre, back past Hadid’s Performing Arts Centre and Gehry’s Guggenheim to another engagement elsewhere in the hotel.

(ends)