



Interview – The Architects, Thanu Boonyawatana and Eduardo Robles

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Brand new old

Designer Thanu Boonyawatana re-imagines history to create a fantastic world for people who expect a cinema-style thrill from hotels and malls. Text: Matt Jones.

Architectural purists may question the authenticity of its design and murmur about exaggerated proportions, the faddishness of themed developments and the Disneyfication of our cities, but even its critics admit it's what people want, and for designer Thanu Boonyawatana, pleasing people is second only to satisfying the client.

Thai-born Boonyawatana is, along with Mexican-born Eduardo Robles, the co-designer of Madinat Jumeirah, the luxury themed hotel and resort development for Jumeirah International that, even before its completion, has become a Middle East calling card for Creative Kingdom, the Los-Angeles based architectural practice specialising in resort, leisure and entertainment design.

“When you design this kind of thing it's for the people, especially tourists,” says Boonyawatana. “They don't know the real Dubai, what it was, but they do have a perception and we use that as a fundamental to design.”

In attempting to match pre-conceptions with reality, Boonyawatana likens his approach to that of a special effects wizard who, with the aid of computer generated imagery (CGI), is able to recreate ancient Greece or Rome for cinema audiences. For all the ruins and archaeological remains, we can never know what Rome was really like, he says, but taking historical reality as a foundation, a creative designer can build with imagination. Thanks to modern technology, not only can he recreate the past, he can re-imagine it, exaggerating proportions and enhancing ornamentation to instill in hard-to-impress modern audiences an equivalent sense of awe to that experienced by their less well-travelled, less jaded predecessors of old.

“When we did Mina Salam we thought, ‘What if in old Dubai they had built a building like that? What if in ancient UAE or ancient Oman they had the money we have now and the technology we have now? What would they have built?’ That's how we came up with Madinat Jumeirah. We built what they might have built with the resources available to us.”

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Prior to the establishment of Creative Kingdom, Boonyawatana and Robles designed the famed Palace Hotel in South Africa's Sun City resort. Completed in 1992, it remains one of the world's top 10 resort hotels. "That was when I changed from being a typical architect – designing a box, circle, square – to doing all kinds of ornamental things," says Boonyawatana. "The client said 'More! More!', so I stepped out of the frame and that's where I've been ever since."

Thematic architecture is an American export that has its origins in Disneyland. Later transplanted to Las Vegas, it was initially laughed at but now, according to Creative Kingdom COO Bobby Caragay, "Even the big US architects are copying it".

After the formation of Creative Kingdom in 1997, with Robles as CEO and Boonyawatana vice president design, the duo – both naturalised Americans – conceptualised and designed Johannesburg's Montecasino entertainment and retail development, a R1.4 billion recreation of a 500-year-old Tuscan walled city that was completed in 2000.

"Brand new old" is how Peter Penhall, Creative Kingdom's chief financial officer in Dubai describes it. "What we are doing is very real and is based on history in many ways," he says. "It's not fantasy from the point of view of future creation and something out of this world. It's definitely based on reality and the past. What we're doing is bringing history into the current using modern means and themes and skill base. You're escaping from the reality of the current situation by bringing other reality into play, as opposed to fantasy."

"It's kind of fantasy," says Boonyawatana. "It's like creating a movie set." Back when he was designing more box-like structures, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier were inspirations. "Even now when you look at their work, it's still modern, really timeless," he says. But for his current projects, contemporary cinema is a constant source of inspiration. "We go to see a lot of movies to be inspired by the scale," he says. "*Troy* is pretty good in terms of the set, and I remember *Gladiator*, *Star Wars*, *The Mummy Returns*. These CGI guys are architects. There's a new generation of architects that are going into movies." Boonyawatana also watches television: "Cartoons sometimes, to see what the world is up to now." As for other thematic architects, he says, "I don't see any doing what we do."

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With 150 Creative Kingdom employees working in seven offices in the US, South Africa, the UAE, Thailand and the Philippines, Boonyawatana has designers at his disposal 24/7. “The time zones are to our advantage and the client likes this,” says Mexican-born Gabriel Rodriguez, Creative Kingdom’s vice president of operations, whose background includes resort development for Disney, Universal Studios and Warner Bros. “We can meet a client in the morning and the next day we’re able to deliver a full rendered perspective, design, presentation.”

For Boonyawatana, the key to overcoming challenges posed by a multi-national team spread across the globe is the common understanding that has arisen from previous projects. “The key is you have to work with them before: they know us, we know them. When I ask them something they know exactly what I want.” Remarkably, the concept design for Madinat Jumeirah was started and finished in just 12 days. That the resulting development remains true to the original drawings bears testimony to the watching brief Creative Kingdom maintains once a project has passed to the architect of record – the company tasked with meeting building code requirements and actually constructing the resort.

Uniquely, Creative Kingdom’s principals – Robles, Boonyawatana, Caragay and Rodriguez – base themselves where the major work is. With so many opportunities in the UAE thanks to the jaw-dropping scale of Nakheel’s Palm and World developments, Dubai is, for the moment at least, a de facto head office. “This is where the core opportunities are,” says Penhall. “The Middle East is where the bulk of our present and future projects are located,” agrees Caragay.

While Madinat Jumeirah has proved to be the company’s calling card in the region, their introduction came via interior work undertaken for Dubai Airport’s Terminal 1. “We did the food court and lounges – VVIP, VIP, first class and business class – and the lobby for the health club and hotel area,” says Boonyawatana. “That was our first exposure here,” adds Caragay. “In that process, Eduardo developed a lot of local contacts, Madinat Jumeirah came, we started meeting other people and everything started growing.” So much so, in fact, that on the basis of its Middle East experience alone the company now has plans to open its first European office, in London.

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For the past 13 months, Creative Kingdom has worked exclusively for Nakheel. “We’ve done about 97 proposals that have resulted in probably 47 final projects,” says Penhall. The arrangement with the Dubai developer gave Creative Kingdom a chance to assess the local market, which, Penhall says, “Has sufficient depth for a company of our size and nature to establish an office in order to hit the local market on our own account.” Considering potentially major commercial and residential projects in the wider Middle East, including master-planned communities, he adds, “We’re definitely going to be driving our market within the greater Gulf area, as opposed to Dubai only.”

According to Caragay, the company is “strongly” looking at Saudi Arabia. In addition there are “four or five” other projects for Madinat Jumeirah developers Mirage Mille in the pipeline, a reconstruction project in Baghdad that’s currently on a backburner due to the current instability in Iraq, a master-planned community for Nakheel and Dubai Creek Resort, a residential community which is planned for construction between Dubai Creek golf clubhouse and Dubai Marina. “We’ve got a big project in Qatar right now,” Caragay adds. “It’s not yet announced, but when you see it you’ll know it. You’re going to associate it with Qatar. It’s going to be a major icon. It’s a mega project. The client was walking through Madinat Jumeirah and it blew him away. He said, ‘I’ve got to have all of this, who’s the designer?’ That’s how we got involved.”

With so many “movie sets” to create, for Boonyawatana and his colleagues work is fun. “We have to have fun to design these kind of places,” he says. “Every day is a new adventure,” adds Rodriquez. “We enjoy it so much we whistle while we work,” says Caragay – a highly appropriate approach for one of the world’s leading proponents of an architectural phenomenon that, like it or loathe it, has its origins in the creator of the seven dwarves.

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