

RETAIL

THERAPY

With another megamall receiving approval, Oliver Ephgrave takes a look at the various retail schemes underway in Qatar



Lusail Municipality's recent approval of Marina Mall will add yet another high-profile scheme to Qatar's retail arsenal. Designed by architecture firm HOK, the complex is a striking, space-age design that aims to push the boundaries of design. However, while Marina Mall revels in its futurism, many of Qatar's pipeline malls are rooted in traditional Arabian architecture. Local firm Arab Engineering Bureau (AEB) is behind several historically-flavoured malls that are under construction in Qatar. These include Gharafa mall, a two-storey shopping arcade in Doha inspired by traditional souks and Arabian architecture, with pergolas, wind towers and decorative arches. The firm has designed a large mall for Al Merqab, one of the oldest and most famous shopping streets in the centre of Doha. It contains cinemas, food courts and department stores, as well as office space.

AEB MD Ibrahim Mohamed Al Ja'adah, adds "Retail theming has been quite a trend of late in the region, as it allows the design of a mall which avoids the more industrial-looking buildings that have been built in the past. "With the design, the beautiful arabesque style was utilised, while integrating curtain walls to avoid the façade becoming too solid. Internally, the concept was also carried through, creating tent-shaped tensile structures to cover the main atria." AEB has also designed a Lulu hypermarket in Al Khor, a coastal city in the north of Qatar, which plays on the fort aesthetic. Furthermore, the firm is part of the team behind the \$1.37bn Doha Festival City, one of the largest developments to get underway in Qatar since the country was awarded the rights to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup in December 2010. The scheme will include a 32,000m² IKEA store, which will be developed in the first phase

of construction, set for completion in Q4 2012. The remaining elements of Doha Festival City are due for delivery two years later. Another huge complex with extensive retail components is Barwa Commercial Avenue, which is due for completion in June this year. The mixed-use development will offer about 600 shops and showrooms and 150,000m² of office space spread along 8km. It will also contain around 800 luxury residential units in one- to three-bedroom floor plans. The Habtoor Leighton Group confirmed in October that it has begun work on the first phase of the North Gate Mall project in Doha, valued at \$290m. Phase 1 covers a total built-up area of around 375,000m², with a podium comprising two levels of carpark, a three-level mall and six five-level office buildings. The project is due for completion in March 2014. One mega mall that has already opened its doors is the \$348m luxury Lagoon Mall.

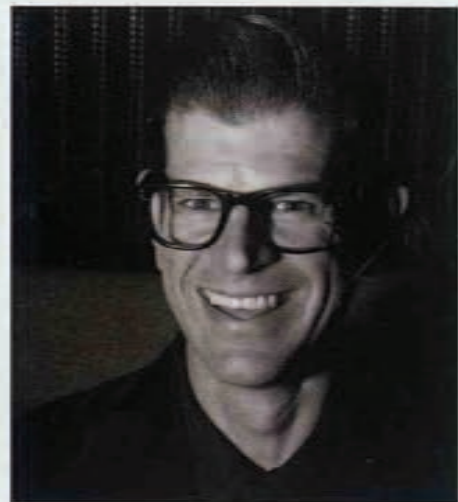
This high-end scheme in West Bay opened to shoppers in February this year, following several delays in construction. It contains 18 restaurants, 160 retail stores and a 13,000m² department store. Meanwhile, HOK's Marina Mall will have a 60,000m² Gross Lettable Area (GLA), with cinemas, restaurants, spas and a hypermarket. Barry Hughes, VP London for HOK, is one of the key figures behind the design. With 20 years' experience in mall design, Hughes has worked on Dubai Festival City, Westfield in London and several US shopping malls. Hughes believes that Qatari shoppers will gravitate to the best malls. "I think there is certainly a demand for better malls," he says. "If you go to any city in the world, and have two shops on opposite corners of the street, the one that has the better ambiance will be more successful. We want to build the mall with the best experience in Doha." Mat Green, head of research and consultancy: UAE for



Mat Green, head of research and consultancy: UAE, CBRE.

CBRE Middle East, agrees that bigger and better malls can win customers. "As seen from markets like Dubai, larger destination malls have the ability to cannibalise the market and take away market share from other smaller or

aging centres," he says. When asked whether there is enough population to support the new malls in Qatar, Hughes replies: "Only time will tell. Doha is trying to create a city for the future. It is trying to manage growth and manage the cultural and commercial aspects." Green is positive, adding: "The future performance of the retail market will, of course, rely heavily on the country's ability to sustain solid population growth in the coming years. "However, with close to 20% GDP growth during 2011 and forecasts of around 6% for this year, the economy is certainly doing its bit to help. The tourism sector is also expanding rapidly, and that could become a major driver of retail demand, although at this stage the market remains business and not leisure led." Hughes believes that any development in the region involve some degree of risk. "There is an element of risk for any commercial developer," he says. Time will tell whether these experiments in the Middle East will be successful.



“If a mall offers a valuable public realm, then it is a valid place to spend time in. It is a big, complex organism, with lots of factors that affect the design.”

Barry Hughes, HOK

I am fascinated by the Qatar experiment. We have an opportunity to create a new place on a grand scale.”

Currently retail demand in Doha remains “very strong” according to Green, who adds that the major mall developments are at, or close to 100% occupancy.

However, he continues: “With significant new retail supply set to be handed over during the next five years, there is a risk of future oversupply. For now we expect to see the established malls continue to perform very well, although some new market entrants may initially struggle to achieve high occupancy rates.

“Qatar is expanding rapidly, and will need to continue to achieve strong growth if it is to keep pace with the current level of construction.”

Hughes believes that, in many countries, shopping malls are not taken seriously as a part of the urban fabric. He continues: “In



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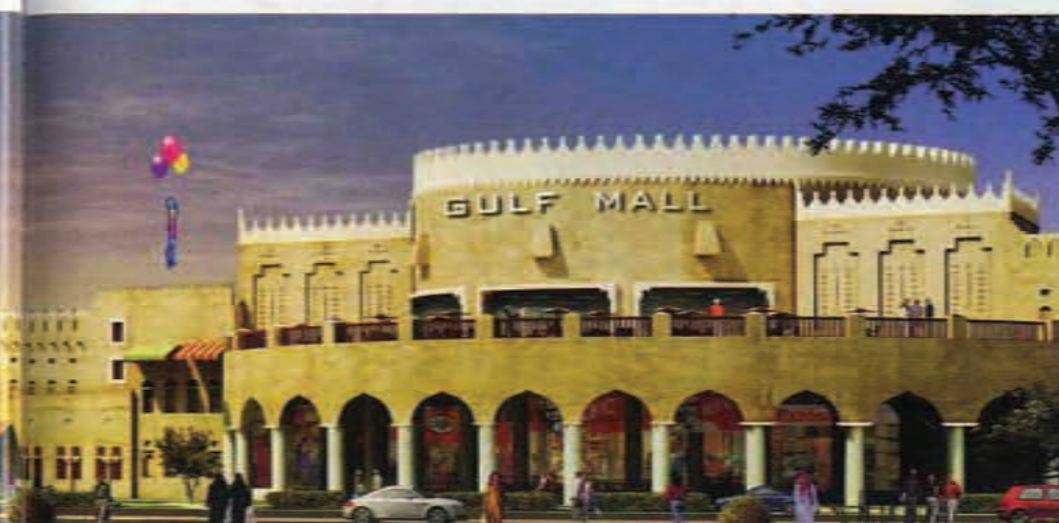
AEB's Gharafa mall is a two-storey shopping arcade in Doha, inspired by traditional souks and Arabian architecture, with pergolas, wind towers and decorative arches.



HOK's Marina Mall is one of the most futuristic mall designs in the Gulf region.



Qatari firm Arab Engineering Bureau (AEB) is working on several mall projects including Al Maqab in Doha.



Ibrahim Mohamed Al Jaidah from AEB.

the Middle East, you have places where you live and work, but there is a third place where you spend a lot of your time. This traditionally would have been the souk.

“If a mall offers a wonderful public realm, then it is a valid place to spend time. At HOK, we take the shopping mall seriously. It is a big, complex organism with lots of factors that influence the design.”

Green agrees that malls can be important recreational areas, especially the large destination malls. “Destination malls have become increasingly popular across the Middle East region, with consumers able to shop and spend leisure time within a single location,” he says.

“By creating entertainment centres and major leisure attractions, developers have been able to increase the dwell time of shoppers and drive up footfall and retail sales. The malls have become the new social centre, and are

increasingly popular among the rapidly growing younger population.”

Hughes believes that the malls in Dubai can offer valuable lessons for developers and designers. “If you took certain elements from the different malls in Dubai, you would probably have the best mall in the world. There are some amazing projects in Dubai; I am fascinated when I visit.”

Scale is an important consideration with regard to malls, according to Hughes. “In Dubai, the scale of the malls are more gracious than in other places. On occasion they feel empty, whereas at peak times they feel about right. Achieving that balance is a challenge. You need a sense of intimacy, without feeling too small.”

He adds that malls are becoming increasingly international in flavour. “With my job, I have the opportunity to travel all over the world. It is interesting, but also depressing,

\$1.37bn

Value of Doha Festival City, one of the largest projects in Qatar

600

Number of shops in the mixed-use Barwa Commercial Avenue

to see how small the world is becoming. The structure of the mall is becoming more global and homogenous.

“The next opportunity for designers is to create something different. Malls are machines for selling goods and services. The key is making it a positive experience. ■