



A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

DRAWN FROM TWO DECADES OF BUILDING MANY OF DOHA'S MOST ICONIC STRUCTURES, QATAR'S LEADING ARCHITECT IBRAHIM JAIDAH SHARES PERSONAL LESSONS AND INSIGHTS



Ibrahim Jaidah's resume as one of Qatar's foremost construction industry professionals, if not the leader in his field in the country, is impressive. Graduating in 1988, Jaidah worked in Qatar's municipal ministry before he acquired Arab Engineering Bureau (AEB) in 1990. Now practising for more than two decades, Jaidah has been designing iconic buildings in Qatar, publishing books and racking up an impressive amount of awards for his efforts as an architect, consultant and leader of the his company, which now has a number of international offices. *TheEDGE* spoke exclusively to the AEB CEO and board member of Jaidah Brothers, who shared personal insights about himself and how he sees building design in Qatar.

SOUQ WAQIF AND ITS SURROUNDS HAD A MAJOR IMPACT ON MY LIFE AND CAREER.

Growing up in Al Jasra in Doha definitely helped, and had an impact on the way I look at the make up of the human environment, simply because of the density of the amount of buildings and the courtyards. Souq Waqif was around the corner and this was where we went to have adventures, in the sikkas, between the shops, with all of the different architectural features of all of these different houses that we jumped on from roof to roof. In my opinion, that had the most impact on my life and even [later] as I was growing up. Later in the 1960s, with the beginning of Qatar's modern construction movement – modern back then, was the building of the clock tower which had only just started to get built in the late fifties, and the old wing of the Emiri (Diwan) the older wing, the green wing and the mosque – they were the new contemporary architecture being built, while I was living in the older town. So it was a wonderful transition and was great to see all of these buildings being built and finished, and it really had an impact. Later on, as I went to college, in the beginning the first courses that I took were interestingly enough engineering courses and physics, but after one semester I realised that this what not what I wanted to do. I wanted to create a building, not engineer a building. So I went to the school of architecture and I loved every minute of it as a student, and when I graduated I realised that I made the right choice and I am still enjoying it to this day, and I hope to be still enjoying it for many years to come.

MY TERTIARY EDUCATION MADE ME REALISE RESEARCH IS KEY TO GOOD DESIGN.

Studying at the University of Oklahoma was a good experience. It was a tough school that emphasised the research part prior to the design. In other words, when you design something, they want to know where did you get your concept from, so you need to research and have a story behind every line that you are drawing and that has really made my research ability and imagination take me places. Coming back and working in the ministry for a couple of years took me from the conceptual or the theoretical to the reality part of architecture, in the sense that everything I do has a budget, it has to built to a budget

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so you cannot just dream and do any shapes as if it does not meet the budget set, it would never see the light. So that taught me how to be realistic, and then when I bought AEB in 1990, with only six people this background information gave me a wonderful idea of what I want to create in terms of an architectural design, where I wanted to make a statement and build my career.

GROWING UP IN A FAMILY BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT AND BEING PART OF A FAMILY BUSINESS HAS TRANSFERRED TO MY CAREER.

Despite the fact that I grew up in a business family, I am not really good in the accounting and business aspects of things, even though I am running a very successful business as such. The childhood that I had was very good, our dad used to take us to the Souq at a very young age, five or six years old, we would sit and listen to deals being done and sometimes we would even get involved in these deals, but I think listening to them and having lived the environment where these deals were made has helped make an impact on the way that we look at things. Later on, as we grew up and were creating the Jaidah brand, which is a continuation of what our ancestors built, as a brotherhood we have started our own and I think we have learnt that in sticking together and complementing each other in our different professions, we have all become totally different individuals, creating a uniquely driven business.



I AM STILL PROUD TO SAY THAT AT LEAST 80 PERCENT OF THE AEB'S WORK IS DIRECT COMMISSIONS AND WE HAVE CREATED LASTING LANDMARKS.

Clients will come to us and commission us to the project rather than making us compete against someone else. It is interesting to hear the client's vision, the statement that they want to create and then the challenges of making such a statement reflected in a feasible manner, to where it makes money. The time that comes between these, and delivering it, is what is keeping us going. All the projects that we have done have been successful business stories for them, and on top of that becoming landmarks etcetera. The favourite projects around the city in Qatar would be the Museum of Islamic Art, which is definitely one of my favourite [projects] and of course with the older buildings, like the Sheraton. There are also some landmarks that are there that I wouldn't say are my favourites, that I have designed by myself. But the greatest success I guess is that one of my buildings, the Qatar Foundation headquarters, was printed on the hundred riyal notes and I think this is something to

be really proud of. As far as the awards go, our projects have won the Arab City awards on several occasions, at least three of them. We also won one Islamic City Award and have been nominated for the prestigious Aga Khan award three times. One award that I am extremely proud of is the State Encouragement medal that I got from the state of Qatar a few years ago. I am very proud of this.

I AM ALSO VERY PROUD OF OUR LOCAL ARCHITECTURE, WHICH INSPIRED MY BOOK.

After I returned from the United States I started to get a lot more impressed by the national architecture that I grew up with, so I started taking a lot of photos and getting hold of surveys and whatever information I could get. I wanted to document this, as it can be a perfect reference for a student to know his or her history in terms of architecture. Not only that, I think that it is important to publish such a book because of the influx of architects that are coming from all over the world, that we try to reflect something of our culture in one way or another – but there was one difference. You could call it “postcard research”, in that from just looking at a couple postcards they would think that they could understand the culture, which isn't really the case. So I thought by providing research on the architecture of our culture, it would become a nice reference for designers, and it has. I have been getting a lot of compliments from famous architects.

IBRAHIM JAIDAH'S CREATIVE LEGACY

The following are just 10 of Ibrahim Jaidah's designs in Qatar:

- Al Dhayaan Municipality – Reinvigoration of traditional Qatari village, Qatar.
- Barzan Tower (pictured) – blend of modern and traditional design in West Bay, Doha.
- Qatar Financial Center – “Q” shaped headquarters of QFC, West Bay, Doha.
- Kempinski – High-end luxury tower inspired by traditional wind tower, West Bay, Doha.
- Diplomatic Club – Design nominated for Aga Khan Award, West Bay, Doha.
- Grand Heritage Hotel – European influenced hotel complex, Al Waab, Doha.
- Commercial Bank Plaza – Headquarters of Commercial Bank, West Bay, Doha.
- Alfardan Twin Towers – Mixed use conjoined towers, West Bay, Doha.
- Omani Embassy – Traditional construction blending Qatari and Omani influences, West Bay, Doha.
- Qatar Foundation HQ – Appears on QR100 note, Qatar Foundation, Doha.

HOWEVER, WHEN WE GET INFLUENCED BY WHAT IS THE QATARI CULTURE IT DOES NOT MEAN WE SHOULD JUST COPY WHAT THE SOUQ WAQIF IS, FOR EXAMPLE.

We still can be influenced by the Gulf and by local architecture, but we must reflect it in an extremely modern manner to where the patterns, even an abstract pattern, can reflect the culture rather than the straightforward elements of architecture.

THOUGH AEB HAS GROWN TO A FEW HUNDRED EMPLOYEES I HAVE NEVER LOST THE JOY OF DESIGN.

We have about four hundred and sixty employees. We will probably have five hundred by the end of the year and that is really a big challenge – how do I manage them and still have the joy of designing and being creative? That has been achieved with two things. A strong management team taking care of the day-to-day management procedures in the office. On the other hand, to maintain the design I have been blessed with a good design team who have been working with me for so long and now we have reached a stage to where we understand each other, whether we are sketching or describing something. With this we can achieve the vision that I have and that they have and we can combine our skills to create whatever we are creating. Now the other challenges and obstacles that we face on the business side of it is the growth that we have internationally. Now we have branches in Abu Dhabi, Oman, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Hong Kong. With all of these branches, it makes the business side of it a challenge and we also have ambitions to go to North Africa. Those are the ambitions that we don't have a time frame for, but I am still going to do it sometimes down the line. Business-wise it is a challenge because we want to maintain the quality and this is what I am trying to do with this great team.

QATAR WILL DEFINITELY BE ONE OF THE BEST PLACES FOR YOUNG ARCHITECTS OR FOR EVEN SIGNATURE ARCHITECTS TO PRACTICE.

This is because Qatar is currently a blank canvas where you can be as creative as you want to be and there is a lot of work to be done. In addition to that, in other places in the world, between what the architect's concept is that is designed, by the time that he/she has finished it can take 10 to 15 years before it is finished. In Qatar while we are sketching something, a month or a couple of months later you would see it on site and in a year and half you would see your finished building, so your dreams come true a lot faster here. With the different names of architects that are currently practicing in Qatar, this is sort of currently like a small encyclopaedia of the most contemporary architecture that is happening in the world, in Qatar and in our region. It is unfortunate that throughout the history of mankind while there are some people that have had the creative thinking of the pyramids or of the great monuments and temples of the Pharaohs that have been built... at the same time somebody was developing and building an unpleasant design. That will obviously continue, but there is public awareness that is being driven by the government now, I think that these unpleasant buildings are going to be now reduced to the minimum. Especially because the government builds the state of the art buildings, top quality buildings as we have seen with the Education City and Musheireb,

they are top quality buildings and eventually this will influence the taste of the public, and slowly you will see that everybody will start to go towards that type of quality buildings.

THE VILLAGGIO TRAGEDY HIGHLIGHTED SAFETY IN QATAR, BUT WE HAVE ALWAYS FOUND THE APPROVAL PROCESSES VERY STRICT.

Every building that is being built now would have gone through the stringent safety process. For about eight years the civil defence department approval has been the most difficult process in terms of safety. They would go through our concepts, architectural and then as we progress and proceed with the design they would go through every piece of mechanical equipment, so that buildings that are being built now or built in the last five years or so will meet the highest standard of safety at an international level. They are even implementing NFBA, which is an international standard for fire and safety. In the past buildings, 10 to 15 years ago, didn't have these standard but their scales are much smaller and not that much of a concern, as they are mostly houses and small shops open to the outside. Later on with all of these malls, all of the precautions are now being done. After this unfortunate incident I think that things are going to be much stricter and now it is going to be more of a burden for the civil defence department, because they were just running all of it alone, trying to do this protection. But now there is awareness, even with the developers and not just the clients themselves, as they have realised that the price can be very dear to everybody.

RESOURCES AND AFFORDABILITY WILL BE KEY CONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES IN THE FUTURE, BUT NOT SKILLS.

Resources have always been a challenge for this part of the world, because we are not heavily populated and there are people from all over the world that have come to help us. Prices are extremely competitive at this stage, but as projects are going to start coming in in the next year or two I think that it is going to be a challenge to keep the prices from inflating in the construction industry. In getting skilled labour, maybe we have an advantage that there isn't much happening in most of the rest of the world, so this is an opportunity to get the best brains available to help us build our nation for the next generations.

AEB IS AND WILL CONTINUE TO CONTRIBUTE TO QATAR'S NATIONAL VISION 2030.

In many aspects of the designs that we do there will be something related to our Qatari identity, as the vision states that our identity should be maintained in a modern and contemporary way, so that we are following along with that. The other challenge is that the projects which we do have to be sustainable, so things have to link in with green architecture and to sustain the time and the usage. So we are very much in line with the vision and direction of 2030 in front of us in every step, and we also make sure that we are always thinking about it in terms of innovation.

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