

Han of the Moment

The man behind some of Istanbul's most credible structures, Han Tmertekin is an architect on an anti-megalomaniac mission





Han Tümertekin is unlike other architects. In more ways than one. While other design bureaus are fuelled by adrenalin and arrogance – not to mention caffeine – his agency’s office in Istanbul’s chic Kuruçeşme neighbourhood is an oasis of calm.

Both Tümertekin’s projects and personality purvey an aura of zen. The winner of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture – not to mention Harvard lecturer and Venice Biennale contributor – should be knee-deep in client-induced stress. Instead, he’s the most laid-back designer in the Middle East.

‘Good architecture is all about the “Third Way”, the slow way,’ explains Tümertekin. We are discussing his B2 House, located south of Istanbul, which won the Aga Khan prize in 2004. This über-modern stone and glass villa overlooks Turkey’s timeless Aegean Sea. Yet the stark design gels completely with the surrounding settlement, which has been established for almost 5,000 years.

‘There are two tendencies in the Middle East,’ he continues. ‘The first is to copy Western solutions. The second is to copy historical forms.’ For B2 House, Tümertekin grafted his well-travelled client’s vision onto the age-old landscape – a ‘Third Way’ if you will.

The first thing Tümertekin did was to personally visit the space on Turkey’s Aegean coast. He contemplated the sea view. Drank tea. Read a good book. The architect then toured the local village. In contrast to the ‘megalomaniac architects’ that Tümertekin decries, he wanted to ‘create a dialogue’ with the villagers. The end result was to commission several local masons to create their own stonework ideas for B2 House.

The result? ‘The designs were terrible!’ laughs the architect. The Aegean stonemasons had tried to wow the Istanbul architects with their own vision of modernity. Instead, Tümertekin turned their traditional techniques – two-storey structures built in cool local stone, terraces to match the topography, no surrounding walls – into an inventive/inclusive hybrid.

B2 House is constructed from interlocked layers of local granite and volcanic rock. Despite its modernity, getting building permission for B2 House from the local muhtar, the head of the village, posed no problem. After all, the design fitted its surroundings perfectly.

It’s a decade since Tümertekin won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Ten years on, he now lectures at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, Paris’s École Spéciale



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Good architecture is all about the ‘Third Way’

HAN TÜMERTEKIN



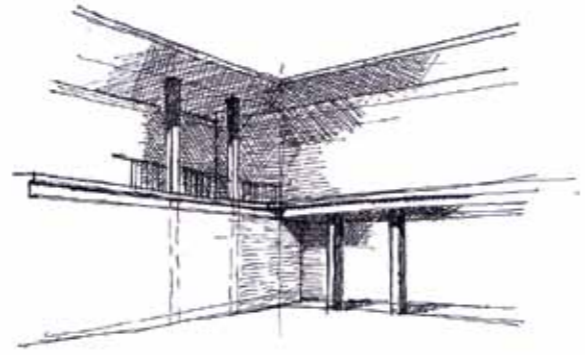
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d'Architecture and Istanbul's Bilgi University, the respective architectural epicentres of the United States, Europe and Turkey. He now helps to oversee the Aga Khan prize, a responsibility arguably more important than winning the prize in the first place.

Tümertekin won wider fame for his contribution to the Venice Biennale in 2006 to 2007, where he worked on urban sociologist Ricky Burdett's exhibition on Istanbul. His reimagining of the Silahtarğa Power Station into the spellbinding santralIstanbul Museum of Energy won plaudits from across the globe.

State-sponsored commissions quickly followed. The new Tümertekin-designed Turkish Embassy in Ulan Bator (pink stone on the outside, rainbow glass inside) was just completed a few months ago. Construction of Turkey's new diplomatic mission to the EU in Strasbourg – a commanding multi-tiered riverside edifice – begins next year. He is also on the advisory board for the second Istanbul Design Biennial, a fiesta of fine design that will surely pull in architecture fans from across the Middle East in late 2014.

One imagines that Tümertekin's architectural practice, Mimarlar Tasarım, will be swamped with commissions in 2014. So how does he choose from the many offers? The

chance to meld new materials? The architectural challenge? Hard cash?

'The only thing I care about is the client,' claims Tümertekin. 'Genuinely, little else matters.' Unlike many other Turkish architectural firms who ply their wares across the Muslim world from the Atlantic to the Caspian, his agency's approach is personable and collaborative.

Fame assured, it seems that our Aga Khan prizewinner can dictate the mechanics of each design. 'I cannot work with a Board of Directors or an agency,' he continues. 'I need to talk face-to-face with the decision maker. That's it!' And like any new partner – business or otherwise – he claims that if the meeting of minds is not 'love at first sight', the relationship simply won't work.

Moreover, Tümertekin ensures that each project is utterly inclusive. Architectural sites are personally inspected. The thoughts of every contributor – from the glass etcher to the graphic designer – are individually consulted. Each tradesman, purveyor and backer is kept in the loop at all times. Again he asserts: 'There is no place for megalomaniacs on my projects.'

But such collaborative 'slow design' is surely the antithesis of much of the fast-paced building in the Arabian Gulf.



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Tümertekin agrees that many Gulf states have been in 'a hurry' to make a mark on the global design stage, rather than pairing an architectural vision with time-tested local building skills.

For example, new buildings in the Middle East with north-facing windows and traditional ventilation 'windcatchers' on the roof are rare; more desirable are expensive-to-cool skyscrapers built entirely of glass. But Tümertekin is optimistic about the future of architecture. In a world of diminishing resources, 'good design is by its very nature ecologically conscious.'

On the flipside, what's missing in modern day Turkey – yet is oh-so-prevalent in the Arab World – is public space. The likes of Cairo and Casablanca have huge piazzas and parks for locals to laze in; Istanbul has nothing comparable. As cities grow, and square metres rise in price, Tümertekin sees 'an entire generation asking for more (public space).'

Istanbul's Gezi Park demonstrations, which reverberated around the Middle East, started a few kilometres south of where we now sit. According to Tümertekin, the protests were a constituent part of this architectural oversight. With this in mind, his agency's forthcoming projects seek to weave public space with modern design. Now that's a lesson in good architecture for us all.

Although Mimarlar Tasarım's projects have shaped the urban landscape of Istanbul, its projects can also be found in the Netherlands, Japan, United Kingdom, France, China, Mongolia and Kenya