

# TheNational



## Design on track

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The Yas Marina Hotel designed by Hani Rashid's architectural firm boasts the world's largest programmable LED-lighting display. Randi Sokoloff / The National

"Driving past Yas Island, I thought it would be beautiful to create something that feels like a mirage on the horizon," says Hani Rashid, the New York-based architect behind the Yas Marina Hotel in Abu Dhabi.

The 500-room complex was unveiled last week and is due to open in October. It straddles the capital's Formula 1 racing track and also sits at the mouth of the island's yachting marina. The hotel was designed by Asymptote, one of the world's most progressive design and architecture firms, which was founded by Rashid in 1988 with his wife and fellow architect Lise Anne Couture.

Their previous works have included the HydraPier Pavilion, an elegant glass-and-steel lakeside building in The Netherlands, as well as the advanced trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange, a design that included both physical and virtual elements.

Currently under construction is Asymptote's crystalline World Business Center, a 600-metre skyscraper in Busan, South Korea, which is set to become one of Asia's tallest buildings. However, when the 85,000-square-metre Yas Marina Hotel is opened, it will be Asymptote's

largest completed project. “It’s meant to look like billowing sails or cloth, sitting above the dunes of the desert or the sea,” says Rashid.

Comprised of two 10-storey towers, the hotel and connecting bridge are entirely covered by a giant netlike “grid shell”, which is made up of around 5,600 glass panels.

“It’s like a diamond glass encasing that flows over the building like a cloud,” he says. “Each of the diamond-shaped pieces of glass are set slightly off-angle, so they produce a kind of shimmering skin. The angles of the glass pieces reflect the sky in a very artistic way.

“I wanted something that plays against the light of the sky and the atmosphere of the place,” he says. “I didn’t just want to design a couple of hotel towers, sitting there like normal buildings. I wanted something almost musical.”

Rashid is known for more than just his design flair and a metaphor for every occasion. He is also part of a famous family. His younger brother is Karim Rashid, an award-winning industrial designer, known for his love of plastics. With a “democratic” design philosophy, Karim creates interiors, fashion, furniture, lighting and art that is accessible both artistically and financially.

Their late father was also a man with a strong visual sense, the Egyptian abstract painter Mahmoud Rashid. Studying in Paris in the 1960s, Mahmoud fell in love with a teacher from England, where the family originally settled before moving to Canada while the boys and daughter Soraya were still at school.

“Coming from two cultures, British and Egyptian, [my father] told me that if I ever went into architecture, I should pay attention to the history and the culture and background of the place where I’m working,” says Rashid. “I really don’t want to just export American architecture.”

Asymptote was originally commissioned to design two contemporary art pavilions in Abu Dhabi by the Guggenheim Foundation for the cultural district of Saadiyat Island.

“When we designed the pavilions, I worked hard on trying to produce something that made sense in the region,” he says. “I wanted something that has a deeper appeal than superficial aesthetics or artificial history – it couldn’t be Disneyland.”

After impressing developers with the pavilions, Asymptote was asked to enter a competition by Aldar Properties to design the Yas Island hotel. The architects began studying ancient crafts, jewels and ornamentation from the Middle East in search of inspiration. Aspects of Bedouin culture and desert life were of particular influence to the New York designers.

“We took inspiration from beautiful tents and carpets,” says Rashid. “We tried to extract from all that history something that would be very contemporary, but at the same time, resonate with something authentic.”

In keeping with the Gulf's fondness for customisation and things that shine, the building's grid shell is also fitted with the world's largest programmable LED lighting and image sequence display. On UAE National Day, for example, the 217-metre shell could be illuminated in the colours of the national flag.

Fine art will be accommodated in the building, with a new gallery situated in the bridge connecting the hotel's two main towers. It is expected to feature a rotating exhibition of contemporary works. And, of course, no Gulf hotel would be complete without high-end apartments. The giant presidential suites will feature original artworks and exclusive furnishings from New York's Museum of Modern Art. They will also have lap pools, private lifts and a full kitchen.

"Initially, we designed all of the hotel's interiors, but there was some trepidation on the part of the people that would manage them. They wanted something a little more conventional," says Rashid. As a result, the British interior design firm Jestico + Whiles and the New York outfit Richardson Sadeki created much of the hotel's interior.

"However, we had some beautiful ideas for the lobbies and the hallways and the ballrooms, which came back to us," he says. "So a lot of the public interiors are by my firm and the rooms are by another."

Perhaps the masterstroke of the building's design is that it is neither wholly modern nor traditional. As well as attempting to incorporate some of the Middle East's historical flavour, Rashid says he was also influenced by the concept of speed and state-of-the-art engineering.

"We wanted to combine the spirit of auto racing and the elegance of a Formula 1 car," he says. "It's a statement about land speed and also the freedom of sailing and the power of the wind. The building's skin almost seems to be held up by air."

Rashid says winning the project was a particularly sweet victory for him because of his own interest in motor sport.

"I am an avid fan of Formula 1 and I also have a great interest in technology and speed. As a kid I loved rally cars, then when I got to school I began to look at the way cars were formed," he says. "I am also very keen on racing road bikes."

The architect says the project was also an opportunity to experiment with new technologies and methodologies, including some of those used to produce the Airbus A380, the largest passenger airliner in the world, and also the luxury Wally yachts.

"A lot of the teaching that I have been doing at universities [including Harvard, Princeton and Columbia] has centred around high performance architecture," he says. "So I even took some of my students to go and see the Renault wind tunnel, which is used for their Formula 1 cars, to see how speed affects design with the assistance of computing."

Without state-of-the-art computer modelling, designing the hotel's grid shell would not have

been possible: “It could never have been produced five years ago the way we did it without that technology.”

With a wide knowledge of art, design and technology, Rashid and his brother seem to be 21st-century renaissance men. But the architect says he and his brother were encouraged to be creative from an early age.

“Whereas most kids would be doing more normal things, my dad would make us draw a lot and do mini-exercises to try to make things.

“Karim and I grew up with a healthy competition, our father was a fantastic influence on both of us,” he says. “In fact, he believed correctly that my brother would work with graphic imagery and that I would be a sculptor, or someone who works with the three-dimensional form. We certainly went in those directions.”

Rashid’s mother, Joyce, a teacher with literary training, is talked about less than his father. However, the architect believes that her influence on the pair should not be overlooked.

“Growing up in a family which included a European-educated Arab painter and a literary British mother made me very focused on aesthetics, but with an intellectual backup,” he says. “There were some very interesting conversations between the two when it came to politics, about the West and the East.”

However their differences also created conflict, something that Rashid believes was partly responsible for his family’s move across the Atlantic.

“Both of them were quite uncomfortable in each other’s worlds and that’s how we ended up in the States,” he says.

So it is ironic that the unusual mix of perspectives and skills that drove Hani Rashid’s family overseas, should also lead him towards a career in architecture, the very thing that has brought him back to the Middle East.