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## Heidar Sadeki

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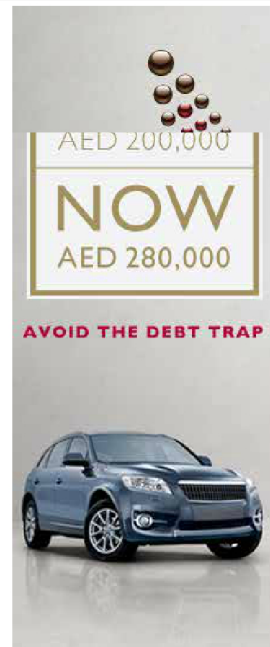
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Heidar Sadeki.

**The Yas Hotel in Abu Dhabi is world-renowned for its architecture and design, created by Asymptote Architecture. It's no surprise that its spa, ESPA at The Yas Hotel, is of a similarly striking standard. However, the spa has a very different look and feel to the hotel and the design was not impacted by the hotel building's iconic architecture at all, reveals Heidar Sadeki, design director at Richardson Sadeki, the spa interior architect.**

"The spa is a very different thing because we looked at the traditional hammam, and the defining feature of the hamman is privacy, and the fact that there is a major difference between the interior and exterior," explains Sadeki. "If you look at the entrance of ESPA, I have covered all of the windows entirely, and except for the tepid relaxation room and the retail area, there is no access to the exterior from the spa. I closed it off. In that sense, I created a rather excessive interiority, similar to the Islamic hammam. In the hammam, the only means of light coming through is in the form of rather gothic, small windows in the ceiling.

"With the spa we went into a language that is completely different to the architectural language evident in the rest of the hotel," he says.

The design ethos of Richardson Sadeki is "very modern and minimalistic", says Sadeki. His challenge at The Yas Hotel was to articulate Islamic architecture, especially in relation to the spa centrepiece of the hammam, described above, but in a minimalist way — something which Sadeki acknowledges he has rarely seen achieved.

"For example, I have taken the Islamic motif on the walls of the entrance area, but the articulation of the motif is very modern. There is cut brass and cut aluminium installed on layers of glass," he says.

Sadeki considers this a very unique approach, and the result is far removed from the tendency towards Asian-oriented spas.

"There are very few spas that I know of right now in the world that have taken this approach. Most spas go down the traditional route of creating a very quaint space. And while I think those spas are quite wonderful, it's not what we do," he says.

### **Design goals**

So what does Sadeki do when it comes to spa design? First and foremost, the goal is to ensure that "the server does not run into the served".

"I am always very careful for you not to run into the guy with the mop," says Sadeki.

This is intertwined with the priority placed on guest privacy and comfort — the number one concern for Sadeki.

"The three major experiences that have to do with clothing are: fully clothed, robed and naked. It is important to make sure that people are comfortable in all three of these stages, within a very small space," says Sadeki. "That's very difficult, especially in situations where we have both genders.

"Even if you have a situation where you only have one gender, for example in the women's lounge or locker room, women may not be comfortable being naked within the proximity of other women, whether that comes from a sense of shyness or being insecure about one's body. That is the technical aspect of designing a spa. You can basically lose the whole game if a client is made to feel even a little uncomfortable in any of those situations.

"How can I make a place memorable when essentially we bring you into this space, you take your clothes off, and then a strange person comes into the room and gives you a massage? How can we make sure that you leave the place and still have a fond and comfortable memory of it? I believe that spa programmes, alongside hospital programmes, are some of the most difficult programmes to design," he asserts.

"Also, I don't want you to just remember that you were comfortable. I want you to be comfortable enough to remember what you experienced. So, if I succeed in making you feel comfortable, then the next step is creating an experience that is memorable," says Sadeki. And this is a man who knows what he is talking about, having designed the famous Bliss Spa in New York City.

"I asked the spa owner to allow me to work in the spa anonymously for five days and I really got an idea for how a spa functions," he says.

At ESPA at The Yas Hotel, this has resulted in a very linear, sequential and luxurious facility.

"So when you arrive [at ESPA], you have the option of a waiting lounge, check-in or retail. As a gentleman you will be taken directly upstairs. In my western spas, I will assign a lot more space to men than women because it is an emerging market. In this part of the world, the female part of the spa is more prominent," says Sadeki.

"I want to take you through an experience that cuts out the outside world, so you can recalibrate your senses. On arrival, I have thrown in a visual reference, which you will

remember later on — The Carrara stone [also seen in the tepid relaxation room]. In all my spas I want to create privacy but I also want to create a sense of connectivity.

“There are two aspects to this. One is from the purely economic point of view. I would like to enable you, as a spa owner, to make sure that the space works very efficiently so you maximise income. In other words, you could have up to two people at any given time in the hammam, and you can have four more waiting in the tea room. A lot of spaces are both a part of the processing line, but at the same time, they are part of creating a journey for the guest that is both comforting and relaxing,” says Sadeki.

After the hammam, the guest moves to the tepid relaxation area, which has access to a balcony overlooking the marina.

“We’ve included lots of small foyer areas, so there is an intermission between all of the main spaces. In terms of creating comfort in a space where you are not fully clothed, this is key. You have a place to recompose yourself.”

### **Operator opinion**

The spa was designed before the operator came on board, although ESPA was a consultant on the project. So how does the spa manager perceive the design?

Aoibheanna Bonner, spa and recreation manager at ESPA at The Yas Hotel says: “Our design highlights include the feeling of space throughout the spa, we have lots of natural daylight with floor to ceiling windows in most of our treatment rooms overlooking the marina. Our colours and textiles reflect Arabia with bronze walls in our Hammam, Italian marble walls and the sculptured garden within our Rotunda.

“Spas as we know are traditionally dark. At ESPA at The Yas Hotel our design immediately captures the guests; they feel indulged as they walk through the spa and the mix of colours, textures and light allows them to relax.

“Our spa suite with private elevator access from the presidential suite offers privacy and exclusivity that is quite unique,” adds Bonner.