

COMMERCIAL

# Interior design

The essential guide for Middle East interior design professionals

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HOW THE WORKPLACE IS  
CONTINUING TO EVOLVE

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# Year of the Dragan

ROMANIAN-BORN RADU DRAGAN HEADS UP A FRENCH DESIGN FIRM THAT'S BUILT WORK IS ALL TO BE FOUND IN THE MIDDLE EAST. CID MEETS HIM.

**R**omanian-born, Paris-based Radu Dragan takes a highly intellectual approach to design. As well as being an architect, urban planner and the founder of Dragan Architecture, he is also a doctor of social anthropology and ethnology, and the author of two books, *La représentation de l'espace*

*dans la société traditionnelle: les mondes renversés*, and *Symbols and Language in Sacred Christian Architecture*. He is a member of the French Order of Architects, has been an associate professor at the Ion Mincu Institute of Architecture in Bucharest since 1982, and has lectured at the renowned Ecole Pratique des Hautes

Etudes of Sorbonne. But what looks like a decidedly European CV also has a surprising Middle Eastern twist.

Since launching Dragan Architecture, a multi-disciplinary design firm that does everything from urban planning to interior design, in 2000, Dragan has enjoyed notable success in the GCC, particularly



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Saudi Arabia – to such an extent that all of the French firm’s completed projects are now to be found in this part of the world. *Commercial Interior Design* caught up with Radu Dragan to find out why.

**Tell us about your career so far.**

I started my career in Romania, where I worked for some years before settling in France in 1990.

I then worked in prestigious French firms such as Vasconi Architecture, Ingenierie (where I contributed to the design of the Palace of Justice in Grenoble) and François Deslaugiers. I opened my own office in 2000. There were only a few of us in the beginning, but the office has developed over the

last few years, mainly due to important commissions from Middle Eastern developers. All of our built projects are in the Middle East. We also have some important projects in Europe on standby. Due to the economic crisis, many of these projects remain unbuilt.

I have a Doctorate in Social Anthropology and another one in the History of Religions from Sorbonne. For some years, I taught at Sorbonne and am currently a visiting professor at the University of Architecture in Bucharest. I have also published a couple of books on anthropology.

**Why design?**

For a long time, common philosophical thought preached that form follows

function. The architectural theories of the 20th century are largely indebted to it. However, and on a larger scale one might suggest, form also determines function. And form is design, if we accept a definition larger than that in the fashion magazines!

So, I think that ‘designing’ things is bringing them into existence.

**What are the defining characteristics of your work?**

I think it is a continuous (and often tortured) search.

**What are the most interesting projects that you have worked on?**

Undoubtedly, the unbuilt ones... our five-star hotel project in Bucharest, the

1 Dragan recently completed a luxury hotel project in Jeddah.

2&3 The company has also done work in Riyadh.



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Towers of Cluj, the Library of Prague. There are too many imperfections in finished buildings.

**How important is the Middle East market for you?**

In recent years, the largest part of our work has been for Middle Eastern customers, so I can say that today it is our most important market. We have designed the common spaces of a luxury hotel in the region, and the King Abdullah International Conference Centre, which is currently under construction in Jeddah. We have also designed many luxury villas and private residences, and an urban project in Riyadh.

**Tell us about the high-end hotel project in Riyadh.**

It is a luxury hotel of 360 rooms and suites, with a restaurant for 600 people and another one for 240 people. The rooms are set around five large inner atriums. The decoration of the four lateral wings symbolises the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. In the middle of them is the central atrium, which has the symbol of the sun.

It was difficult to propose a very modern design as it is an official building. However, I tried to bring in some art deco style themes.

**4&5 What other projects are you working on right now?**

Dragan has designed a new housing district for Riyadh.

As mentioned, we are finishing the building of a new convention centre



in Jeddah. We are also working on a private villa, and a hotel in Kuwait is on the cards.

**How sophisticated is interior design in this part of the world, would you say?**

Sophistication in its sense of refinement is not wealthy (even if it is not necessarily un-wealthy). Rather, it is a conceptual problem. In practical terms, it means a perfect mastering of details. As far as I can see, there is a frantic search for modernity here in the Gulf. It is as if, with the almost unlimited means that you have, you are trying to push design to its limits.

But is society prepared to assimilate this very rapid change? I think that sophistication will be reached only when

the social psyche perceives this futuristic design not only as an exterior sign of wealth and power, but as an inner dimension of its own weltanschauung [a comprehensive view of the world and human life].

**How does this compare to France, where you are based?**

There are very good architects and designers here in France, with a very interesting conceptual approach. Unfortunately, design is a collective approach and it needs considerable financial support. In France, we have a competition system which makes it rather difficult to obtain a public commission, where the financing is still considerable. It is certain that today the





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**6,7&8**  
Because of the current economic climate, many of Dragan's European projects remain unbuilt.

Middle East provides much more opportunity for architects and designers than Europe does.

**What are the greatest challenges currently facing interior designers?**

Technology is changing our world very quickly. We must assimilate it and integrate it into our work, but the problem is that these transformations are happening too fast for our minds. We are not able to understand most of the things around us (for example, I know few people that are able to fully understand how to work not only a computer, but even a washing machine). Increasingly, we are users, not makers, and how can we shape the world if we don't understand it?

**What is the most important piece of advice that you can give to students looking to work in the design field?**

As a French anthropologist recently said, the younger generation wishes not to work, but to create. This may seem like a good thing, only I am unable to see the difference between the two. I am afraid that work is viewed less and less as a positive value in our modern society. And design, as I have said, is not only about a good pencil or even computer. I think we must teach our students a sense of labour that our modern society seems have lost.

**Is there a type of interior space that you haven't worked on, but would like**

**to? And is there a country that you would like to work in, but haven't yet?**

It is difficult to say. After almost 30 years in the business, I have worked on many types of architectural and interior design schemes.

Maybe I'd say that I would like to have more liberty in my design choices, and more trust from clients. A good design is born only when an intelligent designer meets an intelligent customer. Last but not least, I would like to work more on contemporary design.

However, if there is an architectural programme that I never touch, it is the sky scraper. I am not a fan of high-rise buildings, but they are evidence that our modern cities must develop in a vertical sense if we want preserve land

– and the vertical sense is fascinating because it is almost metaphysical. Also, I have never designed a museum. A museum space dialogues with singularities, when all other programmes do it with multiplicity.

As for a country where I would like to work, the world is very uniform today, and, concerning our cities, design is largely responsible for this. This makes the world smaller and more familiar, but also more boring. I am, as with many people today, a citizen of this smaller (and more accessible) world, so I think I could and would like to work anywhere.

And I have found the search for modernity here in the new Middle East quite fascinating. **CD**

