



VIKTOR UDZENIJA

ONE ON ONE WITH ARCHITECT AND INTERIOR DESIGNER

Viktor Udzenija is of Croatian origin, born in Belgrade in 1980, in the former Yugoslavia. He is not only dashing in person, or in pictures, but he is dashing on paper too, his designs that is. This architect and interior designer *extraordinaire* is somewhat of a prodigy, having successfully completed and award-winning building in Dubai at the age of 28, an age when most of us are still struggling with career choices, he started his own cutting-edge architectural and design firm, and since then, has enjoyed one phenomenal success after the other. *IN Magazine* talks with Viktor about his career, his love of architecture, and his passion for Dubai.

Tell us about your architectural journey, where you studied, where you began your career...

I knew I wanted to be an architect from an early age. I was always drawing houses and was admiring buildings wherever we used to travel with family. I commenced my education at the Czech Technical University in Prague, Czech Republic, where I received a Bachelor's degree in Architecture. It gave me a very solid base of general knowledge. I still think the eastern European school system is one of the strongest worldwide. After I completed my Bachelor's I received a scholarship to go and continue my studies at the prestigious Technical University of Munich, Germany. I was highly impressed with the quality of teaching and what students were given to work with: latest technologies, famous architects as visiting professors and unlimited access to the latest innovations in the field. I decided to stay in Munich and after three years I had gained my Diploma in Architecture finishing the studies with the Project of the year award for the proposal of the New Orangerie building for the University of Erlangen, Germany.

What first brought you to the UAE?

I came here to overlook the construction of the Index Tower in Dubai in 2008. I was working with Foster + Partners (UK), one of the leading practices worldwide and was given this amazing opportunity to be in charge of our tallest project at the time. I was only 28 and was working in the headquarter office as a junior architect when my boss offered me the position. I didn't hesitate for one minute and accepted the job, moved to Dubai within three weeks and that is how my journey here began.

And what made you decide to stay and plant roots here?

At the time of completion of the Index tower I had already fallen in love with Dubai and the people living here.

I saw plenty of opportunities in the city, even though the economic crisis wasn't over yet. It was a risky and brave move to leave one of the world's leading companies at such uncertain economic times but it definitely paid off. My company has prospered greatly in the shortest time frame and I have been given the chance to work on some remarkable projects.

What makes your company, Viktor Udzenija Architecture + Design, so different from other reputable architectural firms in the UAE and the region?

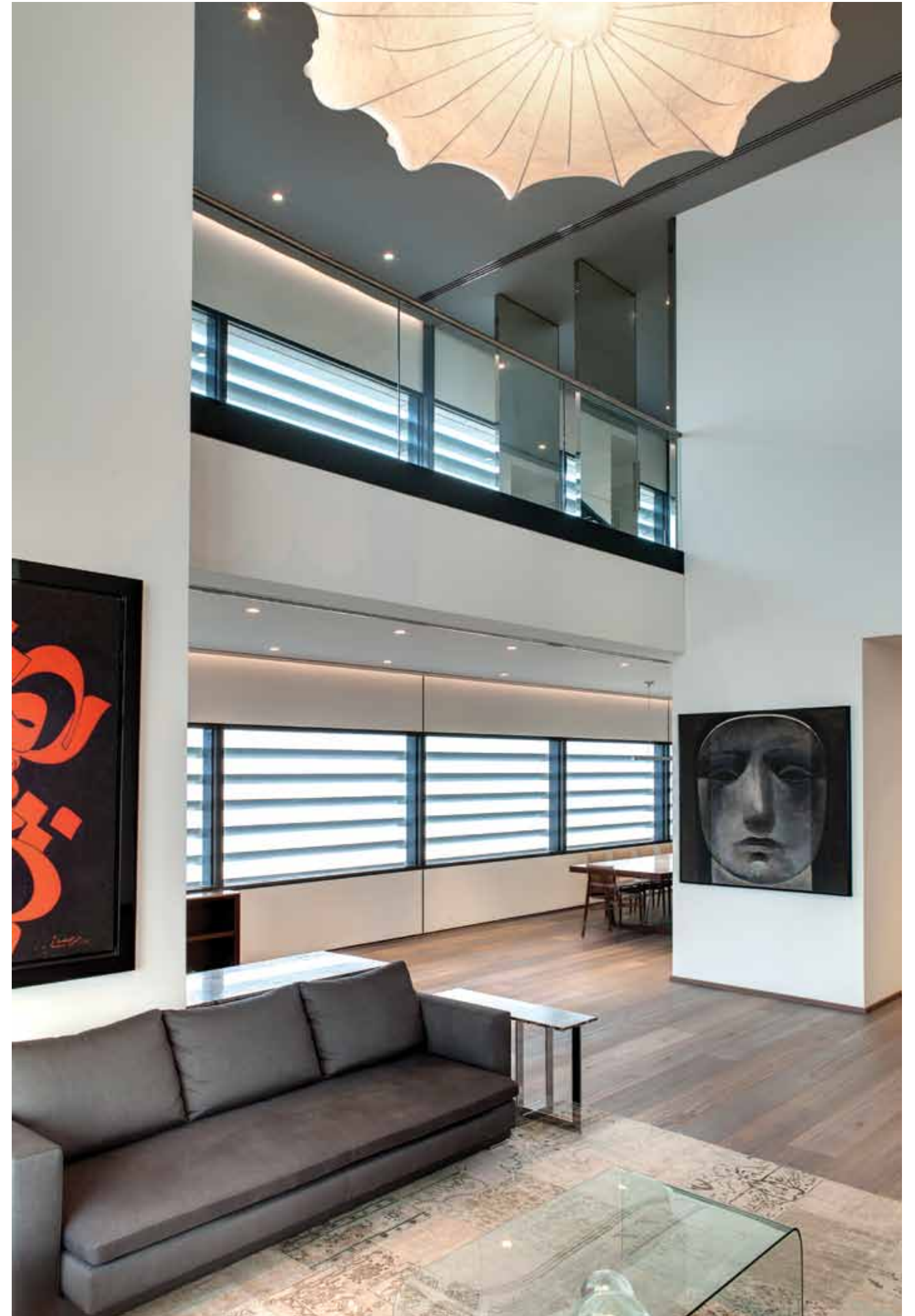
We always try to create timeless modern spaces that will withstand more than one generation and still be very much "*En Vogue*" a couple of decades after completion. One of the key aspects is definitely great attention to quality and detail not only of the materials we use but also of the implementation on site. One of the key elements is absolute devotion to the client and a fully individual approach to each and every project we do. We strive to bring something new with each new project and perfect our skills and knowledge.

What are some of your most memorable projects that you have worked on?

Before setting up my own company, it is for sure the Index Tower in Dubai that I have worked on during my years with Norman Foster. I still think it is one of the best buildings in Dubai together with the Burj Khalifa. At the time we had won the award for the Best Building in the Middle East and North Africa, which was a great reward for the hard work. Another project I am particularly proud of is a beach residence in Croatia, my home country, which was completed to our exact vision and expectations. I was very lucky with the client who has given us full trust without much prior work in our portfolio.

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What have you learned from architecture that you apply to your own personal everyday life?

That there is a solution to everything!

Your website mentions that your firm is environmentally conscious, what are some architecture and design methods you have applied that cater to sustainability? In what projects have you applied them?

Sustainable design is one of the key factors in architecture of the 21st century. With every architectural design, especially in this region where sun and heat are key elements related to energy consumption, one of the first aspects we look into is the solar and heat gains and its impact on the comfort levels within our buildings. We also look at its' direct impact on the carbon footprint of a building caused by the energy that has to be consumed to keep the building cool. We always try to minimize the energy consumption and thus the impact on the environment with clever means of building orientation, shading, suitable insulation materials, construction detailing and use of renewable energies where possible. When it comes to interiors we always try to use natural materials from controlled suppliers that adhere to the strict international standards of sustainable production.

What excites you the most about your work?

Getting to know new people. How they live, work, and think. I enjoy doing residential projects especially because of the close bond I create with the clients during the process in order to be able to create a space where they will feel comfortable and relaxed. The constant challenge of evolving

as an architect is what also excites me and drives me forward. I try to bring innovation with every new project and try not to repeat myself. Keeping up with the research on new materials, design and new technologies takes a lot of my time but is as equally exciting because you never stop learning and developing.

How has contemporary architecture in Dubai evolved since you have been there?

There was always a very strong drive in contemporary architecture for commercial projects in Dubai where some iconic landmarks have risen like the Burj Khalifa, the DIFC district and many more. Where Dubai is still running slightly behind is in residential architecture but this is slowly picking up now as the demand for modern spaces is rapidly growing not only from the side of the expats but also from the side of the Emirati nationals, especially the younger generation that has much more knowledge of international architecture and design due to their frequent travels and education abroad. More recently, international contemporary art and design fairs that are taking place in Dubai have also influenced the younger generation's interest in residential architecture.

What are some of your all time favorite architectural designs, in the region and in the world? And who are the architects, past and present, whose work you admire?

Looking back in time it would have to be the era of the 1960's in California, USA, that inspires me immensely. This was an era where huge progress was made especially in residential housing, stand-alone family residences

amongst others, also the so-called Case Study house program. Where use of concrete and steel was explored in order to create clean, modular spaces that were both very functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. One of my all-time favorite architects from this era was definitely John Lautner and his projects like the Sheats-Goldstein Residence or the Elrod House in Palm Springs.

When you are designing an interior for a client, how much of yourself do you put in it as opposed to what the client wants and the client's taste?

Designing interiors and especially private residential spaces is always about a mutual vision and understanding. At the end of the day the architect is not the one who is going to live in the interior and use it, hence I never try to force something if I see the client is not 100% confident with my decision. Client's requirements are the driving force; that said though, I only take projects on board where the taste of my client is in line with my own taste and where I see that we can mutually achieve a result that we will both be happy with. I have had to decline clients in the past where I see that their aesthetic feeling does not correspond with mine. At the end of the day you cannot be passionate about your work if you do not like what you are creating and vice versa: the client will never be happy with the result if he feels he was not involved in the process in one way or the other.

What is your ultimate design dream?

I guess a dream of every architect is to get a project he could envision, design and complete from A to Z both from the aspect of the architectural design as well as the interiors.

This is something that we are more and more getting into and I am very happy for the trust of our clients and their full support. I am not a megalomaniac but I would love to think that one day I will leave a great building behind that will surpass several generations.

If you had to choose one city in the world where you could design a building, what city would that be and why?

Every city and country around the globe has its charms and magic. Currently most of my projects are located in Dubai: a city where I live, and which I am very passionate about. There is a fantastic new residence we have designed under construction in *Khawaneef*, a very popular residential area in Dubai. We have also started plans on another stunning family residence in *Jumeira*, Dubai that should be completed towards the end of 2014.

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