Where two worlds meet

By Shirine Saad

This page Hani Rashid and Lise-Anne Couture
This page and opposite page Yas Hotel, Abu Dhabi

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Architect Hani Rashid combines his Eastern and Western backgrounds to design singular structures

Technology is a form of poetry for architect Hani Rashid, whose firm, Asymptote, creates fluid structures with the help of 3D software similar to those used for video games. While architects have traditionally used natural forms as inspiration for their buildings, Rashid views the virtual world as an extension of life.

"In every form of expression the impact of the digital is very strong," says Rashid from his pied-à-terre near Urbino, Italy, where he often stays with his partner and wife Lise-Anne Couture and their 13-year-old son. "We become used to smoother transitions from one spatiality to another and a constant influx of data which is part of our environment and has to do with phones, Skype, the immediacy of our technological understanding. Even esthetically, the surfaces are smoother. We're not necessarily locked in a Cartesian, grid-like world. Everything is much more liquid."

The word liquid aptly describes most of Rashid's projects. Thanks to the 3D software, Asymptote foregoes traditional structures to create undulating, organic, rounded buildings. His aesthetic has a name – "the blob" – and he

was influential in institutionalizing it when he co-directed the new technology program at the Columbia School of Architecture in 1995, under the tutorship of dean Bernard Tschumi. Meanwhile, Rashid has co-represented America at the Venice Biennial in 2000 and won the Kiesler prize in 2004. He has designed the Alessi and Carlos Miele stores in New York as well as the virtual trading floor for the New York Stock Exchange and the virtual Guggenheim Museum. He is also the brother of another visionary who favors "blobby" forms, interior designer Karim Rashid.

In 2010, Rashid pushed his technological explorations further with two major projects, the Yas Hotel in Abu Dhabi and the Perry Street residential building in Manhattan's West Village. An 85,000-square-meter complex, the Yas features a 217-meter cloud of steel and glass, which encompasses two hotel towers and a link bridge above the Formula 1 track that goes through the building. "A project like this one wouldn't have been technologically possible five years ago," explains Rashid. "We used parametric tools that allowed us to create a very large surface with changing curvature." The cloud is made of 5,600 side openings and lights up

Top photo <u>Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi</u>
Bottom photo <u>166 Perry Street, New York</u>

at night. Asymptote programs the pixels in the structure to project animations, which create the powerful illusion that the building is moving in the desert.

Rashid, who was born in Cairo to an Egyptian father and British mother, strove to create a building that echoed the local culture. The optical effects and reflections of the cloud are meant to fuse with the sky, sea and desert. For the enveloping structure, the firm looked at veils, Bedouin tents, desert formations and the speed and performance of car racing. "I wanted it to be progressive and modern, but also a poetic nod alluding to older cultures of that part of the world," says Rashid. "My father being Egyptian, I had to find a way to do a respectful building that talks more about Middle Eastern culture than about Western culture."

Rashid would know about the complexity of finding expressions of local culture in a globalized world: he grew up in Algeria, Rome, Montreal and Toronto, then studied architecture at Carleton in Ottawa and completed his Master's at the Cranbrook Academy of Art under the tutorship of Daniel Libeskind. In 1998, He co-founded Asymptote in Milan along with Couture when they found that they shared the same views on architecture. The team and couple then moved to New York, where they now operate a large office.

New York, old and new, culturally heterogeneous, artistically vibrant, remains a constant source of inspiration for Rashid. For the Perry Street building on Manhattan's West side, he designed an undulating glass façade that reflects the sky and sun and sometimes becomes invisible, merging with the environment. A collage of glass panels, it echoes the urban patchwork, says Rashid. It also offers the residents the luminosity and views without the lack of privacy; thanks to cutting-edge software, Asymptote has made sure that the interiors are invisible from the outside. The doorman lobby is the futuristic version of a luxury car or yacht; the kitchen's Corian structures conceal appliances. For the building, Rashid was inspired by art in New York, like the spot paintings of Roy Lichtenstein and the color washes of Mark Rothko. At sunset, the façade becomes a watercolor of brilliant hues. "As architects, we have a mandate to do something really powerful and inspiring," says Rashid.

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