

Islamic architecture personified by Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh By Paul Rivas

In designing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building in Riyadh, its architect Henning Larsen said that he “wanted to create harmonious proportions with light and colour; and to provide a place that would be pleasant to be in...a place that would be a tribute to the architectural traditions of the Islamic world, and that would function as an important addition to the diverse styles of architecture found in the capital city of Riyadh.”

Larsen’s first impression of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh is of remarkable and stunning monumentality. His architectural creation speaks of knowledge and power in the world of international architecture as the massive structure has the appearance of having been carved out of one solid piece of stone. His approach as a creative artist is to think of the entire building as a three-dimensional structure that can be viewed successfully from all angles and at all times; conscious of light and openings that create a space which invites the viewer to move freely and inspiring an environment of adventure.

Chris Abel in the respected Architectural Review states: “Henning has understanding of the orientation of Islamic architecture” adding that the “entrance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is like entering a fortress..Upon entering the dynamic and monumental structure two stories are clearly visible... illuminated openings displaying a curvilinear structure.. with a pool and fountain... there is a mood of serene peace and great beauty. Other openings are austere...portals and windows provide Islamic details. The mass created together with the volume is the most impressive... in Riyadh and in the middle east.”

The main library and the banquet hall are testaments to Larsen’s awareness of Islamic reference in its purest form. The true international Islamic dimensions are clearly visible. Commenting on the building Henning has said: “My personal and professional experience in working with all Saudi professional and general public was an amazing and great experience. Their knowledge and assistance was invaluable and the people in Riyadh and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were an inspiration.” He added, “I wanted to create buildings that individually and collectively would reflect the core of Islam as it has existed for centuries and provide it with contemporary feelings that would prolong and extend its traditions.”

The focus on Larsen’s wondrous architectural structures is uppermost on comfort and in function in terms of time and of location in the structure’s interior and exterior. Past Islamic architectural needs are thereby intertwined with the present visions.

Inside the Ministry, Larsen has adopted classic ideas combined with grace and a proud reflection of Saudi culture. European individualism is bridged in his overall creation since Larsen has a special and unique love of falling light. He expresses great admiration for the effects of ‘light’ through his magnificent interior creations. Born in Denmark in 1925, he received his training at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen (Architecture and Planning 1950-1952) The AA School of Architecture in London 1951-1952 and MIT School of Architecture, Boston, Massachusetts in 1952. He is internationally known for designing the Ministry (for which he won the Aga Kgan Award in 1989) and the Copenhagen Opera House and is the founder of the company that bears his name, Henning Larsen Architects (Formerly Henning Larsens Tegnestue A/S). – SG