

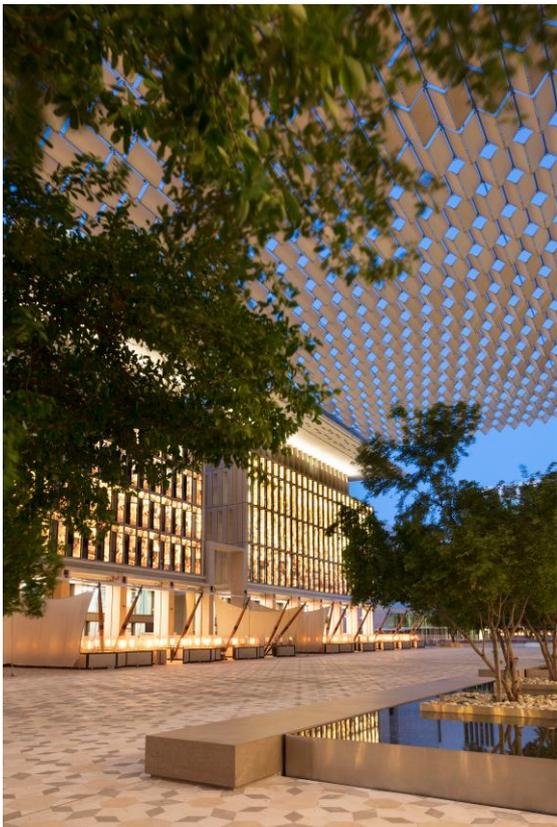
Interview with

## Mr. Michel Mossessian

Architect, Creative Director of Mossessian & Partners

# ARCHITECTURE IS MADE OF SPACES AND PEOPLE

This is the narrative with which Mr. Mossessian participated in “**Zak World of Façades**” conference held in Doha, April 24, 2018 where he was invited as a famous and prominent architect practicing all over the world and had designed and accomplished important part of the project **Msheireb**.



**Msheireb** is a downtown Doha urban development coming to its final completion and will be open to public at large to stroll through narrow comfortable streets and courtyards shaded by tensile structures, trees and cooling systems for harsh summer season.

**Msheireb** is located in central Doha where the very old city was located before and the new design development was to retain the idea of the old neighborhood respecting the heritage and the traditions of the old city.

The buildings constructed there are for mixed use like shops, restaurants, offices and apartments with underground parking spaces and pedestrian approach to all.

The city of Doha was developed well in many directions and the citizens, expatriates and the ruling family are very proud of what

has been achieved and they have achieved the impossible by utilizing the income of natural oil and gas resources to the development of their homeland which is now a world known destination to fly and visit and to be proud of.

This all happened in the last 40 years of Qatar’s economic development and was rapidly faster in the last 25 years, which is coinciding indeed with the same time as the Independence of Armenian Republic after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

We as VGC-Arplan, part of the multinational engineering community living and working in Qatar along with government and private citizens, were very proud to know that Mr. Mossessian as a world known architect along with his fellow architects has contributed with landmark signature to Doha cityscape development, namely the project **Msheireb**.



## "ZAK WORLD OF FAÇADES" CONFERENCE



"Zak World of Façades" conference started 24th of April, very sacred day for us Armenians and we were there at the conference to appreciate the fact that we were alive and descending from the families that survived the 1915 Genocide of Armenians by Ottoman Empire where we lost our historic homeland to ethnic cleansing.

Strangely enough the invited professionals that were there to do presentations at the conference were consisted of different nationalities, including the Turkish prominent architect with his presentation and showing his achievements in the field of architecture.

Here we were as colleagues sitting side by side at the conference contemplating our past and appreciating the present achievements and getting ready to challenge the future.

The message of the day of April 24, 2018 from us as Armenian architects present there, was to confirm the fact that

"We are indeed part of the Global professional community".

## FOR PAAAE FOLLOWERS

**Dear Mr. Mossessian, I did not ask any questions at that time, but instead researched and prepared an interview for PAAAE followers all over Diaspora, enabling our colleagues to learn more about you, not only as a world known architect with Armenian roots living and working in London, but as a fellow architect with whom we met in Doha last April.**

- 1) My first question to you is based on Armenian historical past and yourself being related to it from your parents' side. Did that historical Armenian past by any way influence you as an architect?**

Not directly or consciously. Perhaps, when my Grandfather Missak, started to design his house as soon as he settled his family then the new business he created in France, the house oddly didn't look like a typical French urban house, all the rooms on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor were organized around a big empty room with a Skylight above. That was a strong concept I am sure he brought from the memories of his childhood home in Moscow that might have originated from an Armenian typology.

Later on, what most impressed me and possibly as much as revealing some strong affinities with my work, is the invention of a new architectural concept, the church. In Judaism it takes ten to make a prayer space, and most of sacred buildings from polytheist or pagan beliefs were celebrating monuments to their gods. The concept of entering in a space to pray with others was fundamentally new, and started the second monotheist religion. That is huge and phenomenal, a void filled up with human voices to transcend the unity of a people.

2) We noticed at the time of your presentation the black tufa from Armenia was used in one of your recently designed buildings. And then later when we asked you about black tufa, you said it has velvety texture and looks good as an external wall cladding.



Tufa, I believe was first used as forms to cast and hold concrete. Typically it was used in construction as forms and removed after the concrete had solidified. But maybe something happened as the texture, colors and variation of the tufa stone made the building unique and distinctive.

Yes, I picked the black tufa stone for its deep and velvet texture.

This stone has many properties and I am also trying to use it more than just an esthetic expression of a building.

### 3) Speaking about the Velvet...

The Velvet Revolution that happened in Armenia in April has completely changed our country's face for good. The Armenian government has taken a new direction on and slowly but in steady pace is going to get rid of oligarch domination and minimize the corruption levels.

We are interested to know about the challenges you faced in obtaining the black

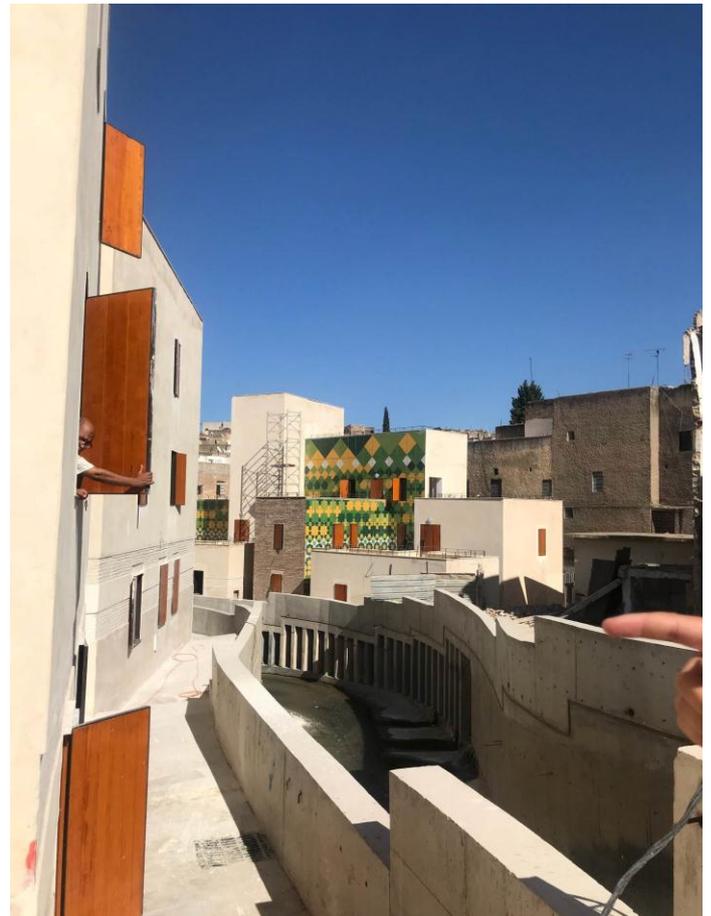


tufa stone from Armenia which was used in cladding of your recent project in London, and now after the Velvet Revolution, have you been in touch with the Armenian suppliers to continue using the Tufa again?

I should be careful in my response to your question. I am pleased to hear a new breath of hope has taken Armenia out of the perceived routine of the Apparatchik mentalities. I hope all can move quickly but habits are hard to change. My challenges with the Tufa stone were not due to the people of Armenia; on the contrary all were very supportive. The challenges were mostly due to the standards and culture we have in the UK to set our criteria. That is more difficult to communicate and get all to understand. We did our process to establish the viability of the stones our way, tested the stone in UK labs, brought in expertise to be resident in Armenia over 18 months so all would be done to Western standards. Hopefully we will repeat this process further my next buildings, but sure many will want to use that beautiful stone for their own realization.

- 4) Since we learned that you have visited Armenia and then Artsakh few years back, seen a lot there to get inspired (you had used the zillig patterns as an inspiration for a project in Fez, Morocco). Can you describe for us what was it, that inspired you most and your observations about Armenian Architectural signature, which was vividly developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century based on our inherited realm of the past centuries?**

No, I never use or bring artefacts from another culture to feed my projects. That would be pastiche and totally irrelevant. On the contrary I tend to investigate so I can understand where, why and how a craft tradition established itself and to become part of the culture, the artifact signing a culture. But of course influence may spread as much as people do; Armenian people always moved across culture and continent, the silk route most likely the longest path linking through time very diverse culture and religious beliefs. My friend Berj Adjian, the eye of tapestry, once walked in my workshop looking at a project I was then working on for a Columbarium in Beaujolais using patterns originated from Frank Stella, one of the greatest painters of the American abstract expressionism. Berj thought it was Celtic, and then said many thinks Celtic ornaments were initiated by Armenians back then...



Perhaps, but what appears clearer in your question, is perhaps that once you get interested in craft and marking the stones or materials with patterns, there is ultimately something Armenian about it.

**5) Do you think we can brand the Armenian architectural signature as unique as the Arabic traditional architecture or Japanese modern architecture, where both have a strong narrative conceived from their religion and philosophy?**

Yes we could, this is a very interesting question. What seems sure is that Armenians created a new concept, that we called Church ever after. It was then adopted by Rome and clearly used as a successful model to turn Christianity as one of the widest religion spread in history of our civilization.

This concept is big, like the invention of the Zero in arithmetic.

I do think, that because the Armenian people in their merchant culture, moving between East and West, constantly exposed to other cultures, philosophies and religions, their leaders felt the need to create a unique and unifying concept that would keep them 'together' across the territories, a second monotheist religion, based on the same concept of belonging and freedom.

The Rabbis of the time may have advised on its principle, a text, a language and how to unite in prayer.

Here comes the unifying gel through the New Bible, the New Testament, the writing of a new alphabet and the first time concept of entering a building to pray in small groups. All seems to have happen in the third century, in Antioch on the crossing roads of Jerusalem and Rome and the Silk route.

This is no small concept and intrinsically linked to what we call Architecture. I remember on one of my first trip, guided by my architect friends from Yerevan, we entered a small medieval church good to receive a small group of people 10 or more, three women were rehearsing sacred songs... it was divine! The combination of a void space filtering the light and echoing beautiful voices did set up a long legacy of religious Christian buildings. Who could resist to such beauty?

The next steps centuries later we have the Mozart Requiem in a cathedral to host thousands.

Yes, this call for unity and freedom across various cultures has very much come from Judaism, but the unique invention here was the invention of a space for people to unite in spiritual belief.

In confidence, perhaps my motto about architecture 'sculpting the void' has been influenced by this heritage.

**6) Indeed Armenian architecture is different and has a strong character and I do remember when in London, where we first met and there was a conversation going about inviting you to the PAAAE conference of 2015 and then I remember you casually remarked that the Armenian traditional architecture is sculptural.**

**What will be your inspiration based on which you can design a project in Armenia or Artsakh?**

Yes, I was certainly referring to my visit to the Catholicos in Ejmiadzin. The buildings are an amazing demonstration of tufa sculptural mastery. It is very impressive, so is the Great Cascade in Yerevan.

But again, the real sculpting in architecture is about making spaces for people, going back to the invention of the Church concept, a perfect combination of engineering on a simple plan as a small cross to elevate a volume for the voices to echo magically. Sculpting the void is about making spaces where all comes together for its occupants. Many lessons have been drawn from this first concept across time and civilizations.

If I was given the opportunity to design a project for Armenia, it would have to respond to my driving conceptual approach, that architecture is not about object making but rather a space for people.

So is the link with the first church as proposed by the Armenian people, a space to enter and to be together as one.

I have in the recent years been promoting a few of these concepts in context. The first one was with one of the greatest astrophysical mind of our time, Garik Israelian. Garik and I went to Artsakh hosted by Artsakh Republic President Bako Sahakyan, to propose a planetarium for the young people of Artsakh. Garik's proposal was to bring an affordable technology of a totally immersed three-dimensional learning experience going from the infinitely small to the stars of the universe. He also argues that an hour of such an experience is worth an academic term of studies. A beautiful project that I hope will find sponsors to come to reality and in a way another void full of content providing a real educational experience.

Another project was started a few years ahead of the genocide centenary anniversary. As an Armenian from the world, I realized across the various countries I lived, that many people know of an Armenian in their profession and distinction but hardly know where Armenia is. I proposed to use architecture along with a famous artist from New York to do a public square, possibly Republic Square in Yerevan, to put the city and country on the world map. Such is the power of significant buildings I thought in the translation of Armenian cultural DNA it would have to be a space to welcome all from the world, diaspora or friends of Armenians and turning the original design of the great architect of Yerevan Tamanyan from an initially designed to state a central power affiliation in the Soviet era to a truly popular place for all.

I hope this project can still bring all the best I can think of Armenian culture, made of its people and a sense of common shared values.

**7) We learned that you participated in Venice Biennale 2018. We will appreciate your professional opinion about the architectural works that have been presented in Venice and the summary or quick conclusion from there.**

The Venice Biennale is a world-class event. I love being back in Venice, a city of merchants built by the people to welcome the world and for its inhabitants to depart from. Venice is the city I lived most without having an address, a city I have been going back to so often since my early age. There is something magical in the way it was build, piece by piece in a totally consented process by its owners, users and visitors, exposed to many influences across history with its vital role of exchange of goods and

values. As it may appear to sustain itself as a tourist destination, it is truly a manifest of a collective from our history of 'meeting of culture' not 'melting of culture'. As Venice may refer to our collective legacy, but in the past, I think this is repeated in History and believe New York City build itself on the same values. A city I lived in for many years and totally enchanted my vision of the collective power of people; NY has been the Venice of the XXth century.

The Architecture Venice Biennale is a fabulous forum to be part of, and was pleased that a 'small' piece of Armenia was presented in the main exhibition.

- 8) Can you tell us about your participation in Venice Biennale and what was the content of your presentation this time? Was it in the content of the same narrative you addressed in Doha titled ARCHITECTURE IS MADE OF SPACES AND PEOPLE or there was something more you wanted to tell to the STARCHITECTS there and the professional community?**

My title refers in effect that Architecture is not about making objects. This Venice Biennale addressed the issue as how the build environment can engage truly in our daily lives and activities. Quoting the curators *'architecture based on people, place, time, history, to sustain the culture and relevance of architecture on this dynamic planet'*. I would add with this set of values our planet has better chances to survive the immense challenges that the twenty first century has already revealed to us all.

- 9) We were honoured to meet you in person in Doha and spent time with you to get to know you better and hoping to collaborate together as colleagues in the near future.**

**My last question to you Mr. Mossessian is**

**Having in mind your narrative is about and you said**

**ARCHITECTURE IS MADE OF SPACES AND PEOPLE**

**What will be your message now to our fellow architects in Armenia, Artsakh and Diaspora after the Velvet Revolution?**



I met many great architects in Armenia that unfortunately were not used for their talent, it was then. Now with a new Armenia since the Velvet Revolution I am hopeful to see the true expression of that spirit part of an architectural renewal.

10) Thank you again for your time spent with us. We are hoping to see you next year in Armenia and participate in the PAAAE conference where you can meet us all.

Please, count on me.

*To learn more about Mr. Mossessian, the architect, click here: <http://www.mossessian.com/>*

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Mossessian Architecture. Established and led by Michel Mossessian, Mossessian Architecture is an award-winning London-based architecture practice.

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***Interview conducted by:***

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