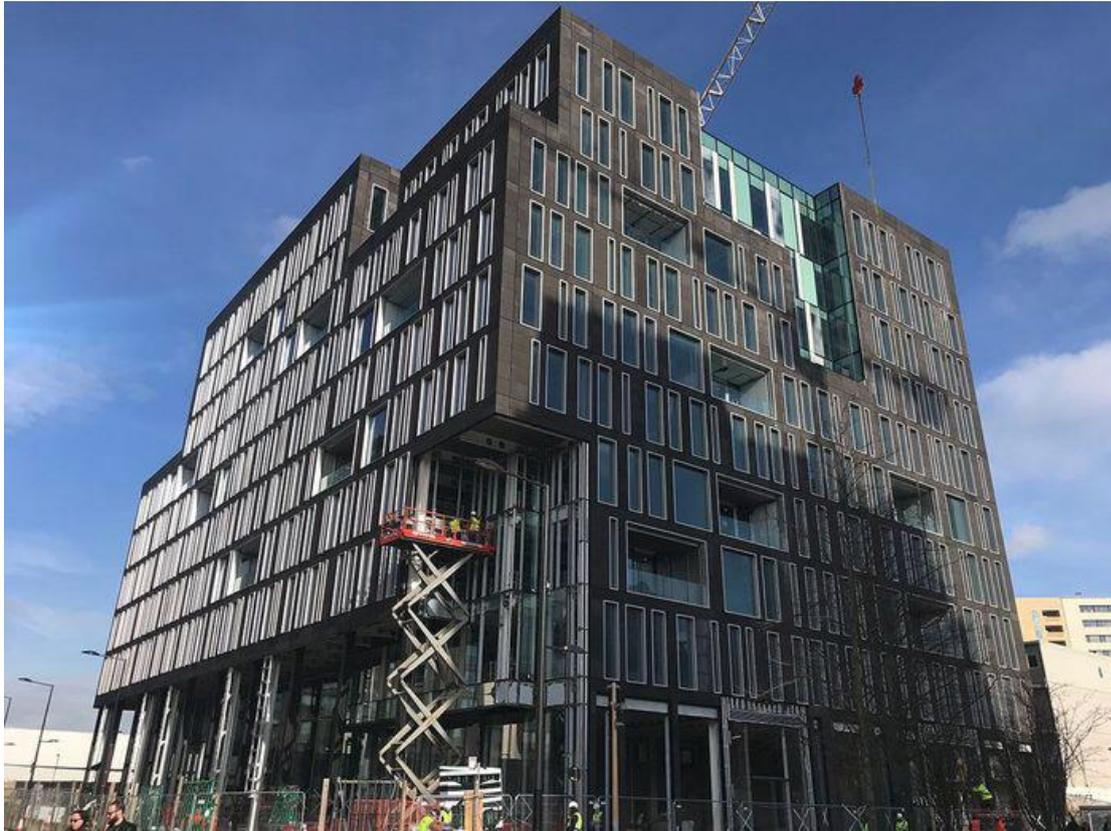


Comfort zones | RIBA J



Google DeepMind at King's Cross, London, with its deepset balconies and white window reveals to bounce light into the space.

'What I am obsessed with is that when you start to make an environment where people engage, you have the premises of wellbeing'
– Michel Mossessian

If you look casually at the building designed by Mossessian Architecture that is under construction in London's King's Cross development (the first of two) you will probably notice first the dark cladding and the tall, slender windows. You will also clock some deep set-in balconies. These balconies are the main indication, until the building is complete, of a scheme that encapsulates the approach of the eponymous Michel Mossessian to wellbeing.

The building will be the new home for Google DeepMind, an artificial intelligence company. The balconies are part of the company's request that a full third of the building should consist of voids. These will be used for a theatre, sports arena and a library.

The point, says Mossessian, is that DeepMind has recognised that it is now possible to do single-minded work anywhere. Its team are employed, he says, to think – and a space where you can engage is a place where you can think and bounce ideas off others. 'What I am obsessed with,' Mossessian says, 'is that when you start to make an environment where people engage, you have the premises of wellbeing.'

Wellbeing is one of Mossessian's main interests, and he lectures on the subject at Imperial College, London, where he is a visiting professor. It is important, he believes, that notions of wellbeing are not subverted in the service of commerce or to keep people at work for longer periods by satisfying all their immediate needs.

Instead, he is interested in the synergies that come from different people meeting and being in the same space. So, his King's Cross building has a cut-away corner and an arcade that is public space. 'Most of our purpose is to meet other people,' Mossessian says. 'Most consumerism has aimed to keep them apart. How can we define the spaces that you don't have to pay to inhabit?'



Designed by Mossessian Architecture Barahat Square, at the centre of the Msheireb development in Doha, Qatar, is a new kind of gathering place to create a sense of community, made possible by shelter from the ferocious sun.

The Baths of Caracalla in Rome is one of his models, a monumental, communal structure that is all about the senses and, he says, provides 'an elegant way to recognise others'.

But the senses, Mossessian is aware, mean different things to people from different places. He can build on his own experience, since he is of Armenian origin, born in Paris and educated both there and in the US. He worked in the US before choosing to come to London, and to set up his own practice here in 2005 – with projects across the globe. He loves London because it is a city that is always changing. But how do you accommodate people from across the globe, with their different sensory requirements? The answer, Mossessian believes, is that you work with nature.

So, he says, 'In London, if I do a building, I want light.' As a result, the window reveals on the DeepMind building are white, to bounce as much light as possible into the space. In contrast, when designing the Barahat Al-Nouq Square, at the heart of the Msheireb development in Doha, Qatar, his concern was to keep light out.

Qatar has a brutal summer climate, with temperatures approaching 50C, winds and high humidity. The purpose of the Msheireb development is to find a new characteristic architecture for Doha, and to make a habitable, walkable centre for the city. The Barahat Al-Nouq is a new concept for a country that does not have a tradition of squares. Around the size of Rome's Piazza Navona, it has to work entirely differently.



Traditional zellige tiles of Fez reinterpreted by artist Michael Pinsky at Mossessian's Place Lalla Yeddouna.

Mossessian has conceived it as a majlis, the meeting room where guests are welcomed in every Qatari home. Designed as 'a jewel box', the square is partly covered and temperatures will be modulated by solar-powered cooling, so that they should never exceed 30C.

'Nature is cultural,' Mossessian says. 'Look at the climate and come up with the technology. If you look at the wind, the sun and the rain you will get a common sense culture to protect against the elements. If you use nature, you don't have to ask engineers to compensate.'

In Fez, Morocco his practice is working with the local culture to create new facilities deep inside the Medina. The project, at Place Lalla Yeddouna, provides distinct working areas for the different craftworkers who represent much of the city's culture – including women, who for the first time will get a crèche. The existing workplaces are often devoid of natural light, ill ventilated and stinking of processes such as leather tanning. Yet they produce wonderful work. 'You can get used to anything and give of your best,' Mossessian says. He however is providing light, ventilation thanks to a labyrinth designed by Atelier Ten, and imaginative decoration that is a contemporary interpretation of traditional patternwork. Wellbeing should be greatly enhanced.

Mossessian is dedicated to using his creativity in order to create environments where everybody, whether Moroccan jewellers or cosmopolitan AI designers, can be as creative, and as happily creative, as possible.

Written by Ruth Slavid.