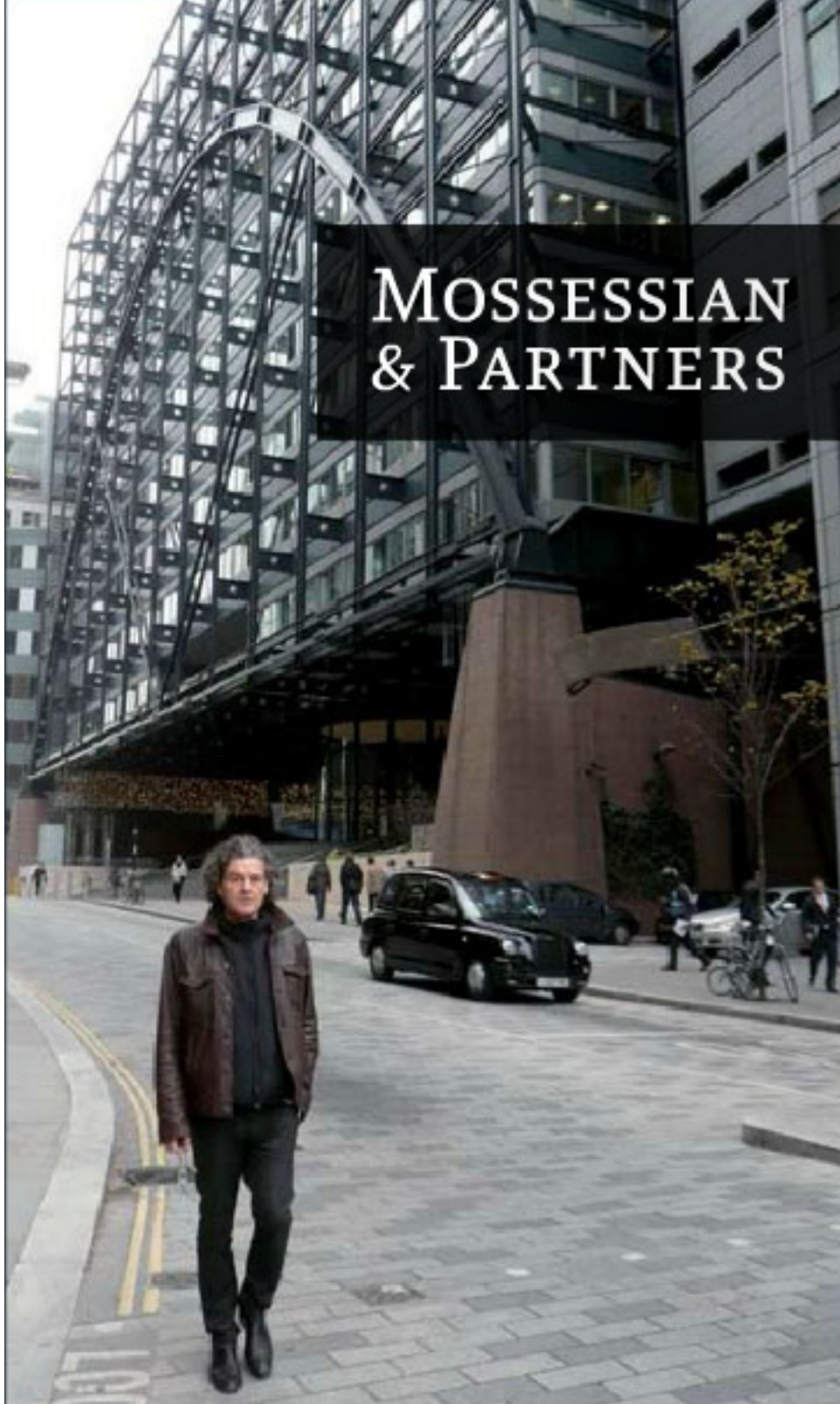


MOSSESIAN & PARTNERS



Michel Mossessian, Exchange House, London

10 YEARS AGO, MICHEL MOSSESIAN CUT LOOSE FROM THE MOTHERSHIP OF ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICES TO SET UP HIS OWN. HIS SMALL LONDON-BASED FIRM HAS THRIVED, PUNCHING WELL ABOVE ITS WEIGHT IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

In his bright Hoxton studio, strewn with futuristic architectural models and wall-papered with computer renderings of his projects, architect Michel Mossessian talks about the Middle Age tradition of his profession. 'As a student, I had an intuition that you don't suddenly become an architect when you graduate – you have to go through times and cycles and be exposed to masters. You continue to be an apprentice until a master tells you that you are ready,' he explains.

A graduate of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture in Paris, Michel was singled out for a Villa Médicis Hors les Murs fellowship, which allowed him to study further overseas 'to complete and fulfill his vision of the world'. He chose the Cooper Union

SUCCESS STORY

School of Architecture in New York and later Harvard Graduate School of Design, both outstanding schools with exceptional masters from whom he could learn. 'They questioned what architecture is,' he says. 'I learned that a building is not just a shell – its form comes from a conjunction of intent, ideas and purpose which has to be expressed to its inhabitants, to mankind and culture.'

At Harvard, Michel studied for his PhD in Computer Aided Design under the tutelage of Professor Bill Mitchell, whose work has been credited with profoundly changing the way architects approached building design, and was exposed to other brilliant minds such as Marvin Minsky, a cognitive scientist in artificial intelligence, and Spanish architect Rafael Moneo. But it was Visiting Professor Bruce Graham, architect of the Sears Tower¹ and John Hancock Center in Chicago as well as the masterplan for London's Canary Wharf, who would have the greatest influence. 'He saw my drawings, not one line of which looked like a building, and said to me, "I'm going to teach you about buildings."' Following the master, Michel pulled out of Harvard to join Bruce Graham's practice, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), considered the 'Mecca of architecture'.

Although based in Chicago, Michel's first building was Exchange House above Liverpool Street Station in London. 'Every single line I drew was built,' he says proudly of a building that combined the best of technology, engineering and architecture, and created a destination in East London. At SOM, Michel also worked on the King's Cross masterplan, bringing him into contact with the likes of Gehry, Foster and Chipperfield, who were yet to reach the heights of their architectural renown.

When the Gulf War brought all development activities to a halt in the early 1990s, Michel returned to academia, teaching at the University of Pennsylvania and doing research on facades with the building industry in Italy. Towards the end of the decade, he returned to Paris as a one-man band, working on small residential and cultural projects. But things were starting to happen again in London, and in 2000, Michel was offered the design lead of SOM's restructured London practice. Happy to be back in the arena, Michel became immersed in projects in Canary Wharf, the City and beyond with a masterplan for Bratislava. But the real big fish he landed was the NATO Headquarters in Brussels, after a year-long competition against 22 top international architecture firms. 'That was when I developed my methodology about how to capture the psyche of a client,' he explains. 'We could not talk to the client because it was a competition, so I came up with my Black Box concept, based on principles of artificial intelligence, which is the space where we establish the vision before we draw, taking into account the environment



Msheireb Downtown Doha – aerial view of masterplan

beyond the physical – climate, programme, aspiration, activities and people.' It was also a way to manage egos trying to impose individual visions in a collaborative process. 'Out of multiple points of entry came one concept, which was very well received,' he says.

However, Michel's biggest achievement was snatched from him when the partners decided to move the design development to Chicago and New York, sidelining the London office. Bruised and uncertain of what to do next, Michel sought the advice of Lord Rogers and Lord Foster. 'They are masters and I still considered myself as an apprentice,' he recalls. One of them – he won't

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say who – told him his work spoke for itself, and the time had come to go it alone. 'Basically, a master had told me, you're done, you can start now. Without this kick, I would never have started my own practice.' So in 2005, Michel established Mossessian Architecture. 'It was scary,' he admits, 'I went from being a prima donna designer who wins everything to an employer who had to convince people to work for me.' His first work came from a former client who asked Michel to design his residence in Kent. That led to the commission for the Carmine Building at Five Merchant Square in the Paddington Basin Development, an exceptional building that well and truly established the practice.

Local work began drying up with the onset of the financial crisis 2008, but Michel struck lucky again by being shortlisted for a project in Doha, Qatar, and winning the schematic design for the main public square and 26 buildings. It was no mean feat for a small practice of 25 in competition with big name international firms with workforces of hundreds. Another competition win for the regeneration of the World Heritage Medina in Fez, Morocco, became a 'cherished project', also helping to sustain them during the recession. Both projects are award winning, which Michel attributes to being able 'to understand the psyche of a culture, work with

nature and bring technical specialisms to it' in a way that makes the architecture 'look like it belongs to the place.' However, they fuelled a perception that Michel had become an architect of the Arabic world, and it took two years to get an invitation to participate in the competition for the King's Cross redevelopment. Mossessian won not one, but two buildings out of this, which are currently awaiting planning approval.

As Mossessian Architecture marks its 10th anniversary, and Michel his 15th year in London, what is next? 'There are two places that are close to my heart and progression – Paris and New York,' Michel says, 'and I am looking at how I can help Paris.' He sees Paris and London as communicating vessels – the success of one benefits the other. Right now London is a model for the world with the kind of regeneration that is happening in the heart of the city. 'The beauty of London is that it has the imperatives of ownership, tradition and preservation of history, without being stiff about what can be done for better value – there is a flexibility of interpretation, unlike Paris, which is constrained by a nineteenth century model and vision,' he explains. But

London's success is creating other problems such as unaffordable living costs, and this, in Michel's view, is an opportunity for Paris. 'Maybe we can reinvent Paris from London,' he says. 'Paris could house the creative industries that are being priced out of London, the very ones that have made London the best city on the planet.'

Joining the French Chamber was a way to meet compatriots who might share this impetus. Undergirding this all is his passionately held belief in the power of his art: 'Architecture speaks to people, engages, gives a sense of belonging, creates culture. It is a place where you feel right and want to meet with people. If you have this, business happens.'

■ KF

5 Merchant Square, London South-east view at dusk



1. Renamed Willis Tower in 2009, this 110-storey Chicago skyscraper is the tallest building in America and until 1998 was the tallest building in the world.