

ISSUE # 28 | WINTER 2014-2015

SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND



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· LULU AL SABAH AND THE CHAMPIONS CONTEMPORARY ART · IN THE LIBRARY WITH ETEL ADNAN · THE ABSENCE OF LIGHT ·
· LILIBUANA DESIGN BIENNIAL · SPECIAL SECTION CURATED BY LEILA HELLER ·

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A CITY'S DREAMS MADE FLESH

By India Stoughton

Lebanese artist and architect **Nadim Karam** takes Selections on a tour of his studio to learn more about his urban interventions

In an apartment behind the offices of Atelier Hapsitus, Nadim Karam unlocks a metal cupboard to reveal three decades of inspiration. Sketchbooks dating from 1985 to earlier this year are piled ten-deep on the shelves. Some are neat and carefully-finished, filled with watercolour paintings that look ready for an exhibition. Others are chaotic, stuffed with loose sheets. Their pages are covered with the seeds of ideas contained in half-finished sketches, as though the artist was anxious to get everything down quickly, before the inspiration evaporated.

These books attest to the seemingly endless creativity of the Senegal-born, Beirut-based Lebanese artist. An architect, fine artist and urban visionary, Karam has executed high-profile public art installations around

the globe. In his atelier, a team of young architects and designers sit at a bank of computers, helping to transform his ideas for sculptures from two into three dimensions. In his studio, however, Karam works alone.

"Sculptures go through a whole process of 20 or 30 people working on them," the artist explains. "Painting, no. It's a private relationship between me and the canvas."

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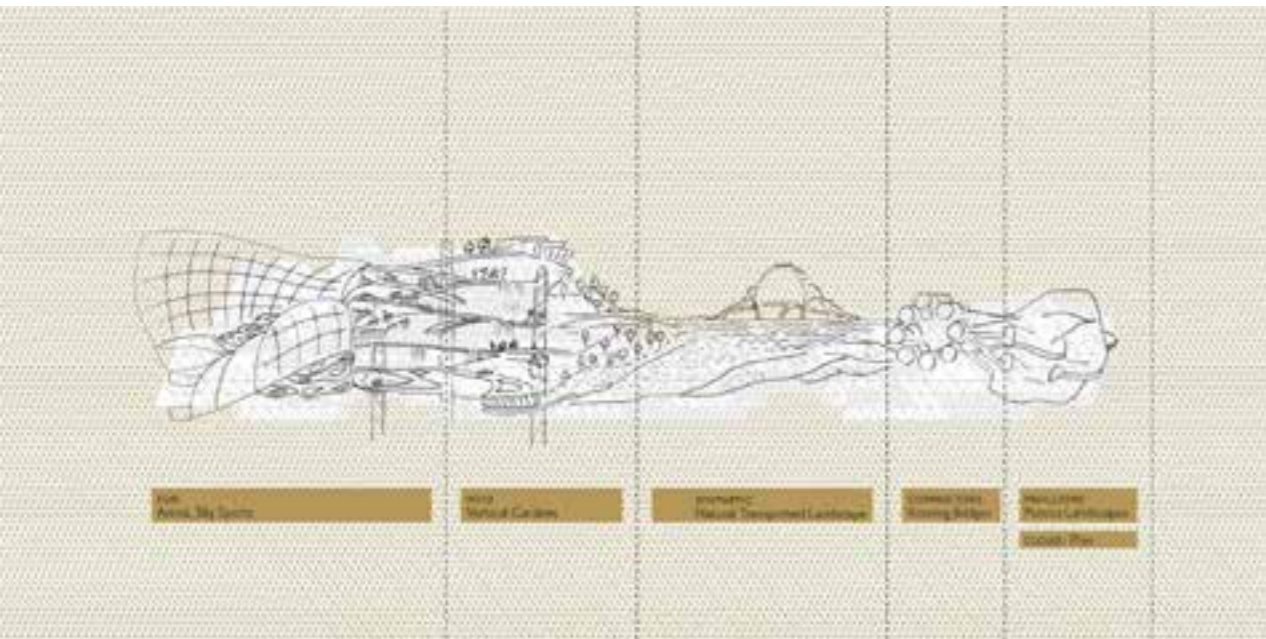
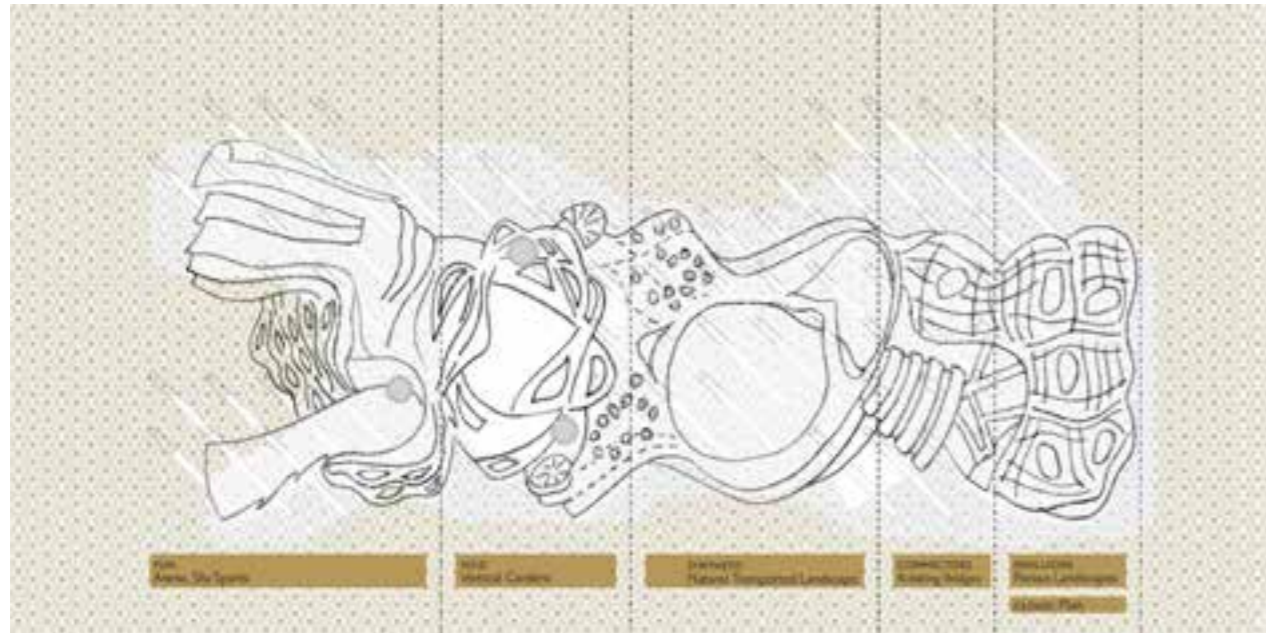




"Stretching Thoughts, standing"
 "Stretching Thoughts, seated"
 are both made of steel with a
 rusted finish. Their heights are
 respectively 4.85m and 3.52m.

As he speaks, Karam is putting the finishing touches to a black-and-white painting, a seated figure with a marbled swirl of paint around her head – it might be crystallised thoughts, billowing smoke or the intangible substance of a cloud.

Karam's sketches transform into a near-constant stream of paintings and sculptures. At the same time, he is working on a number of long-term, enormously ambitious projects set to transform city skylines across the globe. A refrain the artist often returns to is the question of whether or not a city can dream. He himself dreams up the kind of projects most people would probably dismiss as being too fantastical, and then finds ways to make them a reality.



One such project is The Cloud. “It’s a public platform in Dubai that will reach up to the sky,” Karam explains. “It comes in parallel to all those high rise buildings that are happening, where it’s private and exclusive. The cloud is public – that’s the most important part.”

The artist came up with the idea for a 100 by 200 metre platform, surrounded by a multifaceted glass structure, in 2007. The viewing area is designed to be located 250 metres from the ground on a series of pillars, slanted to look like falling rain. The logistics of building such an ambitious structure are mind-boggling, but Karam and his team are now in the process of making his designs viable, working with Arup engineering firm and Cultural Innovations, a cultural management firm in London.

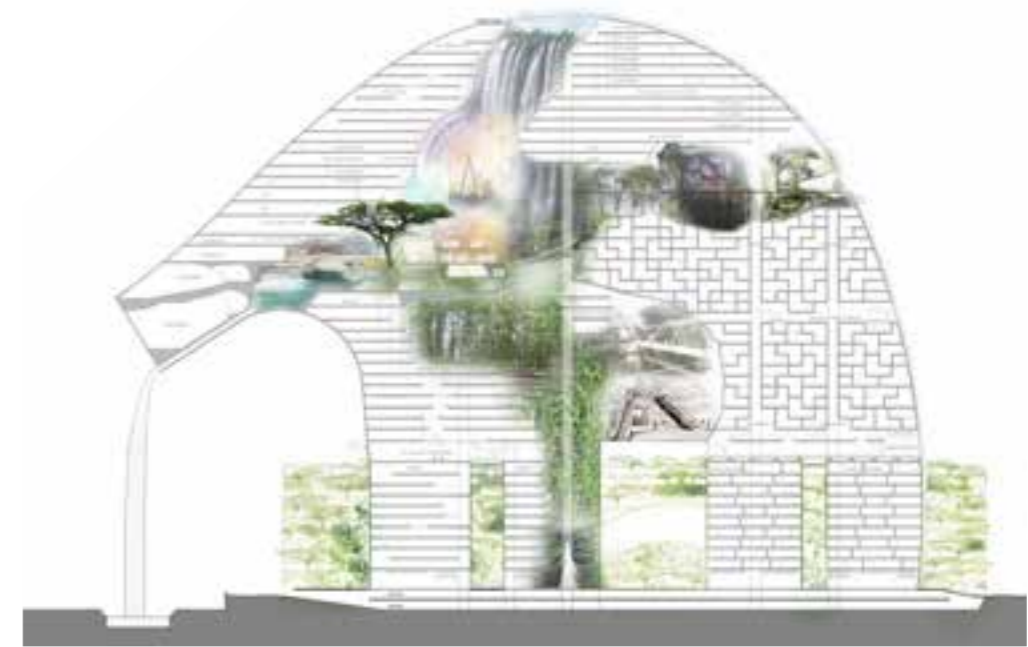


” IT KIND OF ECHOES WHAT DUBAI NEEDS NOW – A CLOUD SOMEWHERE.

Cloud project of Dubai



“In terms of vision I think it would bring something new to the region,” he reflects, “because it kind of echoes what Dubai needs now – a cloud somewhere. A cloud is also an idea – like the iCloud. So a cloud is somewhere where you can store things – you can store memories.”



At the same time, Karam is developing his idea for an equally monumental project based around another of his favourite motifs – the elephant. Designed for a vacant plot of land in Lagos, the Elephant City, like many of Karam’s projects, is at once art and architecture: a vertical city built in the shape of an elephant.

“We were asked to design something for this plot in Lagos,” he explains, “so we thought, ‘Okay, the best thing is to create a story for them’. So you have the elephant going through all of Africa and picking up memories... everywhere it goes. This elephant remembers everything he has done.

“Then we thought, ‘Okay, now we’ll transform the small elephant we’ve made into a big sculpture, higher than the pyramids’... You can ride [a roller-coaster] along the back of the elephant, and in the elephant’s trunk you have a waterfall. In the big eye of the elephant there’s a giant Ferris wheel. Inside the body of the elephant is the structure of a city, so you have office buildings, then you have residential buildings in the legs, you have a hotel in the upper part and you have arts and cultural projects in the centre.”

Elephant City project



Karam is also excited about a project dubbed The Wheels of Chicago. Inspired by the history of the Ferris wheel, which was invented by a Chicago native and first exhibited at the city's World Fair in 1893, he plans to build seven enormous metal wheels, turning above circular ponds.

"There is such social diversity in Chicago, so we thought each wheel would represent a different aspect of the city," Karam says, explaining that they divided the city into seven themes: diversity, industry, business, art, leisure, playground and nature. The idea is to work with local artists in each area, he adds, to come up with a design for the wheel that best reflects the character of each sector.

Wheels of Chicago project

Five of the wheels will be located in Olive Park, one in the Navy Pier's Gateway Park and a final one in the middle of Lake Michigan. Though they are inspired by Ferris wheels, they won't serve as rides, but decorative sculptures.

"Chicago is the windy city, so having them turn is also part of having something that fits Chicago's character," Karam explains. "We're trying as much as possible to design them to turn with the wind, but when there's no wind probably there will have to be a mechanism to make them turn, using the energy generated by the rotation when there is wind."

Although Karam's longer-term projects might take years yet to materialise, flicking through his renderings, blueprints and sketches provides a glimpse into a world where a city's dreams can come true. ■