

Chameleon architecture

Having spent the past five years in Ho Chi Minh, in Vietnam, the Brazilian designer Maurício Alves is now seeing his architecture and design companies growing at a fast pace

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Better remembered by Brazilians for having kicked US troops out of its country 36 years ago, Vietnam has been attracting the world's attention thanks to its rapid economic development. In the shadow of its historic rival, China, the Southeast Asian country has implemented a strongly socialist market economy ever since the US, the old enemy, suspended the economic embargo in 1994 (imposed after the war defeat), and reestablished commercial ties in 2000. With a large part of its population of a young age (only 5.5% of the 90 million Vietnamese are over 65), the country has left behind the former division between the South (supported by the US) and the North (when it was supported by the then Soviet Union), and is now a magnet of prosperity and optimism.

Six years ago, when he received a proposal to work in this part of the world, the São Paulo architect Maurício Alves (38) would never have suspected he would end up in Vietnam. He even had a hard time finding the economic capital of



the country on the map, the city of Ho Chi Minh — the former Saigon, ex-capital of Southern Vietnam, which combated the communist regime in North Vietnam. He nevertheless accepted the invite. Having previously worked as a professor for a few months at the Raffles Design Institute in Singapore (where he had gone after replying to a job advertisement published in a São Paulo newspaper), Maurício accepted the challenge of leading the process of setting up a design department at the school's first unit in Vietnam in 2006. There, he discovered fertile land to grow. Vietnam, a country in the midst of a full-blown rural exodus and that was starting to experience a real estate boom, soon proved to be the right place for an international architect looking to develop his career. “When I started giving English lessons in Vietnam, I realized that the country would grow even more”, he recalls. The combination of his time working as a teacher and a market bereft of talents helped bring in the first demands for work, leading to the formation of a core group of teachers based at the school itself. With a team of other teachers and ex-students of the Raffles institute, Maurício had sufficient labor to start accepting the projects that came his way. His full devotion to classes gradually started to give way to the business side of his life. Two years after touching down in Vietnam, the company Gema Arquitetura was born. As at the institute, where the faculty hailed from different countries, Gema grew in multicultural fashion. “In the beginning, it was us and the Vietnamese”,

Architecture, urbanism, interiors and furniture: Gema does a little bit of everything

recalls Maurício. But then an Australian woman arrived, who helped develop the atelier's graphic arts activities, and a French-Swiss man arrived who helped to structure the company's management. “What we frequently do is subcontract professionals and foreign companies to improve specific areas of the company”, explains Maurício. Now, for example, two English teachers (a Canadian and an American) give classes to employees, while an English lawyer provides legal advisory services. From their troubled past, the Vietnamese people have a list of “non-grata” nations, but they do not impose any restrictions on expatriates when it comes to day-to-day life. On the contrary, says Maurício: the Vietnamese are very welcoming to foreigners and are friendly to Brazilians – in practice,

this friendliness mainly translates into curiosity, since Brazil is just as little known in Vietnam as Vietnam is in Brazil. With a population of almost 6 million in Ho Chi Minh and another 2.6 million inhabitants in Hanoi (the political capital of Vietnam) and economic growth of 7.2% p.a., Vietnam cannot afford to reject qualified workers. Foreigners are well received and Gema did not turn down job opportunities. This is reflected by the profile of the first three clients to visit the Gema offices when it opened up for business. The first client was a furniture industry, which ordered a line of residential products for export. The second client was a shopping mall store seeking an interior decorator, and the third client was an apartment owner in need of an architect. They were all Vietnamese clients.

Over the next four years, Gema received another 37 projects involving architecture, interior design and development of products and brands. These clients included



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fashionable restaurants, stores, schools, and deluxe apartments and residential buildings. Today, around 70% of the projects are ordered by corporate clients. Most clients are Vietnamese, but Gema also receives orders from foreigners living in the country.

Installed in an ancient building built by French architects, the Gema studio caters to the eclectic demands and needs of a country whose market is still too incipient to meet demand for specialized services. When Valerie Gregori McKenzie, a Frenchwoman living in Vietnam for 12 years, sought out Maurício's services, she made one thing very clear: she wanted her future clothes store (called Song) to recreate an atmosphere reminiscent of the film “The Lover”, by Jean-Jacques Annaud and based on the Marguerite Duras novel. She asked Maurício to recreate the forbidden passion of a young French woman for a Vietnamese man of Chinese origins in the 1930s in the decoration, which

gained overtones of a garconniere. After pursuing the French style of colonial Cochichina, Maurício switched to Asian graphics. Hired by Sakae Sushi (from Singapore, with 40 stores worldwide) to design the chain's first unit in Vietnam in 2008, the designer used the idea of the Japanese mangas and cartoons, which adorned the walls of the restaurant. “We ended up becoming a chameleon, doing a whole bunch of different things”, notes Maurício.

In parallel, Maurício and his team projected 255 Casa Lavanda luxury condos in the coastal city of Mui Ne. In an area of 150,000m2, with a hotel and services complex, Gema takes care of the architectural and urban development and oversees the construction of the real estate. After projecting spacious

Each project incorporates a bit of the Brazilian style of mixing cultures

beach houses, Gema worked on the interior design of a group of 670 apartments targeting Saigon's middle class. “I was thrilled to reach a large universe of people and to make their lives better”, comments Maurício, in explaining that he recommended that the homebuilder resized the internal areas. “Here there is strong demand for apartments, but this doesn't mean that they are built with the design in mind” he says. “I had to explain that the windows needed

to have a comfortable size and that the kitchen requires a correct space”, he recalls.

The profile of the real estate mar-

1 Maurício with a worker at Casa Lavanda...

2 ...and with team of designers at Gema studio

PICTURES HANDOUT



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ket in Southeast Asia doesn't differ much from what we find in Brazilian cities. In general, new apartments range from 65m² to 200m², at an average cost of between US\$1,000 and US\$4,000 per square meter. But there, unlike in Brazil, garages give way to parking lots for motorbikes, which are an overwhelming presence in Brazil, and internal leisure areas aren't a focus of homebuilders.

Furniture by necessity

When working on interior design projects, Gema also came up against the same stumbling block. After the

project was ready, the client had difficulties finding a furniture supplier. From this need (and from identifying the opportunity) arose Pepper Design, a product creation company. "When we create a new project, we also end up making the furniture", he explains. "Between inspecting the execution of the work and doing it, we preferred to assemble a parallel team and create Pepper."

For Maurício, this represented a return to his roots. Despite his education as an architect from Universidade Mackenzie in 1997, his

previous career in Brazil had been molded on experiences with furniture design at companies such as Esfera and Etna (where he was head of creation) and Artefacto (where he helped coordinate the decoration displays). "At Pepper, I created a product line that blended everything which I had developed in my 15-year career", he explains. One of his most famous creations is



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the Saigon Paper Chair, an armchair made out of paper with a collapsible structure and ten types of graphic design as finishing. The lightness of the product, the fact that it is easy to carry around and its ecological appeal attracted the attention of a US distributor, which is negotiating the right to sell the product in the US.

Together, Gema and Pepper currently have around 30 employees and are growing at an accelerated pace of 30% p.a. "It is a unique moment for the country, which was closed for many years after the war",

defines Maurício. "It is a development boom on all sides." The major challenge of the Brazilian company nowadays is to train and manage the local labor to be able to execute the projects. "It is a major problem. Here, a project takes much longer to be completed in São Paulo. Because of the war, the country has a generation that was burned, that was unable to receive an adequate

education", he explains. This difficulty requires novel solutions. Some techniques cannot be used in the country due to the lack of trained people. This is the case, for example, of the structure of a home roof, which is generally made from metal or concrete in Vietnam, and not from wood as in Brazil. Thus, we have to rethink and adapt. At the same time, local creativity comes into play. The scaffolds, for example, are made from bamboo, even for the construction of buildings. "We learn from them and they learn from us."

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Expansion plans

Reversing course and expanding the business to Brazil is still a remote possibility. Maurício reckons that the next five years should be dedicated to expanding here in Vietnam itself. "A lot has changed since I left Brazil", he says. "I see myself here, I am committed to my team and to the people that I chased after to join me here." This is why expansion should first of all occur in the capital city of Hanoi, and the rest of the country. "We will grow across Vietnam. We have made numerous price quotes for Hanoi and we need to open an office in the city, which has just received a new urban master plan." Afterwards, Southeast Asia will appear on our radar screen, especially Cambodia.

"In this part of the world, everything is very close", explains Maurício. "From here to Phnom Penh (the capital of Cambodia), it is a 30-minute flight. To Bangkok, in Thailand, it is 60 minutes". Brazil, in the meantime, can expect to see sporadic moves by the company, such as the technical consultancy services that Gema provided to Singapore Airlines' offices in Guarulhos in 2010. "Brazil is very competitive", he explains.

With the growth of Gema, it is increasingly easy to find Brazilian architecture and design in Saigon. In 1H11 alone, the company developed projects for four restaurants in the city. Each one of them has a little bit of Brazil, something which is already incorporated into each process and each project. "Gema has a Brazilian style of doing things. It is a power of adaptation, syncretism, accepting different things", explains Maurício. "This is why, over these four years, we have become known by many people. But we still need to grow a lot more, sharing our Brazilian vision of the future and progress." ■

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| 1 Gema projects: women's clothes store... | 2 ...and sushi bar with manga comics adorning the walls | 3 Students at design school: classes in English |
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LEARNING TO TEACH

THE EXPERIENCE of Maurício Alves as a design teacher at college in Brazil really helped him adapt to life in Southeast Asia. Mauricio arrived there as a teacher, and in both Singapore (where there was a strong diversity of foreign students) and Vietnam (where students came from various parts of the country), the search for communication took center stage in the classes. "It is not easy for a teacher to teach in a second language (English, in this case)", he says, while adding that "the solution was to convey my ideas as simply as possible". To help in the teaching process, Maurício took Brazilian examples of architecture and design with him to classes. He even created an event in partnership with the University of Ho Chi Minh, as an invited teacher. The theme: 100 years of Oscar Niemeyer. "It was really cool", he recalls. "It had a major repercussion, with a crowded classroom and everyone asking questions."