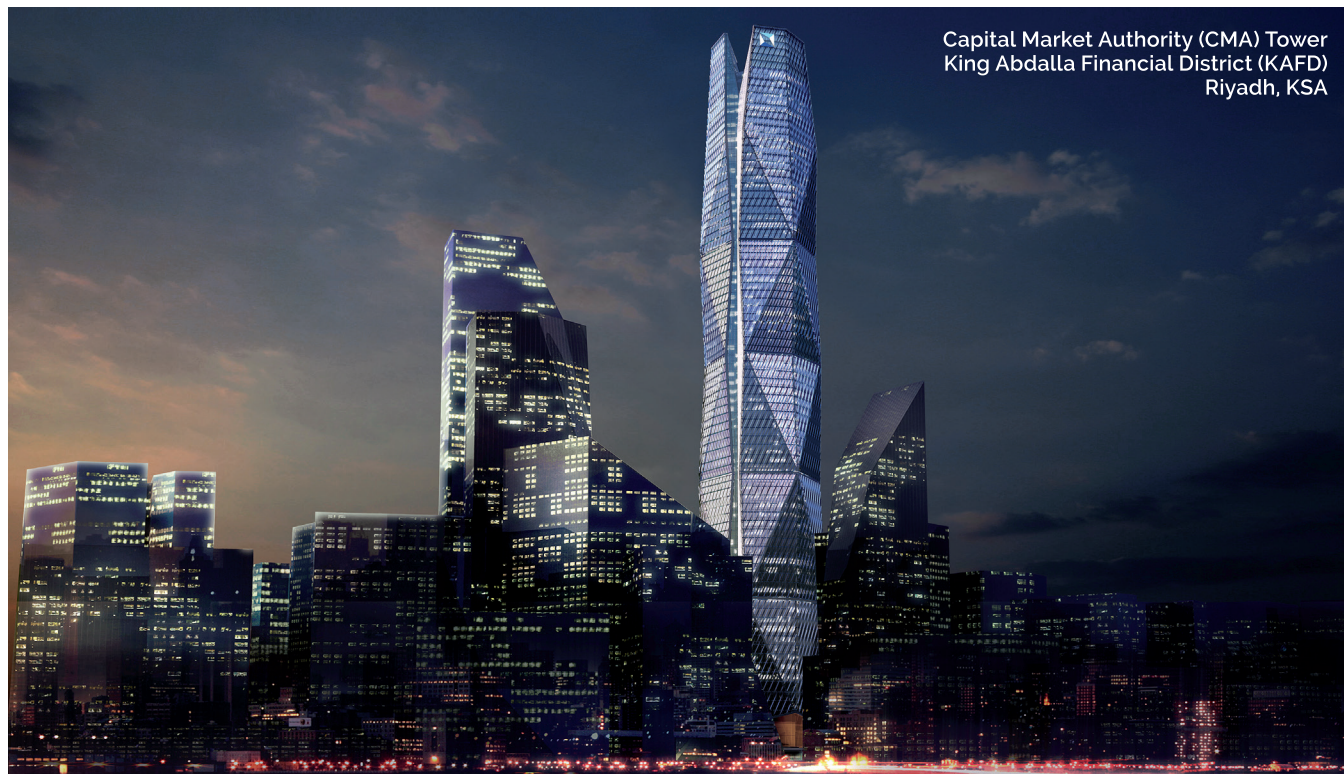


Reinventing Riyadh's Skyline: Driven by context and function; Omrania & Associates builds a timeless architecture in the Kingdom



Capital Market Authority (CMA) Tower
King Abdalla Financial District (KAJD)
Riyadh, KSA

Approaching architectural design with a clear mindset to 'create timeless architecture' Omrania & Associates has solidified its status as a leading Architecture & Engineering Consultancy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Managing Director and Chairman of the Board, **Basem Al Shihabi**, shares his insight behind the organizations sustainable and continuing success, as well as the rationale behind the consultancy's unique design philosophy.

What are your views on how has architecture evolved over the recent past in the Kingdom? What changes have you seen in the industry?

Saudi Arabia has witnessed a major transformation from traditional to modern architecture that took place over a period of 80-90 years. Throughout its journey, modern local architecture was faced with criticism as being an imported implant that is antithetic to local culture and heritage and unsuitable for the local hot arid environment. Consequently, there has always been a trend to mimic the past to mitigate the perceived negative aspects of modernism. At Omrania, we believe that

the evolution of modern architecture in the Kingdom is an essential part of the irreversible transformation to a developed urban society. There has been a witnessed increased awareness of differentiating between alien ideas that are simply imported and those that do blend with context. We are just one of many architectural practices that experiment with the adoption of new forms that work with culture, functionality, and environment.

In a more recent timeframe, there have been a number of positive changes driven by government intervention in the local market place. The last few years have seen many excellent mega projects for the public sector, which raised the bar for architecture country-wide and reinforced the need and value of good design. New awards programs have been launched to acknowledge outstanding contributions to architecture in the Kingdom, such as the Prince Sultan bin Salman Award for Urban Heritage. Moreover, the government has taken many steps to better regulate the industry, such as empowering the Saudi Council of Engineers, introducing the Saudi Building Code, the civic defense regulations, and the green building requirements. Also, special attention is being paid to the construction and development of the private sector - where limited experience in working with consultants and contractors resulted in unsatisfactory outcomes. Regulations are being developed, and we hope will be implemented quickly.

Trends in architecture seem to come and go quickly and consistently. How does Omrania design buildings that withstand the test of time?

It is fairly simple; we don't follow the trends nor do we limit ourselves to a certain design style. However, we adhere to a set of design "values" that help us create timeless architecture that is a source of pride and joy for its users.

We understand client needs and work with them to meet and exceed their expectations of the final product while applying the rules of thumb that our profession calls for. We respect the requirements of location, local culture, and local environment. We aim to design projects that fit and complement their contexts, that are inspiring, humane, flexible, energy efficient, and functionally exemplary. Moreover, we take a participatory team-work approach to design. Our project teams always have a mix of new and old bloods. We investigate new ideas and we develop them to become workable solutions, with durable and constructible details and reliable building systems.



Kingdom Center
Riyadh, KSA

What separates Omrania & Associates from its competitors and peers?

It would be a number of factors that differentiate us from other firms in our industry. First, it's our great team. We are an interdisciplinary and multicultural family of pragmatic designers and engineers. We always attract new talents while we try to retain most of our experienced employees. Some of them have been with us for the last 30-40 years, and as such we have a collective and accumulative knowledge that helps us to compete. Second, it's our attitude; we are known for our "sleeves rolled up" approach to work. We have a strong team work spirit, along with a strong sense of responsibility. Another advantage we have is our industriousness; we meet our deadlines, we stay within budget, and we deliver exceptional designs. Moreover, we are never shy of joining forces with our competitors on selected projects. We welcome those opportunities to learn and develop with our partners to achieve the best results. Finally, we keep our team "slender". We currently have 480 employees, which will likely grow to 770 within one year. This number is much smaller than that of our competitors, but we have intentionally controlled our numbers to ensure product quality and the sustainability of the company.

What are the current projects that Omrania is working on? How are these projects helping shape the skyline of the Kingdom?

To take your question literally; one of our most recent projects is affecting the skyline in the truest sense. Currently, we are working on Riyadh's highest skyscraper; the Capital Market Authority (CMA) tower in the heart of King Abdullah Financial District. The project was designed in partnership with HOK.

However, we are avoiding creating a skyline that is overcrowded by skyscrapers. We are involved with Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA) on issues related to Building Heights Regulations, where careful measures are taken to avoid such overcrowding. Via master-planning, selected clusters of tall buildings are sparsely located throughout the capital, such as the King Abdullah Financial District. This mixed-use concept of a 'city within a city' is being slowly introduced and controlled in the Kingdom to merge new developments with the existing urban fabric, in a cohesive manner.

On another urban front not related to skyscrapers, we have been awarded the design of one of the four main metro stations in Riyadh. We are the only Saudi architectural firm working on the design of the stations amongst three



Western Metro Station, Riyadh, KSA

other top international firms.

We are also proud of our work on the Granada Business Park and the Hilton Hotel and Apartments complex in Riyadh.

Finally, we are working on a major contract with the Ministry of Housing, where we are providing master planning for over 25 new residential communities in the western region of the Kingdom, with a total land area of 45 million square meters.



Basem Al Shihabi

Given the constant evolution of the industry, what steps does Omrania take to enrich its team?

Loyalty is what empowers our team, and we build loyalty by ensuring that each individual has a vested interest in the company's success. We try to retain - and attract - talent by carefully selecting the type of projects that engage our staff creatively. We also try our best to award credit where due for all team members involved.

We have a diverse team in terms of expertise, and we always try to maintain a healthy balance of old and new blood in our human resources.

Internally, we adopt whatever is needed to raise our performance to the best standards, for example we constantly invest in training programs, BIM systems, in addition to HR, project management, and financial systems and policies that raise the efficiency of the company.

What are the organization's plans for the near future?

We have a number of points that we would like to tackle in the foreseeable future. Our goal is to secure more projects and to diversify. Since we are a multi-disciplinary firm; we want to expand our technical expertise into areas that are not currently part of our offered services. We are working on joint ventures to enter new market niches. We are also planning for the inevitable transition period within our company, as one generation evolves into the next. We are actively preparing the new generation at Omrania to be able to take on leadership roles within the company.

Finally, what will be the main challenges for the future generation of Saudi architects?

The main challenge is how to develop the core skills and the mindset that freshly minted graduates need in order to survive in their future career. The essence of architecture is commonly branded in their minds as an individual artistic fast pursuit, instead of a complex and grinding team work where many individuals from various disciplines and of distinct strengths and interests complement each other and each adds value to the profession.

Universities are doing their best to emphasize the importance of design and rendering skills. However, there is a glaring need for more professional practice skills. Students are not taught enough about construction details, building systems, project management, budgeting, work ethics, marketing, client relations, or business development, which are the core skills that can make them invaluable employees, and prepare them to run their own practices in the future. Graduates are later hard pressed to learn such skills on the job. Depending on the culture, size and structure of the firms who employ them in their early careers, they may never get access to such knowledge.

Architecture in Saudi Arabia is thriving, while the entire world is suffering from recessions. This is an invitation for Saudi architecture schools to consider how to better prepare the next generation of architects with the skills and experiences needed to turn their future careers into successes. ●