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Avcı Architects Working in Al Khobar

Avcı Architects has been working in the Middle East on various projects, for the last 7 years, and interestingly apart from their experience of Mecca for which they were asked to design the extension and master plan to the Al Haram mosque, or in other words the mosque of the holy Kabe, almost all of their other middle eastern experience have been in Al Khobar.

Al Khobar is a singularly strange place, in which it is almost impossible to find any signs of history or local culture. It was created early in the 50s to house the American Arab oil refining company Aramco, and it is the main city in which all the oil gets bottled and transported out of Saudi Arabia. Americans live their lives behind closed walls in Aramco City and you hardly see them in daily life, but there is quite a sizeable community there. But then, on a smaller scale, almost all Arabs live behind closed walls. It some how comes with the territory, and will be the case as long as women take a back seat in the life of the city. This tradition goes back centuries of course, but nevertheless like with all other muslim countries our belief is that eventually women's position in muslim society too will change, as is the case in say Turkey, or Malasia or Indonesia,

where they are almost equal partners in urban life. Therefore the urban typologies that are being created by developers will become obsolete in not too distant a future. Avcı Architects tell us about their project:

"Our approach is to try to discover a new kind of urban typology for cities like Al Khobar, which look to the future more and which include for the interaction of people in public spaces in the city. This project is a mixed use development of nearly 30,000sqm including a hotel, residences and offices. The site occupies an important corner on the crossing of the Main Northern City axis King Saud Road and the Prince Sutan Bin Fahd Street. Along King Saud is placed the taller land mark component of the main hotel building which rises 12 stories. The massing gradually falls back towards the residences and the office building on the east edge of the site.

The office itself is organised around a courtyard-atrium which opens out on to a further courtyard that leads to the residences. The lower levels are retail units, much like in any public square, which in this case is screened off from both edges to prevent excessive exposure to public view. This sort of approach is a relatively unusual one where buildings come together to form public spaces, because of privacy issues, but we believe that more and more Arabian cities will need to acknowledge the need for public space, however carefully positioned in the city scape."

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