

Time keeping

The new Rolex Tower on Sheikh Zayed Road is a perfect illustration of the luxury watch brand – stylish, understated and internationally oriented. TEXT: **GLENN FREEMAN**



Rolex Tower.



Top to bottom: SOM's futuristic design for the Bahrain headquarters of Arcapita Bank; *Soundwave*, an art installation in Rolex Tower's lobby by James Clar.

Amid the exuberance of Dubai's Sheikh Zayed Road, Rolex Tower is defined by its refined simplicity and classical, understated elegance.

Rolex Tower is the latest Dubai development from Chicago's Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), the world-renowned architects behind the record-breaking Burj Khalifa. Commissioned by Ahmed Siddiqi & Sons, the exclusive regional distributor of luxury Rolex timepieces, this latest offering from SOM is a 59-storey mixed-use building comprising residential and commercial apartments.

The exterior of the building is clad in highly durable, patterned green glass, with the colour fading as it ascends, a detail that accentuates the building's height. Viewed in the bright Dubai sunlight, this glass coating also creates a shimmering effect. Rolex Tower's two setbacks create the sky-terraces and give the building its three-tiered structure, also denoting its different office, residential and amenity sections.

SOM was involved with the entire project, from the architecture of the building exterior through to the interior design of the lobbies, health club and penthouse suites. George Efstathiou, general manager of SOM, was in town recently for the inauguration of the building, and spoke about the understated elegance of the tower and gave some insight into the interaction between the architectural firm and the client.

"We designed it with a very classic, elegant look and, as it turns out, that fits very well with the Rolex brand... the simplicity of the building is the theme," Efstathiou says, revealing that although his firm knew the client was Ahmed Siddiqi & Sons, the decision to brand the building as Rolex Tower was not made until after the design had been agreed upon.

"They wanted a very simple, minimalist, modern expression and that fitted perfectly with our thinking. It was also specified to have high attention to quality and high attention to detail and material. We had a great partnership with the client and it shows in the finished building," Efstathiou says.

However, as he points out, it is one thing to specify the use of premium materials, high quality workmanship and detailing, and quite another to execute it. "We worked with a contracting company, Dubai Contracting Company, on a day-to-day basis. When we were finished with our work in specifying what was needed, they executed it perfectly. They demanded a very high level of execution from their subcontractors, and you can see it in the end result," Efstathiou says.

This is one of the major challenges he identifies in the project and in working in this region generally. "There were a number of details that can get lost in



some subcontractors' inability to execute, or in their workers' lack of experience or training," says Efstathiou, who points out there were no such issues with this project.

As he explains, one of the earlier stages of SOM's involvement in creating any project starts with the client's idea for the mix and number of separate units, such as apartments, parking facilities and offices. "Typically, the client has a pro forma for the number of units and the mix of these that they want, that then gives us something that allows us to sit down, and look at how it fits into an



SOM's concept for Pearl River Tower, Guangzhou, China.

efficient and rational footprint for a building and allows us to plan the structure," Efstathiou says.

"Any good developer will have a financial model before the project, it's not up to the architect to decide what the uses are... with that we can create the design and then share some basic design philosophies with the client."

In creating the interior theme of the building design, he points out that SOM followed a modern, predominantly Western-style concept, in recognition of the largely international population that inhabits Dubai: "There are few references to local culture in the building. It was conceived as a modern building with an international style that would appeal to a wide range of people."

Efstathiou also points out that the large, transient expatriate demographic of the UAE influenced the design. "This is predominantly a rental building, especially given the transient expatriate community, which have a tendency to want a cleaner, international style," he says.

He says one of the few things that may differentiate apartments in Rolex Tower to those in Western apartments is the addition of elements such as a maid's room. "There are also certain ways of handling kitchens so as not to open them to living areas too much," Efstathiou says.

However, he believes that the cultural differences between apartment living in the UAE and the West are changing, with considerable convergence in styles. In particular, he refers here to SOM's experience as architects on the Burj Khalifa as an example "here we found that the open Western-style kitchen arrangement was used anyway."

Efstathiou also talks more generally about architectural trends in the UAE, which he has been visiting on and off for the past seven-and-a-half years. "In the course of that time, we have seen a wide range of building styles with a lot of international architects coming to Dubai and a lot of locally-based architects trying to compete," he says. Out of these, he believes there are a handful that really stand out, including the Beirut-based architectural firm Erga, which SOM partnered with on Rolex Tower.

An important role Efstathiou sees for Dubai in setting the agenda for architectural style regionally is in office-building design. "When trying to grow a city, you need to make buildings that fit the needs of the people who live and work there," he says.

Particularly in attracting increasing numbers of multinational companies. Efstathiou believes more needs to be done to ensure office space meets increasingly sophisticated demands in terms of design quality rather than volume. "Work is a very important part, yet I don't see many good examples of good use of office space – most of the architectural work being done here is residential. You have to ask the question: 'Where is everybody working?'" he says.

Especially along the more saturated Sheikh Zayed Road commercial and residential areas, where Efstathiou says sites are relatively small, presenting architects and designers with the challenge of creating spaces as flexible and as open as possible. "Leaf-spans here are often very tight and not very conducive to modern design styles," he says.

SOM worked around this in Rolex Tower by minimising the use of columns in interiors and using floor-to-ceiling glass. "You don't see a lot of that here [in Dubai]. Rolex Tower also has high ceilings, which provide a good, open feel – those things are very important in being an effective workspace," says Efstathiou, drawing the conversation to a close in order to make a soon-departing flight.

But with another project due for completion soon – the striking, 90-degree twisted Infinity Tower at Dubai Marina, which is set to open in 2011 – he's sure to be back again soon. ■