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Architect firm branches out to Dubai

Elaine De Valle

Mar 02, 2008 (The Miami Herald - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX)

John Fullerton is comfortable in Coral Gables.

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That's where the architect lives. That's where his firm with his partner is. That's where he has served on the city's board of architects and planning and zoning board.

That's where he and partner Julio Diaz just completed several multimillion-dollar projects, including the San Remo Plaza building with the new Whole Foods Market.

That's where in February they opened 55 Merrick Way, a mixed-use project with 167 condominium units, 40,000 square feet of office space and a ground floor of retail.

That's where they are building three office high rises on Ponce de Leon Boulevard in the next year.

In all, they have nine open projects in the Gables as well as two towers rising on Brickell Avenue.

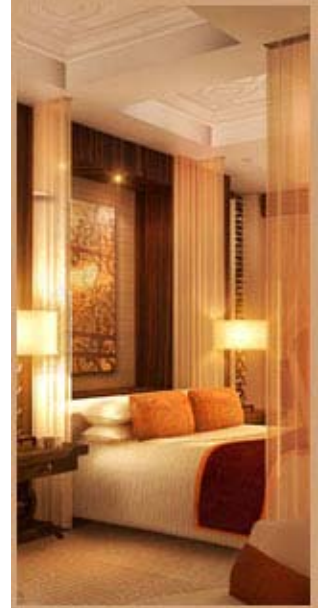
But now the duo is headed out of its comfort zone.

Fullerton and Diaz -- recently named FDA firm of the year by the American Institute of Architects -- are about to open their first branch outside Coral Gables. That branch will open in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, which is amid a development boom.

Faced with a slowing local real estate market, the partners already turned elsewhere in small measure -- a project in the Dominican Republic, housing for the indigent in Honduras -- when they learned about a convention last October that brought developers and land owners from



A new legend begins in the Middle East



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around the world to Dubai.

"It's like an architect designer's dream," Fullerton said about the region, where an office and a tourism construction boom have begun and where Tiger Woods is building his first designer golf course.

"They're doing something there," Fullerton said.

"We'd like to be involved in the creative aspect. They're just going crazy over there trying to create an alternative to their oil-based economy."

But that oil-based economy is what is driving development now.

"In Dubai, there is no cost. Cost is never an issue," Diaz said. "They have some buildings that you look at and think, 'You can't build them,' and they do. They just want to create an image and be known throughout the world and money is not that important."

Said Fullerton: "Their new business and tourist center is the biggest in the world. They are building the biggest airport in the world, the biggest shopping center in the world."

The firm is already designing a building in Morocco from a contact they met in Dubai, but they do not yet have anything on the drawing table for Dubai or Abu Dhabi.

"I don't know if we're after the world's biggest anything," Fullerton said. "Just the ability to create with a free hand, to let our creativity be our guide rather than the budget."

And while the firm has designed signature buildings in the Gables, Asheville, N.C., New York and Atlanta, the Middle East offers the architects a unique opportunity, Diaz said.

"When you get older, you want to leave something behind. And here there are so many restrictions in terms of codes and sites and economics. Developers here are out to make as much money as they can," Diaz said, recalling a gold leaf element he once had to take out of a building's design because the designer wanted to buy his son a Mercedes-Benz instead.

"It puts handcuffs on us," Diaz said. "It's skiing with one hand tied behind your back. Pretty soon, you want to try with both hands."

He said he took photographs of more than 400 buildings walking around Dubai.

"Anyone who loves architecture should go to Dubai. It's a Disney World for adults," Diaz said.

"Very welcoming," said Fullerton, who stayed at the Sheraton on the river in Dubai in October. Diaz stayed at another Sheraton in Abu Dhabi in December.

"They are very religious and they pray four times a day, and sometimes they need a break in the middle of a meeting so they can pray," he said.

The partners also learned of an interesting taboo when Fullerton ordered a beer at dinner one night. Said Diaz: "They don't drink alcoholic beverages."

As soon as the firm gets its licenses and permits, expected this week, one of the architects, Pedro Valdes, will move to Dubai to open the branch office.

"To do work there, you have to be there," Diaz said. "The trip takes a long time and the people are very demanding."

Florida International University professor and associate dean of the business college Jerry Haar said the region is a hot spot for development

because it is one of few opportunities for Westerners in the Middle East.

"It's one of the new frontiers," Haar said Friday. "The Gulf states are outside the line of fire. It's not a conflict zone. It's pretty well established. The Gulf States don't have the ... problems you find in other places.

"The Gulf states really want to turn themselves into an enclave of development, of knowledge, industry, of tourism. What do they need? Architects, designers, engineers. They need universities. They need everything that a competitive developing economy needs in the 21st century and they seem to be doing it right."

The flip side is that the country is not a democracy, he said.

"That is the only fly in the ointment. But nobody wants to kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

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