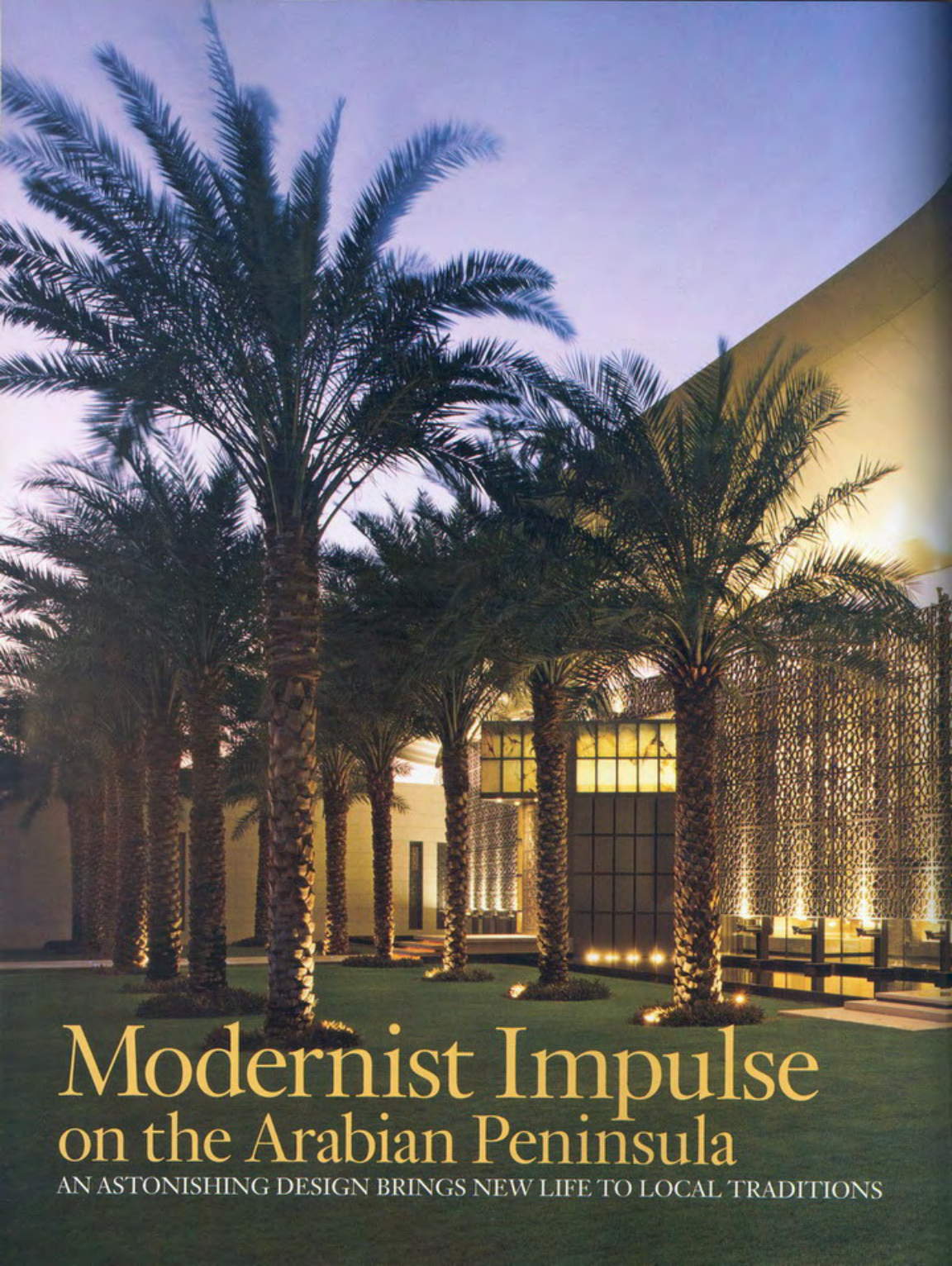
ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

PRESENTS

The Architecture Issue

Dialoguing with Nature: Inspiring New Designs Around the World, from Brooklyn to Dubai

When Le Corbusier first pushed aside a floor-to-ceiling sliding glass door to step from the living room out onto the terrace of his newly completed Villa Savoye in Poissy, France, he was in a certain way predicting the future. It was 1931, and the concept of a house having a seamless integration of indoor and outdoor space—the room was not restricted by its architecture but instead flowed unobstructedly from it into nature—hadn't been explored to this degree, ever. That element (like most others of the house's design) forever changed the way architects think. Seventy-six years later, as this year's Architecture issue shows, we're fully engaged by the dichotomy of an indoor-outdoor experience, of both living under a roof and not having one at all, no matter the house's location. In Pebble Beach, California, a residence by BAR Architects uses the largest sheets of glass in production to wed the building to its sea-sprayed site. In Dubai, a master bedroom of a Steven Ehrlich–designed house opens itself up to a grove of date palms via a massive corner void filled with floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors. In a Texas house by Peter L. Gluck, the entire first floor is window walls and sliding glass doors. Despite being vastly different, these designs all suggest that, with the right architect guiding the way, we can be entirely at home both inside and out.



Modernist Impulse on the Arabian Peninsula

AN ASTONISHING DESIGN BRINGS NEW LIFE TO LOCAL TRADITIONS

California-based architect Steven Ehrlich designed a dramatic 35,000-square-foot house in Dubai, transforming an arid desert site into a modern oasis of gardens, fountains, terraces and courtyards. THESE PAGES: A cast-aluminum *masbrabiyya*, or lattice sunscreen—"decorated with contemporary versions of Islamic patterns," notes Ehrlich—shades the glazed great hall.

Architecture by Steven Ehrlich Architects
Interior Design by Hirsch Bedner Associates/Landscape Architecture by Cracknell
Text by Joseph Giovannini/Photography by Erhard Pfeiffer

ABOVE: Inspired by the crescent moon, "which symbolizes new life and new beginnings," Ehrlich created a swooping roof—supported by 14 travertine-clad columns—that cantilevers over the main structure. "Technology allowed me to reinterpret ancient regional symbols on a grand scale." RIGHT: The great hall is cooled by reflecting pools.

"Multicultural Modernism is my term for the philosophy that guides the design of the house," says Ehrlich. "It incorporates local building traditions with Arabic themes into the modern idiom." ABOVE: In the women's majlis, enormous doors slide open automatically, "fusing the indoor space with the outdoor space." Bergamo chair fabric.

By the slow clock of cultural time, Americans conquered their desert yesterday, with the air conditioner. But Arabs, using the technology of the camel, conquered the desert more than a millennium ago, and over the centuries, vast stretches of apparently inhospitable terrain became the homeland of the Arab soul.

Today, in a changed world, as denizens of deserts in the Middle East have become citizens of the world—at home on jets as much as in SUVs cruising the sands—many remain devoted to their deserts, almost as an article of faith. For many Arabs, the desert is a terrain of purity intensified by penetrating light, washes of color and the shimmer of absolute heat. The clarity in this pristine environment fully reveals the fundamentals of nature: the horizon, the moon and a vast night sky sparkling with the stars that once guided caravans. An unpromising desert floor here is full of history, tradition and lore, and traced with lines of life, like the palm of a hand. For the new nomadic cosmopolites who travel abroad, the desert represents a place and space of spiritual return.

Its minimalist beauty may not be obvious to Westerners, but the way traditional Arab cultures have lived on the land with a light footprint has long interested Western architects, who have appreciated Bedouin tents and vernacular habitats, with their wind chimneys, earthen walls and courtyards. Since his early years in the Peace Corps in Morocco, Los Angeles architect Steven Ehrlich has been a student of indigenous structures, from Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa through Yemen. What he calls "architecture without architects" offers lessons in environmental wisdom. In California he has integrated these lessons in his own work, giving designs a subtext that warms and enriches his Modernism, leading it out of simplicity toward a multicultural complexity.

So when a citizen of Dubai asked the architect to design a house in a family compound in the desert, it was kismet. Ehrlich had spent a career preparing for this kind of commission.

In a gesture of traditional hospitality worthy of a Bedouin, the client invited the architect and an associate to spend a

Steven Ehrlich absorbed the spirit of Dubai and fused the

Ehrlich (below), who practiced architecture in North and West Africa for six years, collaborated on the execution of the project with Jason Burnside, of Godwin Austen Johnson. ABOVE: The interior design firm Hirsch Bedner Associates chose furnishings and fabrics for the dining room, as throughout.

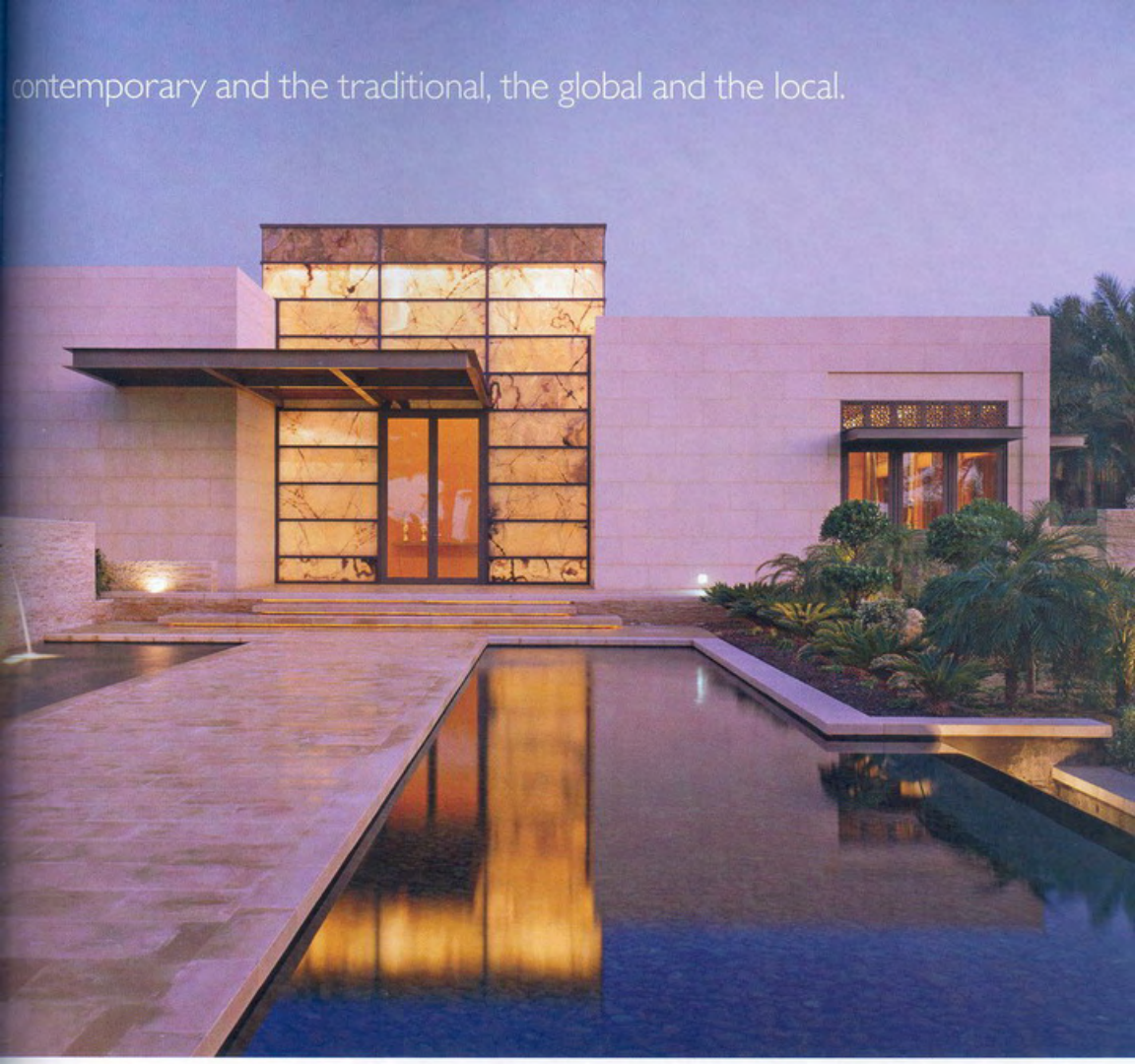
week in Dubai so that Ehrlich could understand the site, its moods and his family. "We drove the site in a four-wheel-drive Range Rover, passing camels that were just there, hanging out," he recalls. "We'd work in the morning and then meet in the evening."

In the stillness, Ehrlich gravitated to the major event of the desert night: "The big idea came from the crescent moon, whose profile I thought could form the roof, not unlike a huge shade structure or a Bedouin tent, lifted very high." As he designed the roof, he projected the profile of a crescent at either end of the house. "At the tops of minarets, the same profile symbolizes new life in the new moon," he notes. Ehrlich named the house Helal, or New Moon Residence.

Attenuating the crescent shape, he lofted the roof at its edges, floating it like a tented canopy over the structure below. Ehrlich further cultivated the imagery of the Arabian desert by planting the house within shallow basins of water and a grove of palms, conveying the feel of an oasis rather than a suburban house. Evaporation from the pools creates a microclimate around the house, cooling a structure already vented and insulated by the space under the floating roof.

The grace and power of the house lies

contemporary and the traditional, the global and the local.



largely in the tapering ends of the crescent, which cantilever 30 feet beyond seven pairs of evenly spaced, stone-clad piers. The columns establish the organizing divisions within the 35,000-square-foot interiors and emerge through the roof, alluding to flues in the mud towers of traditional Arab dwellings that channel air currents.

A house with a sprawling open plan as large as a football field needs a very tall ceiling, which prompted Ehrlich to call on modern technology. Dubai, fast becoming the Singapore of the Middle East, has witnessed an explosion in structurally ambitious construction, and Ehrlich did not shy from the modern materials and techniques at hand. He translated ancient building traditions into contemporary terms. The modernism suited the client, who, says Ehrlich, "is a highly educated, global superstar, an international businessman."

The sheltering roof protects enormous glass doors that slide back to establish continuity between inside and outside. "The design puts the residents in touch with the weather and the light," he says, "and engages the full landscape."

In places, the glass walls rise all the way up to the crescent roof, enclosing majestic

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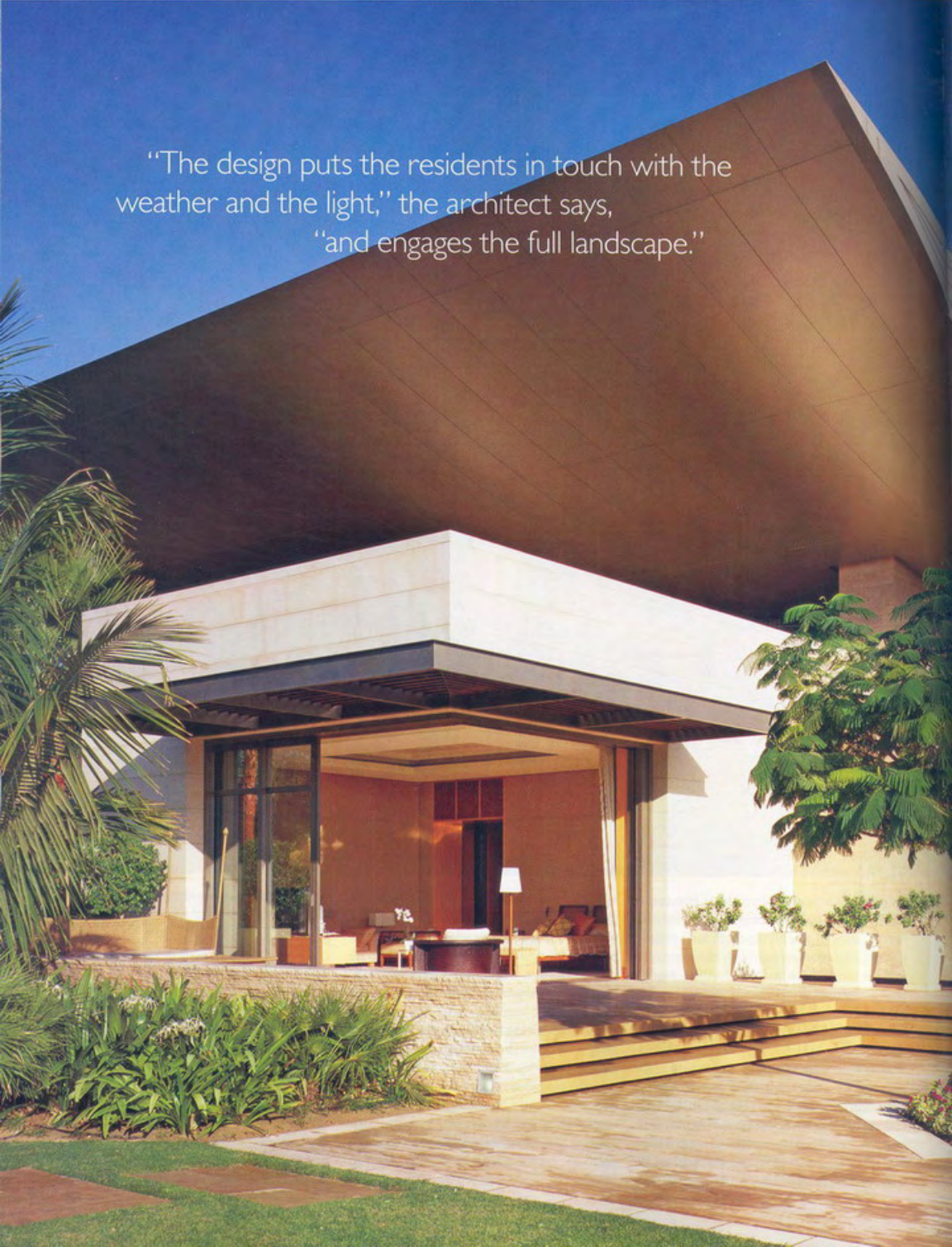
"Centuries of Muslim tradition dictate that the men's majlis be separated from the women's and also have a separate entrance," remarks Ehrlich, who framed the doorway with onyx panels. He worked on the fountains and terraces with the landscape architecture firm Cracknell.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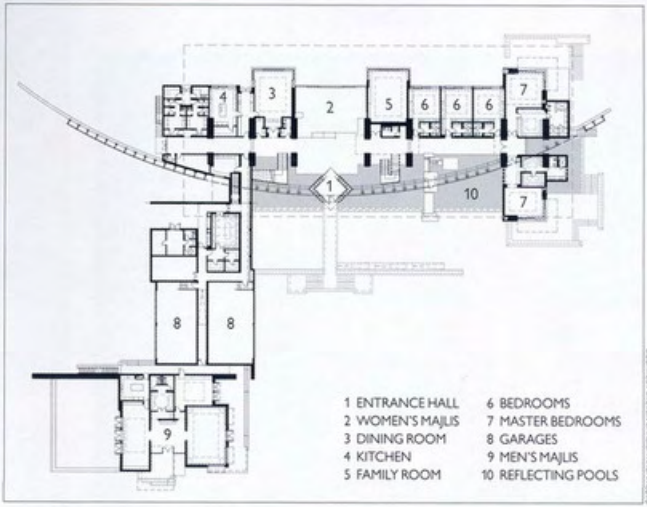

COURTESY EHRLICH ARCHITECTS

LEFT: The roof, sheathed in shimmering aluminum, shelters an open sleeping porch above one of the master bedrooms, which has glazed doors that slide completely open. ABOVE: The L-shaped floor plan shows the main house and the men's majlis, where male guests arrive.

ABOVE: A grove of date palms winds around the pool and flanks the women's majlis. Designing the house, Ehrlich observes, "reinforced my philosophy that for every work of architecture, sensitivity to people, place and culture yields a unique solution."

MODERNIST IMPULSE

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volumes of space, but the roofs of the more intimate pavilions, which serve as terraces or sleeping porches, are another evocation of desert traditions. Ehrlich has fused the Arab idea of outdoor rooms, the California ideal of horizontal space and the New York concept of urbane living in an open, loftlike interior.

The heroic scale is domesticated by delicate details from Arab culture. Inspired by *mashrabiyyas*—intricate wood or stone lattices that screen the sun and afford privacy while admitting breezes—the architect built a huge, geometric screen wall of aluminum panels cast in a repeating pattern of interlaced stars. Traversing the length of the house, it protects the interior from the sun while projecting dappled light inside. Ehrlich augments the ephemeral effects by surfacing the belly of the roof in aluminum sheeting, which reflects light that itself is reflected up in moving patterns from the surrounding pools. The polished-limestone floor shimmers, and translucent onyx panels at the entrance glow warmly on the interior during the day and on the exterior at night.

Ehrlich did not parachute in like a missionary preaching Western Modernism; instead he absorbed the spirit of Dubai and fused the contemporary and the traditional, the global and the local, in a hybrid that reconciles what might seem to be opposing styles. The message is agreement.

> Since his early years in the Peace Corps in Morocco, Ehrlich has been a student of indigenous structures.

He takes into account both the geographic and cultural environments. "I don't believe in a singular global architectural answer but in the counterpoint of the primal and the futuristic—how cultures learn from each other," he says. "I was not mimicking old buildings, but I was inspired by them, thinking about how an ancient local tradition can be respectfully broadened and transformed. Like Dubai itself, the house is adapting traditions while working toward the future." □