

'What I enjoy most in allow us to

Property Weekly SPEAKS TO
BEHR CHAMPANA,
VICE PRESIDENT OF
TVS INTERNATIONAL

A straight tower does not elicit much excitement these days. The surfeit of vertical structures clouding the Dubai skyline has seen to that. This is when an architectural firm willing to think outside the box can make a difference.

US-headquartered TVS International has achieved the distinction with candle light-shaped design for the Dubai Towers in Business Bay. It is truly a first for the firm, which has had its share of innovative designs in its home market.

It was an excited Behr Champana, Vice-President of TVS International, who spoke to *Property Weekly* about his passion: architecture. He loves the challenges of putting artistic, yet functional, concepts into practice and is not afraid of the competition either.

With so many new designs coming out all the time is it hard to get a foot into the door?

I cherish and respect the work of other architects — when someone creates a masterpiece using the right technology and structure for a perfect solution to a problem, it is to be admired. At times you come up with an idea yourself, other times it is a team effort. An artist can make a beautiful piece of art and you don't need any logic to feel an emotional and personal experience to relate to it. It is the same for architects.

What is the difference being an architect here and back home in Atlanta?

We go into think-tank mode at home and in our office here in Dubai, we enjoy looking at using new metals, composite structures, glazing and technology working towards sustainability.

It is a lot more difficult to realise these in the US as they have their own formulas driven by a bottomline. China, India and Middle Eastern developers want to push the envelope in terms of design and technology to be on the top.

When buildings are completed they are 10 to 20 years into the future and that's the right way to think.

Do you think Dubai is the most adventurous?

What I enjoy most in Dubai is that the clients allow us to dream with them. As an architect boundaries are always set because of buildings requirements and schedules. As architects from a Western mentality, we automatically make sure that they are feasible, economical and efficient. This is a perfect combination — our talented and experienced architects and a forward-looking client.

With all the growth in the whole region developers have a need to distinguish themselves with quality developments that are innovative and yet can provide all the



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services and liveable conditions. Not even in China can you dream and explore as deep as we have here in Dubai. You still have to be sensitive to a budget but Dubai allows for a unique think-tank of collective creativity. It is a fantastic playground for good architects and designers.

What about setting different plans into action?

Dubai is not an accident. I am just rolling with the punches here and I think we all should. The vision is great for everything that is happening — at some point it will settle and become the city that everyone hopes for.

Every economy developing at this speed has traffic problems and everything else that comes with progress. It is the same back home in Atlanta.

Are the 'dreams' sustainable?

We've been working with developers to make masterplans very liveable. We have people in the office who are certified by US standards to advise on sustainability and apply it to a lot of projects we're working on.

We propose efficiency, recyclable materials, renewable energy to the developers to see when and how they want to incorporate it early on in the process. They are all things that Dubai because of its harsh environment has to consider. There are a lot of glass buildings, the environment is going to get hotter and with the amount of construction that we're doing, sustainability will be considered.

What is your trick to maintain sustainability within your masterplans and towers?

In The Lagoons we took the flamingo preserve as an asset of what the master-plan was going to be. The density of the design is higher towards the intersection of the two roads with Ras Al Khor. As it moves towards the flamingo preserve the scale drops.

There are plenty of green parks and water ways. The idea was to create a new type of community that is more sustainable including aspects that foster a true city within the development as it was growing. It was a really easy solution considering the stage was already set in a way. Business Bay's Creek extension will connect back to the Gulf helping to clear the waters of the Creek. It adds value to the developments.

What challenges are you facing?

Dubai Towers and the Vision Tower are extremely exciting. The structure needs to be the most economically feasible using the best glazing, orientation, and internal systems.

We're looking at conventional technologies for economy at the same time pushing the envelope of sustainability. We create very smart buildings in a harsh environment based on the environmental traditions which best suit the Middle East.

Does this include exploiting nearly 365 days of sunshine via solar panels?

You need a lot of space to be able to collect the amount of energy you need. In Murcia we had acres of land in a very remote and arid area with strong sun. Dubai is dense, you need space. The initial cost scares some developers away, even in Barcelona where the government offers an 80 per cent loan of the construction for going 'green'.



Air-conditioning must be the biggest energy eater. What are the solutions?

District cooling has become very popular in Dubai. Sustainable and energy saving building systems' initial costs are higher than basic development costs. But there is a pay back time where clients can save a tremendous amount on maintenance costs and energy saving systems on the building itself.

Among all this modernity are history and culture being maintained?

Dubai will have bridged the gap between past and future in one generation. You can see it in the diversity of buildings. It will always keep its culture look at Bastakia or Shindhaga. High-rise may best suit modern architecture because of the technology. The UAE's traditional environmental architecture is adapting to today's way of life yet maintaining the past. The concept of the wind towers is alive and well. The Burj Al Arab is a highly modern building yet traditional in its sail metaphor and so will be

the Dubai Towers — the candle light symbolises hope, integration, progress and harmony.

The symbol of what it has developed out of Dubai not anywhere else. Dubai's culture is providing the opportunity and still defines its identity. The connection to the culture and tradition is not that obvious as it is an interpretation of the abstract.

What projects and clients do you favour?

The hardest thing is the masterplan — urban design is a totally different ball game. We've been lucky with great clients respecting us as part of a team. We're involved in a mall for Dubai Sports City and The Esplanade. We're involved in Libya, Egypt, Oman, Turkey and Morocco and looking at Saudi, two convention centres in China and a mixed-use five million square metre development in India.

The geo- and socio-political advancements of the region will see everything from China via India to here be the future of the world for the next 50 years.

As told to Nicole Walker