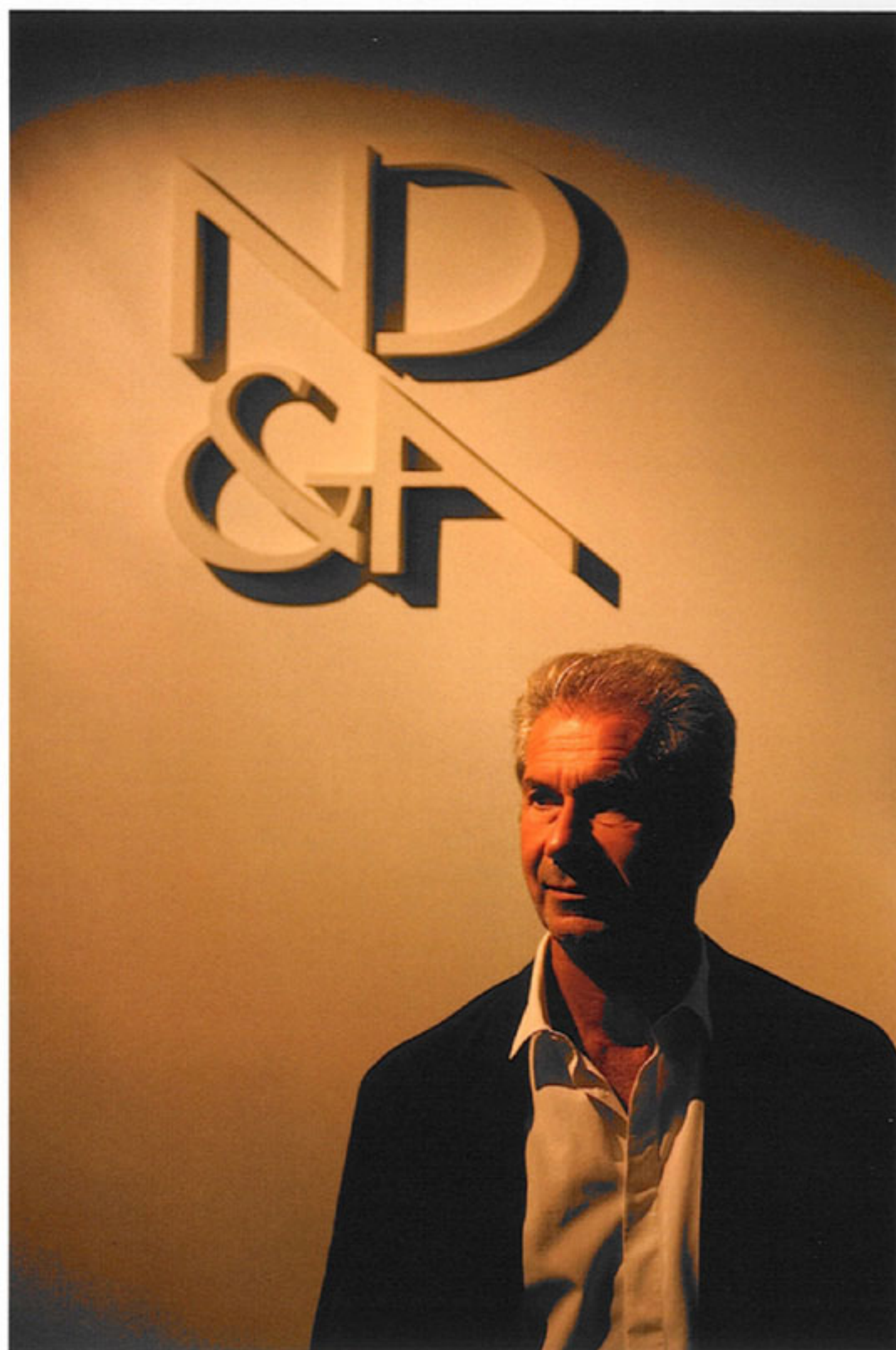


Generous Volumes

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“I loved walking, but I didn't used to walk - I was running all the time.”



If a Phoenician were to leap onboard one of the early sailing vessels and glide into the 21st century, then an exclusive yacht club emerging on the Beirut waterfront would make an ideal port of entry, thanks to Nabil Dada's period-bending interior design.

The traveler's eyes would surely widen on catching sight of a floating, stainless steel reception desk that cuts the air like a boat on a swift current, but he could take comfort in the Phoenician lettering engraved in 20 meters of basalt, or volcanic rock, that spans the greeting area's back wall.

“If someone comes in, it makes sense,” Nabil says with obvious pleasure. The decorative script will be authentic, its meaning plain to anyone who can read what's widely credited as the patriarch of modern tongues. Not many can, of course, and the script will also serve as a visual anchor that ties the ultra-contemporary design to Lebanon's historic roots.

Nabil spent more than a year designing the club's extensive conference rooms, apartments, restaurant, bar, spa, and gym. He's been working as an interior architect for four decades and now heads a team of more than 30 design professionals, including a new architecture department directed by his eldest son, Adib.

His practice, Nabil Dada & Associates, has become known for interiors that possess a remarkable degree of coherence, authenticity, and strength of character, whether they follow a single

style or subtly bring together different forms, periods, and cultures.

“I like designing temporary houses with a twist and a touch of different periods to achieve the chain, sequence and character I'm looking for, without forgetting the harmony that would complement the personality of the client,” Nabil says, his soft ever-courteous tone contrasting appealingly with the twinkle in his eye. “Although the word minimalistic sounds effortless, this approach requires profound studies in order to achieve a stimulating environment.”

Nabil harbors a special fondness for modernity, the newest of the new, but he's also had to master the classical mode often preferred by his mostly Arab clientele. Along with the yacht club, his team is designing 14 cinemas and restaurants for the new downtown souks, and they recently finished the vast interior of the blue-domed Mohammad al-Amin Mosque overlooking Martyrs' Square.

In 1995, Prime Minister Rafic Hariri asked Nabil – who had already designed several houses for the billionaire – to revitalize some of the most prominent rooms in the Grand Serail, the Lebanese parliament building.

One façade of the elegant Ottoman-era fort is visible through the window walls of Nabil's fifth floor office in Bab Idriss. He usually sits with his back to the enticing view – a microcosm of Beirut's timeless, urban splendor – but Nabil's admiration for his city remains undiminished. “I know it by heart,” he says. He learned it in his boyhood. >

Generous Volumes

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“When you have a nice volume,
you don't need to do silly decoration.”

>Born in Saida at the end of the Second World War, Nabil moved with his family to Beirut after a year. His father owned a clothes shop in the city's old souks, and when he grew older, Nabil would often help him during the summers. When he wasn't riding horses at the Hippodrome, he wandered the streets, or drew cars, boats, anything moving.

“I loved walking, but I didn't used to walk – I was running all the time,” he says. “Sometimes, I used to go to the port, because I loved the view of the ships, and the loading, unloading with the big crane.”

Nabil's uncle took notice when his teenage nephew began drawing plans, elevations, and interiors. One summer, he introduced Nabil to a local architect who, every year, invited a Parisian decorator to exhibit his perspectives in Beirut.

“I was really amazed by what he does,” Nabil says, meaning both men, who became his mentors. From then on, he willingly surrendered his summers to train for his chosen career. “That was my first experience in an office, and I used to go there for free, just to spend a good time, and inquire about design,” he says.

At age 19, he enrolled at Beirut's Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, because it had a strong program in interior architecture and he had a practical streak to honor. “I was going straight for that,” Nabil says. “I never thought of shifting from architecture to be an artist, painter, or whatever.”

He remembers his university days as a golden time. “The whole atmosphere was nice and relaxing, although we worked so much,” he says and laughs. With one eye on the future, Nabil befriended many architects, and two years before he graduated, he'd already begun collaborating with them on small projects for friends and family.

On completing his degree program, Nabil set off on a 40-day tour of Europe, his first solo voyage. In Paris, Nabil's natural capacity for awe found fulfillment in the abundant museums, furniture showrooms, and gardens.

Back in Beirut, he opened his own practice. “Starting was easy,” Nabil says. “At that time, competition was almost nil.” For seven months, he shared a two-room office in Hamra with a pharmacist friend. “We used to have one secretary, one phone line, and one bathroom,” he recalls.

In 1972, another friend financed him to open a gallery of contemporary furniture in Sanayeh, and Nabil filled it with all the avant-garde names of the period, such as B&B, Cassina, Saporiti, and Tekno.

About a year after the Lebanese Civil War began, Nabil partnered with a Saudi investor and opened an office in the kingdom. “I had to shift to classical because all the clients... they didn't appreciate the modern,” he says. A cousin fatefully introduced him to Hariri, who eventually called on Nabil when he bought a house in Riyadh. “And he was happy because I did the house in 10 days,” Nabil says.

He married in 1980 and opened a third office in Paris a few years later, then spent the remainder of the war years circuiting between the three points – drawing the ire of Adib, who often scolded his father for traveling so much. In 1991, Nabil contentedly closed the offices abroad and resettled in Beirut.

He now works with specialists on lighting and acoustics, but volumes form the heart of his own labors. “I’m so concerned in every design about proportions,” he says.

A room’s basic dimensions – ceiling height, floor area, and wall angles – contribute enormously to how well it performs a given function and influence the choice of furniture and décor and their less remarked-upon cousins – such as ceiling panels, flooring, and lighting fixtures.

Rooms not only contain their inhabitants, they should envelope them in a desirable mood or feeling, Nabil says. Bedrooms should be smaller so as to create a sense of coziness. A dining room must accommodate, even encourage, the varied dynamics of different-sized groups.

If possible, he starts work with the architect at the project’s conception. “Most of the time, actually, we change the whole circulation of the apartment,” he says. The boy who used to love drawing moving objects has become the man whose eyes follow the invisible currents of human life.

“When you have a nice volume, you

don’t need to do silly decoration,” Nabil says, smiling at his own bluntness. He prefers to use minimal materials and colors, neatly uniting items from different periods through a shared palette. More subtle furnishings frame a single dramatic painting, or a few striking objets d’art, which set the character of the space.

It is immensely important to Nabil that his designs project strength. A statue he created at ALBA stares down from atop his office bookcase. Cast in concrete, it shows a man struggling furiously to push himself up as though from underground.

It does not at first seem to suit its creator, who radiates an affable calm. But, it is a wonderful metaphor for the unseen dimensions of creativity, for the obdurate will and dogged persistence that Nabil’s serene smile and warm laugh so successfully conceal. ■

