



# Mikou Studio

Meet the twin sisters turning theory into practice

مختبر أم سليم

P: NORAH AL-AMRI & MAHA MALLUH





Selma and Salwa Mikou decided to start their own architecture and interior design practice after many years spent collaborating with Jean Nouvel and Renzo Piano, setting up shop in a classical Haussmannian office at the heart of Paris. ¶ Their work together, which includes housing projects, high schools and aquatics centres, is defined as much by thought and emotion as it is by aesthetics or feats of engineering. “Even micro-projects interest us if they pose interesting questions,” explains Salma.

BB — *What’s it like, working with your sister?* Selma — It’s easy and difficult at the same time. Easy because we share the same values and a common vision of our profession, but we are also very different, and we sometimes need to harmonise contrasting viewpoints. Salwa — It’s a blessing. We’re twins: complementary, yet very different. The key is to allow each other room to grow and to respect each other’s nature and autonomy. The same rules apply as for a partner; respect for each other is the foundation of everything. BB — *In what ways has architecture allowed you to explore and learn about the world?* Selma — Building abroad means, first of all, travelling—discovering new lands, new cultures and new traditions. And then designing a project is another form of exploration—an adventure of thought and visual memories that brings together craftsmanship and high technology. In that sense, architecture is both a local phenomenon, linked to culture, building traditions, usage, history, climate, and universal in the values it expresses. Salwa — Architecture, if you think about it, is really a method or a tool for thinking about oneself and others; about time passing, about society and how it changes. It’s an intoxicating and somewhat risky undertaking, both grandiose and terrifying. To build is not a trivial act: Architecture reflects the

culture of society, its foundations, beliefs, and symbols. To build also means to construct oneself, and in this respect being an architect is the most beautiful job in the world.

BB — *You once proposed a design for an Institute of Islamic Culture. What architectural motifs did you choose to represent the Islamic world?* Salwa

Islamic culture is a very broad and fascinating subject. For us, it was

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فايق عابدي وسلمان الهويش









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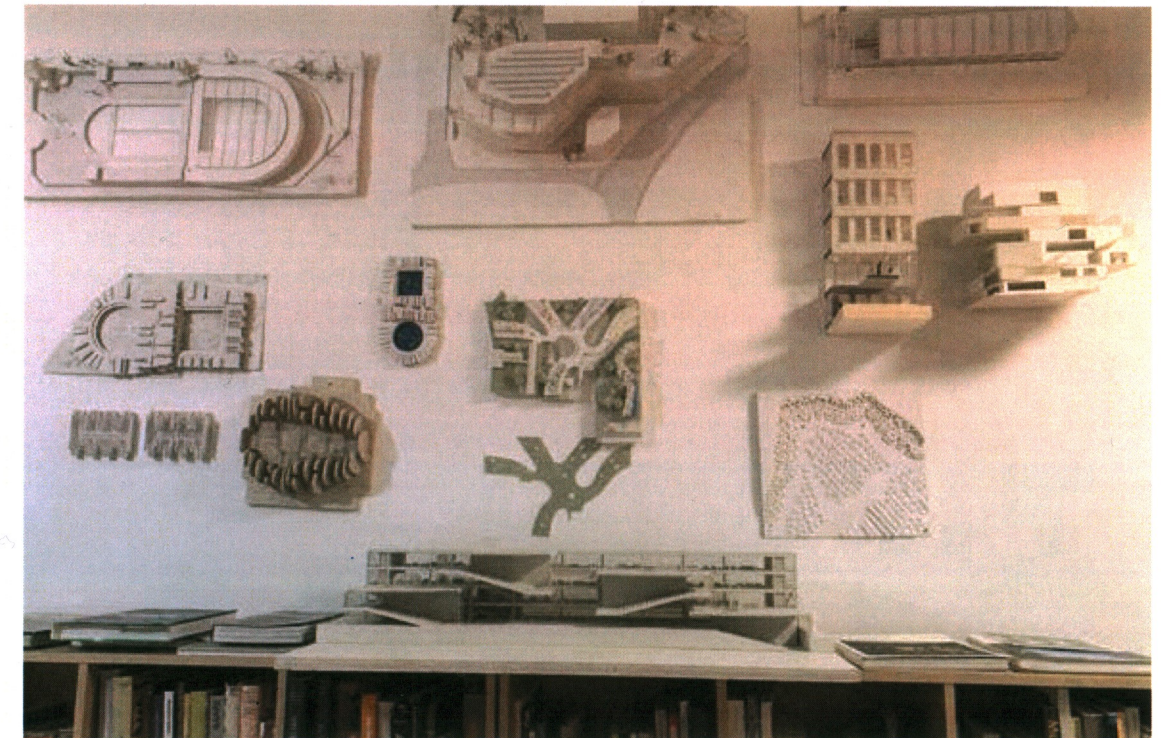
more about emotion than formal quotations: Working with light, geometry and spatial depth to reflect a concept of infinity, and spiritualizing matter through architectural details that resonate with the project's symbolism. There's also the urban dimension, the poetics of the situation: In the case of the Institute of Islamic Cultures in Paris, we proposed two sites in the Goutte d'Or neighbourhood—a lively, popular area rich in the diversity that characterises Islamic culture. <sup>BB</sup> — *What are you currently working on?* <sup>Seima</sup> — In France, we're working on a mixed-use project in Bordeaux, facing the Garonne river, which includes housing, student accommodation, coliving spaces, and a sports and wellness center including padel courts, water sports and balneotherapy. We are also working on a modular residential tower in Paris. <sup>Salwa</sup> — We have two hotel projects in Morocco's northern region, between Tangier and Asilah on the Atlantic coast. The light is exquisite there, and the landscape is incredibly wild. Additionally, we're working on another project in Rabat, very close to the Kasbah des Oudayas, with a private foundation that approached us to design a cultural project based on promoting women's skills in Morocco. It will be an interactive space deeply rooted in local culture, overlooking the sea. <sup>BB</sup> — *In what ways has your Moroccan background influenced your work?* <sup>Salwa</sup> — My Moroccan origins are deeply





rooted. We were born in Fez, in the heart of the ancient medina, in a traditional house that has been in our paternal family for four generations. Oriental and Andalusian influences were everywhere in daily life and domestic spaces. Later, we lived in Casablanca, which was a hub for modern architecture experimentation during the 1950s. It's a visual and sensory memory, like an atlas, that we carry with us and constantly evoke. Living in France and engaging this heritage with Western culture is a great opportunity. *Selma* — It's quite a delicate matter, because our imaginations are nourished by multiple influences. I have childhood memories of my grandparents' house in Fes: it was a large courtyard house that brought the whole family together,

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## To build is not a trivial act.

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and yet everyone found their own space within it. The house offered different spaces depending on the seasons. In the summer, my grandparents occupied the rooms around the patio, where the presence of water created islands of coolness, and in the winter, they moved to the upper floors close to the rooftop gardens. The natural ventilation was remarkable and the thick walls created a microclimate. <sup>BB</sup> — *One of your designs, the Aquazena pool in Paris, draws on principles of feng shui. Were any of the principles challenging to implement in a public use space?* <sup>Salwa</sup> — Feng shui was a non-negotiable component of the Aquazena sports centre and pool program. The client saw it as a means to create a harmonious environment conducive to well-being and relaxation. What initially seemed like a constraint turned out to be a significant asset in designing the spaces. <sup>Selma</sup> — We learned that feng shui consists of harmonising the flow of energy between earth and sky, interior and exterior. It's somewhat the middle path; the balance between light and darkness, noise and silence, stillness and movement. Understanding that helped us introduce spatial fluidity between the varied uses of the Aquazena building—spaces related to water, calmness and well-being, the more noisy sports and competition areas, and the spaces open to the sky, on the rooftop. <sup>BB</sup> — *The pool seems to embody your approach to sensual architecture. Can you say more about why you think that's important?* <sup>Salwa</sup> — Sports projects, especially aquatic ones, speak to us about the relationship with the body, the symbolism of water, and the return to essence and senses. This is a fundamental dimension that is not questioned with the same acuity in other programs. Water temples have always played a crucial role in society since the times of the







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Greeks, and especially the Romans, who developed a unique art of bathing and formalised it in Roman baths to make it a spécifie characteristic of their culture. Closer to us, Moorish baths are magical and timeless places that hâve always fascinated me.<sup>BB</sup>*A lotofyourworkis for municipal or communal use. What rôle does architecture play infosteringeomunity? And why is that important in Paris?*<sup>Salwa</sup> Architecture créates the conditions for human and social interactions. A standard architectural response to a given program in a given site is no longer sufficient today. Our lifestyles are changing and our habits are evolving. To remain relevant to society, buildings must be versatile, multifunctional, and adaptable. •

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