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ZAINAB
SALBI
EMPOWERING
ARAB WOMEN

CREATIVE DIVAS

EGYPTIAN WOMEN MAKING THEIR MARK

A PASSION FOR DESIGN

DINA EL KHACHAB'S CREATIVE FLAIR

Brought up in Montreal, Dina El Khachab studied architecture at McGill and came to Egypt to do research on Hassan Fathy for her studies. She met her future business partner and started their company, Eklego, in 2000. They more or less freelanced for over three years and then opened their office. At the end of 2005, they opened their first showroom and a few years later were joined by a third partner. eniGma's Salma Hussein met with El Khachab to know more about the entrepreneur.

El Khachab works on both commercial and residential projects, but she says that at the moment, she's more interested in working on restaurants. Ted's and Vinny's Pizzeria are recent projects that she has enjoyed working on. "Working on restaurants gives you more freedom and you can be funky and creative," she exclaims. Their work also includes residential projects in Cairo's biggest compounds. Their ultimate aim is to continue their expansion and go global.

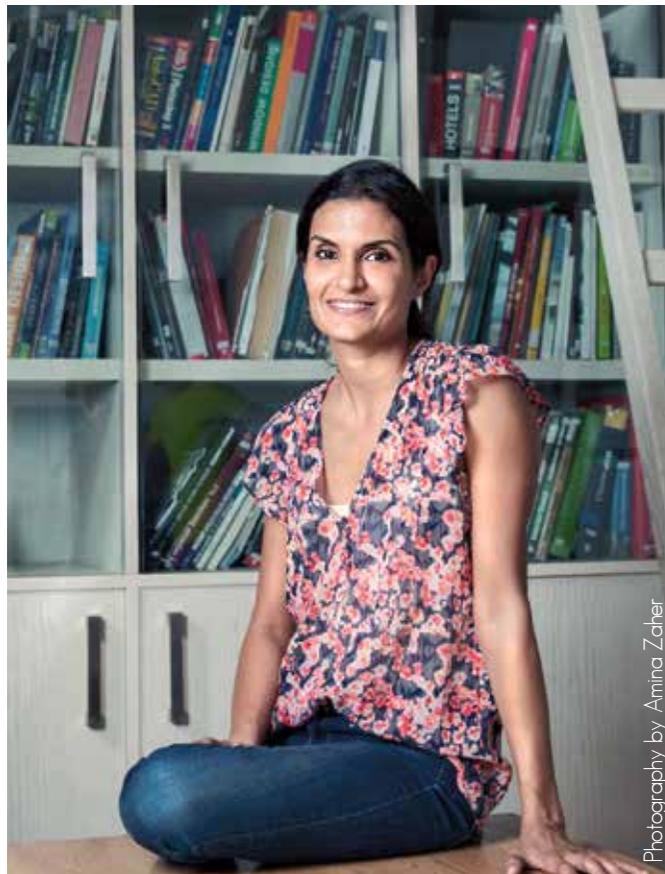
How would you describe the process of establishing one of the most successful firms in Egypt?

Difficult. I think the most important things are dedication and quality. I also think hiring a good staff is extremely important, one that believes in what you're doing, and wants to truly build a future with you. Our company is divided into two sectors, retail and projects. The project part is older and a bit more developed. I would say the retail part is more difficult from a business perspective. They're both different challenges but the retail is still being built. It needs to be huge to be a profitable good business, and that takes quite some time.

Have you faced any obstacles along the way?

There are always obstacles I guess. We are all aligned to build a company that is self-sustainable, whether it's with or without us, and to succeed in creating an iconic brand. Ideally it's an international brand, but we are still working on establishing it. We all want it to be a prosperous company, we don't want it to be only dependent on us, but rather on good designers.

What's your favourite style in terms of architecture and interior design?



"I like people who work hard to get what they want and achieve it; those who prove that anything is possible"

It's different within the company; everyone has a different preference. I personally like warm minimal; not too many items, warm colours, warm natural materials, and not too modern. I prefer a warm minimal base with eclectic pieces.

What do you think of the architecture scene in Egypt?

I think the architecture scene in Egypt still needs to be developed. Some of the new compounds have houses that are well designed, but I think the majority is cookie cutterish. It's not a flaw in design, it's just

how things are built. There are a few good designs that are created individually. I think the biggest problem is that over time, we started looking for quicker finishes and buildings. If you look at buildings from the 1800s, they were pieces of art; people took time to design and build. Now it's minimal because things became easier. I think the biggest problem is urban planning; people build individually and don't look at the entire cityscape as one backdrop. It's not a problem of style, but of cohesiveness.

How would you describe your relationship with your company?

Currently, we are one thing. Me and Eklego are the same. I guess it's a goal, I'm passionate about what I do. I really enjoy building things, observing them being built from scratch.

What advice would you give to female Egyptian entrepreneurs?

First of all, there's no difference between women and men. Secondly, one of the most important things is to understand what you want and what you want to achieve through whatever you are doing. Once you have a goal, constantly move towards it. If you really want this thing, you will definitely earn it.

How do you balance your personal life and career?

I have a talent for being able to switch off. I can switch off maybe 50 or 60 percent. It's never perfectly achieved though.

What inspires you?

Highly accomplished people inspire me. I like people who work hard to get what they want and achieve it. Those who prove that anything is possible.

Do you have any plans for the future?

We want the company to grow to be somewhat independent. We also want to expand in the Middle East, we're already working on few options. ■