

Cybertecture savvy

by [Melissa Hancock](#) on Sunday, 10 June 2007

"We are standing here in one of the most historic and iconic buildings of all time," says Mehdi Amjad, as he peers up at the roof of the Norman Foster building housed within the British Museum. "And this is a suitable setting because we believe we are writing history." It's a bold statement from the president and CEO of Omniyat Properties, but one that he is intent on carrying through.

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A few minutes after his speech finishes, the audience stands as opera music floods the room and an enormous block of ice is wheeled in. We all stare on as ten men dressed in black from head to toe begin driving their pickaxes into the ice. As the ice falls off piece by piece, we begin to see the formation of a cubic structure with a distinctive hole eroded in the middle.

Omniyat's latest project - The US\$235m Opus - emerges from its chrysalis. That it is a dramatic unveiling goes without saying, but it is also a clear message that Omniyat want to be recognised on the world stage as pioneers in a new field, which it has dubbed 'Cybertecture' - architecture that incorporates technology into the design and operations of a building to make it more efficient and user-friendly.

Earlier in the day, Amjad admits that its reason for launching the Opus in London was a simple one: "We want to attract international investors, specifically British investors and generate a global awareness of Omniyat Properties."

The company is now setting its sights on the overseas market, which is all the more astonishing considering Omniyat Properties (Omniyat translates as 'the wish' in Arabic) was only founded in December 2005. To date, the company's portfolio of development projects is currently worth approximately US\$1.6bn - forecast to rise to US\$2.75bn by the year end - making it one of the fastest growing real estate developers in the region.

Integral to its success has been that it has not simply subscribed to the 'build it and they will come' philosophy which has been the propensity of many developers in Dubai. Rather, the company prides itself on creating architecturally iconic buildings that focus heavily on integrating state-of-the-art technology. Upon realising the potential of the real estate market, Amjad combined this with a vision to develop the most technologically

advanced buildings in the Middle East.

In this sense, he had a unique advantage. In 1995 Amjad founded Almasa Holdings, a group of IT hard and software-related companies which had grown into the largest IT distribution company in the MENA region in less than a decade. Omniyat Properties was formed as a result of Almasa spinning out a five year-old real estate investment division which had implemented numerous successful investment projects in the UK and Iran in previous years.

Today, Omniyat Properties is the real estate development arm of the US\$544m Almasa Holdings and combines its mother company's two core areas of IT expertise in all its developments. Believing in the potential of the Business Bay District in new downtown Dubai, (Dubai's free zone commercial district on Sheikh Zayed Road), Amjad was among the first developers to buy land there for the site of the first Omniyat tower - One Business Bay. Almasa Holdings itself has bought three floors within the building for its corporate headquarters.

Two residential offerings, The Pad and The Square and four commercial towers followed - Bayswater, The Binary, The Gemini and more recently The Opus, which Amjad claims is of "worldwide and international significance."

For its design, Omniyat commissioned none other than the Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid whose work is described as a combination of art and architecture and has won her international acclaim. She became the first woman to be named Laureate when in 2004 she was chosen as the Laureate of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, and she has also held prestigious posts at several of the world's best universities including Harvard and Yale.

The revered architect is famed for consistently pushing the boundaries of architecture and urban design which is evident in The Opus, for although the building itself will appear as a singular unified whole with a distinctive void, it will be constructed of four buildings - three for office space and one for retail space. Furthermore, her work experiments with new spatial concepts which, according to Hadid, "intensify existing urban landscapes in the pursuit of a visionary aesthetic". For example, the Opus has been designed in such a way so that it will appear to hover from the ground.

Dressed in a flamboyant green silk jacket, Hadid steps onto the podium to explain her creation in her own words: "I thought it would be interesting to design something other than a high rise, so we concentrated on creating a degree of density in a cube," she says in her deep and authoritative voice. "I wanted to break an existing language of form with manipulation so I eroded a cube structure - a concept we have used for ground-level projects but until now not for high rises." Indeed, The Opus' low design of only 20 storeys will stand out in Business Bay - an area which is largely to be characterised by high rises, and where the cost of land is very high.

However, Amjad is keen to point out that this does not mean the office space is going to be any more expensive: "The plots of land that are sold in Dubai's Business Bay are

priced according to their built-up area so it doesn't matter if you go by height, or width. So we took the liberty to design the Opus as we liked."

The strategic location, stunning exterior and the extensive range of facilities make the Opus project a strategic buy for potential investors.

The Opus will 'break ground' in July 2007 and is scheduled for completion between Q4 2009 and Q1 2010. Omniyat's aim, according to Amjad, is to cater to the market segment who wish to live in futuristic and forward-thinking modern buildings. "Omniyat doesn't build the tallest buildings but the smartest," says Amjad, somewhat cheekily. However, these are not just empty sales pitches.

An aspect that sets Omniyat apart from other developers in the region is the thorough market research that it carries out ahead of launching any project. In order to ensure that its developments remain commercially viable in Dubai's increasingly competitive market, Omniyat consults with DEGW (a UK urban design consultancy) for an insight into the exact requirements of European investors looking for Dubai-based office space. As Amjad explains: "One of the key things that DEGW consult on is the space-utilisation requirements of blue-chip companies, and consequently advising on how to use office space most efficiently. So their advice typically becomes a prelude to working out how many metres a room will be, the penetration of the floor and so on."

Consequently, DEGW-approved space planning has become a trademark for space efficiency among corporate law firms and banks, and The Opus' 87% space efficiency is a feature that Amjad is particularly proud of: "This was not an ego trip. We needed to work hard to make this a commercially viable project - to use Zaha's sculpture, but also to create effective office space. It hasn't been easy. From a floor plate point of view, it's 87% efficient.

"The same 100,000 sq ft floor plate can have 30% more or 30% less people depending on whether it's well-designed. For example, whether it has good or bad light penetration can make a real difference. A lot of office space can be quite challenging so you might rent 10,000 sq ft but you only end up using 8000 sq ft.

Optimal use of space is becoming a big topic for all the top corporates around the world, and determines where they rent their office space from. Through what it has branded as its 'Oyster concept' - an acronym for Offices Yielding Superior Targets Through Efficiency and Relaxation - Omniyat tries to combine modern lifestyle elements with technologically advanced working environments. This is evident in the Opus where the uppermost floor will feature a tranquillity zone, and a beach deck with a reflective pool, gym and media zone. Meanwhile, the materials have been sourced to provide efficiency while reducing noise to sustain privacy.

Omniyat also recruited the services of both Cisco Systems and Fujitsu Siemens for the Opus' infrastructure technology. Amjad has no qualms in stating that "Dubai isn't doing enough" when it comes to technology incorporation by property developers. "I believe technology can improve a lot - the design, the inhabitant's lifestyle, the way they feel, the

way they maintain the building. I don't think even we at Omniyat are doing enough," says Amjad. Whether that is the case or not, Omniyat's widespread application of technology includes internet telephony, radio frequency identification, biometric access, intelligent lighting and energy management systems.

In this way, Omniyat is not only focusing on improving space efficiency but also improving the time efficiency for those inhabiting its buildings. Such space and time efficiency helps to both optimise manpower, and minimise wastage, but it also leads to a third and arguably most important efficiency concerning energy. Amjad is keen to stress that enhancing the environmental friendliness of its buildings is a subject that Omniyat will "increasingly address in every forthcoming project" both through increased technology utilisation and design features.

For example, the Opus will have reflexive fitting patterns in the form of pixilated striations applied onto the glass facade to provide a high degree of reflectivity and materiality to the cube, which will simultaneously assist in the reduction of solar gains inside the building, thus reducing the air-conditioning costs. While Amjad concedes: "It's a question of how much we can do while also maintaining commercial viability," he is keen to stress that Omniyat is making a concerted effort. "Having said that, we don't only try to meet environmental regulations but we try to stretch the envelope and I think we have been achieving that," he insists.

That Amjad is a hands-on CEO is evident by the pride he exudes when speaking about Omniyat and particularly the Opus. According to Amjad, whereas UK investors typically expect a 5-8 % rental yield, a very conservative annual yield on the Opus would be 12-15%.

The terms of payment are equally attractive: a 15% deposit with seven payments of 5% during construction and the outstanding 50% due on completion.

Amjad believes the market remains buoyant and is not in the least bit disheartened by pessimistic predictions concerning real estate. "Dubai has consistently impressive growth - 16% last year - beating that of markets like China and India." He is not in the least bit deflated by property specialist firm CB Richard Ellis' April research report claiming that cross border real estate investment elsewhere in the world now accounts for 50% of the total, whereas for the GCC, it currently represents only 9%.

"Of course, in absolute terms, China and India will be by far bigger," Amjad says evenly. "But if you consider that percentage in proportion to the rest of the world, then 9% for the GCC isn't bad. So while it might seem a small percentage, the property boom that's happening within it is absolutely huge."

Consequently, Amjad believes that Omniyat's properties will succeed in attracting international investors: "We are always looking for international investors - in fact, most of our customers today are international investors."

"Our top five customers come from the UK, Russia, India, Pakistan and different GCC countries. We have quite a diversified portfolio including many customers from Asian continents."

Amjad believes that Omniyat's next generation service-orientated working and living spaces are carving out a niche in the market and testament to that was not only the good reception of the Opus at the London unveiling but also the Dubai premiere last week at the Emirates' Madinat Jumeirah. Furthermore, Amjad feels The Opus is fairly and competitively priced. "Obviously when you build a building, you target it to a certain customer base, so I would say that every architecture has its own price," he argues.

"As a company we like to be innovative and I think for some companies, they don't like to go through the pain," he adds. "It can be challenging to constantly come up with fresh design ideas and see them through. But we enjoy creating these innovative designs, and our customers enjoy experiencing them." The drama is not over yet, it appears.