

# Middle East Consultant

FOR THE CONSTRUCTION SPECIALIST

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## On Their A-Game

*Middle East  
Consultant* honours  
the region's top  
consultants  
and projects

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### IN PRACTICE

Delivering 'experience design'  
on built assets in the region

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### IN PRACTICE

Designing Adidas' new  
regional HQ in D3, Dubai

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### ON SITE

Managing expectations to  
manage risk on projects

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INTERVIEW

# Building Experiences

Jason Lewis, founder and CEO of LIMAH, talks to *Middle East Consultant* about his firm's first decade, the importance of experience design and growth

**L**IMAH was founded in 2007 by Jason Lewis to bridge the gap between built assets and human experiences. When it first opened for business, the consultancy focused on wayfinding as its core business and set out to prove that signage was just one of many different tools it could use to deliver a quality customer experience. The firm recently celebrated its tenth anniversary and has worked on multiple high-profile projects within its first decade. The mixed-use Yas South Resort in Abu Dhabi, The Wharf – Dubai (part of the La Mer project in Jumeirah) and the 4.5m sqft Deira Mall are just three of the projects LIMAH has within its portfolio.

In recent years, the company has transitioned from wayfinding and has made customer experience its key focus. "Creating exceptional human experience has made our studio quite broad and unique in its offering. We look at the built environments from each and every step of the user's journey, from the moment they leave home, visit the space and return. This has allowed us to bring into our offering digital design, customer services design, user experience and public art," explains Lewis.

Lewis notes that his firm differentiates itself in a competitive market by offering a complete holistic experience. This approach has paid off; LIMAH had a stellar 2016, and in fact was named Specialist Consulting Company of the Year at the Middle East Consultant Awards. The firm was also the Workplace of the Year winner, and Lewis is quick to point out that office culture is an element of business close to his heart.

"Great culture is something I care deeply about. In fact, one of the areas I am most proud of is our culture and the development of our team. In the early days when we were smaller, it was quite hard to get

people to buy into my vision, especially as my vision was to create a global design firm with such unique niche services.

"Over time, we have been able to bring into the studio a passionate group that has started to share that vision and made it grow faster. I've noticed that those who haven't stayed with us or needed to be removed were always those that just didn't care much about the vision or the future. The team we have now is very dedicated and recognises how important our culture is to our future."

## On Strong Ground

Despite generally tepid regional market conditions, 2016 was a good year for LIMAH. Lewis points out that the strong business results and industry award wins pushed him to consider the consultancy's future.

"It was an opportunity to reflect and see our accomplishments, but I also saw that we've only scratched the surface in creating a truly global design firm. I have always run the business as a start-up, almost the same as how tech start-ups run: they are lean, fast moving and agile. As a team, we refocused our attention and regrouped, to be sure we are always hustling and outworking anyone else in the business, and that we are providing an exceptional experience for both our clients and our fellow team members."

Finishing 2016 on a strong note, Lewis was keen to take things to the next level. Earlier this year, LIMAH began working with new developers, authorities and other consultants on significant projects.

"We've begun working with Emaar, which is an important milestone for us. An area we are passionate about is accessible design, and this is something we have always put into all of our projects, even if current building codes don't require it. With that in mind, we were pleased to be awarded the project to develop the Qatar Standards for Accessible Transport in collaboration with WSP. This is a project we are still working on," Lewis says.



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**01**  
Experience design played a big part in the creation of Last Exit.

**02**  
Working on Zayed City, the firm created elements to highlight the individual districts through patterns, colour and wayfinding elements.

**03**  
LIMAH's team recently worked on the Bvlgari Resort & Residences in Dubai.

most common response is 'Wow' and 'What is this place?' Entering it feels more like an art exhibition space or a funky furniture showroom. A rotating collection of art, sculpture and

one-off furniture pieces welcome the guests."

"With 12m-high ceilings, the team collaborates together in large open spaces but has plenty of opportunities for quiet, smaller team meetings. Prototypes and drawings seem to be found everywhere. The giant sofa on the ground level has become a popular meeting place or for the public resting their tired feet from exploring the neighbourhood's numerous art galleries, not to mention a great place to catch a nap during a long day of design workshops. The space was designed to make sure employees stay happy, comfortable and inspired to do their best work."

Another milestone he highlights is LIMAH's studio in Alserkal Avenue. He reckons that the new studio has been one of his firm's most challenging and rewarding missions, noting that he and his firm was its own worst client, while challenges with contractors and deadlines were also pain points.

Lewis says he's now satisfied, however: "Now that the studio is done, it's really the place I had in mind from day one of LIMAH. I wanted a studio that showcased our brand to the public and allowed clients to visit and collaborate with the team in comfort. For starters, the workspace doesn't look like an office. At first impression, the



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**Next Steps**

With 10 years and numerous projects under its belt, LIMAH has arguably established itself within the regional construction industry. It is now eyeing expansion into other markets.

"We are quite well-known in the GCC region, having collaborated with many of the world's top architects and project management consultants. They have all stressed the need for our services within their other office regions. We are currently researching other markets which are definitely lacking in the type of services we provide. We expect to have a presence in two more markets by the end of Q1 2018 – London and Singapore. Due to the nature of our work and how we have structured the company, we intend for the brand to be global within the next three to five years," Lewis explains.

Of course, the consultancy will continue to deliver its bouquet of services within the region. Lewis points out that a number of sectors are showing potential.

"Healthcare, education and retail have shown the most promise for us in the region. These types of projects benefit from effective wayfinding. Hospitality has always been a strong player and does make up a majority of our current work; however, these tend to be focused more on design, with little strategic work required. As we get more and more into the large-scale and important infrastructure projects, our strategic work plays a huge role, as we can influence people's daily lives, creating ease of movement through spaces."

He adds, "The retail sector is a growing segment as clients begin to learn of our work in customer experience design. As competition increases for people's attention to brands, more and more businesses are

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recognising they need to do something exceptional to stand out. This is where we come in, assessing and designing the complete customer journey through both the digital and physical space."

Looking ahead, Lewis expects experience design to ultimately become the biggest growth driver for his business.

"In this service, we aren't limited to property developers as in the case of wayfinding. Rather, this service can be offered to any business. Currently we are working within the fitness and retail space designing customer journeys, and this broadens our market. Wayfinding will always be our core and the majority of our business, but we do expect public art and experience design to make up 40% of our business in the next three to five years. This aligns perfectly with our most valuable architecture clients, who see the need for attention to the user experience. They can keep costs down by collaborating with a team such as ourselves, rather than trying to develop an in-house team which needs to be large and multidisciplinary." ●



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