

ONCE THROUGH THE MAIN ENTRANCE, GUESTS ARE GREETED BY A VIEW OF THE SEA FRAMED BY THE HOUSE'S THREE VOLUMES, THE POOL HOUSE (LEFT), THE LIVING AREA (RIGHT) AND THE CANTILEVERED FIRST FLOOR, WHICH HOUSES THE BEDROOMS. OUT OF SIGHT, THE COURTYARD OPENS UP INTO AN EXPANSIVE OUTDOOR SPACE WITH AN INFINITY POOL.

— Winter Boltholes —

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BAHRAINI HIDEAWAY

INFINITY AND BEYOND

New horizons from a very private Persian Gulf guest house

Perched on a funnel-shaped slice of land on the coast of Bahrain's manmade Reef Island, the sculptural Reef guest house is something of an 'alien in its surroundings', admits its architect Jalal AlNajjar. From the street, its vast angular entrance – four tilting planes of pristine plaster angled towards a towering 3m door – makes for an intriguing spectacle alongside its more conventional neighbours. The Bahrain-based architect, whose portfolio

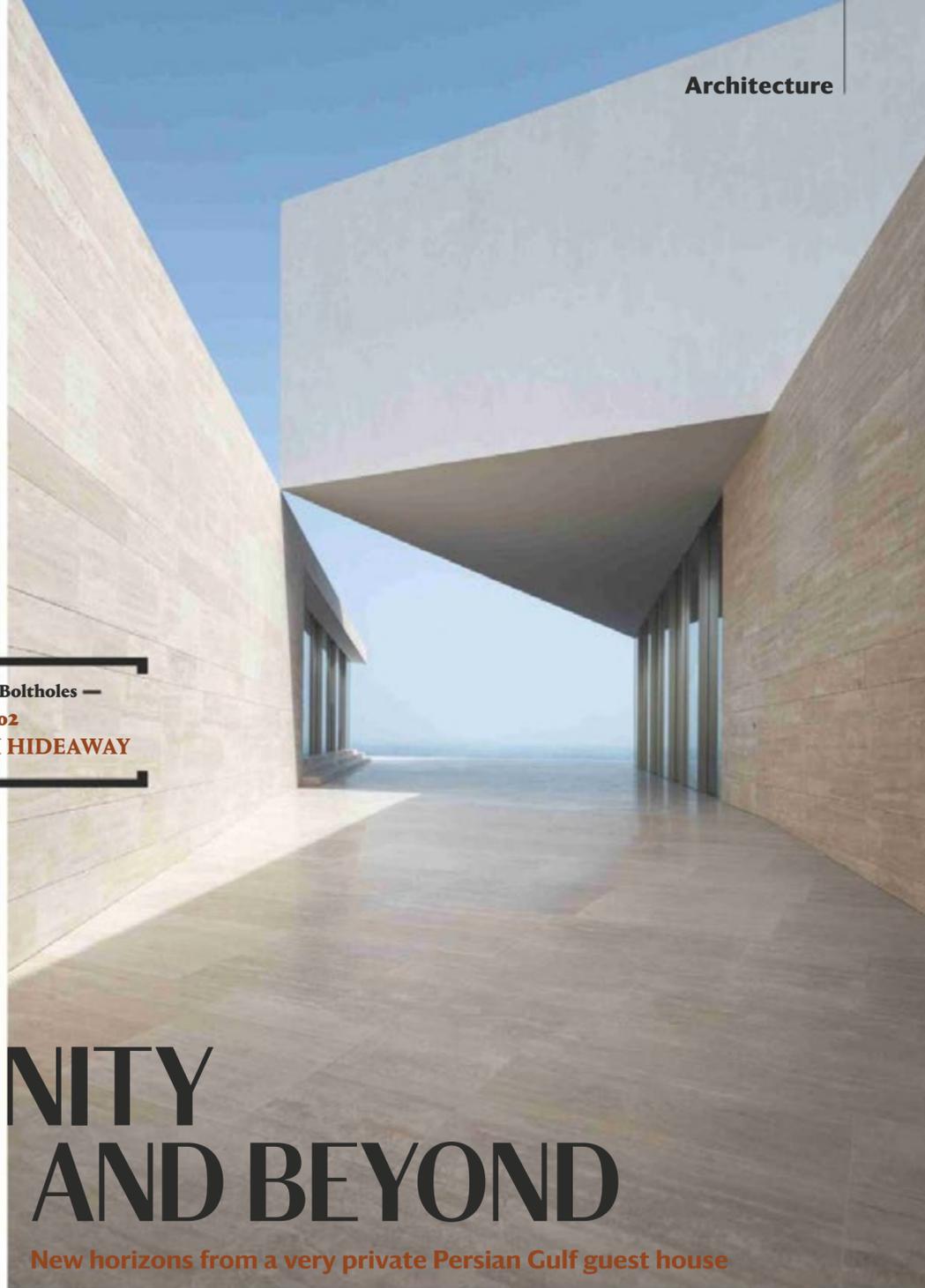
includes luxury residences and showstopping public buildings, designed the five-bedroom property for a local client who wanted a spectacular but private space for entertaining high-profile guests. 'Almost everything in the house was custom made,' says AlNajjar of the four-year project. 'It was the most complex and ambitious project of my career to date.

'With the entrance, the idea was to have this really monolithic volume, even the door,

all rendered in the same material, a plaster that we imported from Italy,' he says. 'The span of the top of the entrance is 26m, but you get this paper-thin line.'

Beyond the property's walls are villas, glossy towers, hotels, shops, a yacht club and a marina, nestled amid landscaped gardens. However, once you're inside the house, none of this is apparent. AlNajjar, who worked alongside Chris Briffa Architects on the >>

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'People expect to walk into the house; instead they are blown away by this view'



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP, THE 3M-TALL FRONT DOOR IS SET WITHIN AN ENTRANCE, RENDERED IN PLASTER; A TEAK-LINED BATHROOM WITH SKYLIGHT; A CONCRETE AND FUMED OAK STAIRCASE CONNECTS THE GROUND-FLOOR LOUNGE WITH THE FIRST-FLOOR BEDROOMS

early concept and interiors stages of the project, says he wanted the house to offer guests a 'transcendent experience'.

Upon entering, visitors find themselves in a courtyard where a tantalising strip of turquoise sea is perfectly framed by the building's three travertine and concrete volumes. On the left is a pool house with a dramatically sloping roof, on the right is the main living area and, above, its cantilevered first floor jutting across the walkway. The buildings bow towards each other, with the corner of the first floor just millimetres from the pool house roof. The arrangement creates a very private space at the plot's centre, where an infinity pool blurs with the Persian Gulf. 'People expect to walk into the house, but instead they are met with this courtyard and view,' says AlNajjar. 'There is no way anyone could not be blown away by it.'

With glazed façades oriented towards the sea, the buildings are inspired by traditional Bahraini courtyard houses that used wind towers to catch the cooling, prevailing north-west winds. 'Here you have a similar effect with a V-shaped floor plan,' explains AlNajjar. 'So, as the wind comes in over the water, it speeds up and cools the space.'

In the living area, an entertaining space is backed by a wall of glass and teak slats that offer privacy and feature integrated lighting and shelving. 'This wall was created to soften the effect of the massive cantilevered volume above,' says AlNajjar. 'We used slender columns on the ground floor to make the first floor appear almost to be floating.'

Running alongside the glass and teak wall is a 33m-long indoor-to-outdoor breakfast bar carved from a single piece of travertine. It extends outside through the floor-to-ceiling windows, where it morphs into a poolside bar before sloping down into the pool to accommodate bathing guests. 'We wanted to merge the inside with the outside,' states AlNajjar. 'The windows in the lounge slide to create a 4m opening.'

The first floor, which overhangs the ground floor to create shaded areas below, hosts five bedrooms with balconies. These are angled towards the sea, benefiting from complete privacy and the prevailing winds. The master bedroom's balcony is positioned above the sea, offering uninterrupted views. Further into the first floor, skylights funnel light into the teak-lined bathrooms and late-night lounge, where a large tree is an unexpected centrepiece.

Over in the pool house, a lounge area is backed by a brass-lined bar. Above the bar and tucked under the sloping roof is a 40 sq m gym, while in the basement, AlNajjar has inserted a spa clad in teak and travertine with a massage room and hammam.

For all its amenities, AlNajjar believes the building's true appeal lies in its perfectly calibrated proportions. 'It's the interaction of its simple lines and striking volumes,' he reflects. 'This is a structure that is not only breathtaking in its local context, but it could also be transposed anywhere else in the world with similar effect.' ★ jalalalnajjar.com