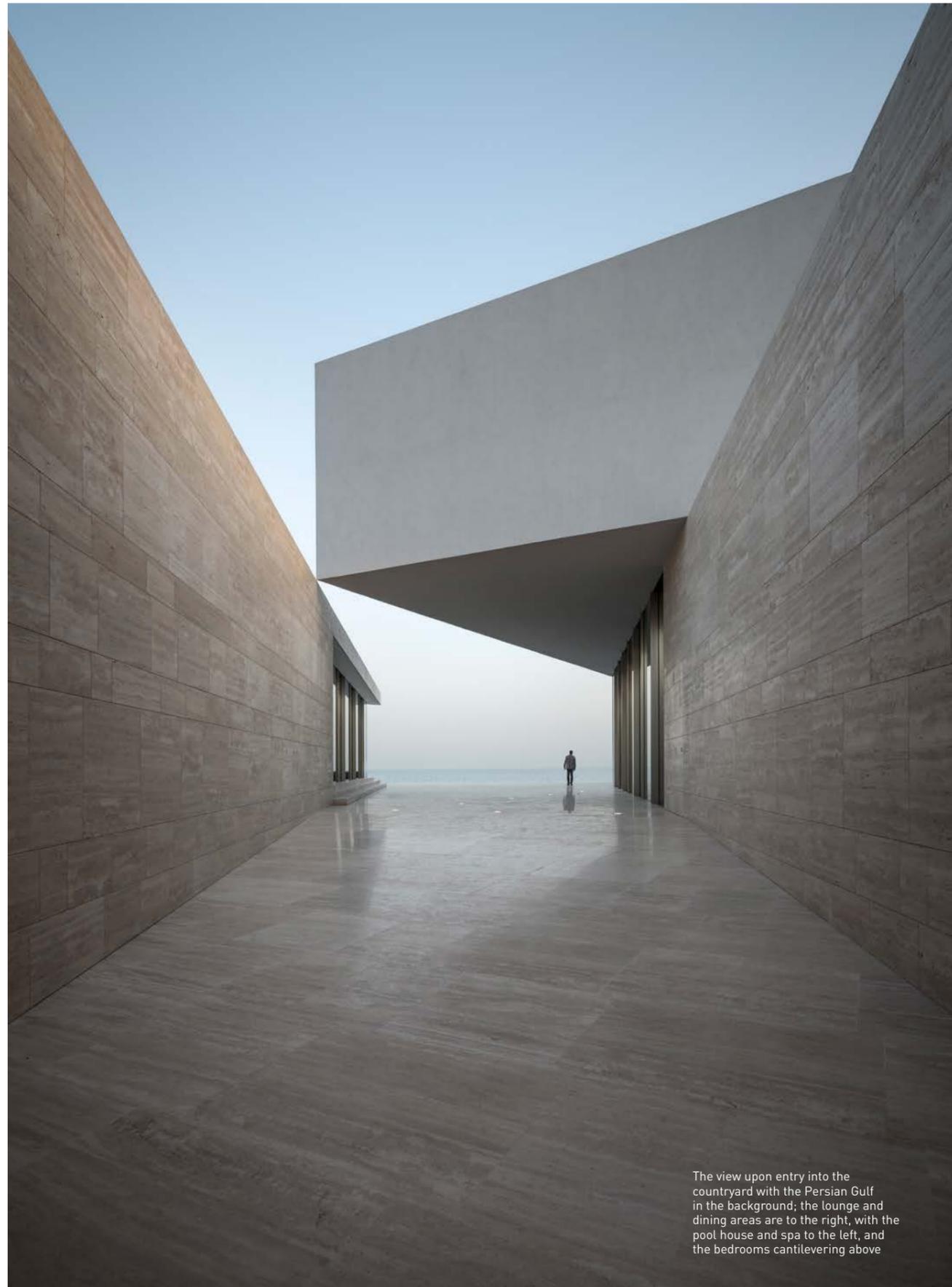


FRAMING THE PERSIAN GULF

A collaboration between Malta's Chris Briffa and local architect Jalal AlNajjar, this monolithic and sculptural guest house on an island off the coast of Bahrain is strikingly different to the architecture that surrounds it, both in its design and the emotions it provokes

Architects: Project by Jalal AlNajjar Architect in collaboration with Chris Briffa Architects
Photography: Aldo Amoretti **Words:** Lisa Gwen Baldacchino
Special thanks: Davide Groppi represented in Malta by Elektra Ltd

The street facade and main entry consist of a tent-like garden wall built out of reinforced concrete and clad with a lime plaster with mother of pearl, from Oltremateria



The view upon entry into the courtyard with the Persian Gulf in the background; the lounge and dining areas are to the right, with the pool house and spa to the left, and the bedrooms cantilevering above



Top: Seaward view showing the three distinct volumes: sleeping areas hovering above the glazed lounge, flanked by the independent pool house on the other end, stitched together by the entry gate in the background

Above: Hidden door into the lounge clad in travertine. The full height glazed apertures are by Keller AG

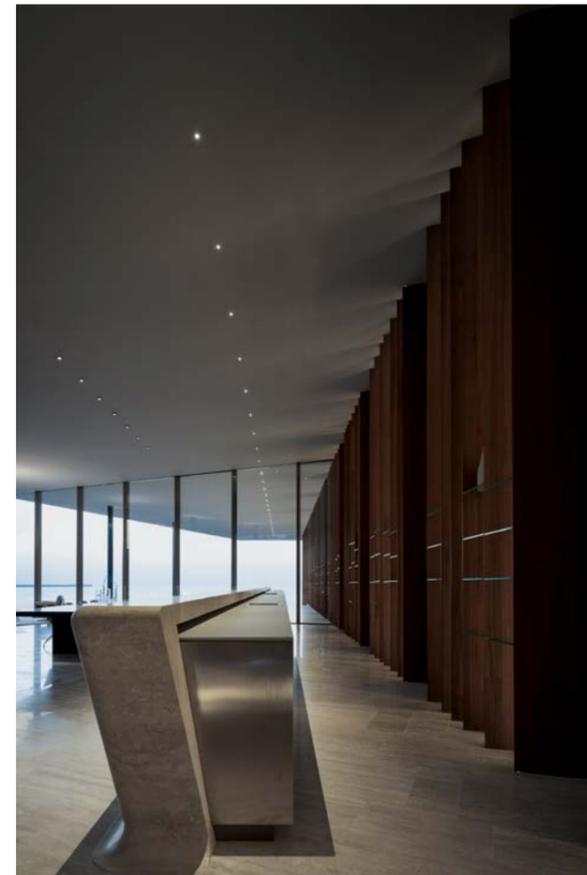
The expression 'building on sand', is generally used to denote instability or the lack of a secure foundation. And yet, that is precisely what Chris Briffa's architecture studio, in collaboration with Bahraini architect, Jalal AlNajjar, managed to pull off with the breath-taking Reef guesthouse. Situated on one of the manmade islands of the Persian Gulf, little more than a large patch of flat ground and sand, it is anything but unstable.

'Sitting on 100 piles, the base and foundation of this build was by far the most challenging of hurdles,' explains Chris. 'Other than that, we had a unique context to work in, and work with; it was a fantastic playground in which we were able to take architecture to the limit, and a really good budget in order to do so.'

As the site faced north west, the initial concept immediately proposed the inclusion of a courtyard, which would be split into two, allowing the wind to funnel through it. 'The seaward design of the courtyard, allowed us to stretch the inner, glazed façades of the house, which would remain ventilated thanks to their orientation along the prevailing winds,' says Chris. ▶



Interior view of the pool house, showing the bar, overlying gym, stairs to underground spa and seating area



Above left: Detail of the breakfast bar edge with bespoke shelving and storage system in the background



Above right: On first floor, skylit passageways lead the way to the bedroom suites; with natural light during the day and artificial light at night

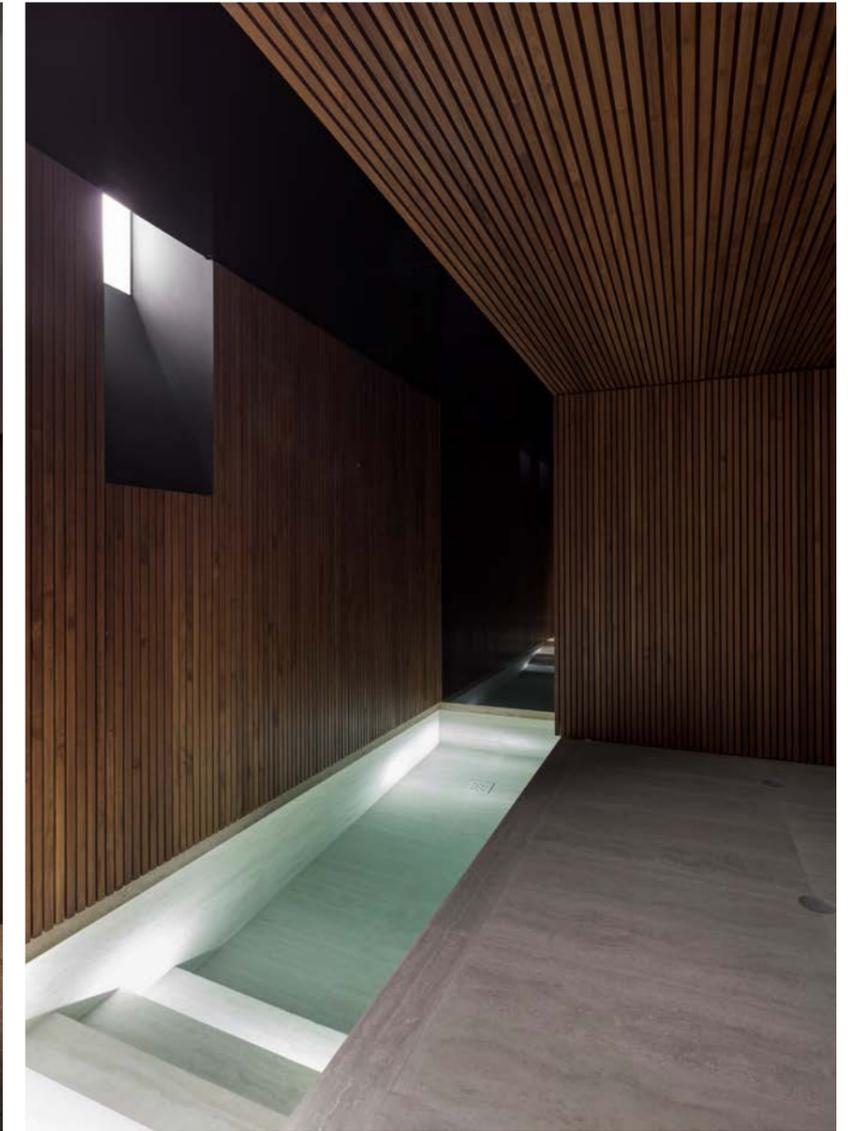


Lounge and dining area facing sunset, with a 33m breakfast bar in solid travertine sinking into and serving the pool; 3D-cut and custom built by Il Casone

Yet, from the exterior, none of this is evident. One enters the build through a minimalist façade which is both nondescript and highly sculptural. Four planes of precast concrete, seamlessly plastered by a mix of lime and mother-of-pearl, make up what Chris calls the 'origami gate', creating a highly angular and geometric play of line, light and shadow. The convergence of these planes, leads the eye to the three-metre doorway, laterally flanked by a thin slit of glass on its innermost side, which allows light to pierce the otherwise uninterrupted monochromatic and mono-material entrance.

The play of volumes and masses on the façade persists on entering the courtyard, where the sky, sea and horizon are framed by the build's three main monolithic spaces – the 'pool house' and leisure area on the left, the glazed lounge and living area to the right, and a triangular, double cantilevered volume sitting atop, housing five bedroom suites. The last, a veritable feat of engineering, made possible by Perit Ivan Muscat, is just five millimetres shy of bridging the courtyard or latching onto the pool house roof – making this a poetically, impossible embrace. ▶

'Working in such a context, means that one's skill set is extended, expanded and tested to the limit'



Over the years, Chris and Jalal have collaborated on several projects, more often than not comprising the submission of designs and proposals for the occasional competition. However, their working relationship traces back to some 15 years ago: before founding his architecture firm, Chris spent a month working with Jalal, whose own practice was just kicking off. Since then, Chris has been invited to collaborate on a number of competition designs - none having been as high profile as this one.

Completed in May 2018, the design for the guesthouse was submitted almost four years earlier - in July, 2014. A closed competition to which only four architecture firms were invited, Jalal reached out to Chris, whose firm conducted the entire research and design process. In the brief, the client specified wanting a well-designed space in which he could entertain and host large parties, as well as impress foreign dignitaries. ▶

Above left: A Corbusier-inspired concrete staircase in the lounge, invites the way up to the sleeping areas

Above right: Akin to a sailing boat interior, the master bathroom revisits nautical traits; naturally lit by archetypal overhead skylights around curved partitions. Bath by Agape, mixer by Cea Design

Above left: Guest changing room vanity in the pool house, embracing the sloping lines of the pitched roof, on the Ceppo di Gré marble floor

Above right: The basement spa, clad in solid Burma teak and travertine, features a long plunger by the sauna and hammam



Above left: A recessed seating area on one edge of the chlorine-free pool; softly lit by Sampei fishing-rod-lights, from Davide Groppi

Left: Pool bar serving guests in the water, with a background storage wall built of teak. The mirrors and recessed lighting (by Davide Groppi) are sheltered by the overhead bedrooms

Above: An engineering feat on many levels, the entire villa is built on reclaimed land while sitting on a hundred piles. Structural design by Perit Ivan Muscat. Lighting, Davide Groppi

Chris spent a total of six months in Bahrain in order to oversee the completion of the design process, under the supervision of Jalal's firm. The final design included a lounge space which could host as many as 200 guests, a car park which could easily accommodate 20 cars, an infinity pool facing and blurring into the Persian Gulf, and a pool house clad with a gym, bar and underground spa for after hours.

Wedged between other villas, towers and skyscrapers glaring from a short distance, the design of the guesthouse becomes particularly unique when considering the context of Bahrain - where builds are generally ornamental, possessing a Middle-Eastern aesthetic, and where clean geometric and contemporary design is not necessarily appreciated.

'Working in such a context, means that one's skill set is extended, expanded and tested to the limit,' says Chris. 'Opportunities to work with such clients, a good budget, and on such a site, don't come along often.'