

INTERVIEW

Can you give us a brief about your educational background and your experience in the GCC area?

I studied Landscape architecture at Newcastle University in the UK as a master's degree finishing in 1987 following a general academic degree in history, politics and economics. I have worked in private practices ever since qualifying including RPS Clouston as an Associate and Broadway Malvan Landscape as a freelance landscape architect before setting up my own company in 1995. However, by 2008 I found myself in something of a rut and spotted the opportunity of working overseas. I had spent some time in Turkey with my previous employer and then six months in Malaysia and had always enjoyed the challenges and surprises of other climates and cultures.

When did Al Shamsi Terraforma first set up business?

Alshamsi Terraforma was established in January 2006. Lionel Fanshawe, the UK director of The Terra Firma Consultancy grew up in the Gulf as a result of his father being in the Royal Navy during the 1960's. The company is a joint venture between a well established UK Landscape consultancy and a UAE based enterprise, Alshamsi Holdings, not a sponsorship. The connection was made through a third party following work Terra Firma had undertaken in Beirut and at Tittenhurst Park in England for His Highness Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan. One of our Directors, Jamie Liversedge worked in Dubai 20 years ago and he has had continuing involvement with schemes in the region ever since. Although he now runs the Landscape architecture course at Greenwich University he is a frequent visitor to Dubai. I joined the company in June 2008 and became resident director shortly afterwards.

How has your business expanded since its inception?

It has been a bumpy ride, from a rapid expansion in 2008 to cope with the huge amount of schemes around at the time including a large landscape masterplanning project at Al Falah, Abu Dhabi to the all too familiar downturn in workload in 2009, which caused us to reduce staff numbers. Our main objective was for the practice to expand into other countries in the region. Between The Terra Firma Consultancy in the UK and Alshamsi Terraforma in Dubai we have now worked in 23 different countries in the world, half of these are from Dubai since the establishment of the practice in 2006.

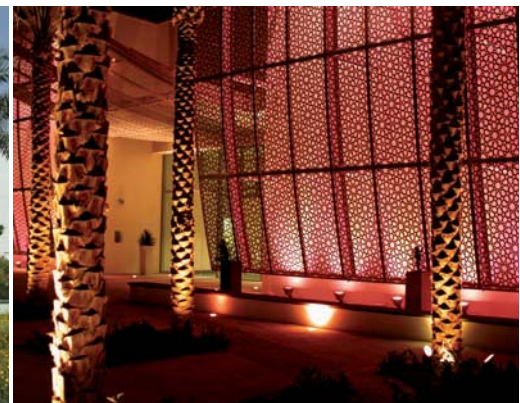


ALISTAIR WALBY

Resident Director and Landscape Architect of Alshamsi Terraforma

Alshamsi Terra Firma

MANARAT AL SAADIYAT

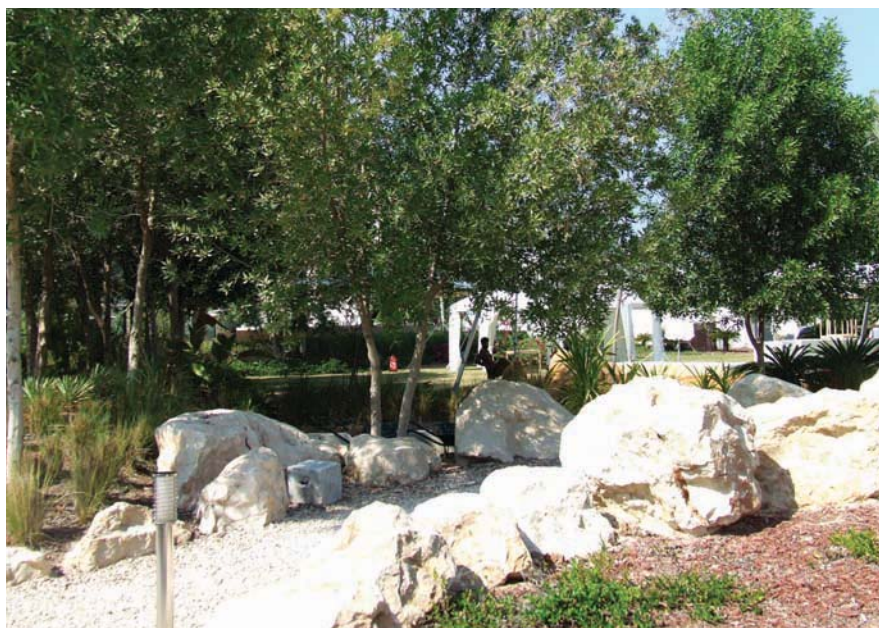




Manarat Al Saadiyat - Aedas Architects,
Masterplanners and Architects
TDIC, client

What are the main challenges of doing business in the current GCC market post recession?

We are definitely in post recession mode, as proven with the difficulty in sourcing suitably qualified and experienced staff, and the requests for fee proposals appear to be more frequent and more urgent. However, it is still a challenge to efficiently produce fee proposals and to judge exactly where the market price of landscape consultancy lies. There still seems to be a general culture of 'Hurry up and wait' during the inception process of many projects which makes programming, cash flow



projection and resource allocation extremely difficult. I take pride in calculating well thought through and accurate fee proposals in terms of deliverables, programme and time taken to produce documents and drawings and sometimes I have been astounded to later find out what some people are promising for unrealistically low fees. At the same time, professional colleagues in other sectors of construction appear to be able to charge far higher rates.

As far as the practice of landscape architecture is concerned, I am pleased to be increasingly working with architects who are willing to involve us with projects from inception rather than being brought into to garnish proposals, which are already fixed in design. Some of the more resilient problems of working in the Middle East remain with the quality of workmanship in landscape construction resulting in large time demands on us during site works supervision.

In your opinion, what changes need to be adopted in the GCC landscaping industry to become on a par with the rest of the world?

More competition in the landscape construction market, more variety in the supply of landscape materials, better trained and managed landscape construction managers.

In terms of landscape it would be good to see more of an engagement with sustainability and local context rather than the prevalence to international styles and it could well be the key to producing exemplar work. A willingness on behalf of clients to demand something different rather than landscapes which use the same materials, the same plants and even the same techniques time and again. Having said that I think that there are many really impressive projects in the region that can be seen as world class.

INTERVIEW

FANR RESTAURANT, MAS



Photo credit: Aedas Architects, Masterplanners and Architects TDIC, client



Photo credit: Aedas Architects, Masterplanners and Architects TDIC, client

Do you think that the international standards for the landscaping industry are too rigid and unrealistic or can they easily be applied when executing projects?

No, LEED is the source of Estidama, which provides the necessary drive towards sustainability in Abu Dhabi, British and American standards for materials and workmanship and aspects such as safety and access provide guidance, which is required where none exists in most of the Gulf States. NBS or CSI provide alternative but essential standard structures for specifications. The main issue is that designers and contractors do not always follow the guidance and specifications are not read.

What is the most frustrating aspect of your work? And the most rewarding one?

Chasing late payment is an endemic problem in the industry and is possibly the most frustrating because it is time consuming and diverts me from the more creative aspects of

the work. The difficulty of getting things built in accordance with drawings and specifications and the commercial pressures to accept lesser materials, unsatisfactory workmanship and 'unavailable' stock is compounded when the time allowed for supervision by landscape architects is limited. These are the daily challenges of work, but when projects do come to fruition, the speed of construction, and the time it takes for planting to establish and grow substantially is amazing. It is also a thrill to see landscapes we have designed and seen constructed, occupied and enjoyed by people within a very short period of time. I am also delighted to see the birdlife attracted to the landscapes where previously there was none or at least none that I could see or hear.

Who are your major clients and what major projects have you been involved with on their behalf?

Some of our early work, prior to my arrival was for the Engineer's office and we had

already worked on a number of projects directly for Emaar and other well known developers in Dubai both in the UAE and in the region. We have also worked for Aldar and TDIC on projects in Abu Dhabi and local and international residents on private developments.

A high proportion of our work comes as sub-consultants to architects and engineers including local, regional and international companies.

One of the earliest projects before my arrival in Dubai was the Marina Sales Centre in Umm Al Quwain for Emaar. This was an interesting project because it is all about making an impact with potential buyers and providing a comfortable atmosphere for sales. The landscape has a little bit of everything including, streetscapes, an entrance plaza, gardens, decks over-looking the coast and a seating area.

We worked on the Landscape Concept for Al Falah New Community for Aldar with GHM Design architects based in Abu Dhabi which was a great project and we enjoyed working with architects who were receptive to our ideas and strategies and it felt like we were very much in a partnership with them taking their masterplan forward with respect to the landscape. Another significant project is Manarat Al Saadiyat for TDIC with Aedas architects because it was an extremely fast track project using materials which were available that week, introduced the idea of low irrigation and native like semi-desert planting with gravel areas, ghaf trees and acacias in perimeter and car park areas with more ornamental shrubs, turf and more mature trees in entrance areas. Finally, we worked on Al Muneera at Al Raha Beach, Abu Dhabi with Waterman International (Resident Engineers), in the role of landscape supervisors. It wasn't our design but our job

AL FALLAH



Al Falah - GHM Design Ltd Masterplanning Architects Aldar Properties, client



AL MUNEERA

INTERVIEW

Al Muneera - Waterman Middle East, Resident Engineers
Aldar Properties, client

was to inspect and supervise the construction of hard and soft landscape including water features. The architectural and engineering design had been developed since the landscape design was prepared so some coordination was required with much of the planting and water features to be refined and rationalized but again it was a challenging project at the 'front line' for both supervision and resolution of site design issues. There's no better way to learn!

Where do you see the GCC in 10 years from now with respect to developments and landscaping?

I think that the time for 'cut and paste' universal landscape design has past and that clients and architects will be demanding site specific designs which reflect more of what the site, the architecture and their visions for the landscape require. I cannot foresee a time when some of the stalled developments in marginal desert areas start again but clearly there are key areas within the city and in particular in core and water front areas where it will be commercially worthwhile to redevelop and

enhance the existing ageing architecture and landscape. I believe these will be regenerated in a much more environmentally and people friendly manner with higher quality design. I look forward to the opportunity of taking part in at least some of these developments.

As someone who is well established within the industry, what do you see as the main challenges we face in the next 12 months?

I am very pleased to be saying that managing growth for our practice in a more sustainable fashion is one of the biggest challenges we now face. Picking up work with the best clients and best architects is my aim so that we can be part of what I think will be a step change in the best of what is now happening in the region in terms of development.

In your opinion, What position does Al Shamsi Terraforma currently hold in the market?

Realistically, we are small player in what is a competitive market in which some very large consultancies operate. However, we like the fact Alshamsi Terraforma is an independent, exclusively landscape

practice registered with the British Landscape Institute with a key relationship with our 'parent' company in the UK and at the same time have the back up support provided by an established and organized local partner. This enables us to punch well above our weight and set up relationships with a variety of key clients and architectural and engineering practices that we admire and want to work with again and again. On a number projects we have been appointed to developed concept designs which have been prepared by international landscape practices based outside of the region, especially with regard to planting and irrigation.

Our track record so far has seen us work on projects as diverse as Masdar, the Marina Mosque in Dubai and the Hard Rock Hotel in Abu Dhabi as well as in countries from Algeria, Egypt, Oman, Pakistan and Afghanistan on projects as diverse as individual villas to whole new communities.

Our current work includes projects in Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Turkey and includes hotels, schools, villas, parks and mixed use and recreational projects and interior landscapes.

We hope that the momentum now being experienced continues and trust that we will be here long into the future.



UMM AL QUWAIN

Umm Al Quwain - Enad Properties, client

Alistair Walby
Resident Director and Landscape Architect

Tel 00971 4 321 1133 (128)
Fax 00971 4 3211144
Mob 00971 50 758 6115

alistairw@alshamsiterrafirma.ae
www.alshamsiterrafirma.ae