

Gulf Business

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COP29:

WHAT IT MEANS
FOR OIL-RICH
ECONOMIES

BUILDING BOLD

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BLUEPRINT FOR REAL ESTATE SUCCESS

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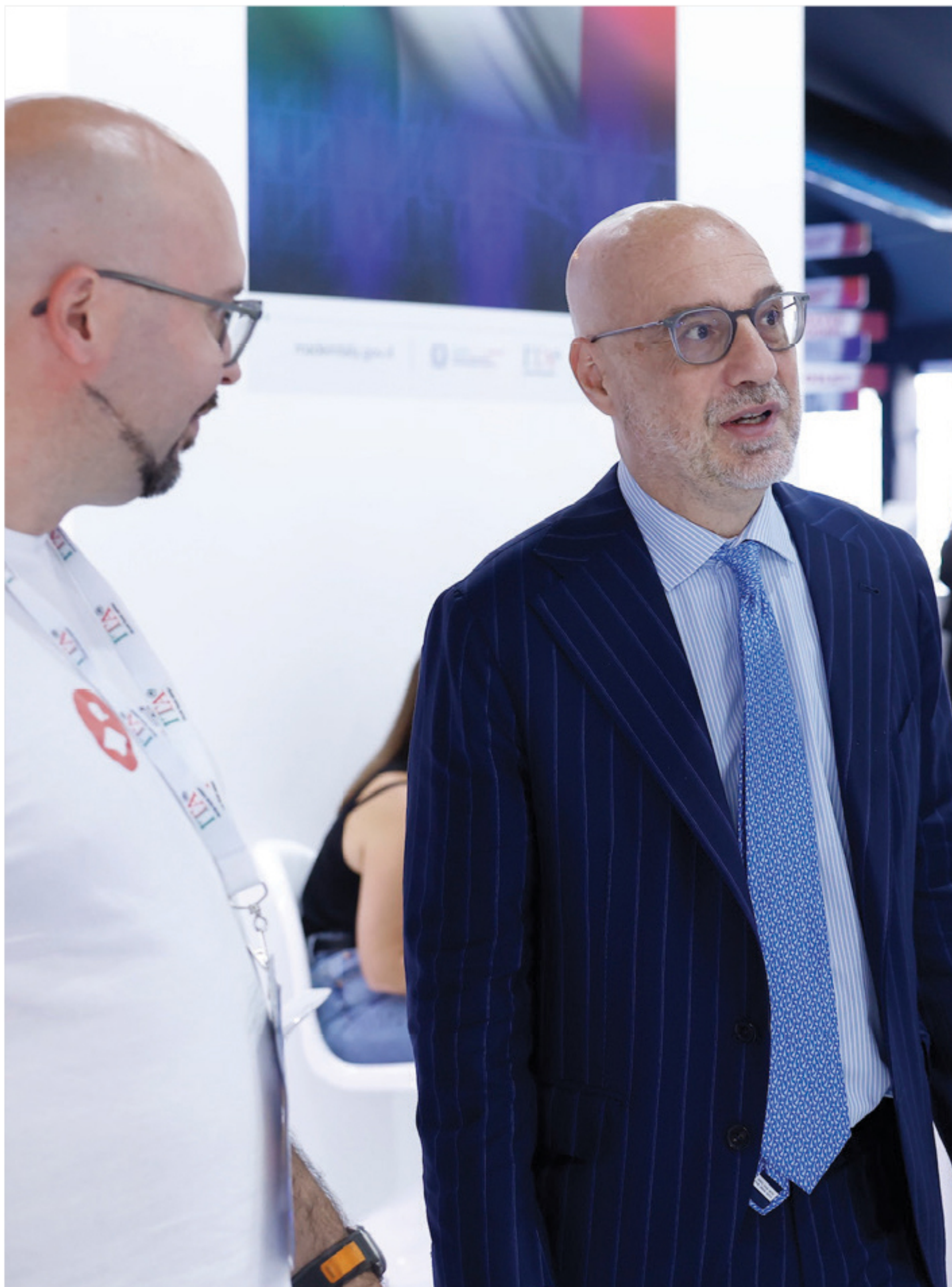
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BUILDING LEGACY:

ATIF RAHMAN ON ELEVATING DUBAI'S REAL ESTATE GAME

IN THIS Q&A, THE FOUNDER OF ORO24 SHARES HIS JOURNEY THROUGH DUBAI'S REAL ESTATE LANDSCAPE, HIS APPROACH TO RESILIENT GROWTH, THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING, AND HIS PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE OF THE REAL ESTATE MARKET

WORDS GARETH VAN ZYL | PHOTOS MARK MATHEW





Atif, ORO24 is your third successful venture in Dubai. Can you tell us more about your journey?

I have thoroughly enjoyed the journey, and while it feels rewarding, I never stop learning and improving. I have certainly built successful businesses and nurtured many talented individuals along the way. The most important thing is that they continue to grow in their respective fields. Each business I've built was founded on a vision tailored for its time, followed by assembling a team to help execute it. No journey to success exists without failures, and I have certainly experienced some. In pursuit of success, you will face challenges - be it decisions, people, situations, processes, methods, or choices. It's by confronting these obstacles fearlessly that success is achieved. To reach the top and stay there, it's essential to be resilient in both success and failure, keeping a firm focus on the vision.

I started ORO24 immediately after Covid-19, not the most opportune time for the economy or the industry. I was simply backing my latest aspiration: to build a transformational company with great professionals delivering human-sensitive assets. We'll be completing three years next month. I have been fortunate to work with a fantastic team that has turned the organisation into a force to be reckoned with, and I am confident they will continue to set new benchmarks. We are about to deliver an incredible gated community of six buildings, and alongside that, we will be announcing something truly significant.

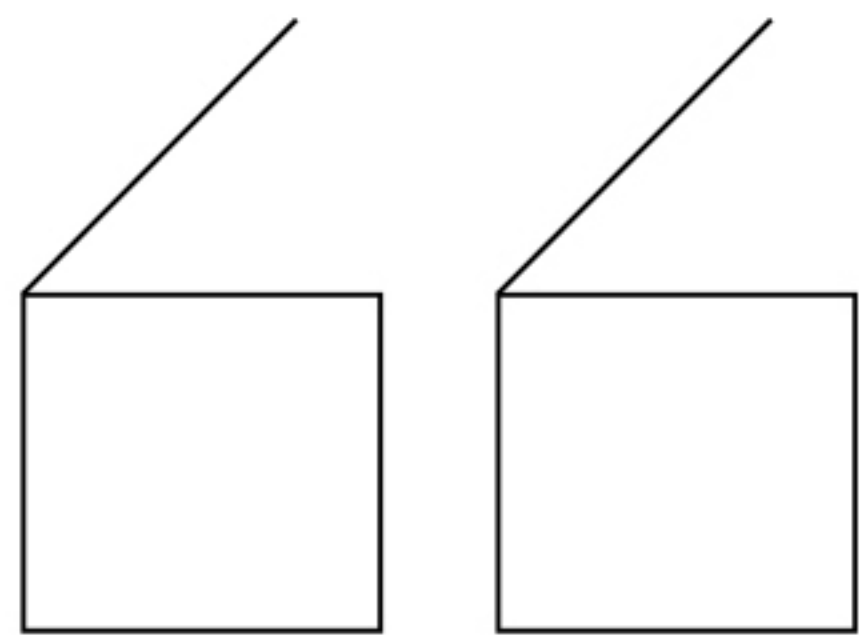
Your portfolio is growing— over Dhs11.5bn in total sales and 11,750 units across 32 projects. What key factors have contributed to this growth?

Every project is unique, and I have learned countless lessons from each one, whether during the planning stages or through execution. Property development is an attractive yet complex and high-risk business, with challenges at every step. The most vital lessons have been resilience and taking a scientific approach to every situation. I remember building two projects just 70 metres apart, both twin towers. While one proceeded smoothly, we faced a unique challenge with the other. After reaching the formation level, half of the plot sank by over a metre, despite a comprehensive soil investigation study before construction commenced. I brought in experts from Singapore and England, who found that the land had been backfilled and contained layers of gypsum—extremely fine particles that washed away during dewatering, leaving cavities. We then decided to build pile beds beneath the raft for added safety. I have a whole library of such experiences, and I continue to learn from them.

I believe that meticulous planning, expanding core competencies, controlled leveraging, healthy cash flow, strong construction management, and a focus on delivery are crucial for success in this industry. Every project faces its own set of challenges, and it's vital to minimise unknowns as much as possible because surprises are inevitable.

You have navigated through three economic cycles. What lessons from those experiences are shaping your current strategy?

It is a common misconception that economic crises are the only times of challenge. In reality, you encounter equal or sometimes greater challenges during boom periods too. For example, an off-plan project that sells out quickly during a boom has its top line secured, but without adequate planning or contingency, it may still be at risk due to design flaws, cost inflation, or a shortage of contractors and materials. My investments in technology, while beneficial, also come with their own risks. Reflecting on the 2008 economic crisis, I value the lessons it taught me. We had eight ongoing projects, and it was not an easy period. Remaining conservative was our greatest asset. Many



NO JOURNEY TO SUCCESS EXISTS WITHOUT FAILURES, AND MINE HAS HAD ITS SHARE. IN THE PURSUIT OF SUCCESS, YOU WILL FAIL BECAUSE OF DECISIONS, PEOPLE, CIRCUMSTANCES, PROCESSES, METHODS, CHOICES, AND MORE. IT'S BY FACING THESE CHALLENGES FEARLESSLY THAT YOU ACHIEVE SUCCESS."

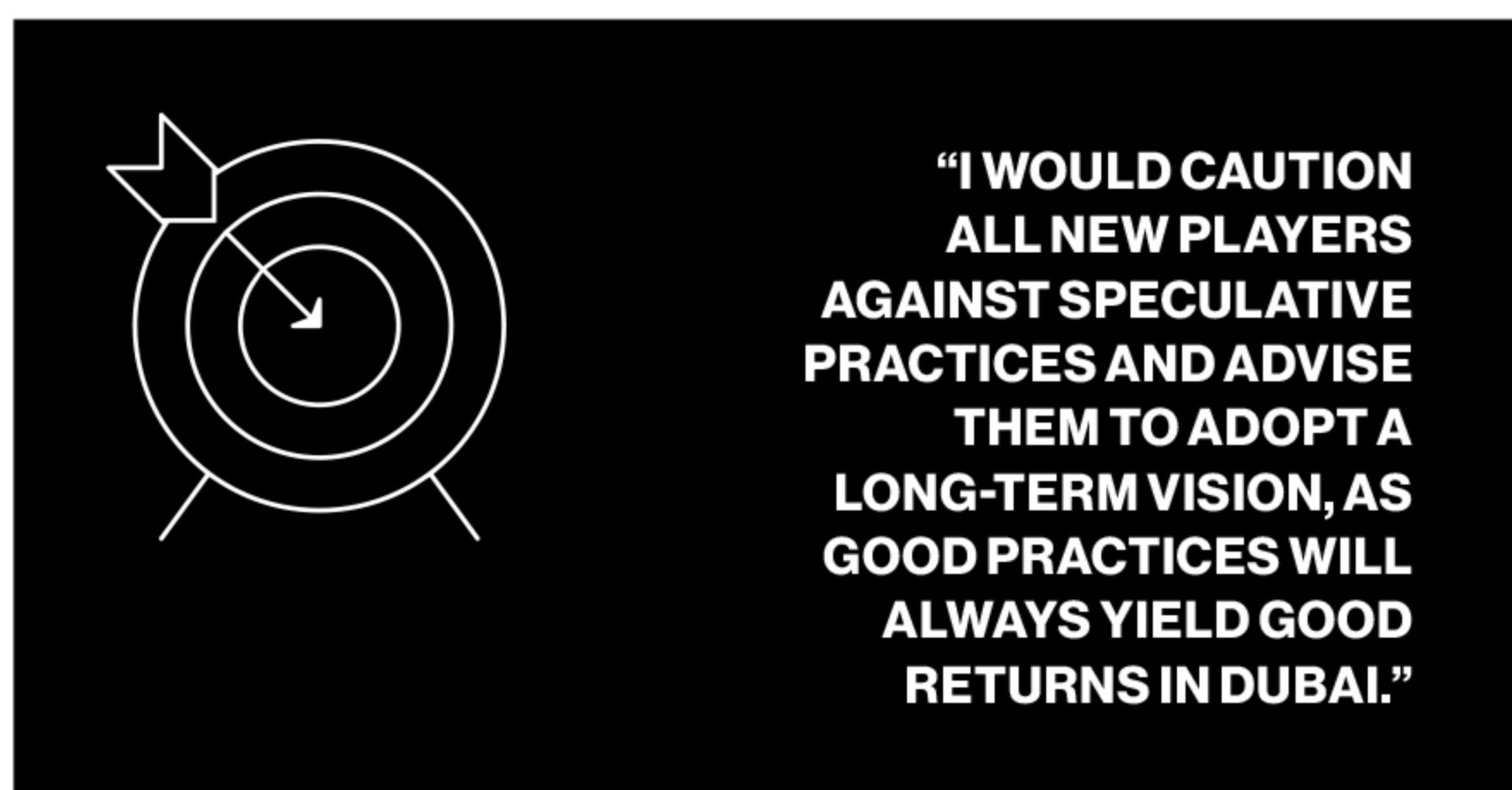
adventurous and overly ambitious transactions took place just before the crisis, but we stayed focused on strict credit policies and economical leveraging, which allowed us to maintain sufficient cash flow to complete all projects when the crisis hit. The next major challenge was the pandemic. I learned the importance of supply chain control and accelerated construction management, which helped us navigate the situation smoothly. Looking back, I realise that one misstep during any of these crises could have brought the company down.

My strategy is rooted in understanding that my business affects many stakeholders, including employees, customers, regulators, bankers, brokers, contractors, suppliers, and more. Knowing that you cannot afford to let any of them down drives the mind to find solutions. Experience has taught me that where there are risks, there are methods to mitigate them. If there are challenges, there are also opportunities. It's essential to constantly assess and eliminate exposures.

I owe my approach to the values instilled by my grandfather and father, who taught me the importance of ethics, duty, and responsibility. They also imparted the knowledge of real estate and construction that I carry with me every day.

You spend a lot of time in the US, how has that impacted your personality?

Yes, I have learnt a lot during my various stays in the US. I honestly believe that the country created a legacy before most other countries in many spheres, especially technology, real estate and the financial market. I have always visited as a student to learn and educate myself. As the leader in my office, it's important that I inspire new thoughts and possibilities, for that I must continue to learn. Additionally, it's a huge landscape and you never get



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bored. I have also used my travel to educate my daughters on many things including business, life and minimalism.

What is your view on the influx of new developers and brokers entering the market?

Having spent over two decades in Dubai's real estate industry, I am proud to see more people investing in this remarkable city. It's a positive sign, clearly demonstrating the growth of Dubai's real estate sector. This influx will undoubtedly contribute to economic expansion, with increased contributions to the GDP. While competition will rise, it bodes well for the future of our industry.

I would advise new players to steer clear of speculative practices and adopt a long-term vision, assuring them that good practices will always lead to profitable returns in Dubai. For brokers, my advice is to understand clients' needs, be genuine advisors, and recommend appropriate asset investments. This approach will earn continued loyalty and referrals. For developers, don't rush; invest in expertise and focus on delivering quality projects without over-extending financially. We must adhere to regulations and work together to safeguard the industry from malpractice.

There is considerable activity among financial institutions entering the market, as they continue to see growth opportunities. I would like to see existing firms grow and an increase in new consultants, contractors, and suppliers. The industry is expanding rapidly, offering substantial opportunities for all, maintaining the ecosystem's balance. I am a firm believer in relationships and collaboration, and I have been pleased to advise some of the new brokers and developers on various matters.

With projects in prime locations like Arjan, Furjan, Studio City, Jumeirah Village, Business Bay, and more, you have established a solid footprint in Dubai. How do you choose locations for your developments?

I'm glad you consider these prime locations today. I remember when they were seen as secondary or less attractive, and now there is hardly any land left. We were the first to build freehold real estate in Arjan,



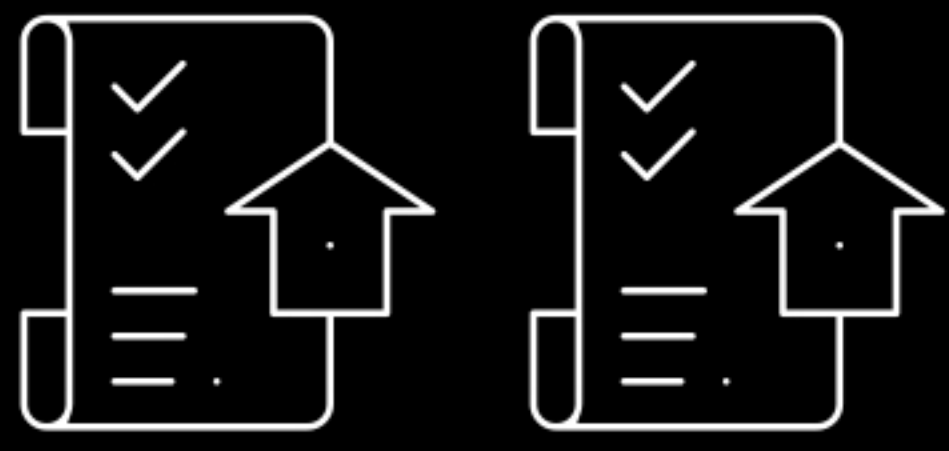
Studio City, and Furjan a few years ago, and those areas have appreciated significantly. The city has expanded rapidly and will continue to do so, and those who have made prudent investments in future locations will see good returns.

The 2040 master plan aims to transform the city into one of the world's most liveable places. While ultra-luxury locations like the Palm, Marina, and Downtown have their markets, they won't suit every budget. Dubai offers a wide spectrum of real estate investment opportunities for every budget. The government is committed to enhancing each location's appeal. The best way to approach asset acquisition is to assess your budget, return expectations, and real estate preferences, and then make informed investments. Rather than investing to flip, hold onto the investment for a few years and enjoy solid returns.

At ORO24, we are a boutique company focused on mid-segment quality assets. We understand the need to provide a competitive edge to our consumers to stay relevant in the market. Every real estate project begins with the land, and we work hard to select the best available option. Following this, we design an innovative asset, and when we are confident enough to invest in it ourselves, we offer it to the market. I firmly believe that real estate is not sold; people buy real estate, and this approach helps us attract buyers who genuinely believe in our offerings. We also ensure we operate within our capacity so that each project receives the attention it deserves. Through every community we build, we strive to add value to the real estate landscape.

The UAE real estate market is known for its resilience and growth potential. What is your outlook for the sector?

Every indicator today favours Dubai, whether you consider competitiveness, ease of doing business, safety, transparency, or digitisation. Credit must go to the leadership and government agencies. I have said this many times before and will repeat it: in most other countries, the private sector leads the way, while in Dubai, it's the opposite. This is reflected in the substantial investment in infrastructure, whether existing or planned. What is commendable is that, unlike many places, the Dubai government is always active and constantly working to elevate the city to the next level. This consistent effort underpins its resilience. It's akin to a healthy body continually building its immunity, which rarely falls ill. That said, it's important to recognise that every economy must go through cycles. Real estate corrections, debt defaults, and construction risks are natural outcomes for any industry during a downturn. Personally, I believe a global slowdown is imminent, with signals such as an inverted yield curve, deflationary trends in China, and contractions in major European economies, which experts are already warning about. Capital will inevitably move to more attractive opportunities, and Dubai is well-positioned to capitalise on this. The city has demonstrated its strength and ability to recover from economic and global crises, such as the pandemic. In the long term, Dubai will continue to attract investment and a growing population.



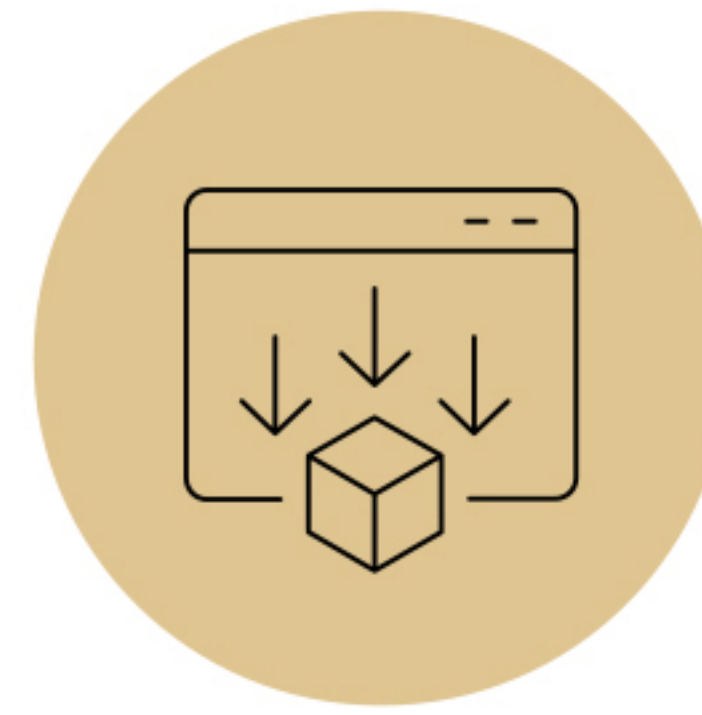
DUBAI'S 2040 MASTER
PLAN PROMISES TO
TRANSFORM THE CITY
INTO ONE OF THE WORLD'S
MOST LIVEABLE PLACES

You have been recognised for both financial innovation and design excellence. Can you share any upcoming initiatives or projects that will push the boundaries?

Product innovation and financial liberalisation are essential for any industry. To stay relevant, we must continuously offer new solutions to our customers. We study human needs and aim to create solutions in our real estate offerings through functional space planning, amenities, and financial liberalisation. Our unique selling point extends beyond a single aspect and is centred around providing comprehensive solutions for our customers. For example, when I introduced the 1 per cent post-handover payment plan, the goal wasn't only to make consumer financing more accessible but also to secure the construction, which is equally crucial for project delivery. I have been pivotal in developing some ground-breaking design solutions that maximise space utilisation, achieving great success. Good governance is vital for any industry. I was the first to voluntarily implement third-party surveys of drawings to provide consumers with size guarantees. We're also designing our communities to serve non-occupants, such as delivery personnel and movers. I am particularly interested in how our communities impact even the smallest segments of our audience. The idea is to create real estate with soul.

On that note, how do you build your communities? What is the foundation of your project design approach?

As I mentioned, we begin by studying the land and its surrounding



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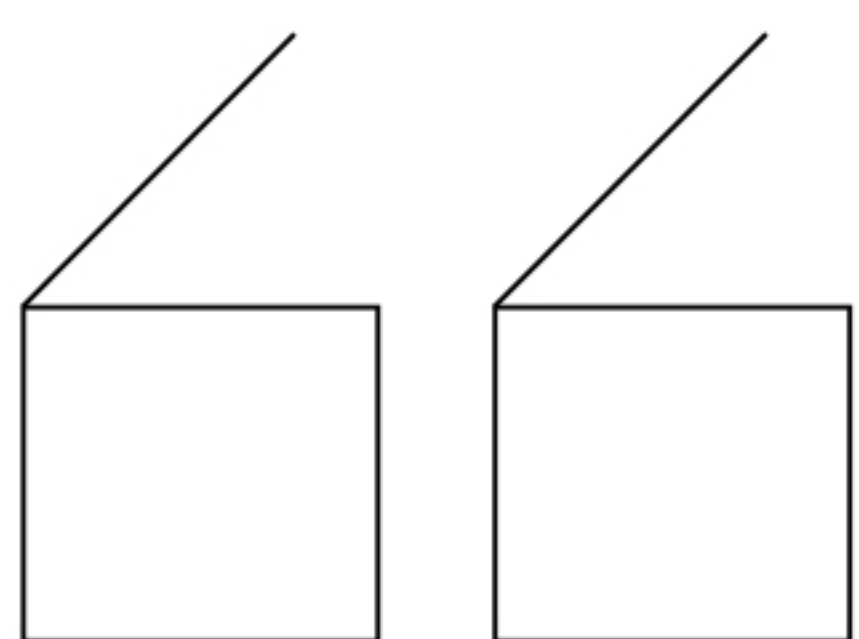
areas to determine suitable architecture. We draw inspiration from human life and modern needs, using these insights as key data points during the design process. There are three primary elements that help make our real estate offerings attractive: economies of scale, modular design, and value engineering. We also collaborate with specialised companies through strategic partnerships. In my experience, backward integration can be limiting and increase risks, so we avoid it. Through all these elements, we envision human life thriving within our communities, which is reflected in our project designs. Much of our work revolves around delivering value through rethinking and reimagining real estate.

What emerging trends in real estate do you believe will have the most significant impact on the UAE market?

In the short term, contrary to concerns about oversupply, I believe there will be an increased demand for quality residential real estate, along with significant new demand in both commercial and industrial sectors. Population growth will also fuel demand for specialised real estate, such as educational and healthcare facilities. In the long term, I see vast opportunities in innovative real estate solutions, construction technology, and financial modelling within the real estate industry.

We know you are passionate about CSR. What's next?

I am human; I am not perfect, and I am also a God-fearing person. I genuinely believe that God favours those who give back. This belief makes me feel that CSR is the soul of our organisation. Today, we have a CSR committee supporting numerous initiatives, and many of our employees volunteer in CSR activities. The satisfaction of giving is greater than receiving. In fact, we work hard to grow the organisation so our ability to support social causes grows as well. Our latest initiative, launched in June this year, is called "Heroes of the Site". While it is still small, I have big ambitions for it. With the growth of the real estate industry, I believe it's essential for site workers to also reap the rewards. ☺



**PRODUCT INNOVATION AND FINANCIAL
LIBERALISATION ARE ESSENTIAL FOR ANY INDUSTRY. TO
STAY RELEVANT, WE MUST CONTINUOUSLY OFFER NEW
SOLUTIONS TO OUR CUSTOMERS. WE STUDY HUMAN
NEEDS AND AIM TO CREATE SOLUTIONS IN OUR REAL
ESTATE OFFERINGS THROUGH FUNCTIONAL SPACE
PLANNING, AMENITIES, AND FINANCIAL LIBERALISATION."**