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LEISURE & ARTS

A CULTURAL CONVERSATION | With David Fisher

Believe Him or Not, He Puts A Fresh Spin on Architecture

BY FRANCIS X. ROCCA

With property prices almost everywhere headed for the ground floor, this might not seem the best time for building a luxury skyscraper. The moment would seem especially unpropitious in Dubai, where the global financial crisis has undermined a once-booming real-estate market and last month halted work on what would have been the world's tallest building. So what are the prospects for a ritzy residential and office tower whose most distinctive features depend on untried technology to which most listeners react with head-shaking disbelief?

If David Fisher has any doubts, he is not sharing them. The 60-year-old architect and businessman, born in Israel and based for the past four decades in Italy, says the world-wide economic downturn has yet to dent demand for his rotating Dynamic Tower, in which the cheapest apartments will go for \$3 million and the priciest for 10 times that much.

"Luxury products are sold almost more in times of crisis," he insists. "The same people that had \$1 billion, maybe now they have \$600 million, but they feel more like spending. They say, 'let's have fun.'"

Mr. Fisher says that groundbreaking, which he once hoped would take place last fall at a still-undisclosed location in Dubai, has been postponed until spring, mainly because of bureaucratic delays with construction permits. But he says that applications for apartments in the 80-story tower have continued to pour in—more than a hundred in January alone—and that a group of private investors from an unspecified "North American city" has approached him to design another like it there.

It's easy to see why they

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would do so. In Mr. Fisher's promotional videos, a computer-generated conception of the tower twirls sinuously like a precious-metal chain, each story turning at its own speed and in its own direction. The effect is mesmerizing.

Life inside the building will be no less attractive, Mr. Fisher says. Not only will residents be able to enjoy sunrise and sunset through the same window; they will be able to shift their balcony gardens throughout the day, to guarantee plants the optimum amount of light. The Dynamic Tower, which

Time magazine named as one of the best inventions of 2008, is that rare idea deserving of shopworn adjectives like "unique" and "revolutionary."

Assuming it works, that is. Because at first glance, and even at the second, the thing seems as fantastic as it is exhilarating.

Well accustomed to incredulity, appearing indeed to relish it, Mr. Fisher cheerfully explains why his design is not only feasible, but actually cheaper, faster and safer to build and maintain than a conventional building. He declares that practical considerations, not aesthetics, are the sine qua non of his architectural philosophy.

"You have to know if a project holds water before you start," he says. "It can be beautiful, but if it's not functional, you don't care about the design."

The efficiency of the Dynamic Tower, Mr. Fisher says, will derive above all from its prefabrication. Each story—the building tapers from 13,000 square feet on the ground floor to 10,000 square feet at the top—will be composed of about 40 factory-built modules, preinstalled with all wiring, plumbing and customized furnishings, including kitchen and bathroom fixtures. This is the "most revolutionary aspect" of the project, he says, since it will enable 90 people to put up in less than two years what would re-

quire more than 20 times as many workers, and nearly twice as much time, using traditional construction methods. Such a vast savings in man-hours will dramatically reduce the risk of accidents, and bring down insurance costs accordingly.

To make things even safer, the process of building the 1,380-foot-tall edifice is to take place for the most part on the ground. The key to that paradoxical achievement will be the tower's silo-like core, the only section whose construction will require a crane. Once the concrete column is in place, each floor will be assembled in a ring around it, then hauled up with cables. The building will thus "rise" from the top down. If Mr. Fisher's project sounds less like engineering than like playing with a child's toy, that explains much of its charm.

The largely hollow core will function as the axle around which the floors turn. It will also be the conduit for elevators, electrical wiring and plumbing. To enable water to flow through a constantly shifting structure, Mr. Fisher says he has patented a system, based on technology used to refuel airplanes in mid-flight, that will serve each floor through a single "smart connection" for clean water and another for waste.

And what about the electricity needed to turn 80 floors all day long? In an age of anxiety about energy's economic and environmental costs, such a spectacle sounds prohibitively extravagant. On the contrary, Mr. Fisher insists: his building will be not only the most dazzling in his-



Ismael Roddan

tory, but also the most "green."

Panels on the roof of each story, part of which will be exposed at some point in every day's rotation, will collect heat from the sun's rays. Horizontal turbines, like airplane propellers sandwiched between the floors, will gather power from the wind. The building will actually produce more energy than it consumes, he says, leaving the rest to be sold to the neighbors.

Perhaps recognizing that all this might seem a little too good to be true, Mr. Fisher occasionally interrupts his boosterism to note that, compared with other famous inventions, the Dynamic Tower is in fact not so very remarkable.

"I laugh when people say it's incredible," he says. "It's ridiculous to compare it to an aircraft. It's ridiculous to compare it to a laptop computer. This is by far simpler." He notes that he discovered the virtues of prefabrication when making bathrooms for luxury hotels, one of several

building-related ventures he pursued in a two-decade hiatus from architectural practice before he got the idea for a rotating skyscraper.

The unexpected notes of modesty are not only disarming but oddly inspiring. After listening to Mr. Fisher talk about the Dynamic Tower for a couple of hours, you might still be skeptical, but you certainly hope he succeeds, if only to prove that the choice between the practical and the marvelous—a trade-off that most of us learned to accept as an inevitable price of growing up—might not be necessary after all.

Providing such inspiration, Mr. Fischer says, is the part of his work that gratifies him the most: "I think that the most important contribution that this project can make is to help people understand that everything is possible."

Mr. Rocca is the Vatican correspondent for Religion News Service.