

Disruptor | Raouf Ghali, president of international project management, Hill International

By [Claire Lambrecht](#) | September 3, 2013, 1:36 AM PDT



Doubters said it was impossible. After all, the project of building an island visible from space sounds like the plot of a Hollywood blockbuster — not real life.

“Initially, nobody believed it would happen,” Raouf Ghali said over coffee in New York in August. “Nobody, except for a small group of people, thought this would be materialized and implemented.”

Ghali, who supervised the construction of Palm Island as president of international project management at Hill International, had a front-row seat to the project.

Upon completion, Palm Island didn’t just disprove naysayers; it transformed the shoreline — and global perception — of Dubai. Now home to 150,000 people, the development also includes 2,000 villas, 40 resorts and a man-made reef.

“Having to fight everyone’s opinion and see it happen was a hell of a satisfaction,” Ghali said.

Disney in Paris

Born in Egypt and educated between Austria, Greece and the United States, Ghali never imagined he’d embark upon what he calls a “love affair” with the construction industry. “That came later in life,” he said.

Shortly after earning a bachelor’s degree in business administration and economics and a master’s degree in business organizational management from the University of La Verne in California, Ghali took a job with Disney Imagineering, the company’s creative construction arm. While there, Ghali was part of a small team flown to Paris to lay the groundwork for Euro Disney, a theme park modeled on other Disney parks around the globe. The project, which put Ghali in the company of seasoned executives, offered a crash course in the construction industry on topics from infrastructure to architecture to finance. “Basically, we were building a city in what used to be agriculture fields,” Ghali said.

Though Euro Disney was built more than 25 miles from Paris, the project still had its share of critics. French essayist Alain Finkelkraut said the park was “a terrifying giant’s step toward world homogenization.”

“I think there was resentment from the mass population that the American invasion of Mickey is coming into town,” Ghali said.

In response to its critics, the park took steps to reframe its identity. Since renamed “Disneyland Paris,” the park attracted 16 million people in 2012. Today, Disneyland Paris is Europe’s second most-popular tourist destination, according to *Travel + Leisure*.

“I think now they consider it their own product and their own park,” Ghali said.

Cast of thousands

Following the launch of Euro Disney, Ghali joined Hill International, a global project management firm specializing in large-scale construction projects. In his 20 years with the company, Ghali worked on the Petronas Twin Towers in Malaysia (the tallest building in the world when construction was completed), the Athens Metro and the National Library in Latvia.

Of these projects, few stand out like the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi. Described as a “masterstroke” by Robert Hillenbrand, professor emeritus of Islamic art and architecture at the University of Edinburgh, the Grand Mosque can hold up to 41,000 people at a time (roughly the same number fit in New York’s Citi Field baseball stadium). It does so with an antiquarian’s eye for detail.

Commissioned by Sheikh Khalifa, president of the United Arab Emirates, for his father Sheikh Zayed, the Grand Mosque is home to both the largest chandelier in the world and, at 60,570 square feet, the largest Persian carpet in the world, woven on site by more than a thousand carpet knotters. In 2013, the Grand Mosque was named to TripAdvisor’s “Top 25 Landmarks” of the world, a list that includes India’s Taj Mahal, Cambodia’s Angkor Wat and San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. “It’s a masterpiece,” Ghali said. “It really is.”



Managing risk

Mammoth construction projects like these are challenging enough during times of political and economic calm. Ghali, who manages up to 30 projects across the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe, doesn’t always have those luxuries. To compensate, Ghali and his team diversify the type and location of projects they take on.

“There was a strategy behind it,” Ghali said, describing his approach to the 2008 financial crisis and the Arab Spring. “That is, never have too much work with one client. Never have too much work in just one spot.” This diversification gives Hill International the agility to respond to shifting markets. During the economic downturn of

2008, for example, investment pivoted from the Gulf States to North Africa, opening up new opportunities for investment.

“We picked up a lot of business we were losing in the Middle East,” Ghali said.

The Arab Spring posed a different set of challenges. While violence in Libya delayed the construction of Al Fateh University in Tripoli, progress continues on other projects in the region. Building of the Egyptian museum in Cairo, for example, stopped for no more than three or four days in January 2011.

“The authorities in charge really believe in moving this project forward, wanting to move all projects forward, in order not to stop the economy,” Ghali said.

On the road

Success in the global construction industry requires understanding the world. “If you want to become a global player, you also have to be sensitive to local environments, local cultures,” Ghali said. “You cannot do what we do unless you are right there close to the client, close to the project site, creating a culture.”

Maintaining this standard sometimes requires traveling at a frenetic pace. “You’re always on the road. Even my direct reports are always on the road,” said Ghali, who spends about 60 percent of his time traveling for work. Between Wednesday and Friday of the week of our interview, Ghali traveled from Athens to São Paulo to New York.

Ghali’s home base in Athens facilitates this kind of movement. “Athens was a good location from a logistics point of view. It’s right on the heel of the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and it’s right at the entrance point of the Middle East,” he said. Visiting an existing project, like the Green Line of the Doha Subway or the Muscat International Airport in Oman, is just a quick trip away.

The rigorous schedule wouldn’t be possible without a stable home life and family, Ghali said. “Every morning, it’s a totally different day from what you expect. I don’t go into the office having a certain agenda. You go into the office, you think you know what you want to accomplish and you wait to see what is going to come up.”