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Fantasy island?

How many starchitects does it take to turn a Turks and Caicos island into a cash cow? A Turkish businessmen is staking \$1bn on five

PORTRAIT: ANDREA FERRARI. WRITER: NICK COMPTON



Italian designer and architect Piero Lissoni operates from just the kind of space you would expect. It is a former silk factory in the Brera area of Milan, large enough to hold the 60 or so staff of a designer who is near the peak of his profession. One of the all-white rooms, a large, light-filled basement, is given over to a single architectural project. The models and drawings displayed suggest that plans are well advanced and ground should soon be broken. And while it seems odd that matters and models have got to such an advanced stage before client and architect have worked out what gets built first, this seems to be the case.

The designs are part of a mixed leisure and residential project on a 560-acre island, Dellis Cay, in the Turks and Caicos in the Caribbean. The island,

until now uninhabited, was bought by Turkish travel entrepreneur Dr Cem Kinay in 2005. Lissoni and his team are designing an anchor resort hotel for the island, as well as a number of residences and villas.

Lorenza Marengo, a smiley, even-tempered young architect, is leading the project for Lissoni. Emre S Oral, meanwhile, is Kinay's right-hand man and, when need be, bad cop. Oral has a CV that includes stints at Coca-Cola and L'Oréal and as managing director of The Media Group in Turkey, running TV and radio stations. He has managed venture capital operations in London and most recently 'transitioned' into property development in the UK and Turkey.

Marengo suggests that some of the residences, for access reasons, be completed before the hotel itself.

Oral is not convinced. Nowhere near. 'How many hotels have you built? I have built five.' It is, as the Italians sometimes have it, a dicks on table moment. Marengo remains poised but silent. She doesn't seem like the kind of lady who would ever throw her dick around, metaphorically. And, after all, Oral speaks for the client. And the client is king.

At this stage of developments, with an awful lot of money and ego involved, in a project that has little in the way of precedence, dicks hit the table and shit hits the fan. As Oral explains later, the time for delicacies and deliberation is over. 'We have reached a series of turning points. It is not a matter of co-ordination now, it is a matter of making decisions: What? How? When? If those decisions aren't made now, they just



INTELLIGENCE NEWSPAPER

come back bigger and more dangerous. And pretty soon you have a disaster on your hands.'

Lissoni seems to think that this is already exactly what they have on their hands. The Dellis Cay venture, says the man who seems as laid-back, restrained and patient as his chief-lieutenant on this project, is a 'disaster for us'. He says this within earshot of Kinay and Oral, who are sat at the room's enormous table scrutinising models, and he is joking, at least in part. The project has taken a lot of his time and a lot of his staff's time – two years – and he won't get paid till houses are sold and the hotel is up and running.

Lissoni is not the only star architect involved in the Dellis Cay project. Shigeru Ban, David Chipperfield, Zaha Hadid and Kengo Kuma have also been recruited.

A SLICE OF CAICOS

**This page, Dr Cem Kinay (left), the Turkish entrepreneur behind the project, with chief architect Piero Lissoni in his Milan studio
Opposite, Lissoni's hotel design for Dellis Cay**

But Lissoni and his office are acting as point man. They are the hub through which information is flowing, to and from architects, engineers and so on. Means, methods and materials are discussed, infrastructural progress outlined – the island is going to need an infrastructure and it is already being installed.

Lissoni's hotel and houses will be the first to be completed on the island, so the other architects are relying on him for a certain degree of guidance and

assistance. He doesn't mind; this is the way it should be, but it takes time and there is a lot of pressure.

In reality, Dellis Cay is anything but a disaster, so far at least (Lissoni has a dry, and you imagine dirty on occasion, sense of humour). He finds himself leading an architectural super-group, an A-team that will bring the Dellis Cay project international attention. Which, of course, is a good deal of the whole point.

His patron, 50-year-old Kinay, is based in Vienna, though Miami has been a semi-permanent home of late. He attended the Austrian School in Istanbul, then studied medicine in the Austrian capital. In 1987, while still a student, Kinay and a friend, Oguz Serim, started a small business chartering gulets (wooden sailing boats) in Turkey. In 1990 he gave up on »



medicine entirely to establish the Magic Life Group, offering all-inclusive holidays, an innovation, to the Austrian middle classes. By the time Kinay sold the company to the Turkish TUI group in 2004, Magic Life was managing 20,000 beds in Turkey, Greece, Tunisia, Spain, Egypt and Bulgaria. Also part of the deal was Gulet Touristik, the largest tour operator in Austria.

Kinay was seeking a new challenge and direction. Now a man of substantial means, he wanted to set up a business more in line with his tastes and habits, and a new-found interest in design and architecture.

Dellis Cay is the first and flagship development of Kinay's new company, O Property Collection, a top-end real estate firm with a leisure component. (Kinay is also looking to develop properties in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and Asia, and is already working on a mixed-used project in Cappadocia in Turkey).

Around 350 acres of Dellis Cay is owned by the Crown and protected, leaving Kinay 210 acres to build on. And building is the plan: 154 'residences', 124 villas and 25 hotel suites are planned, with the first phase due for completion in 2008. Though Kinay is coy about the financials, it is rumoured that he bought the island for \$50m from an Italian aristocrat. More concretely, Kinay, and his backers, will have invested almost \$1bn before the development is complete and he expects to make \$1.5bn in residential sales over the next five years. Villas are expected to sell for \$1.5m to \$10m.

Each of the architects involved will help develop different 'lifestyle zones'. Shigeru Ban, who is working on the new Centre Pompidou in Metz, is designing a series of over-the-water villas; each will have a main

SHIGERU AND SPICE

Above, the Houses at Sagaponac pioneered the multi-modernist model for private residential developments. Over 30 international architects have signed up to design modestly budgeted and sized houses on the 65-acre Hamptons site. The latest to open (pictured) is by Japan's Shigeru Ban and his US partner Dean Maltz
Below, the site of Kinay's resort on Dellis Cay



unit on the beach and a floating outbuilding linked to the house by a floating bridge. David Chipperfield is designing a number of villas, each with 150ft of ocean frontage and views of Parrot Cay. Japanese architect Kengo Kuma is designing the resort spa and a number of spa-area villas. Zaha Hadid has produced the Dellis Cay master plan, as well as devising a marina lifestyle zone, to include luxury condos and a hotel, beachfront buildings, restaurants and boutiques, a 110-slip marina and (most intriguing) a lighthouse. All four, along with

Lissoni, will design one of the West Beach Estates, a series of villas that will enjoy the longest beachfront of any of the island's residences.

It is a unique project. There is nothing in the world quite like it. Kinay is not an ambitious civic authority dipping into the public purse to fund a new cultural big top, a gallery or a museum promising regeneration and reputation. Nor is he a giant corporation for whom architectural patronage is considered good for profile.

Kinay is betting that there are enough very wealthy individuals willing to pay serious money to buy villas or stay in hotels that look like nothing else on the market. He is sponsoring and commissioning a team of the world's most adventurous architects, not out of whim or fancy, not because he is a rich man who can, but because he believes it makes commercial sense. He is betting that utterly contemporary – and in some ways uncompromising, daring and difficult – design and architecture are now essential components of contemporary luxury. At least, for enough people with the adequate resources to make the project viable. And not only enough to buy the villas themselves, but enough people to then rent and holiday in these villas and make them a viable investment for the owners.

He has no other safe but dull commercial interests, no mining or manufacturing, to bankroll and sustain a diverting sideline. This is it. The big idea. Kinay has bet everything on it. And to his credit, when Kinay and his team talk about design, they understand it as the source from which all the good stuff flows: comfort, technology, aesthetics and ecology.

This is no architectural theme park, like the Commune by the Great Wall project in China, nor a laudable one-man mission, like the late Coco Brown's Houses at Sagaponac project in the Hamptons. And it is no Puerta América, the multi-designer hotel in Madrid, which, for all its beauty, has had its critics. 'It was a fantastic design exercise,' says Lissoni. 'But it was also inconsistent and the designers were competing with each other rather than designing for each other.'

'This is not a design hotel or a design resort,' insists Kinay. 'I respect design, but there is no point in design without the functionality, the service, the experience. And without the commercial sense. You have to get the balance right between the design and the business aspect. We are in the real-estate market, so you have to respect the design, but you also have to respect the market.'

The project ventures into uncharted territory. The starchitect-branded condos cropping up in Manhattan have raised a lot of interest, but also some scepticism and derision, and the depth of demand for off-the-peg architecture is yet to be proven.

Kinay is aware that the success of Dellis Cay cannot stand on architecture or star architect power alone. 'Of course, there will be people who are only interested in buying a Shigeru Ban villa or a Zaha Hadid villa, but the main selling point is the destination. It is about living in and with the architecture in this amazing environment, but is still mostly about the destination.'

For the moment, projects like Dellis Cay are the antes of megawealthy entrepreneurs like Kinay. For the more corporate developer, there is too much risk involved. Dellis Cay is a lot of unbuild, difficult architecture waiting to find enough design-minded and super-rich buyers. Kinay has done the research and he says they are out there. ★