

# surface

Legends at Work

TOMAS



TALENT: ARCHITECTURE

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## Ready for Takeoff

Paris-based *DGT Architects* launches by melding a former Soviet airbase with a museum.

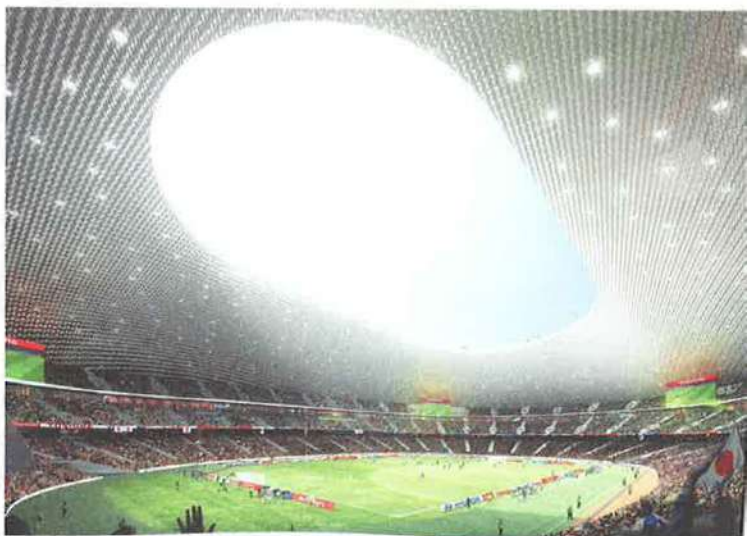
PORTRAIT **FRANCK JUERY**

In 2005, architects Dan Dorell and Lina Ghotmeh were working in London for Jean Nouvel, and Tsuyoshi Tane for David Adjaye, when suddenly, like many young, ambitious designers, “we found ourselves in a situation in which we were wanting to do something different,” Ghotmeh says. They decided to apply for an open competition for the Estonian National Museum in Tartu and put together the design during what little spare time they had, often late at night. The next year, they won the prize—a very rare feat for first-time competition applicants, let alone a firm that technically didn’t exist yet.

Shortly after that, Dorell, Ghotmeh, and Tane moved to Paris and established DGT Architects. Projects took off from there, among them a fashion-show set in Paris for Japanese brand Minä Perhonen and an installation for the Taka Ishii Gallery at London’s Frieze Art Fair. In recent months, the firm, which now has a staff of 12, has flourished. In March, the Estonian museum broke ground (it’s set for completion in early 2016); at Baselworld in April, they unveiled a stand for Citizen watches; and an apartment complex in Beirut and an office building and home in Japan are currently under construction.

During the design process for the Estonian museum, the architects discovered that they shared an affinity for archeology, for maintaining a sense of history through architecture. While researching the site, they learned that it had been a Soviet airbase during World War II—a fact that wasn’t on the brief. Instead of ignoring this, the firm made it central to the scheme. “We understood that the airfield was very emotional and charged with negative memories for Estonians,” says Ghotmeh, 32, who was born and raised in Beirut. “But we thought it was a unique opportunity to take it and to connect it to the museum.”

Rather than become a flashy, Bilbao-style structure, the firm’s massive yet surprisingly subtle design, once completed, will blend the building’s new form into the old runway. The 365,900-square-foot structure, intended to house a collection of 140,000 objects, will have a flat roof that extends roughly 3,200 feet, long enough to conceivably land a small airplane on. The result will create what the 39-year-old Dorell, who was born





PHOTOS: ESTONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM AND NATIONAL OLYMPIC STADIUM COURTESY DGT ARCHITECTS

in Israel and raised in Milan, describes as a “memory field.”

Connected to this historical mindset is another main tenet of DGT’s work: the notion of space and time. For the French automaker Renault’s fair stand, Bump—which debuted last fall at the Paris International Motor Show, went to Geneva in March, and will travel to more than 20 countries by 2015—the firm built an organic, sand dune-like landscape. Arranged across it are soft, stone-shaped seats intended for comfortable viewing of the main act: Renault’s cars. The space is flooded in a dense, ever-changing sea of colored light: greens, blues, yellows, reds, purples, oranges, pinks. A parking lot it is not. Visiting the stand is a visceral experience, almost like watching a film or live concert. “You remember many things, but you don’t remember clearly what was there,” says Tane, 33, who hails from Japan. “All the images are changing and the sound is changing and the cars are changing. We call this

“space orchestration.” Adds Ghotmeh: “You lose your context, and you start to dream. You feel like you don’t know how long you’ve been there.”

DGT’s recent runner-up design for the National Olympic Stadium in Tokyo also evokes this ethos. The proposal, which ultimately lost to Zaha Hadid’s but was named a finalist alongside designs by powerhouses like SANAA, UNStudio, and Toyo Ito, brings nature into the center of the city by embedding the 3.1-million-square-foot structure in a mound of a park. As Ghotmeh describes it, “You have the implication of two different times: the time inside the stadium for watching the event and also the time for walking around the stadium’s roof and enjoying it as a park. Architecture becomes almost nonexistent, but is still very much existent.”

The Estonian museum will realize all these ambitions when it’s completed. “It’s our baby,” Tane says, “and it’s still growing.” The same could be said of the firm. —SPENCER BAILEY

Tsuyoshi Tane (left), Lina Ghotmeh (middle), and Dan Dorell at the firm’s Paris studio. (OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM) A rendering of DGT’s Estonian National Museum, to finish construction in early 2016. A rendering of a 2012 competition entry for the National Olympic Stadium in Tokyo.