

We met at a property seminar recently and it was interesting to hear about your background and decision to set-up AMA. Can you recall how it all started and the main challenges you had to overcome?

Well, I used to work with a chartered surveying firm called Kenneth Raiden & Partners and I realised that there was a gap in the market. At that time, as a qualified chartered surveyor, I was doing project management work for institutional organisations and I realised that there was an opportunity to create a good quality and niche product in Scotland.

With my brother Ali, a qualified structural engineer who had done his PHD and was teaching at Heriot Watt University, we decided to put a team of professionals together, register the company name using our initials AMA and create products that were above and beyond what the Edinburgh market was offering at the time in terms of architecture, design and endurance.

We started the business in Edinburgh New Town, initially refurbishing existing properties, either putting them into residential use or from residential into commercial, breathing life into many Georgian buildings in the city.

The main challenge was planning because we were working right inside the historic New Town, working with listed building which presents certain constraints in terms of the approval process with the Council, going through Historic Scotland and so on. The challenge was convincing the right people that we were trying to achieve the best solutions within the architectural context we were dealing with.

Looking at AMA's portfolio it demonstrates a desire not to produce the same building twice, with a flair for creating bespoke designs and a focus on quality. Could this be defined as AMA's ethos?

That was the main objective; we didn't set up the company to do standard products on greenfield sites. We felt the niche would be to problem solve brownfield sites or do things that added value to Edinburgh architectural heritage. It is important to us that we work with architects that have the right experience and for that reason we are currently working with eight different design houses together with our own internal architectural team, to ensure the design we propose for a building is consistent with the architecture of the area, fits in with the architectural grain and adds value to the surrounding area.

The development on St Vincent Place seems to have become the one that, at some point, defined you as a more established developer. Does this project have a particular importance in your history and why?

It was an important site from our point of view. It had been on the market for a while and our proposal was based on a design with fewer units than the competition was proposing. Whilst everyone else was trying to get hundreds of units on the site, our approach was to reduce the numbers, making the floor template of each unit consistent with the New Town and then ensure that the façade fitted with existing architecture. However, there were three key issues there, as we wanted: accommodation with underground car parking, as there is limited parking in the New Town; lifts, as people like living in

Below: A new street created within Edinburgh's New Town; a world heritage site. Two architects were appointed; one known for their traditional design capability to

design the south blocks, the other to design the north block in a contemporary design, along with underground parking with a capacity of 150 vehicles



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INTERVIEW WITH VIRTUS: MIKE AFSHAR

AMA's managing director Mike Afshar talks to Alex Crovetti about the company's ethos and the ideas developed since its creation



the New Town but they get into a “tired leg syndrome” and as elderly people they would not like to climb up the stairs; apartments with external space, as there were no balconies in traditional Edinburgh buildings. And of course, we wanted to include under floor heating and better bathroom and storage facilities than the typical Victorian conversion might allow, as in order to gain a bathroom you often lose a room.

For these reasons we made the blocks a bit wider. To ensure that they sat properly into the site, we made a 3D model of the development which gave us a very realistic view of how it was going to sit and how it was going to engage with the existing urban pattern. We also wanted to ensure that the facades of the new development paid respect to the fenestration left by the Georgians within this world heritage site.

Of course, we had a number of difficulties with that site. Historically it was a lake; the Fettes Road development stopped there because the ground substrata could not take the normal foundation, as the Georgians used limestone to support the structure. We had to pile down to 13 metres and came across dolerite rock which we had to drill through using a special rig brought over from Germany.

In addition, we had a listed church adjacent to the site which had to be structurally supported during the operation and listed tenement buildings around it. We had to put vibration sensors on the gables of all surrounding structures, so that when we did any piling they were connected to computers to assess if there was any impact on the buildings. We also used bore piles as opposed

to driven piles, which added to the cost. It was a particularly challenging experience building this development as there was 8.5m of difference in level between one side of the site and the other, and a very high water table. To us it was exciting completing the remaining street that the Georgians left unfinished, which hopefully left a bit of a legacy for AMA.

On your projects you are using materials such as stone, marble, granite and travertine, mostly from Italy, as well as Spain and Iran. Has the market become more knowledgeable and sophisticated, now expecting this type of quality materials?

I think it's very important that what we build is not just done with very high quality materials... the materials that you choose must have a good life cycle in terms of durability. One of the objectives of the company is not about making the bottom line but to leave a legacy behind. The whole point is that what we build should last for a long time. We spend a lot of time sourcing the right material with the right detailing that will endure, even managing to open up a Scottish quarry to extract stone for the façades.

We buy a lot of the products from Italy; I was at a Milan show recently. We buy marble, granite and travertine from Italy, but also appliances, electrical components and sanitary ware as we feel that they have more design edge and style than German products.

We often see beautiful designs on paper and as 3D models, but once they are built there is a conflict between the interface of materials, as well as issues with durability, hence reducing the appeal of the building.



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Above: East view illustrates glass box detail of the north block's penthouses, ensuring that the building does not compete with the listed St Stephen Church; designed by

William Playfair and built in 1827. Below: View to the east of the penthouse of the south block illustrating the city escape and detailing of roof overhang.



What we have done in the past was to experiment with new materials and use some of the old materials that have stood the test of time, like slate and lead work. In Cramond, where we were creating an art and crafts modern housing solution to urban design, we used powder coated aluminium on windows for long term durability instead of timber, a low maintenance polymer based render which does not crack and Alumasc gutters and down pipes instead of cast iron. We have never used PVC type materials in our developments. We have always used materials that have long maintenance cycles; because that is the cost that you are passing on to an unqualified person if they don't maintain the building.

Let's talk further about the concept of beauty and its relationship with utility and durability in architecture, an art that can have many meanings for us as a society and certainly a significant impact on our lives. What is your relationship with architecture and how important is the pursuit of beauty on your projects?

I think one should be proud of the homes they live in, from the first moment of stepping into the house. You should be able to walk into a road or a development and feel a sense of ownership, a desire to move into the development, and it should also be a welcoming experience for visitors. We put a lot of emphasis on the elevations, the way they look, the environment around it, and the experience of entering the building.

Right from the initial days of building in the New Town we were keen to turn the entrances from flagstone into marble and decorate the walls, making the entrance space, which was previously dark and dingy, brighter and

welcoming. This goes back to our approach in 1986, changing the environment by making the front door more than just the door to the apartment. We wanted the communal area to give a sense of safety and common ownership.

I am a believer that every site has its own attributes. As developer you only have one chance to get the concept right. Once the development is implemented and the site is fragmented legally into different ownership, there is no return! There is a duty in my view to ensure that the design is right for the location. You can't put a standard design product as lots of builders do on a site. If there is a certain vista or view that we need to capture, that would give the apartment or the house an advantage, that has to be taken into account into the design. For example, at our Cramond development we had five different house styles, flipping the layout over so that the master bedroom or the lounge would have the right view of the bay.

I once shocked a well-known architect by scribbling on his drawing, to suggest a change to the width of the building, to increase the size of a bedroom, adjacent storage and bathroom. I thought the added space would benefit the eventual occupants and enhance their life style. I was told that I was the first developer asking the foot print to be increased!

Similarly, I agree with your view that the layout of the typical home, whether a detached house or a tenement flat, is outdated and no longer suitable if it does not include as standard a room that can be used as a study or as a space that can free our kitchens, bedrooms and living rooms from the unwelcome and cluttering presence of

Below: A new street understruction within the world heritage site, completing a streetscape left by The Georgians due to complexity of the ground conditions encountered

almost 200 years ago. The new development was carefully knitted into existing buildings with matching fenestration and a modern accent of design.



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computers, printers and other objects that are now part of our everyday life.

Yes there is a lot of extra work in doing this type of design and project management, but I do believe that it adds value.

Is there a project you are particularly proud of, and why?

I think that everything we have done we are proud of. Lots of people go past their developments, pull their cover up and don't want anybody to know. We started off with refurbishments in the New Town and then we went on to developing listed buildings. We did Jex-Blake House in Bruntsfield which Dr. Sophia Jex-Blake set up as a hospital for women and children. That was a lovely Edwardian building with lots of extensions; we changed it to a development with 30 units, rebuilding the façade of the Edwardian building with old stone, breaking into the elevation and creating a four-storey development with a courtyard. It is great to see that few of these apartments change hands and, when they do, they sell for substantially more money than people paid. It is obviously the right formula.

And with new build projects we have done a number of different schemes which we are all proud of, but I think the one that has made a huge impact for Edinburgh's New Town is St Vincent Place; it was a car park site accommodating over 90 parking spaces that belonged to around 40 shareholders and to buy the spaces from these individuals and institutions was a significance challenge; some of them wanted to stay on the site and others to move to Lothian Road to the new commercial district, so we had to create enough space for those who wanted to stay

Above: Typical spacious and bright kitchen with an abundance of work surfaces and storage space. There is a family seating area; now a central hub to modern homes.

Below: Rear elevation using contemporary materials such as terrene coated steel and treated timber, creates enjoyable external spaces within the city centre; accessed from

without affecting residential values of the development. It was a big legal challenge as well as a project management and construction challenge. We created a lovely walkway that links different spaces, making it a safer and more secure area.

In terms of regeneration schemes, we've done a 1 million square foot in Fountainbridge with Grovenor and RBS, significant for the process of regeneration of the area. We did a large urban housing development in Cramond designed by Richard Murphy, where we brought in a new form of design which has gone into the English Partnership book of good design. We have a bus full of people coming up every year to look at what we have achieved there, in comparison to the national house builders because it provides different solutions to urban housing in terms of privacy, engaging in private and public spaces and security.

If one were to listen to TV programmes it would be tempting to believe location is the key factor to the success of a project. Does this reflect your experience?

I think the key is ensuring that you do the best you can for the particular site. Sometimes the best is not pushing for the maximum number of units, which is an issue we have with the planners; they all understand now, that if we are involved and if we think that fewer units would work better that is the best way forward.

There is a culture of developers fighting with the planners for more units. It should not be the case, as you should do your market research and understand what can fit there in terms of volume and neighbouring buildings. The development has to look right and

the kitchen, family room and master bedrooms. Below: The old spire of St Stephens church soars above, as intended by the city's architectural master plan.

respond to what the market is looking for. If you have over-development or an unsuitable product, you have got it wrong.

You have an in-house development team and you are also collaborating with a number of external practices. How important is it to have the right team and what is it that you are looking for in a project team?

A key aspect is engaging the right professionals with the right experience, because if you do that you can achieve the best product. You have got to look at different designers depending on the product. At St Vincent Place when we talked to the planners we knew that engaging only one architect was not going to be good for the development. One side had to be done to match the Georgian architecture, on the other side we had to build a contemporary block that didn't compete with the listed church, so we brought in Oberlander for the Georgian block and Riach & Hall who are known for the merit of their contemporary design.

They were rivals at the beginning, but they had worked for us before, so we pulled them around the table and it resulted in a great alliance. The back of the Georgian block was sympathetic to what Riach & Hall had done for the front façade of the contemporary block, so the architects learnt from each other and worked with each other. It was a very good example of how to bring a team together.

As an organisation in Scotland we probably pay the most design fees than any other developer, because we never use a standard design and we model everything, so we make sure that things work in a new situation all the



time and, as a result, everybody in our team is interested, they are learning and they are kept on their toes as a result.

Working with developers, project consultants and industry colleagues, there is a shared view that, right now, the residential market in Edinburgh is very competitive. It is difficult to make financial sense of some of the figures that are circulating.

A lot of non-professional people have come into our sector as a result of low interest rates. There are no returns in keeping the money in the bank. However they realise that Edinburgh has a green belt policy, making it very difficult to find sites, unlike in Glasgow.

There is a perception that if they buy a site they can sell it for an uplift. The unfortunate thing is that when it goes to a bidding competition these people often do not have the right advisers and they do not do the right appraisal of what the site is worth. This is why the market in Edinburgh has become overheated. Often people buy sites and then come to us; they know we were interested and ask us if we would like to buy the site from them. So when we look at what they paid for it, it does not make sense. Part of the overheating of the market is that we have unsavvy property professionals and part of it is a supply shortage.

Developers often refer to the need to be a lot more creative, in spotting those sites that perhaps are more difficult to unlock and where with a clever design it might be possible to beat the competition.

Well that's why historically we have tackled those sites. Anyone can do a greenfield site, but if a site has problems with lease

agreements, legal issues, engineering issues, adjacent historic buildings... these are bids outwith the range of the average buyer, but we look for them.

We both moved to Scotland many years ago, so I suspect that we might have a similar view on Brexit. What are your thoughts and how do you think the decision to leave the EU is affecting the property market and the construction industry?

My view is that these days people get together to collaborate and young people want the facility to be able to move around. Brexit will make it more difficult. I believe that having an open market helps the construction industry and moving out of the EU will have a significant impact on the supply of the construction workforce.

We don't have enough professionally qualified people and tradesmen to do the work. Latvian and Polish people have a great skill set and can do a lot for what is a dying market here. We've not had much apprenticeship in the construction industry during the recession and with the retirement of a quarter of a million workers within the next four years in our industry we are going to have a chill off period.

Obviously, Brexit has also brought uncertainty to the market which affects investors coming in. Although Edinburgh has not been affected significantly I believe that without Brexit we were going to be better developed as a city.

I could not agree more. It is puzzling that a country that needs, and benefits from, foreign construction skilled labour as well as professionals such as architects

Top: Cramond, A modern Arts & Crafts crescent house built using a combination of traditional materials, such as lead and slate on the roof. Sto render powder coated

aluminium windows, are double glazed with argon gas for maximum insulation. Large patio doors provide easy spillage to decked areas and garden. Above: Inter connecting hallway

designed to create a drama on immediate entrance to the house, ease of access to the garden area, and an uninterrupted view of the Forth and Cramond Island.

Below: Detached Arts & Crafts house featuring stair tower.





Above: Master planning of a major regeneration area within the city of Edinburgh, next to a main travel hub and proximal to a canal waterway, following closure of a major brewery. This will

become the new district of 'Springside.' Below: Phase 1 of development mid-way through construction of the underground car park, 256 residential units and a 185 bed hotel.



and engineers, is going to make it harder for itself by coming up with Brexit. It is also ironic... you are from Iran and at the helm of one of the most prominent development companies in Scotland;

And similarly you are from Italy, running your own consultancy. You are absolutely right, we have done so much in Edinburgh and we as a society should just encourage all of that.

There is one unintended benefit of the Brexit decision: perhaps the resulting weaker pound is making the country a more popular destination with foreign visitors, particularly from Europe. For Edinburgh this means a surge in demand for hotel rooms as well as apart-hotels and Air A&B style accommodation. Does AMA have an interest in this market?

Well we did about 140 units as apart-hotels when the market crashed in 2007. We had started the Springside development, which had been set up to supply accommodation to young professionals working in the financial sector for companies such as Standard Life and Scottish Widow. With the crash and the bank withholding the mortgages we quickly changed plan and we turned a significant part of that development into apart-hotels.

We let it to Staycity and then sold the investment to individual investors and pension funds. Staycity coming into Edinburgh have flourished as that quality of product was not available to the market. They have asked us to do more but we are struggling to find the right site. We would like to do more but you are absolutely right, there is more tourism coming into Scotland. There is also a danger though that so many of the units produced are being

turned into Air B&B type accommodation for commercial reasons. This means that young professionals and families are being pushed further and further out, with the city functioning as a work place which is not ideal.

This is why we see more traffic with people commuting to the city and I believe this is going to get worse, as I hear that we are going to have lots of cruise liners stopping into Leith so we will be more of a tourist destination. You need to provide more supply for tourists and we are short of that. I don't have a problem with this, but people living within the city also need the supply and we are short of that too.

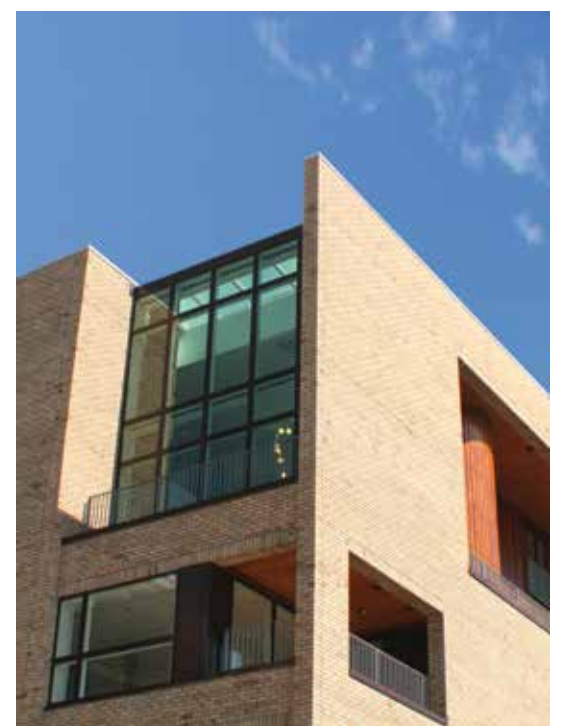
Virtus is a collaborative editorial project that has been put together by like-minded construction industry professionals, with the objective of addressing some of the most relevant and urgent issues in the built environment. What do you think is urgent?

I believe that the biggest issue is to ensure that, and this has not been just recently, every building you build is efficient in terms of its performance. It has to be created with the right architecture, good design, good quality material and it has to function well. All the buildings have elements of sustainability and energy efficiency, such as photovoltaic panels; we have a social responsibility to do that. Our latest phase of residential developments in Cramond for a family of four costs £54 per month, for hot water, electricity and heating. That is critical, whether the end user appreciates it now or in five years' time looking back and saying: I have been on two extra holidays this year or I have improved my car as a result of not paying for those services and so on.

Above: Phase 1 of the Springside development completed; with children's play park, matured landscaping and well considered public spaces. Below: View from the east

showing the design of the new five storey blocks in brick featuring external balconies. Springside is unique in being the first major development built in brick close to Edinburgh

city centre. Below: A detail of the design of a corner block with a duplex flat and double height zone.



The construction industry is notorious for the inability of many developers and house builders, as well as contractors, to hand over snag free projects and to resolve any defects within the liability period. What do you think the industry should do to protect home buyers and how is AMA dealing with this phase of a project?

We have tackled this through a robust controlled management strategy, to ensure that the professionals engaged to deliver the development design have adequate time and coordination meetings with the team to produce detail drawings of the difficult junctions of the build, rather than allow them to hand over standard detail within information package. We request to the team of professionals to carry out regular inspections during the building process to ensure that what is being built on site matches design intent. Our managers and subcontractors are not allowed to make any design alterations. If there are site issues, the design team has to make the design alterations. On top of this there is continuous audit, checking that the correct materials and components are used to manufacturers' guide lines and that all M&E components are tested and commissioned prior to hand over. It is important that our site managers snag the units before these are handed over to our aftersales department, who also snag the units and run all appliances before passing it to sale department. Ali and I of course then have a final walk through, but importantly our team provides the buyers with a sign off sheet allowing them to flag up any snags during the first two weeks. Looking at the industry,

different developers have different set ups; not all of them have in-house subcontractors and so there is the issue of price vs quality. If work packages are tendered with budget's pressure to appoint the cheapest subcontractor, it is inevitable that quality gets compromised. Most of the time first time buyers with no experience of the sector will not know what to expect. Developers and house builders should insist on having consultants signing off quality throughout the projects, with an agreed snagging process built into the contract.

Where is AMA today and where is it going?

We set up AMA as a family company and we've come a long way from where we started. We've been through 3 recessions, successfully; the last one was a very difficult one and weathering the storm is important to ensure that the company keeps running. We started from humble beginnings and we are now going into various sectors of the market: commercial, residential, apart-hotels, student residences. The intention is to do more building in the city. We've always stayed on top of what we do. The second generation is coming along, with my niece in the company and my son who is a structural engineer working outside the company due to come on board.

I think we are creating the pathway for the next generation coming in. I hope they will go on to create buildings that the family is proud of. That's our ethos and for us it is not about the bottom line. That's not where we started certainly. I hope they change Edinburgh and wider afield in a positive way.



All the buildings have elements of sustainability and energy efficiency, such as photovoltaic panels; we have a social responsibility

Above: A former classroom, now with a mezzanine floor; within a Georgian primary school converted to flatted accommodation.

Below Right: Interior of a stair core within the converted school.

