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Reflecting on the Inauguration of the Burj Khalifa, Dubai 2010

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Dubai is a city that emerged in only a decade. Though facing successive challenges it has built an attractive reputation around the world. Criticized and envied, it multiplies the superlatives and keeps being talked about. Its notoriety is impressive compared to its relative size. Dubai holds in its name a fantastic power of attraction, and Burj Khalifa (828m, 162 floors) became the emblem of the new century upon completion. Its opening ceremony confirmed its reputation and won the crowds' sympathy. The Burj was the most viewed building showcased on the media. During the launch show more than 2 billion people saw the event, proving the benefits of the positive image created by broadcasting around the globe. Thanks to its impossible architecture and its record height it acquired a universal symbolic status. People will

be intrigued to discover the real amazing story behind presenting this new global icon.

I was always fascinated by light. In the beginning, I was drawn to the colored lights in my bedroom, but my goal was not to create a night club, because at 10 years of age, my parents would have never allowed that to happen. This was in the early part of 1968, and at the age of 10, who knew what they wanted to be in the future?

So I started to interact with the lights in my bedroom to transform my environment with new colors and atmospheres. It was the start of my interests as an Architectural Lighting Designer.

Later in life, my first job was to manage a branch for an important distributor of electric materials. Of course, my own interests in lighting led me to develop a new market segment that exposed new designs and presentations for lighting. I jumped on this success to learn more about the capacity to create different atmospheres in offices and homes through lighting alone, utilizing a multitude of sources and different powers or beams.

In 1989, The Mayor of Lyon, Michel Noir, tasked myself and two other lighting designers with establishing the first "Municipality Lighting Plan." This established a new dimension for the city's night sky. From this experience, which catapulted similar initiatives in other municipalities around



Left: This outward-facing lighting symbolized how Burj Khalifa radiated its presence around the world.

Source: Prisme Entertainment Inc. & Prisme International

Opposite: The target was to create a simple show through a strong visual of fireworks, marking a new icon.

Source: Prisme Entertainment Inc. & Prisme International



the world, I developed my own attraction mechanism, leasing a new life on each charismatic building inside the city center.

I saw how much the people enjoyed walking around the city at night and their appreciation for lighting as a novel form of art, creating a new dimension to the city's buildings and monuments. For the Municipality, it adds power to attract tourism and new visitors. The Festival of Lights in Lyon created during this period is now attracting more than two million tourists in Lyon in December alone. Each year, the Lyon Municipality selects a building such as a bridge, antique monument, or segment of the district to highlight differently. A large part of the population, including myself, did not really appreciate the city's magnificence

until witnessing it at night, and quite literally seeing Lyon in a new light.

We highlighted some of the most beautiful historic buildings managed by the Mayor of Lyon in order to sell the city's knowledge of lighting to the rest of the world. "The Hermitage Museum" in Saint Petersburg, "Castillo del Morro fort" in La Havana, and "The house of Ho Chi Min" in Vietnam were some of the monumental icons in other cities inspired by our lighting designs.

But during this time, I began to find this type of lighting too static. I began to imagine how to transform the City further, perhaps even for just one night or a short period. I wanted to create an event within the city. Of course, choosing carefully where to do it and where

to have the right angle for the best vision was paramount.

In 1993, a visit to Morocco allowed me to start my first project of real importance. In Casablanca, I revealed a new draping on the Great Hassan II Mosque – the world's largest – through image projections, during the building's inauguration. It was a magical sensation, as we were changing and highlighting the great architecture of this building with only a touch of colors. The image projections by PANY equipment transformed the 200m height of its minaret to a fantastic allegory with different architectural expressions. I had found my interest; I would be an ephemeral transformer of City's through lighting shows.



Opposite: The Burj is celebrated. Source: Prisme Entertainment Inc. & Prisme International

Bottom: The most powerful projector in the world was used to allow light to reach the summit of the tower. Source: Prisme Entertainment Inc. & Prisme International

Three years later, I used the opportunity of the G7 Summit in Lyon to propose a large show to celebrate the event with the population. I would transform a large part of the city into an incredible spectacle themed around the expression of international civilizations. I designed a large visual show with international artists and projections across 2km of Lyon's buildings. Nearly 400,000 people watched live as the river and the hill of Lyon became the canvas of a monumental show. I was able to foster an incredible moment where thousands of people could share their emotions and discover a panorama with symbolic images synchronized to the beautiful voice of Andrea Bocelli and the music of Vanessa Mae. It was my first successful experience designing and producing a show on this scale.

In 1997, I decided to move to a new country where the market would be more eager to develop this new kind of entertainment. I founded PRISME International in Dubai, UAE, and I quickly became recognized as one of the world's specialist for large-scale events.

But one event changed my life drastically, and that was the inauguration of the Burj Khalifa. As many did, I watched the construction of the Burj Khalifa – the most famous building erected in the last decade in the Middle East – as it rose over six years.

When I found out that a special committee was created to select a company to produce the event for its launch, I directed all my energy into being present around that table. I was obliged to use my brother's company address in France to be part of this tender, because the committee would only consider "International Companies," thinking it was indecent to call local talent for something of this magnitude. Finally, by my references I was selected among twenty of the world's most well-known event companies. But, unfortunately for me, the client was precise on their requirement that no fireworks were to be used.



Bottom: The celebration was broadcast on TV to two billion people around the world. Source: Prisme Entertainment Inc. & Prisme International



I was eventually selected as one of the top three companies. Against the tender documents, I was insisting on the use of fireworks to give a new dimension to this moment, and I did not want to bring any International stars. Of course, with the launch of Burj Khalifa, the critical question of guest lists and superstars was a dilemma that lasted for what seemed like eons in the tight lead up to the formally announced launch date.

We live in such an overly celebrity endorsed culture that the question of inviting Hollywood's A-list and paying them to attend is a solution for many big events. In my opinion, the tower is the real star of such a night and needs its light's to shine.

Making the tower the icon instead of a pop celebrity requires a more creative approach. It is hard to layer the raw announcement of a skyscraper launch, where the tower wishes to send out the message of "I am Here" to the world. With celebrity endorsed launches, the media's attention and photographers' lenses are directed to catching celebrity photos and their designer outfits, which steal the thunder from the building in question.

Making a tower the star marks the brevity and tenacity of any event company. Their capability in expressing real creativity must require that company to think out of the box, to have at their fingertips state of the art technology, and even to be the ones who are testing the capabilities in new technology before they have a chance to conduct a trial run, and without the possibility of any rehearsal. This is a courageous step, but one which has many rewards for the tower and the city.

Luckily for me, the world had recently entered a major recession and economic crisis, so the committee's decision to produce an event with a lot of glamour and Hollywood stars had to be put on hold. The crisis saved my dream to be the designer of this launch.

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By chance I crossed paths with Mohamed Al Abbar, the chairman of Emaar, during an event at the Burj as it neared completion. He remembered me from 1998, when he was the chairman of the Shopping Festival of Dubai and he entrusted me to create a show in less than three weeks along the Dubai Creek. At the time I created the first show in town to attract more than 200,000 people, closing the main Makhtoum Bridge and cutting off power across more than half of the city. The show was a smashing success for the marketing of Dubai – an event with no precedent – marking the kick-off for the first big shows in the city of Dubai.

Al Abbar addressed one of his entourage and said:

- “With Pierre we produced the first fireworks show on the roofs of the first high-rise buildings in Dubai! It was really impressive and the whole city was caught by their spell.”
- “You remember Mohammed, but since then you have created a very nice building it’s magnificent,” I said pointing to the Burj.
- “Thank you, but of course I remember it was a really beautiful moment.”
- “Did you know we can do something even more grandiose by putting the whole tower under a coat of fireworks...”
- “Really! You can do that?”
- “Definitely Mohammed, and it would be the highest fireworks in the whole

world... It’s too bad that your tender doesn’t include use of fireworks!”

From that moment on, he requested to be in direct contact with me to imagine a reasonable solution for a great celebration for the Burj Khalifa. He understood that to place his tower on the worldwide market, it needed a memorable launch for the world’s media. In the summer of 2009, I started to present to him my concept for the opening show set to happen January 4, 2010.

I kept insisting on the fact that we needed to go big for an inauguration for the world’s tallest tower. Even without a big budget we could create a strong image and win the sympathy of the World.

“You need to catch the world’s attention with this event, or people will really think that Dubai is ruined and can’t throw themselves a celebration worthy of the tallest building in the world. But our recommendation is not to overshadow the tower; on the contrary we want to have a shower for the tower with the tower as the central piece. The footage will be spectacular, and they will definitely give credit to its architecture. We guarantee you that this will be seen in media around the world ...the fireworks will be monochromatic, all white, like a signature on the rooftop of the world. You will give away the tower to the world’s heritage.”

At a meeting with my team, I insisted on launching the design of the movie that we were going to project. This movie would

carry the story along the show. We decided to erect a massive screen facing the VIP’s on the island opposite the tower; it would be 85 meters long and 18 meters high. The show would last for 15 minutes and be divided into three acts.

The first act was designed to grab the attention of the audience. We wanted to give each person a feeling of escapism, to forget his life and his daily habits, and transform them into an attentive spectator to the story that we were going to tell. The extinction of the lights is real and symbolic at the same time. We needed to drag the viewers into a moment of curiosity – the want to believe in the marvelous world we are going to transport them to.

In act one, we wanted to create a sense of history and culture meeting the future. In the desert, a young Arab boy plays with the sand, and from the sand flowing through his hands forms the shape of the elevation that will reveal itself to be the tower. With this sand, an animated Desert flower, the Hymenocallis – the inspiration for the tower – is birthed.

Act two was a cartoon reflecting the magic of this construction; a 3D animation where we reveal the tower. We anticipated the countdown with a backlight beating like a heart. 200 beams were placed behind the VIP’s, adding to the splendor and adding life to the tower, creating the illusions of a heart beating like a living creature.

And finally the third act was the emotional climax and the surprise. If we managed to bring the audience with us in our dreams,



Left: The show attempted to grab the attention of the whole city in order to create a city-wide memory. Source: Prisme Entertainment Inc. & Prisme International

Opposite: With this celebration the Burj Khalifa was born, and people in Dubai could be proud of their new icon. Source: Prisme Entertainment Inc. & Prisme International

they will be in a position of waiting, and we will play with this impatience delivering simple effects to surprise even more with a monumental prodigy.

The show design was finally approved, and we received the confirmation only six weeks before the show. Yes, six weeks to create the technical drawings and the security files, organize delivery of equipment, and make selections for the 300-hundred-plus teams we needed for this event, among other necessary steps.

I shall not catalog all the ups and downs caused by this event during these six weeks, except one, which illustrates the difficulty of this kind of event. Security is important of course. If you focus the media's attention, you can't risk ruining your image with a bad event or a disaster. And for us, it is our priority, as our reputation and livelihood are in question.

Only two weeks before the show, I was invited to an incredible meeting. I was in front of twenty people; all with a lot of files on their tables, and with hostile faces towards me.

To start, they explained who they were – Insurance Consultants for the contractor who would officially hand over of the tower during the Opening Day ceremonies on the 4th of January. Because of the risks involved, until this happened, they would not allow any fireworks on the tower. Or, if I could provide them my \$40 million Insurance cover and an extension for \$3 Billion, they could revise their decision. We were only 12 days from the show.

An opening ceremony without fireworks would struggle to reach even one percent of the world's audience. I preferred to joke and to look in my jacket pocket and beg my pardon with an ironic smile: "Sorry this morning I rushed to this meeting without taking this usual amount of cash with me..."

Finally I found a solution: to add a few thousand pages to my existing technical report about how we will avoid any risks, and to prove on some pieces of discarded glass façade in the desert how my fireworks – even if they are facing the glass – couldn't be dangerous for the tower.

The last anecdote comes four days before the show. On the 31st of December, after the New Year's Eve ceremony, I received a call from the developer's top management to ask me: "Can you add some additional fireworks?"

They were reacting to the incredible attraction made by the announcement of the launch. Around the world, the media were requesting permission to attend the live broadcast. All flights to Dubai were sold out and hotels were fully booked by people who wanted to experience in person this incredible moment. The client recognized that they tried to cut the expenses for this event and now they were worried about appearing lackluster with a small budget event. It is important to remember that, approaching each New Year, all the fireworks in storage around the world can already be considered taken.

We found some solutions. We would not add on to our previous design, but instead add some preliminary sequences with the reveal of the new name for the tower and its real height.

Act three and the big surprise! Suddenly the music rose to a crescendo. The tower seemed to be burning up like a fire-totem and

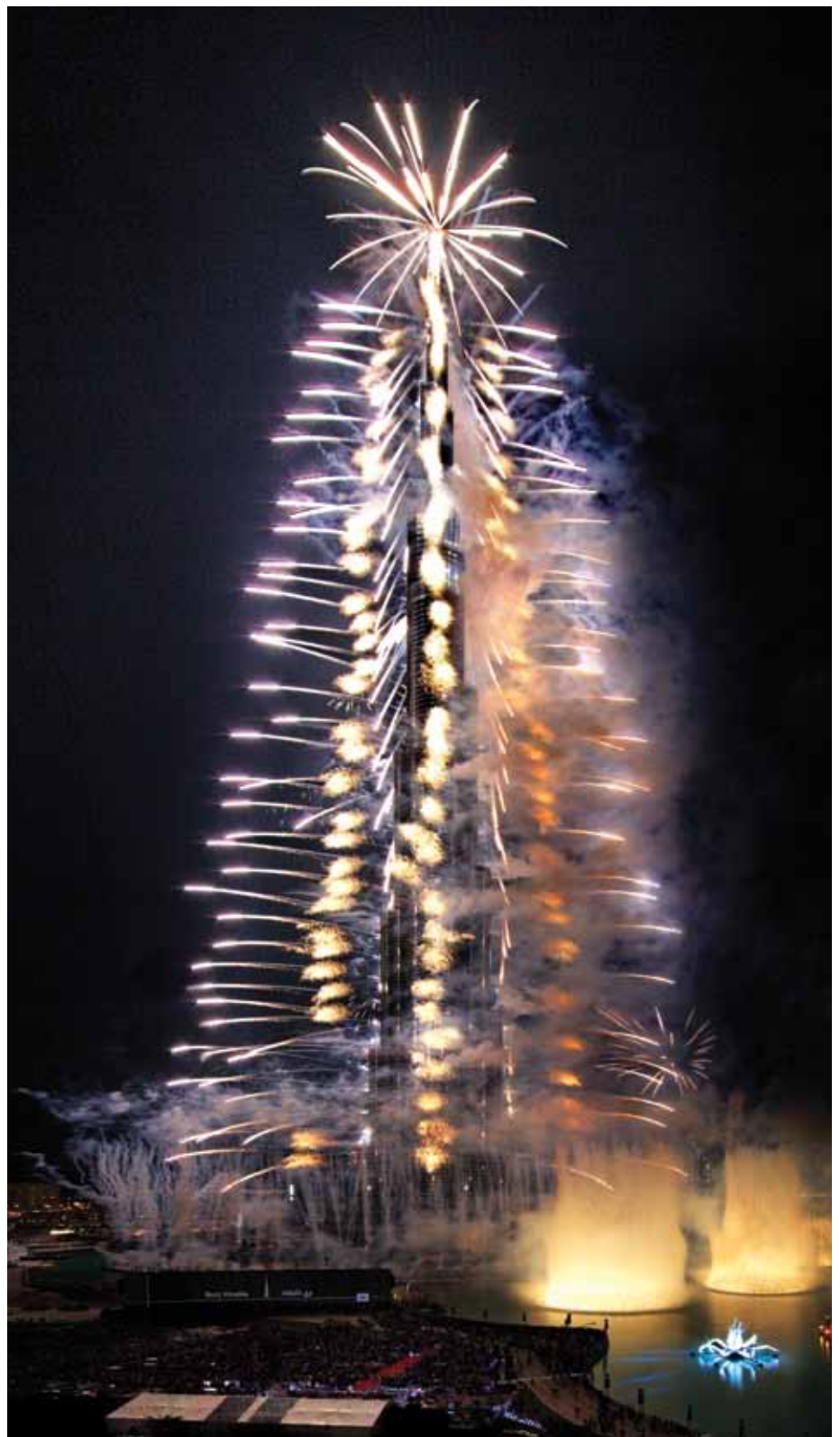
the crowd all issued a collective “whoa” of fascination and surprise. All of us then felt the shiver of happiness on our backs.

The show was more successful than I could have imagined. It was acclaimed as the biggest spectacle event ever held, broadcast for 2 billion people on TV and 500,000 people live.

Launching a Tower

The inauguration of any tower must be a fantastic celebration, not in terms of budget but in terms of creating its signature worldwide. This is especially true if it's the world's tallest tower, or even the first tower to pop up in a sleepy emerging city on the brink of a new wave of economic growth.

The Burj Khalifa successfully created an international icon of itself through numerous strategic means. First, the highly anticipated height of the new world's tallest building was shrouded in mystery until the launch date, keeping all the record breaker lovers on the edge of their seats. Second, their sublime advertising copy of two words: “History Rising” was an apt tag line for the tower, appropriately reminding the world





of this major anticipation. Third, the tower's architecture was not a random choice; it was extremely relevant to the city, inspired by the Hymenocallis to give it a more contemporary yet meaningful place in Dubai versus another city. Lastly, with this futuristic yet locally inspired design it lent Dubai the international image of a city on the rise, which is important as it aims to be more than just a professional oasis in the Middle East.

The international public relations and media perception of Dubai – starting with the Burj Al Arab in 1994 – created the link between this quiet desert city and the extreme opulence and luxury with which it is now known. Yet Burj Khalifa took the next step in turning Dubai into a model of tomorrow's city for the people of the world.

Whose night is it to shine?

The launch of an important tower is an exciting time for event planners and for the owners of the tower. There are many directions one can take to make this announcement. One important bureaucratic item to note for future launches is to ensure that the tower handover from the contractor to the developer is fully complete in a satisfactory timeline. This minor yet consequential detail manifests itself when insurance issues pertaining to such a major event hinders planning and execution due to red tape. The lead up to such an event and all its paperwork can never be thoroughly checked enough.

With all the advances in lasers, lighting, holographic technology, pyrotechnics, and 3D screens, artists can create a real collective emotion which elevates the people. Taking an entire city and telecast public into an emotional contagion is priceless in terms of memories built for a lifetime.

With the Burj Khalifa, the emotional contagion for the city's social cognition was to step out of the world economic

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crisis, the housing crisis, and global media’s austerity messages. It gave the people hope, courage, and optimism, adding immeasurable richness to the fabric of Dubai and UAE (von Scheve 2013).

To return to simple numbers illustrating Dubai’s rise, in 2010, after the launch of Burj Khalifa, the connotation of Dubai was of a city of unstoppable ambition and speed. Yet in 2014, a mere four years later, Dubai had already been named as the No.1 place around the world to live and work; the survey was carried out by INSEAD Alumni, who have worked around the world. Could the launch of a tower and its iconic image have added to this perception?

The study was drawn from 30 criteria dealing with professional and private life: economic dynamism (quality of labor, access to funding), quality of life (sports and cultural facilities, air quality), cost of living (real estate, dining, and entertainment), and the overall attractiveness of the city (young talent, access to technology) (Kapur 2014).

Even nomadic oil and gas professionals agree. 8,000 of them jointly put Dubai in the No.1 position to live, earn, and spend money in 2013 (Kapur 2014).

By focusing on group-based collective emotion, we are given the opportunity to create a once in a lifetime event to elicit optimism in contrast to the daily melancholy in the world media. To bring together a larger collective of a society and nation, there is a symbolic and cultural bonding of ideologies and resistance against the collective fear which has brought an age of distrust to human kind, and reshaping a national emotional calibration to a higher frequency. We need to do the architectural feats created by mankind the justice they deserve by celebrating them in their entirety.

For the next challenge, I have the chance to work on the upcoming World’s Tallest Building record breaker under construction in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, which could be lighting up the skies in 2018 (Wright 2015).

So a note to never forget one thing – you, as the developer, the owner, or the manager for the most beautiful towers, which will be immortalized in the city – your important investments in these urban monuments will never be truly complete if you don’t tell a story from the first ground breaking to its final inauguration. The story and character are created not only by the architecture, but by its style beyond the interior décor, to give the tower life and keep it alive inside the stone by the light of how it will be revealed to the public.

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