

## Nothing but the truth . . .



**David Tang**  
Agony uncle

*Sir David Tang, entrepreneur and founder of ICorrect, offers advice on questions about property, interiors – and modern manners for globetrotters*

I have a very good friend who has bought a large house in the country and spent a great deal of money and time decorating it. He has asked me to be one of his first guests, and I am not entirely sure that I would like any of his decorations because I don't like his taste. Should I be honest and tell him my true feelings, which might hurt his, or should I skirt around my opinions and be polite? Of course the principle is that you should be utterly true to your friends. Indeed, it often takes a really good friend to tell an ugly truth. But in matters of taste, "truth" is possibly manoeuvrable. If I were you, I would sing his praises for things you like, but be reticent on things you don't. If you were pressed on things you don't like, you might choose to use an understatement or even a litotes with which to express your sentiment – something like "I am not entirely sure that I wouldn't have hung that painting elsewhere . . ." or "If I were forced to choose an alternative colour, I might not have stayed with grey." On your first visit, you ought to

adopt this polite approach. After all, there is no reason why you shouldn't be polite to your friends. If he is clever, he would pick your nuances and appreciate your politeness. If he is stupid and does not detect any of your ironic remarks, then even better that he should assume your approval. Over time, you can smuggle your criticisms in a gradual crescendo. But of course there is the school of thought that one ought to be totally brutal with one's good friends. So if you really don't like what you see, you might just bluntly say to him, "This is all ghastly – how could you have possibly wasted all that time and money?" But this frontal attack requires a very strong armour of friendship to withstand.

I have a *faiblesse* for your column even though you ignored a recent request to recommend whether I should affect nonchalance, disdain or irony when your mainland cousins spit as I stroll through the Beijing hutongs. But I now have a new question for you. There are times when one needs to conceal one's identity, notably on the internet. I have always traded under the name BeijingDuck and wondered why I received such an enthusiastic and

colourful response. A Beijing man has explained to me that "duck" is Chinese slang for what some of your readers might call a rent boy. As a cosmopolitan man in occasional need of anonymity, how do you avoid such misunderstandings?

This is a polite column, and I try to avoid dealing with nasty habits. But I was in Wuxi (near Shanghai) this last weekend, sitting in the aerodrome lobby of the InterContinental Hotel when one of my compatriots passed by and spat into a bin. I was so horrified that I went up to him and barked at his unhygienic and disgusting habit. Just as I thought he was going to turn aggressive, he surprisingly accepted my protest and replied, "I totally accept what you say. I am sorry." I rather enjoyed that moment of triumph, until the man walked out of the door and I heard another appalling hawking noise from him . . .

As for your use of pseudonym on the internet, I hesitate to think why you would wish to conceal your identity. The choice of "BeijingDuck" is also ridiculous, and asking for trouble in the Chinese speaking world, as "duck" in Chinese can indeed mean a catamite. You would only have yourself to blame if others believed you to be one.

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I'm probably not the first person to respond – but you cannot really identify left-handers by the way they hold the phone. I will offer myself as an anecdotal example for want, admittedly, of any statistics. I have always used the left hand to handle the phone but can do precious little else with it. I do sympathise with your view on phone etiquette. While walking away is almost never a realistic option for me, my impression of any interlocutor who interrupts the conversation to answer the phone certainly suffers.

Just as well that you are not the one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein who commissioned Ravel to write his marvellous concerto for the left hand. Clearly you are an exception to the norm for, statistically speaking, left-handers use their left hands and right-handers use their right hands to hold their phones. And I certainly wouldn't decry statistics because it is the basis of quantum mechanics which, unbeknownst to most of us in its counterintuitive complexity, rules our world. Finally, walking away from any impoliteness is always the best option.

Email questions to david.tang@ft.com



A 17th-century desk and artefacts in the study-library



'Dome of Tolerance' in the rotunda



Beit Falasteen, or Home of Palestine, stands at the top of Mount Gerizim



The dining room



Munib R al-Masri relaxes in the home that he first conceived at just 19 years old

Dan Dennison

The Palestinian city of Nablus sprawls between Mount Ebal (Mountain of Curse), and Mount Gerizim (Mountain of Mercy) in the northern West Bank. At the top of Mount Gerizim, and impossible to miss, is the home of Palestinian businessman and philanthropist Munib R al-Masri. Beit Falasteen (Home of Palestine), was inspired by Palladio's Rotonda in Vicenza, Italy and its elegant limestone form is in sharp contrast to the dusty city below.

In April 2002, during the second intifada, the valley was intensely fought over by Israeli forces and Palestinian fighters. The city was badly damaged by Israeli tanks and shelling. In the past five years, however, Nablus has rebuilt itself: universities have opened, and unemployment levels are at a record low of 4.8 per cent.

Al-Masri, 77, began constructing Beit Falasteen two years prior to the outbreak of the second intifada that began in late September 2000. Israeli forces entered and occupied the house for three weeks during the building process, halting progress, but over the past decade Beit Falasteen has established itself as an important venue for cultural and political events, in addition to being the al-Masri family home.

Bypassing extensive gardens, we enter the palace through a modest entrance at its rear and join al-Masri at a long wooden table laden with fresh bread, bean salad and goat yoghurt. "All of this, we have made on this hill," he says. "We grow corn for flour, we have poultry. In fact, we grow everything we eat except dates and tropical fruit."

The design of Beit Falasteen was first conceived in the US when al-Masri was 19 years old. "Back in 1953, I was working 16-hour shifts in Chicago to pay for my next semester at the University of Texas. I used to visit a dance hall called the Palladium. It was 15 cents a ticket. I was an avid dancer and I fell in love with that place. I promised myself: if I go back to Palestine, I will build something of this nature."

Al-Masri returned to Palestine in 1956 having completed his degree in petroleum geology, but it was not until 1998 that the plans for Beit Falasteen came together. Al-Masri made his fortune as the founder of EDGO, an oil and gas contracting company in Jordan, later becoming co-founder and chairman of the Palestinian Development and Investment Company. The latter launched many of the building blocks of the Palestinian economy, such as the telecoms company, stock exchange, manufacturing and agriculture companies. And it is now one of the largest listed companies on the Palestine Exchange.

Finally in a position to start the Beit Falasteen project, al-Masri asked his son, Rabih, who studied architecture at Berkeley, US, to draw plans for a replica of Villa Capra (known as "La Rotonda"). Andrea Palladio's Renaissance masterpiece outside Vicenza in northern Italy. Interior designers Joseph Achkar and Michel Charriere

At home *Munib R al-Masri*

## The mediator

The Palestinian businessman invites Izabella Scott and Kate Hardie-Buckley into his mansion atop the 'mountain of mercy'

were responsible for the interior design of Beit Falasteen.

After lunch, al-Masri takes the 25 steps of a winding internal staircase to enter the large rotunda. Four saloons branch out from the 120 sq m hall, each named after sacred locations: "Jerusalem", "Jaffa and Haifa", "Bethlehem and Nazareth", and "Nablus and Jenin".

Al-Masri leads us east into "Jerusalem", a study-cum-library, where wooden bookshelves rise to the ceiling. This room reflects his personal history: photographs illustrate a close friendship with the late president Yasser Arafat, as well as his relationship with Nelson Mandela. (During Mandela's imprisonment, al-Masri sent money to him via a contact in the African National Congress.)

The room is filled with artefacts, including a 6ft camera bought in Tur-

**'I would like to see an independent Palestine. But I am no longer a young man and the days are limited'**



A 6ft camera from Turkey in the study

key in 1998 and a huge Mediterranean fossil shell, but the centrepiece is a 17th-century desk. Al-Masri's "mad habit of collecting – endless and costly, but enjoyable" – started in the 1970s, when he began storing antique furniture and building materials in warehouses across France, where he had purchased many of the items.

In the 1990s the collection was transported to Beit Falasteen in 240 containers, each 40 sq ft, entering the West Bank through Jordan. "Almost every piece could be in a museum," says al-Masri. "But I want people to feel and touch this house. I enjoy people using things and breaking the rules of a conventional museum."

He returns to the rotunda, which is dominated by a statue of Hercules bathed in the light of a sundial's opening in the "Dome of Tolerance" above. "I bought it from a guy in Paris. To me, Hercules represents Palestinian qualities – humility, strength and perseverance," says al-Masri. "Hercules stands here, at 6ft tall, while I'm 6ft 2ins, but he is the real master of the house."

A house with two masters is an apt metaphor, for Beit Falasteen is at once a personal and national project. "This house is a small dream," explains al-Masri. "It's become real despite the fact it looked impossible at times. But the real dream is creating a free, independent Palestinian state. If we had not built the house here, there would likely be a Jewish settlement in its place."

We step outside. Al-Masri points out Jupiter Temple, an Israeli army base 200m east. We walk around the house to view the two other surrounding settlements. These are illegal under international law. The settlements of Itamar and Bracha stretch out over the horizon and, according to al-Masri, are home to approximately 6,000 settlers. Up-to-date statistics are hard to come by but figures published by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics in 2010 documented 2,792 settlers.

### Favourite thing

Al-Masri found it hard to select a favourite object from his "live-in museum without any rules" but he chooses three fragments of pottery encased in the basement museum (pictured below). "When we laid the foundations for the house, my son and I found these three pieces of pottery," he explains. "We stopped building that day, and decided to dig down. Soon we found a piece of coloured mosaic – part of a whole 5th-century Byzantine chapel with beautiful mosaics. Perhaps it's an ancient village. Though whatever it is, it's fantastic. It's preserved below the house. I still go down there two to three times a day and it gives me the goose bumps every time."

### ONLINE

For more pictures of Munib R al-Masri's home, go to [www.ft.com/almasri](http://www.ft.com/almasri)

In an attempt to prevent further settler expansion across Nablus, al-Masri continued to buy the land surrounding his home. He has now acquired a total of 300 donums (300,000 sq m) on which he has planted 8,000 olive trees. These trees have personal and national importance, cultivated "for this centre to have independent means of subsiding itself . . . from olives, oil and soap", as well as their symbolic role as the Palestinian sacred tree. They too are part of al-Masri's life project: to establish a free and recognised state of Palestine.

Affectionately called the Godfather of Palestine, al-Masri is recognised across the Arab world, and on June 11 this year he was honoured for his philanthropic work during the unveiling of the Arabian Business Power 500 list. At home, al-Masri has worked as a facilitator between Palestinian factions, describing himself as "a common denominator" between rival parties Hamas and Fatah. His work initiating a rapprochement between these two factions culminated in an agreement in May 2011, which focused on ending the political division and the achievement of national unity. Many of these meetings took place behind the large wooden doors of Beit Falasteen.

Al-Masri also plays an active role in mediating between Arab and Israeli parties, often hosting Israeli political and business leaders. "I've been working for the past 40 years to create peace between Israelis and Palestinians. I must say that so far I have failed, but that does not deter me from continuing. In my lifetime, I would like to see an independent Palestine, at peace and harmony with Israel. But I am no longer a young man and the days are limited."

Is the house an indulgence, given the occupation? "Under normal circumstances people may think this home is extravagant but they know I am dedicated to Palestine and this is a home for Palestine. Of the 18 hours of a working day, I spend 12 working for Palestine."

