

From an Architect into an Entrepreneur

How Became a Hungarian Architect Designer Student into a Successful Entrepreneur in Abu Dhabi

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Abstract: Szilvia Viczián was my student in the 90'-s at the Hungarian Moholy-Nagy School of Applied Arts. I taught her entrepreneurship, however she already took part in a small business. She was all the time diligent and ambitious – and cheerfull. After some years she became a demanded architect and designer, happy wife and mother in Abu Dhabi.

Keywords: entrepreneur, Student-entrepreneur, Architect-designer, Abu-Dhabi

Szilvia Viczián was born in Budapest. From her 5th year she always attended art schools. When she was a nursery-school child her mother supervised her progress of drawing skills, - thinking: she could become drawing teacher, too.

In elementary school she attended a special class for design, she loved creating and everybody encouraged to develop her abilities. Later she got familiar with enamel painting, sculpturing and history of art. Since she was 11 she won school and town competitions almost each year beside being a top student. She got many awards on children drawing competitions for her works. In addition she did ballroom dancing since the age of 7 and took part in competitions. Representing Hungary she also participated in dancing competitions twice a year in the former German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia with great success.

Beside going to an art high school she also wanted to apply for a strong grammar school because that time she wanted to be a doctor too. To be able to make a free choice in 4 years she had to choose a school serving both purposes. So she applied to the Karinthy Frigyes Bilingual Grammar School with the best entrance exam results and started her studies in 1990 in the special class for drawing and history of art.

In grammar school her studies were priority thus the ballroom dancing period ended in her life although she still has a passion for dancing. This was a deliberate decision because she had to study very hard and was living in a strict dorm where she had responsibilities. She proceeded very well with her studies and participated

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in many Budapest city art competitions to enhance the reputation of her school. She took an international final examination of drawing and history of art.

After graduating from the grammar school she met a man who became her boyfriend and together they developed their common filmproduction video studio: X-TRAME VIDEO STUDIO. That time there were no commercial broadcasts, they made reports for the Hungarian Television (MTV), magazines of extreme and watersports. After 1997 she also contributed to programmes of commercial TVs. They travelled a lot and were present at all sports events in the world. At home they were broadcasting windsurf, jet-ski and sailing competitions from the lake Balaton. She laid the foundations of excellent relationships.

They built the business together right from scratch. He had an MTV background and a great entrepreneurial skills. They had 20 people in their team in a year and other free-lancer cameramen, technicians, cutters, reporters, editors joined their projects and films.

She started to have a look into the media as a reporter, later she edited reports and finally she worked as an editor of a 26 minute-long broadcast. As she got familiar with all the professional details it turned out that marketing, advertisement sales, communication and sales are the subjects which are close to her personality. This is how she became a producer of broadcasts and films.

In the meantime she took a 2-year-long advertisement and marketing course. This gave all the professional base which she improved to perfection in every day work.

She was 24 when she started the Architect Faculty at the Hungarian University of Applied Arts. In 2000 with a special application process she was accepted to the 5-year-long Design Manager course in the Manager Institute.

In a starting business the owner must be multifunctional. This very demanding, hard and early experience gave her a strong base to establish her very own business later on. In spring 2000 she separated from her film-maker boyfriend and as a result of this family affair leaving everything behind she started her architect and interior design business named SYLVISION Ltd. She took her mother and brother in it as silent partners.

She led the business successfully from 2000 until 2005 and after her brother was running it for two more years.

Beside her regular studies she was the leader and main designer of her team. With her free-lancer associates she worked on interiors, unique furnitures, building renovations and planning of new buildings (before graduation, with architects).

She carried out her plans with her executive team. After carefully picking and getting used to the subcontractors the general planning activity was expanded to executive work too. This way she got better and bigger orders. To reach success

personal relationships, the leading experience gained in the media, lot of work, persistence and respect was needed.

Everything worked well but she could not fulfill her dreams in Hungary. She wanted to try herself at an international level. She did give a try for that, she spent a 4-month-long professional tour in New York and Houston. She visited many companies, gave her CV but the jobs offered needed her diploma.

In 2004 she got her architect diploma and that time she already knew her future husband, Adam. She defended her design manager theses coming home from the United Arab Emirates.

Her wedding was on the island of Bali on the 24th of February 2005. It was a wonderful and romantic finish of a six-week long journey. A new chapter started in her life – she knew it. But how new she only realised 2 weeks after arriving home. She had registered herself on an architect forum some years ago. Somehow fate made her come to this page again. Fortunately she was not using so many password combinations so she managed to get on the page right away. She had been on this page exactly 4 years before, so it did not seem so important, still she thought to update her details. It only turned out later that it was a good idea since for those who are looking for new colleagues the page is prioritizing the result by the date of updating. In 3 days she got an e-mail from the ATKINS office in Abu Dhabi if she was interested in a job in the Emirates because they would like to have a telephone interview with her.

Of course she was interested and as they promised the interview was taken. It lasted for 20 minutes and she must have been convincing enough since at the end of the conversation the head of the office offered her a job. After some e-mails and reconciliations they agreed to start on the 21st of April. She had three weeks to finish a chapter of her life and to start a new – totally unknown – one.

In the first couple months she realised the advantage of her personal qualities over those who had much more experience than her. It was the way of thinking, her regular way of approaching problems. In short she did not have to do anything else just be herself to overcome her disadvantages. In three months she became a match for anybody concerning the profession which was rewarded by a promotion of a serious leading position by the company after her probation. She became a lead of 30 architects and was managing three projects in the same time.

In the following one year she became very confident in nearly all areas of architecture. With her team she carried out many projects from conception phase to the last one of presenting it to the government. She even had the chance to glance into the practical building process.

There is no doubt about having made a great sacrifice for this improvement. From the first 52 week-ends only 6 were free, we can say that except for a couple days she was working all year long. Since beside her professional skills, at the company they recognized her management ability too, she had a special role in

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representing it right from the very start in customer relationship issues. Above these she participated in many conferences and exhibitions. Inevitably one keeps an eye on the possibilities for his/her own sake and could be open to accept a better offer. This happened to her too. She picked the next company having in mind to prepare her own business. Certainly, she knew she had to wait for 2-3 years for my turn.

The second company was also British named Shankland Cox. Here she led the whole department for architecture. One of her most important jobs was the planning of a shopping Mall (Bawadi mall Al Ain) and its surrounding area which was close to a size of a smaller town. Beside the main building which had 122,000 sqm itself there were many other buildings like a slaughter-house or a mosque to fulfill all requirements. She managed this project on site for a year after half a year of office work.

Life surprised her again offering a helping hand to establish her own business earlier than she expected. In the Emirates one has to enter into a partnership with a local partner (51% for his benefit) to have his/her own company. Although there is a side-contract to guarantee that the management rights remain in one's hands and at the end of the day one gets his/her share of the profit according to the ownership ratio unless there is a special contract regulating it. She came across with a local partner who has a way of thinking very close to her (as it is used here) Western style. He is the first person of a huge holding and fully or partly the owner of 67 companies. He has been spending 4 months a year in his house in Austria for 30 years. Based on his financial resources and her professional skills they started to build their new business which she named Sustainable Creative Architecture – briefly SUSCA. Certainly the profile of the company is not accidental but consciously positions it towards fulfilling those requirements which only has been recently emerging in that area: sustainability, energy saving, efficiency and environment.

In the first period she had two serious jobs, one is designing a 35-storey skyscraper (Matrix Tower) and the other one is the interior design of the Bawadi Mall. Not only the size but the responsibility was a great challenge in both cases. She took some of her colleagues from her previous workplaces and some from Hungary too thus at the beginning she started off with 7 people to build her company and to work. So the period returned when she had to work day and night. Luckily she did not let stressful situations to come over her since at the time of establishing the company it turned out that she would become a mother. These two very new situations were reinforcing each other and she has never been happier than during this period of her life.

Their next job was also the conception design of a skyscraper, the Galaxy Tower. Unfortunately the customer sold the site before realizing the project and the new owner did not ask them to continue it. In this country it is also great that any project may come up any time. We are waiting patiently.

In the meantime they have started to plan their partner's villa with an area of 5,000 sqm. This was also a great challenge even after so many skyscrapers and malls. This is due to the fact that the owner himself likes being involved in the adventure of creation and is striving for – the sometimes not too healthy – perfectness without thinking of money or time. But they must have such a work in their portfolio as well so she is not complaining.

In March 2008 her daughter Emma was born. She was working until the last minute, we can say that they were working. In that country having a baby is a totally different issue than in Europe. Officially there is a 45 day long holiday, which can be taken any time after giving birth. In her case – as an owner – it was not a question. For six months she stayed strictly at home with the little one and after she only worked for 1-2 hours a day until summer.

In summer they contracted for planning a 113,000 sqm youth hostel. This job gave them the opportunity for a great improvement because the deadline they agreed on for finishing was very short. At the end of September they were 18 working at SUSCA. Their official birthday was at the beginning of November although the business had been running for one a half year by then. To celebrate they organised a dinner linked with a desert safari. 23 employees and 10 relevant went along.

At the end of 2008 the crisis reached the emirates as well. The youth hostel project has finished from their part, a couple of months later they heard that unfortunately from the part of the investor too. She was very sorry, because she particularly liked this project. In 2009 the crisis commenced them too which brought such changes as sending home a couple of architects. Despite some news almost all new investments have stopped in the area which is really bad for any architect office. As everybody presently they stand by too. This means that they are working on their existing projects and waiting for any possible new order.