



Mustaf in Melbourne, left,  
and in Somalia, below.

**After our lunch of all-you can-eat lamb and chilli Somali style,** Mustaf and I strolled around the Melbourne mall, which is a mixture of the shops typical of any working class suburb, with a few exotic Somali businesses thrown in. A mini bazaar squeezed into one shopfront sells traditional Somali wedding dresses, there are two Somali cafes, plus a business that sells cheap phone cards and money transfers to Somalia. It is estimated that about 30 per cent of Somalia's tiny GDP comes from such remittances. Mustaf jokes that she has sent money from her bank account in Somalia to the agency here, rather than from Australia to Somalia. "I think it is a first," she says.

Clearly doing business in Somalia is anything but secure. At first Mustaf tried to tell her children that the gunfire they heard every night was fireworks. But once when the sound occurred during the day, her children told her they knew it was gunfire and she should stop pretending. There is still shooting at night but she shrugs it off: "Only one bullet. I used to be shocked but now I just go: 'okay'."

She is followed everywhere by an armed guard and when she visits schools in outer areas she takes two trucks full of soldiers. There is a security protocol for something as simple as running late for an appointment. Once she called ahead and told a client she was standing at a certain square stuck in traffic and could not make a meeting. Her guard told her never to say on the phone where she was. It made her an easy target if the person she was talking to happened to work for al-Shabab. When she is working for the government, she has to be especially careful not to establish a regular pattern of turning up to government offices, so she does the education work on different days each week.

All this on top of the challenges of starting a new small business. She has signed up for an MBA by distance education and is reading the self-help financial bestseller *The Rules of Wealth*. Jan Van Schaik, who lectures at RMIT and runs a Melbourne-based architecture firm called MVS Architects, informally mentors her. He says one of Mustaf's biggest challenges is convincing clients that architectural design is important, given all the other urgent issues in Somalia.

Mustaf is trying to arrange a congress of architects in Mogadishu to raise awareness of good design and she is planning an exhibition to highlight one of her pet topics: whether damaged hulks of buildings should be demolished and built again or whether – as Mustaf would like – they should be preserved and renovated to try and maintain a sense of continuity with pre-anarchy Somalia.

Van Schaik says he is struck by Mustaf's transition from suburban architectural business to a practice helping to rebuild a war-torn country. "It is amazing that someone can sit there and tell you with this beaming smile and positive attitude that they might be blown up any day."

Yet this is clearly the fulfilment of multiple dreams for Mustaf: being with family, starting a business and working as an architect, returning home. She says she has wanted to be in design and construction since as a 14-year-old she attended a new school triumphally opened under the old regime in Mogadishu. The building was in Spanish mission style with perfect ventilation so no air-conditioning was required. The builders had left a scale model of the project and she remembers looking at it and thinking it was so cool.

She would like to go to the school to see if the model is still standing but it is in a part of the city which is still too dangerous to visit. But she hopes to get there one day. "We don't want history to repeat itself," she says. "Our parents failed us. The young people from here and from the outside are getting together." ■

It is Somali government policy to employ more women in executive positions. The official asked Mustaf to consult on a big project rebuilding schools that had largely been bombed out and closed during the years of anarchy. She started out doing assessments of the schools herself, often seeing children sitting in classrooms where the roofs had been blown off.

Now she is a consultant for the ministry, liaising with NGOs that will provide the funding, and she works with the education ministry writing building standards. There is also talk of reopening the university, but first they will have to convince the Ugandan peacekeepers, who have turned it into a barracks, to move out.



INSET PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ZAHRA MUSTAF