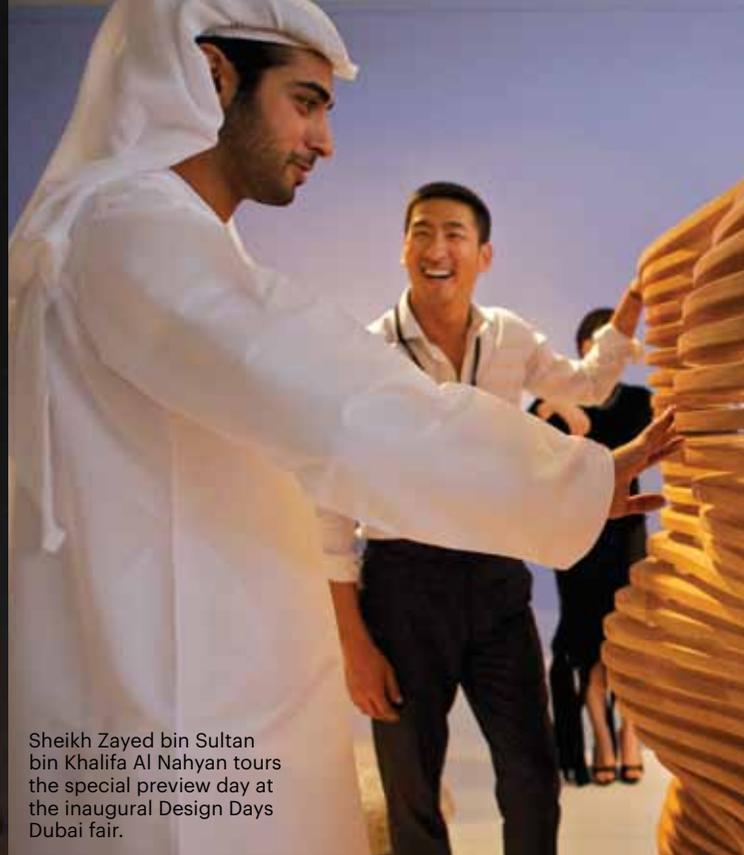


Cyril Zammit, Director of Design Days Dubai, discusses design with guests at the special preview night of the inaugural Design Days Dubai fair.



Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan tours the special preview day at the inaugural Design Days Dubai fair.

A NEED FOR DESIGNER FAIRS

Laurene Leon Boym laments the lack of ingenuity in locally-produced objects in the Arab world as she breezes through Design Days Dubai

D

ubai in March. It was a delicious night for a walk on the promenade near the Burj Khalifa. The evening was ripe with humidity and the sky overhead tinted rich ultramarine blue. On a promenade that encircled a man-made lake with an aqua-color painted bottom, one could see the Pavilion from a distance. A line of guests snaked around the entrance of the temporary

structure, with ladies, patiently waiting, dressed in the latest Alexander Wang clothing and Acme wedge sandals. Excited chatter in multiple languages, and in the far background there was a discreet oud playing its magical lullabies. A few guests clutched a brown, beige and orange invitation in their hands - none of whom seemed patient enough to wait for their turn to get to the front of the line. At the head there was a man in a thobe and Ray-Ban Wayfarer sunglasses. The friendly scene outside the tent could have been Miami in December or Basel in June.

It's a testament to our shrinking, media-saturated planet that the identical scene happens in Dubai, on the eve of the opening of Design Days Dubai. Design Days, as it is affectionately known, is the latest international furniture exhibition on the international circuit, albeit with an Arab slant. It does not diminish in the shadow of its predecessors; it is bursting to the fabric seams of the tent with new revelations in local and international limited furniture. In that way, Design Days Dubai is a revelation, because it eschews the traditional (insert yawn here) stereotype of Arab taste - golden shawarma wrapped in Swarovski crystals with a side order of glitter - for something different.



The Proust Geometrica Chair on display at the PF Emirates Interiors stand at the Design Days Dubai fair.



Guests play with the Abaya/Kandoora-inspired foosball table at the Qatar-based Virginia Commonwealth University stand at the special preview night of the inaugural Design Days Dubai.

are not prepared to pay the price of work on the international market, and there remains a schism between what collectors will pay for art, and will pay for design.” Witness the following exchange:

BUYER: OOH, I LIKE THIS TABLE, IT’S SO PRETTY. HOW MUCH IS IT?

Gallery: It is \$10,000 (QR36,400) entirely handmade. (Buyer says nothing, gives stink eye to gallerist.) Gallerist continues: Would you like to know the history of the artists? The artists’ work has previously been sold for between \$5,000 and \$30,000 (QR18,200 and QR109,000). The work of these artists has been shown at several A-list galleries in the biggest cities in the world and their designs are in many major museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, NYC Buyer: I just bought myself a Bentley, that’s too expensive for a table. Etcetera, etcetera.

THE GOODS

The one booth in the March design madness in the Design Days tent that had Ikea-like prices to satisfy a potential buyer was a truly populist enterprise, the DXB store. In its second year (the first was 2011), the initiative was branded in two additional venues (Art Dubai and Sikka). Planned as a showcase for the explosion of cottage creativity in the Emirates, it featured around 40 designers, many of whom made the product to sell at the store in their home studios, utilizing locally-produced materials to produce limited-edition objects, artist’s multiples, clothes and textiles. The scene in the DXB store in the Design Days Pavilion was crammed like a New York City subway car, with shoppers hoarding pretty bags for their mac babies.

THE BIRTH

Slotted in the crowded category of muscular collectable design trade fairs that include such notables as Salone del Mobile (Milan), 100% Design (London) and Design (Miami/Basel), this jewel of an exhibition in Dubai can stand proud next to its forbear. My spies inside the show report that it’s stuffed to the brim with onlookers, many of them potential design collectors. There is enough buzz and curiosity just for the privilege to view the work inside the tent structure, and maybe participate in an impromptu chat with a participating designer, a workshop or a lecture.

And it could’ve been Miami Basel in 2006, when Design Days Dubai’s Fair Director, Cyril Zammit, was working for private bank HSBC in Switzerland and got the ingenious idea to sponsor the sister collectable furniture fair, Design Miami. Miami came knocking again when, in 2009, at a Design Miami lecture series, Ben Floyd and John Martin of Art Dubai heard a talk about collecting design, by Simon De Pury, the eponymous auction house director of Phillips, de Pury. The duo then got a unique

idea to bring a copycat design-art collectable market to Dubai. It could work. It was an untapped market. With buyers already in town for Art Dubai, collecting limited-edition designs seemed like a no-brainer that would enhance the already privileged Art Dubai brand. When collectors buy the art, they need a sofa to match!

So, in Design Days Dubai, there is this ambitious undertaking, merchandising and selling what amounts to a new independent product in a context that many people in the region would consider a “European” sensibility. Are people in our region primed to understand the quality, themes and presentations that are a norm in countries with developed art furniture markets (UK, USA)? Also, how well does the show prepare and educate the prospective collector? I think a region with our resources can do more, despite attempts by the Design Days Dubai team and the creation of extensive programming and preparation.

Importantly, there is still the problem of selling stuff and the creation of a category for it. According to one gallerist, who would like to remain anonymous, “buyers at the show



Carwan Gallery, Philippe Malouin, Intarsia & Lathe 1 and 2

Handcrafted maple and oak (bowl)
Limited Edition of 12 + 2 P
2008
[Carwan commission 2012]
Photography by Ad Achkar
Photo caption for Coletivo Amor de Madre

Carpenters Workshop Gallery, Sebastian Brajkovic, Lathe V (Red)

Bronze, silk-embroidered upholstery
100 x 97 x 59 cm
Edition of 8, 2008
Image courtesy of Carpenters Workshop Gallery

Croft, Jaehyo Lee, 0121-1110-111094

Wood, big cone pine (chair)
95 x 95 x 77 cm
2011



Digitally-printed scarves and silk cushions by OTT flew off the shelves and were sold out of stock by the end of the show. There was complementary handcrafted Rana Mikdashi jewelry and t-shirts by Khalid Mezaina that were equally admirable.

AND THE SHORTFALLS

While the store was a great success, raising local designers' profiles and bringing in some profit, there were material and production limitations with the initiative, and these underscore the problems of making and selling design in the region. Creativity IS a topic worthy of discussion.

This deficit in ingenuity in the locally-produced objects highlights the real problems of creating a homegrown design initiative in the UAE and elsewhere in the Arab world: limited manufacturing resources for product production. If you need a metaphor for this, it's the design equivalent of an icecream shop serving only vanilla-flavored ice cream.

We need either to start producing objects of better quality here or to create government initiatives to reduce the shipping costs and import duties into the region for designer goods. That's a huge hurdle that needs to be jumped, because it limits what designers here in the region can make. And that limits

the creativity that fires up a fledgeling design scene.

There is poor quality of materials and low standards at many of the existing shops. Currently, there are no standard-bearers for a craft-based economy in the region, and no one has stepped up to the plate.

In a discussion about "Teaching Design" in the Pavilion on a Tuesday evening, teachers at universities in the region lamented the deficit of a small-scale manufacturing infrastructure in the region, which is essentially the key to creating a homegrown design economy. One exception being that in the area of Sharjah, there are plastic injection molding facilities and ceramic sanitary product facilities, but these are focused on producing mass market industrial products in large quantities. There is no local equal to a Royal Tichelaar Makkum, the Netherlands' oldest company, a ceramics manufacturer of the highest order, which adds cultural value to its brand by making the most of history through the eyes of young contemporary designers.

Alexis Georgacopoulos, the Director of Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne, Switzerland (ECAL), a design university represented on the "Teaching Design" panel, underscored the numerous benefits of young designer/student-manufacturer collaboration with established

high-value companies.

"ECAL students are learning to design by designing for the world, with existing companies, and by using materials and manufacturing processes in the factory to get things made," he said. "In ECAL, students mimic the work of a real-life design consultancy's stages with a client. For young people, it is an invaluable lesson in the design process that helps "prime the pump" for later, after graduation - and possibly, if they are lucky, to get products on the market.

"The manufacturer also benefits from the arrangement, with an infusion of young, fresh ideas and energy into their brand. It's done as a research project for the company to see what they can produce in the future. Both sides have to choose partners carefully. We've been incredibly lucky at ECAL to have our students collaborate with Cristofle, Hublot and Swarovski, for example. But ECAL is not the only example of training designers this way. Design Academy Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, has been a leader in this type of training."

It's not unwise to invoke a country that has developed a strong design culture and identity for young people to emulate, such as the Netherlands. In realising the dream, we must look to precedents in the region for that to happen.