

March 26 2014 | Last updated 2 minutes ago

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Art and about: Dubai's design revolution

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The emirate is pulling out all stops to nurture established and emerging artists — from training and opportunities to exposure and future proofing their interests

By Pratyush Sarup, Special to tabloid!
Published: 21:00 March 21, 2014

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Aided by confidence the Dubai Design District has instilled in the region's creative community a new generation of UAE-based designers all set to make their mark.

If Dubai wants to be a serious design destination, not only does world-class design need to step off the glass facades of its iconic buildings and the haloed environments of galleries, local talent and creativity need the right nurturing, support and infrastructure. Towards that, ground work has been put in place by organisations and individuals to provide regional talent platforms for learning, international exposure and successful launches into the highly competitive creative world arena.

Staying true to her creative vocation as an artist and photographer, Shaikha Wafa Hasher Al Maktoum established FN Design in November 2008. "What connects artists is a passionate need to transcend the limitations of their lives to express their ideas," says the Shaikha. "FN Designs provides a multidisciplinary space to exchange, learn, practise and display a wide repertoire of arts."

Their latest project, 10/100/1000, an interpretation of designer Francisco Torres' project of Mexico Design Week, was showcased at Design Days Dubai 2014, but its achievement are set to leave a lasting impact. Working with certified wood and natural finishes, each of the ten UAE-based designers created one original design piece in a limited edition of ten copies each which are at present retailed at Bloomingdale's Dubai for \$1000 (Dh3,670) each. The collaboration with the lifestyle provided the designers a wider platform to showcase their works to a global audience. A well-

rounded exposure, including into the business of design has instilled the designers with confidence to face the world.

At the centre of the city's design revolution is the recently announced Tecom endeavour Dubai Design District (d3).

According to Dubai-based accessories designer Lilian Afshar, a dedicated community for the region's creatives was long overdue. "While Esmod Dubai equipped me with technical know-how, I found it a tad difficult converting my skills into a viable brand and business," she says. Backed by a strong PR team and her small army of craftsmen, Afshar's brand L' Afshar showcased her Perspex clutch collection at FW14 collection at the George V hotel during Paris Fashion Week. Doing it all single-handedly has its own virtue but the emerging designer can see d3 helping her and others in her position. "A creative hub like d3 is a must given how the fashion and design scene in Dubai is picking up pace. There are so many talented and innovative emerging designers who need a platform to be able to build their brands and get their name out there."

In a bid to provide the best support to their students, Afshar's alma mater, Esmod Dubai, has already committed to moving their address to d3 once the district is complete. "Dubai Design District's foundation supports our strategy of imparting education to the next leaders of the fashion industry; moving there means our students will be exposed not only to other creative fields which is always good for a designer, but also the best industry practices," feels Tamara Hostal, founder of Esmod Dubai.

Established in 2008, Tashkeel serves as an independent resource for artists and designers living

and working in the United Arab Emirates. Its 'Artist In Residence' programme featuring international artists provides a platform for artistic and cultural exchange as the artists live and work in the UAE during the programme. Last year, renowned Spanish street artist Ruben Sanchez worked towards bridging cultural gaps during his stint. "The greatest thing about this residency is that you can spend time — like a full time job — developing, studying, testing and experimenting with your art without a worry," he says about his experience. Working with local materials — such as wood dried in the desert sun or signages with Arab scripts, even real camel bones, his installations showcased an inspiring marriage of societies.

"Right now, doors have been opened for designers to enjoy not only the freedom of thought and expression but also the chance to learn from the very best and work among them," says Latifa Saeed, one of the regional designers who showcased their works at Design Days Dubai under the patronage of Tashkeel.

Expanding on its commitment towards facilitating art and design practice, cross-cultural dialogue and creative exchange, last year Tashkeel partnered with Dubai Culture & Arts Authority (the Emirate's dedicated Authority for culture, arts and heritage) and Creative Dialogue Association in Barcelona, to establish the Design Roads Professional programme. Select regional designers, across a cross-section of creative media partake in workshops, lectures and mentoring programmes across the world's design capitals. Their learning, expressed through a final design piece, is exhibited at Design Days Dubai.

Last year's participant Aljoud Lootah presented the *Unfolding Unity* stool — her exploration into extracting the traditional mashrabiya motifs from a flat plane into a

three dimensional object. Since then, she has gone on to collaborate with some of the big names in the region, such as the Level Shoe District at The Dubai Mall, which commissioned her to create a branding concept that would reflect the spirit of the month of Ramadan.

“I designed a pattern inspired by the constellations and included the quote ‘Let your steps have an impact and leave a mark’ in Kufi calligraphy style within the design,” she recalls. The store’s interiors, window displays and merchandise bore Aljoud’s designs. A limited edition of 500 tote bags that Aljoud’s brand Niftee created for the occasion were sold for charity.

Extensive market research into the design, fashion and luxury industries, coupled with Tecom’s track record in Dubai translates into immense market confidence in d3’s vision.

“We want to give design and luxury goods companies a platform for growth and an appropriate base for their operations in Dubai,” says Dr Amina Al Rustamani, Group Chief Executive Officer at Tecom Investments.

Construction work is well underway on the first phase of d3, the Dh4 billion development of the 15.5 million sqft site, including state of the art offices, ateliers and workshop spaces, which are expected to be ready for occupancy by 2015. To ensure the development provides the right facilities and infrastructure to both established international brands and emerging regional designers, d3 “crowd-sourced” much of the design for the project, calling upon the industry insiders to provide their insight into its physical development from the outset.

This process allowed the design community the opportunity to take ownership of their potential new home and ensure that every aspect of the site is

relevant to their needs. As importantly, working with Dubai Council for Design and Fashion, d3 is pressing for stricter Intellectual Property Rights in the region to ensure that the that region's nascent design community's interests are safeguarded and their longevity is future-proof.

— *Pratyush Sarup edits design blog designcarrot.com*