

# BESPOKE

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**INTREPID**

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# Making It

Charismatic, local media darling, heralded as the vanguard of Emirati design and poster boy for a burgeoning industry, Khalid Shafar’s goal is the creation of a homegrown movement that’s recognised in the same way as Scandinavian or Italian design.

“I need more people to be doing what I’m doing. One person or a handful of people can never achieve it,” Khalid Shafar says. “The question that needs answering is how the next designer will reinterpret this culture and its emblems. And this can’t be answered unless designers have the necessary knowledge, which means at least a basic level of technical study, as well as skill with materials. To use a fashion analogy, a designer needs to know pattern making, garment construction and the difference between building a collection, rather than just making some pieces. Only then can you grow. For us, Emiratis, local success is misleading because we are very heavily supported. We need to show that we can sustain this business. Local success, without the ability to grow, will always be limited on the international stage.”

I’m sitting, talking to the designer at his boutique, KASA, out in the Ras al Khor industrial estate on the fringes of Dubai, Shafar headquarters since he returned to his home city in 2012, after several years abroad. The seed of what he visualises as another creative hub for the city, KASA stands in complete contrast to the dusty and unglamorous landscape of truck depots, car repair workshops and building material warehouses around. Polished concrete floors, charcoal-grey walls and theatrical lighting all draw the eye to the objects here – pieces from Shafar’s latest furniture line.

Called Octo, the collection is linear and assertive, a mixture of roughly finished metal, polished dark green marble and soft peachy- ➤



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**Left:** The Palm collection (2011) consists of coat racks and stools, as well as coffee tables. Characterised by upward facing pine and ash blocks, a graphic representation exploring the bark found on the trunk of a palm tree, the seat and table tops are woven from actual palm leaves.



beige leather. Drawing inspiration from the overlapping movements of Art Deco and Bauhaus – the elegance of the former and the quasi-industrial simplicity of the latter – it’s notably simpler than much of his previous work which is instantly recognisable by its witty spin on the Gulf’s cultural iconography. Think of pieces like the Arabi room divider and lamp, made from agal or his Palm coat rack, tables and stools.

“My local references are much more subtle,” he says. “They come through the choice of the octagon, which is related to Islamic geometry and use of local camel leather. Neither is obvious.”

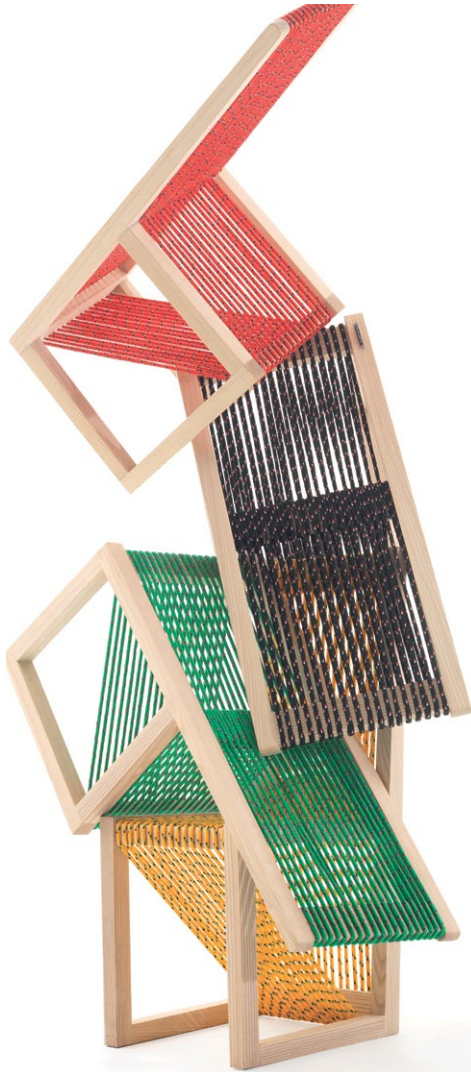
This makes an important point about Shafar’s evolution as a designer and his desire to build “a credible Emirati-designed and produced brand that sells internationally”. To do so, he believes, it is vital to express one’s culture in a way that speaks to a wider audience.

“We have a long history of craft, in brass, glass, inlay, weaving, tiles, embroidery,” he continues. “The question is how do we present this heritage in a contemporary, international way? For me, it’s not in the ‘ethnic’ way because I want to see my work in Asia and the West.”

He cites the success of Turkish designers in presenting their background in a modern way as a pointer to what a Khaleeji design movement could achieve. That is, once there’s a clear sense of what Khaleeji means.



**Above:**The Octo Shelf (2013) is made from marble, treated metal and leather. **Below:** The Gemini chair (2010), which combines a luxurious possum fur seat with an angled elm base, folds forward to become a table with a concealed cupboard top. **Top right:** The Trap (2012) is a sliding wall shelf made from ash wood featuring a metal net. It was inspired by the traps used by Dubai’s fishermen. **Bottom right:** The Illusion Dine chairs (2011) are made from ash wood with taut polyester rope.



“It’s not Emirati per se,” he explains. “I talk about the Gulf because we have a shared set of challenges, characteristics, cultural norms, stories and techniques. But our design identity can’t be established by just a few people, it needs time and a growing body of practitioners.”

While Shafar’s Octo collection is an overtly contemporary spin on his culture, that mixing of heritage and modernity has always been a thread in his work. The Illusion line, from 2011, is his interpretation of the rush of modern Dubai – the pattern of ropes forming the chair seats and backs is inspired by car lights captured in a long-exposure photograph.

The designer’s focus on functional furniture does not limit his more conceptual work. He sees the two as complementary. “The conceptual work is important because it adds another layer of meaning and allows more creative play. The Pearl Chair is an example. It uses the same functional engineering but the material means that it’s not to be used in a functional way. I use my creative pieces to make statements.”

Shafar’s launch of the Illusion line and several other pieces in 2011, brought him immediate recognition and critical acclaim. Suddenly, here was a new star of Gulf design. But his was no overnight success. Behind it, lay many years of work and several changes of both direction and location. Leaving the UAE, he studied in London and then New Zealand, moving

from interior design to furniture-making.

He stayed on in New Zealand for two years before returning full-time to Dubai in 2012. “I realised that I had to commit to one or the other,” he says. “This market is changing very fast and has huge potential.”

It’s not without its challenges, though. “Series production in limited quantities needs a higher focus on artisanship and detail and that means building a workforce with specific skills. Access to materials is another issue. Equally, there is no materials lab for research. Over time, the lack of access to materials will limit design innovation in the Gulf and without innovation you cannot grow.”

He considers learning to be “a constant”, both formally and informally. “If you are a designer you cannot say that you’re satisfied. You keep on searching, studying and improving but all of your steps should be taken within a framework. It’s a journey with an end that you can never reach.”

Recently, Shafar was one of eight international designers on an educational trip to Holland. “We were right in the hub of [design]. It makes you realise your place in the wider scheme, you learn from the challenges of others. We were introduced to new materials, new ways of thinking. In the UAE, we need to educate ourselves about the beauty of imperfection, about artistic versus functional,” he says in conclusion. “It’s all about not being afraid to make mistakes.” **B**