

# EMIRATES DIARIES

THE CULTURE ISSUE

ISSUE 1



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# SHARING TALES WITH KHALID SHAFAR

By: Moza Al Matrooshi



In the heart of Ras Al Khor, one of Dubai's busiest industrial areas sits a 30-year-old construction workshop turned gallery and workspace of local furniture designer, Khalid Al Shafar. Shafar has managed to establish a household name as an accomplished furniture designer both locally and internationally. In our meeting with the highly acclaimed designer he explains to Emirates Diaries just how long his path to success was. Upon entering KASA, Shafar's gallery and showroom, we were greeted by the designer who offered us a seat on one of his furniture designs, and served us a cup of Arabic coffee, a perfect way of starting any meeting, and with the first sip the designer began to unfold his tales of success and wisdom:

While I was growing up I seemed to have noticed that there were two types of boys; boys who were energetic, loud, played with toys and played football and there were timid boys who liked to sit quietly and draw. I was the quiet and artistic kind who liked to draw and paint and even got certificates of appreciation in school for doing that.

Later in life I developed a passion for design and dreamed of being an interior designer, but I feared having an unsustainable future if I pursued it as a major in university, and as a career later in life, because at the time the region's concept of design was not developed. There was a lack of trust in what local designers could do, and so it was hard to imagine myself securing a position in an international company; I did not want to rely on my family's wealth to create a



name for myself. As a way to obtain a university degree I studied Business and focused on graduating as soon as I could.

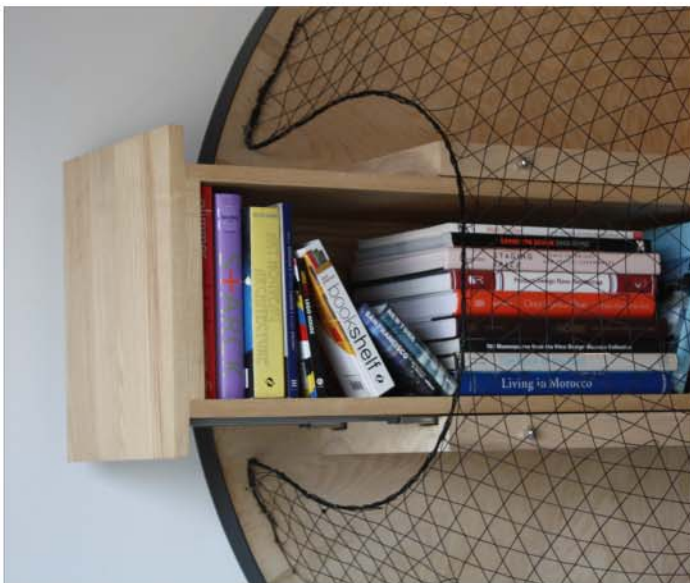
The next eight years after graduation I worked in a corporate job and was able to move up the corporate ladder. I was able to instill values in myself that I wouldn't have been able to otherwise if I had not worked in this field; I learnt how to meet deadlines and be on time for everything and work hard. When the financial crisis hit the company, I took it as a sign to leave and pursue my true calling, design.

I went back to university and studied interior design as a major. When I was still working, I had to take a furniture design class as a required course, and it was then and there that I realized I no longer dreamed of being an interior designer, and that my true calling was to become a furniture designer. After graduating and after leaving my corporate position, I traveled to New Zealand to develop my furniture-making skills. Afterwards I was secure and knowledgeable enough to launch my own label. I thought of establishing a base for my business abroad, in New Zealand. I saw how the artistic style of the original tribes in New Zealand is stamped on everything they design, which made me reflect on my own country and its rich culture and the absence of locals acting as UAE ambassadors of design, and thought who is exposing us? Who will preserve our treasures? I saw it as my duty to carry out our heritage and culture in the form of stories tied to the pieces I create, and by doing so I can say that I fulfilled my role. When I created



the T lighting fixture (T stands for Talli, a traditional stringy element in local female wear), which feature elements tied to the creation of Talli but lacks the Talli itself. I thought that if the practice of creating Talli is at risk, then I can say that I was able to preserve its story by creating these lighting fixtures, and that I did my part.

Some of the pieces I create are quite literal in meaning, like the Auction Table, which is clearly inspired by the "Lailam". The word Lailam means auction, but we know the Lailam as a man who used to carry items in a humble package made out of a big piece of tied cloth who went around neighborhoods to sell them at a bargain price. This practice no longer exists due to it being illegal, yet it was once a part of our culture and when people from the younger generations or foreigners ask me what the story behind this is, I can let them in on a part of our culture that no longer exists. Someone may debate with me over this piece symbolizing something else to them, it would create a learning experience and a point of conversation between generations and cultures. Other pieces are not as literal, such as the Flip chair, which looks much like an ordinary chair, yet the story behind it is, if you flip the back supporting piece you can sit with your legs up and crossed on the seat, which is a typical seating position within majlises in the UAE.



Khalid Shafar



I can see that there are a lot of young talents in the UAE who may be promising future designers. I got to witness much of their work in several events but after these events are over they disappear never to be heard of again. To those people I say do not do your talent the injustice of tossing it on the side and labeling it as a mere hobby, pursue it passionately and take it professionally to the next level, whether you want to create a brand, collection, line, or a label.

Many people fear how can they ultimately make a living out of their hobbies, and these notions I believe are tied to the older generation and have been dictated on us, and we grew up believing that painting and drawing cannot be a profession, or being a chef, or playing football, but let me tell you that all that has changed now; local artist Abdulqader Al Rais recently sold a piece for one million dirhams, after a long journey of being a professional artist mind you, yet he set an example that people here can do it too. We are fortunate enough to be living in a kind of 'comfort zone', in which everything is easily provided for us in this great country, and most of us do not have to struggle with things like living alone and paying rent, yet this comfort zone is somewhat spoiling us and most expect to receive everything on a silver platter.

If you go back and read the history of some of the greatest designers you'll find that many started out washing dishes, pumping gas, waiting on tables, etc. they went through that kind of pressure in life, and although pressure can be a catalyst



that yields great outcomes. We are not making use of the opportunities that are given to us with no pressure at all!

Obstacles are encountered by everyone, designers will face criticism, some might explore repetitive concepts, and to the consumers' eyes the products created by different designers may look identical but have completely different stories behind each piece. A designer may have been able to successfully portray a message and by exposing that creation to a wider audience, he or she would want to obtain the copyrights to that idea. It can be challenging to go against previously explored concepts, and people might abuse that by copying the same topics, but as a designer you have to always stay updated on what's going on in the design world by going to design related events, or reading blogs and magazines about designs and designers. One must stay on the look out for things that are not particularly in your spectrum of interests, such as the latest on architecture, food, movies, fashion, etc., this way you ensure not to unknowingly fall into a whirlpool of redundant ideas. Also, you never know when you will have the chance to collaborate with anyone professionally who might be outside of your field, being knowledgeable will grant you more credibility.

