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A new generation of creative talent is bringing contemporary design to Dubai

Words / Mandi Keighran → Photos / Tim E White

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Something new is happening in Dubai. In a city better known for constructing man-made islands and indoor snowfields than for its cultural innovations, a new generation of creative talent is embracing industrial design as a profession. In doing so, they are creating a new design aesthetic specific to the UAE, and have the potential to change the way the world sees the Gulf emirate.

Alongside these pioneering designers are a number of events and developments dedicated to fostering the new local design scene. In 2012, the team behind the successful Art Dubai event launched Design Days Dubai and Downtown Design, two week-long events open to professionals and the public, held in the Downtown area of Dubai. The first introduced collectible design to the region, while the latter brought with it a whole host of new design brands. Both provide a platform for local designers to showcase work and engage with the international design community.

Also in the heart of the city, sitting in the shadow of the world's tallest building – the 830m Burj Khalifa – construction has started on the Dubai Design District (D3), a gargantuan development dedicated to all things design – from industrial and product to architecture and fashion. It is also where we shot this feature. Inaugurated by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and backed by the Dubai Design and Fashion Council, D3 is testament to the serious investment Dubai is making in the creation of a local design industry; the Dh4 billion (NOK6.7bn) first phase is due to be completed next year.

As Design Days Dubai heads into its third edition this month – it runs from the 17- 21 March, coinciding with Art Dubai – we speak to some of the movers and shakers in Dubai's newly emerging design scene. → designdaysdubai.ae, dubaidesigndistrict.com

1

Latifa Saeed DESIGNER

She studied graphic design at university and was one of the first members of the arts centre Tashkeel (see sidebar p66), but until recently Latifa Saeed was firmly focused on motherhood. Her first foray into product design came by chance. Unable to find a new headboard for her bed at home, she designed one herself. Tashkeel saw the result on Instagram, and invited her to design a product for this year's edition of Design Days Dubai. "I decided to embark on a new adventure and design a chair," she says. She now plans to forge a career as a designer.

The first step, though, is to educate local manufacturers about product design. "They keep asking why I don't just buy a chair," she says. "They have the skill but they are not used to doing this kind of work."

At Design Days Dubai, Saeed will present her limited edition Braid chair (shown here as a prototype) – a cloud-like creation that reflects her ambition to design thoroughly contemporary objects. "As a local designer, I know how to push traditional Arabic references to make them contemporary," she says. "I prefer to live in the now, though."

2

Zeinab Alhashemi DESIGNER

With her side-shaved hairstyle, multiple ear piercings, and her approach to style – which ranges from hip-hop inspired fashion to the traditional abaya – 27-year-old Zeinab Alhashemi represents a new generation of designers in Dubai. Her work (like the lamp she is pictured with) is a contemporary take on Emirati traditions – from working with local craftspeople to reinterpreting traditional typologies.

Alhashemi studied graphic design, but had her own ideas about how best to apply her talents. "I wanted to explore more, so I started building installations... Then, when I saw Design Days Dubai for the first time, I felt a connection," she says.

Her most recent work, to be showcased with Tashkeel at Design Days Dubai, is an updated version of the traditional low seating found in the *majlis* (sitting room). The result is a small sand-filled beanbag-style seat that can be taken anywhere, cleverly referencing Dubai's nomadic history.

"People here are still playing it safe, as product design is very new. I'd like to see more experimentation," she says. "I want to help build a platform in Dubai for local industrial design."

3

Khalid Shafar DESIGNER

Khalid Shafar is, without doubt, the face of design in Dubai. Until recently, he was the only designer in the UAE to treat industrial design as a profession rather than a hobby, and his passion lies not only in pioneering a new local design aesthetic, but also in educating emerging designers on turning design into a full-time career.

It wasn't always this way, however. Although Shafar trained as an interior designer, he didn't feel design was a viable career in Dubai. So, until 2010, he worked in marketing and communications for an investment group. When the bubble burst in Dubai, Shafar followed his design dreams and enrolled in a design course in New Zealand. In 2012, just prior to the first edition of Design Days Dubai, Shafar returned to Dubai to open a studio, workshop and gallery (named KASA – see sidebar) in the Ras Al Khor industrial area.

"I was brought back by the sense of movement here," he says. "I am a local designer, and I don't want to see the design fairs here filled with only international work. The general level of our local design is not yet mature – that is quickly changing, but it needs strong voices to talk about it and show work."

"I was brought back by the sense of movement in the design scene here"



Aljoud Lootah DESIGNER, NIFTEE

Last year, following her involvement in a Dubai Culture initiative exploring local design and manufacture at Design Days Dubai, 30-year-old Aljoud Lootah quit her full-time job as a social media manager to focus on a life of design. The decision didn't come completely out of the blue, though. Lootah has spent the past seven years building Niftee, a successful fashion and accessories brand that draws on her graphic design education.

"It was the right decision," she says. "The design scene here is maturing, and people are getting more interested in product design." Shortly after breaking out on her own, Lootah was commissioned to design a pop-up installation for the 6,410m² Level Shoe District at Dubai Mall.

Now, alongside Khalid Shafar, Lootah is leading the way in the development of an identity for contemporary design in the UAE. Her Arabesque stool (*pictured*), which she created as part of the Dubai Culture initiative, shows her approach. "I like to incorporate elements from the culture and traditions of the UAE, but design it in a very modern way," she says. The response to the work is testament to the appeal of this approach: all five of the limited edition pieces sold out during the event.

Cyril Zammit DIRECTOR, DESIGN DAYS DUBAI

Paris-born Cyril Zammit is the man responsible for bringing collectible design to the Middle East. Following the success of Art Dubai, Zammit was approached in 2011 to start a fair dedicated to design – the first of its kind in the region – and Design Days Dubai was born. "Dubai is an international hub and people have financial means so collectible design fits perfectly into the scheme of things," he says.

Design Days Dubai has also brought a new Middle Eastern design aesthetic to an international audience, and many of the workshops run during the week aim to foster local creativity. (Last year UK-based Studio Swine ran one on creating furniture – like the table pictured – using waste material from Dubai's myriad construction sites.)

"When you look at the work of Khalid Shafar or Aljoud Lootah, it is very strongly anchored to the culture here," he says. "It finally gives a contemporary approach to something that has been repeated for several centuries."

Beyond promoting local design, Zammit's ambition is for the event to reflect the city. "I want there to be a mix of cultures at Design Days," he says. "I think it can be disturbing to certain classic eyes from Europe, but here, when you go to a mall or anywhere else, you are used to this mix."

“Collectible design fits perfectly into the scheme of things in Dubai”



Dubai's design destinations

Tashkeel

A hub for creatives, Tashkeel offers workshops for members and non-members, which cover everything from "calligraffiti" and Arabic typography to jewellery making.

→ tashkeel.org

KASA

KASA showcases the work of Dubai's leading product designer, Khalid Shafar, and gives visitors an insight into the world of contemporary Emirati design.

→ khalidshafar.com

Mahani

With interiors by London designer Faye Toogood, Mahani touts itself as the first concept store in Dubai. Here you'll find a carefully curated selection of high fashion, food, art and magazines.

→ mahanifashion.com

Tom&Serg

Tom&Serg is a café that eschews the polished interiors normally found in Dubai for a more industrial feel. A favourite of several of our interviewees.

→ tomandserg.com

The Archive

The Archive in Safa Park offers talks, workshops, performances and yoga classes. There's also an espresso bar and café.

→ thearchivedubai.tumblr.com

The Magazine Shop

A café and magazine store at DIFC that offers art, design, fashion, architecture, music, and film titles with a focus on promoting independent publishing from across the Middle East.

→ themagazineshop.me



Moza Almatroushi

DESIGNER AND
WORKSHOP
COORDINATOR AT
DESIGN DAYS DUBAI

Recent graduate Moza Almatroushi is one of a number of young interior designers turning their attention to product design. "Being a designer is something completely new here," she says. "Slowly, though, people are starting to realise the impact it can have... they are now willing to make it a viable career."

Following an internship last year with Design Days Dubai, Almatroushi is coordinating the workshops at this year's event, with a view to broadening her understanding of the industry. Her focus, however, lies on the practice of design, and she has also recently been brought in as a product designer with a design collective called Xpoze IDEA Factory, located on über-hip Alserkal Avenue, which is home to more than 20 different art spaces.

"Having platforms like Design Days Dubai and Downtown Design, where people are exposed to the possibilities of what they can do, gives designers a push to start producing," she says. "As a result, there are more and more local designers. I think they're trying hard to capture the spirit of the time - because there are so many nationalities here, they feel a responsibility to translate their experience and traditions in a way that is contemporary."

Khalid Mezaina

PROJECT
COORDINATOR,
TASHKEEL

Just as important as the newly emerging designers in Dubai are the spaces that foster them - of which Tashkeel is at the forefront. Founded in 2008 by Sheikh Latifa Al Maktoum and located a short drive from the city, Tashkeel houses a gallery, studios, creative facilities - from a darkroom to workshops and a screen-printing studio, plus a skate ramp (which is said to be hugely popular with Dubai's youth).

Khalid Mezaina, a graphic design graduate, is responsible for the off-site projects Tashkeel is involved in, including Design Days Dubai and a series of artist residency programmes. "Design is gaining popularity in Dubai," he says. "Our mission at Tashkeel is to bridge local talent and the manufacturing industry, to show that we have the infrastructure to produce design work in Dubai."

For this year's Design Days Dubai, Tashkeel commissioned three designers (including Zeinab Alhashemi and Latifa Saaed) to create new, limited-edition products manufactured in the UAE. The project is just the beginning of a much bigger plan to create a new contemporary design brand that celebrates local design, materials and manufacturing. As Mezaina says of the project: "We are trying to change things".



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