



Dubai-and-London-based design firm Anarchitects contributed this pavilion to Dubai Design Week.
Photo: Marc Goodwin

THE REPORT

What Defines Dubai's Design Aesthetic?

In a city that's constantly under construction, it's complicated

By [Alicia Brunker](#)
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Strolling through Dubai's Design District is both a feast for the senses and a journey across the globe. During the fourth edition of [Dubai Design Week](#), the city's annual design fair, last November, one could just as easily encounter the meditative strains of traditional Gulf fishing songs as walk into a Vitra furniture exhibition. Amid such diversity, it's not so easy to pinpoint what exactly embodies Dubai's contemporary design approach.

"I've been asked how I would describe Dubai's design aesthetic a few times before, and every time, I discover a new answer," says Rawan Kashkoush, creative director of Dubai Design Week. "It's unfair to create a sweeping statement about its aesthetic, because there's such a diversity of creative cultures living here."

Aesthetic cross-pollination is, in part, a function of Dubai's population. Only 17 percent of its three million inhabitants are of Emirati descent. The remaining 83 percent accounts for foreign-born workers from countries as far-flung as Bangladesh and the U.K. By 2027, with the population predicted to balloon to nearly five million, that divide is expected to grow even larger.



The scene at Downtown Design this fall—an offshoot of Dubai Design Week

Photo: Courtesy of Dubai Design Week

This cultural melding has prompted a productive exchange of knowledge between well-heeled locals and expats, which, according to Kashkoush, has permeated Dubai's design community. It's also encouraged the promotion of Dubai craft-making techniques abroad. Because resources in the desert are limited, it's common for designers in Dubai to commission their manufacturing overseas.

Such fluidity creates a unique design feedback loop, observes Kashkoush: "Let's say you have a wooden joint for a chair that was made by a Scandinavian artisan. That joint is then offered to a Japanese designer who has been living in Dubai for four years, and then that joint suddenly shows up in a design by someone who has been here their whole lives," she explains. "That transfer of information in the industry is what's so Dubai."



A Vitra-sponsored exhibition at Dubai Design Week.
Photo: Edward Michael

Collaboration with international manufacturers also fosters this exchange. For example, in addition to its own standalone installation at Design Week, Vitra prompted students from the Dubai Institute of Design and Innovation to redesign the company's iconic Panton chair. Their final creations were put on display at the fair. "We try to empower the designers living here by offering insight from international stars," explains Kashkoush.

That's not to say that Dubai natives don't draw upon their own culture for inspiration. "When [foreigners] think of the UAE, camels and falcons instantly come to mind—they're so obvious, but I like to design based on the forgotten aspects of our culture," explains UAE designer [Alia Mazrooei](#).

Before the oil boom in the late 1960s and '70s, Dubai's design traditions were shaped by its natural resources. Date palm leaves were woven together—known locally as *khoos*—to create baskets and mats, while the city's robust stingray population was hunted for its tail spines to carve intricate timber motifs. The latter inspired Mazrooei's most recognizable piece in her new collection, a sculptural chair named after the sea creature, for local gallery 1971 Design Space.



Designer Alia Mazrooei's "Stingray" chair

Photo: Courtesy of Alia Mazrooei

Mazrooei also took inspiration from Dubai's topography and traditional domestic culture with a low-slung sofa and a pair of chairs inspired by the sensuous curves of sand dunes. "Growing up as a kid, we'd always sit low to the ground," she explains. "In the UAE, we may have modern houses with new design, but we still gravitate toward our old-school culture of lounging."

"Local designers want designs that represent their ancestry, but not in a patronizing way," confirms Rue Kothari, the former editor in chief of *Harper's Bazaar Interiors* and director of Downtown Design, an offshoot of Dubai Design Week. "The new generation here layers their homes in different colors, patterns, and textures. There's a richness, but not in a gaudy sense."

Indeed, lavishness for these young designers is expressed through the celebration of traditional colors, shapes, and materials but with a modern bent. Take a collection from local design incubator [Tashkeel](#): Palm fronds were braided into the interior of a light fixture (a nod to traditional Bedouin fires), while a marble table integrated desert sand into its glass top.

In a city that's constantly under construction and inundated with new cultures, Dubai's design direction could be completely new next year. "It's interesting to witness the evolution," says Kothari, who moved from London to Dubai 15 years ago. "You have to pay attention, though. These are just blips of time."