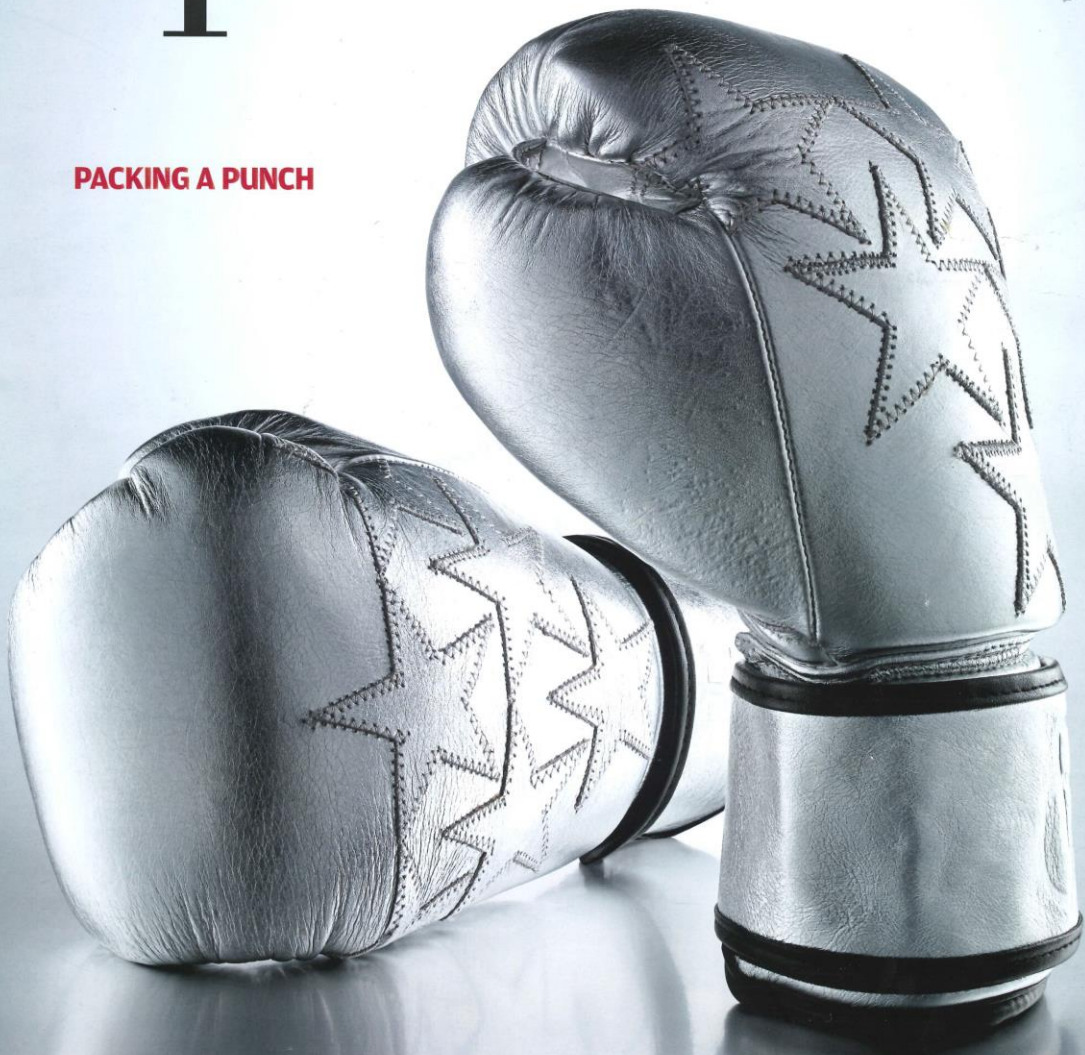


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how to spend it

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PACKING A PUNCH



LINES IN THE SAND

A cool new wave of Middle East designers with a global outlook are igniting the region's design scene - with Dubai as its hub.
Emma O'Kelly reports



Khalid Shafar's metal, glass, silver-leaf and craquelé detail Forma screen, €34,080, was designed in collaboration with Italian mirror works atelier Arte Veneziana

Interior architect Pallavi Dean is sitting in her studio, located in a complex of new glass buildings in Dubai's D3 design quarter - an area designated as a home for creative thinkers and emerging local talent in the ever-growing city. She has a busy schedule. She's building a luxury beach house for a client and has just completed a show apartment in Dubai Marina - both projects fuse contemporary design with bespoke elements influenced by the region's rich culture. The 37-year-old believes her approach is indicative of a shift in attitude as she, and designers like her, develop an aesthetic that pays homage to their heritage in new and inventive ways - often with a global outlook.

Dean's business, which is currently being rebranded as Roar to "attract world-class opportunities", has a portfolio

of international residences - including two in London and one in Kuwait (example pictured on final page) - and furniture that would be at home anywhere in the world. Her Live Edge Wood Table (\$3,000) melds acrylic and wood in modern form, while the Svagata pouf (\$1,500) and co-ordinating console (\$5,000), in dark wood and rose gold, are a contemporary take on consoles found in traditional Indian homes where a *thali* (platter) was placed to burn incense - such pieces would welcome visitors and were used as status symbols.

The designer's D3 neighbours include Reem Al Ghaith, Kholoud Sharafi and Abeer Tahlak, the female founders of Tinkah - a creative trio who attracted attention at Dubai Design Week in November for their new Ramel C01 coffee cups (about \$170 for a set of four at The



PHOTOGRAPH: ARTE VENEZIANA

Foundry). The collection is crafted from a combination of desert sand and ceramic – a new material invented by Tinkah, named Ramel, that can be moulded to create different products. “When I was young, I fondly recall traditions such as sitting on stacked cushions on the living room floor, where we would also share food,” says Sharafi. “Collectively, we have moved away from this lifestyle, so Tinkah is our way of expressing our culture in new ways.”

Designer Khalid Shafar debuted his Forma screen (€34,080, pictured above), lighting and mirrors “inspired by, and paying tribute to, Emirati culture” at the same show, but his collection also creates a “dialogue crossing cultural boundaries” in that the pieces were designed in collaboration with Italian mirror works atelier Arte Veneziana. “My work is open to experiment and

exploration. This collection is influenced by the *agaal* – the woven rope band used to secure head covers worn by Emirati men. It’s a craft in the region that has strong cultural significance, and this is merged with influences from the Venetian culture of glass engraving, particularly its ancient architecture featuring stained-glass rondel window panels.”

Shafar’s desire to push boundaries brought him to London’s biennial Shubbak Festival in 2015, where he created a contemporary interpretation of the *areesh* – a traditional Gulf house made of palm trees and fronds – as an installation intended to bring Arab creative talent to a new audience. He is not alone. Last year, Tinkah appeared at the festival with *Time is Subjective*, an installation of rows of hourglasses that appeared to hover mid-air, while

“My collection is open to experiment and influenced by the *agaal* – the woven rope band securing the head covers of Emirati men”



Clockwise from left: a Tzed Architects-designed apartment in Koa Canvas, a creative enclave in Dubai. Aljoud Lootah copper screen, £7,000, matching stool, £6,400, and copper and glass table, £5,500. Ahmad Khouja for Damj Design/Craft beech, walnut and mother-of-pearl detail Wave table, \$4,250



By 2030, a quarter of Dubai's new buildings will be constructed with 3D printers

rotating periodically – a reflection on the UAE's rapid change, development and progress, underpinned by a sense of nostalgia. Over at east London's Truman Brewery, Aljoud Lootah, a rising star of the Dubai scene, was part of a group of designers from the D3 district showcasing their work. Her suede-lined, woven camel-leather boxes (from £650) – a homage to the wooden trunks that once held a household's most precious possessions in the Middle East – was representative of a broad collection where each object has a backstory, from vases (from £187) depicting intricate patterns that also adorn ancient architecture, to a copper screen (£7,000), stool (£6,400) and table (£5,500, all pictured top right) inspired by the *areesh* and, interestingly, a chair (£5,800) and lighting collection (from £2,800) that take their design cues from Japanese culture with their origami-like forms. Before appearing in London, the designers made their debut in Milan, where Alia Mazrooei was the name to watch, having grabbed the media spotlight with her sinuous Stingray chair (Dh16,000, about £3,455, pictured overleaf) – a creature long linked to the history of the UAE as it is seen as a threat to pearl divers who for centuries brought wealth to the Gulf.

Mazrooei reappeared later in the year at Dubai Design Week with her project, Thuluth – a low-slung seating concept swept into the shape of sand dunes. The

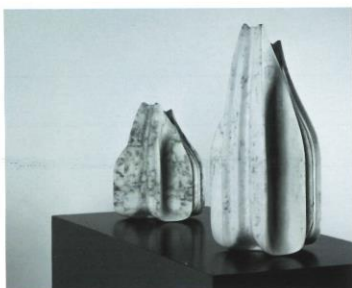
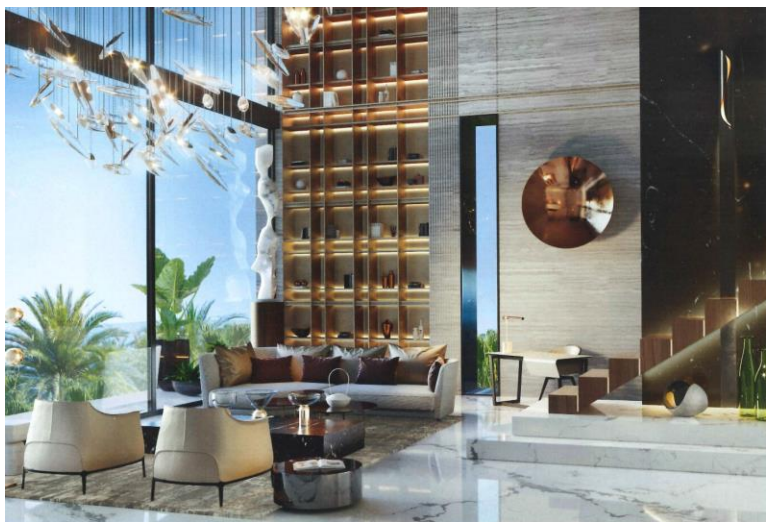
design also referenced Arabic *majlis* – traditional rooms or parlours where guests are received and entertained – that Unesco has highlighted as important symbols of cultural heritage. Dubai-based German designer Sven Müller, of studio Svenm, is another creative inspired by the tradition of the *majlis* (sofas from £12,000, stools from £10,000) but his "Bauhaus-meets-Memphis mash-up" is upholstered in a wool and camel-leather fabric by Danish brand Kvadrat. "We are interested in exploring the evolving relationship between western brands and Arab culture," explains co-founder Sonia Brewin.

Almost 80 per cent of the UAE is desert and the landscape has proved fertile ground for many designers, including Sharjah-based designer Sheikha Hind bint Majed Al Qasimi, founder of Designed by Hind. She was inspired by three native flowers – the small yellow blossom of the *al ghaf* tree, the purple petals of the *al ashkar* and the solitary green *shersir* flower – when creating her Nabata perfume bottles (from €2,000). "Some flowers only bloom after the rain, others are medicinal," she says. Her limited edition collection was handblown in Murano – a place she knows well thanks to shopping trips with her mother – but she hopes that future explorations in glass will be in collaboration with local artisans.

Throughout the design community there are those who talk of breathing new life into the region's neglected traditional crafts, which is becoming evermore possible as creatives born in the region finish their education abroad and return to establish viable businesses requiring artisanal skills. Emirati architect Abdalla Almulla, who showcased his work (example Wov table

pictured overleaf, £1,130) in both Milan, London and Paris last year, is one such talent attracted back to Dubai after studying in California to establish his multidisciplinary studio Mula in 2018. "Opportunities are so great in Dubai," he says, highlighting the fact that within a few months of arriving, he had been commissioned to design the public seating for the city's new Al Safa Art & Design Library.

One of the biggest opportunities for the creative industry across the UAE is being generated by the huge interest in design and robotics. In 2016, Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum announced that by 2030 a quarter of Dubai's new buildings will be constructed using 3D printers. "The strategy will make Dubai the world's 3D printing hub," says architect and designer Layth Mahdi, whose Ripple collection is created from marble offcuts produced by algorithms and carved by robots – vases (from \$6,800, pictured overleaf) and tables (from \$55,000) – that hint at how his architectural imaginings might look alongside Dubai's first 3D-printed office building – a landmark that opened



in 2016 and is claimed to be the world's first building to be made using the technology.

"Dubai has been an experiment in building communities and the environment for 25 years," says Rue Kothari, director of the interiors fair Downtown Design. "Design is now seen as a viable career path here and the industry is diversifying." The fair recently hosted over 175 brands, of which 40 were designers from the region (significant given that there were only 12 in 2017). Among them was Beirut-based architect and designer Ahmad Khouja, founder of Damj Design/Craft. "Dubai Design Week has the reputation of being a strong platform for emerging designers and Dubai city is the hub," he says. His furniture – including the Harmonic table (\$1,500) and Wave table (\$4,250, pictured on previous page), adorned with mother-of-pearl inlay, the Bulge credenza (\$3,750) and Curiosity chest (\$5,000,

Clockwise from top left: a Roar-designed master lounge in Kuwait. Ahmad Khouja for Damj Design/Craft walnut and beech Curiosity chest, \$5,000. Alia Mazrooei beech and velvet Stingray chair, about £3,455. Mula walnut, marble and steel Wov table, £1,130. Layth Mahdi marble Ripple vases, from \$6,800

Dubai's new-found standing as a design hub comes with a price. Studio space is expensive, and the financial barriers to success are huge. "Young designers can't survive without backing from their parents. We need more investment in design education – although the American University of Sharjah is emerging as a hotbed of talent," says Kothari. "The aim is to encourage international manufacturers to collaborate with regional designers."

Developments like Koa Canvas – a creative enclave akin to those common in London, New York and LA, featuring 70 apartments (example pictured on previous page), a co-working space, several restaurants, a boutique hotel and a day care centre – may hold the key as talent incubators. Tarik Al Zaharna, founder of local TZed Architects, cut out floors in the 10-year-old office block, considered old by the city's standards, to create light-filled residences and atriums, and used natural materials, such

as stone from Oman, while filling the gardens with indigenous plants. "I hope it will be a permanent hub for a young creative community," he says. Typically, he notes, the discerning residents who are moving into these homes increasingly desire pieces made by craftsmen. "They want a more personal approach," he says. "But it's not easy. The region is known for its crafts, but they have been neglected for so long that they are not as strong as they could be."

Over in Dubai Creek, the recently opened Jameel Arts Centre, designed by UK-based practice Serie Architects, signals the direction of the area's future design ambitions. The venue is one of Dubai's first contemporary art institutions, which saw 10,940 visitors in its opening week. Art Jameel has already turned its attention to a similar project, but on a grander scale – a 17,000sq m development in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, that will house an entire neighbourhood devoted to art and design and is slated to open in 2020. Watch this space... ✦

TO DUBAI FOR
Alia Mazrooei, @aliamazrooei. **Aljoud Lootah**, aljoudlootah.com.
Arte Veneziana, arteveneziana.com. **Damj Design/Craft**, damjdesign.com. **Designed by Hind**, designedbyhind.com. **The Foundry**, info@thefoundry.ltd. **Khalid Shafar**, khalidshafar.com.
Koa Canvas, koa.ae. **Layth Mahdi**, laythmahdi.com. **Mula**, mula.ae. **Pallavi Dean**, pallavidean.com and see Roar: **Roar**, designbyroar.com. **Serie Architects**, serie.co.uk. **Svenm**, svenm.com. **Tinkah**, tinkah.com. **Tzed Architects**, tzed-architects.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS: NATALIE COOK, WHARF SLEMAN