DESIGNMADNESS

Nurturing responsible, innovative, and contemporary design talents

In a revealing interview with Wenta Design Christiansen, Director of the Downtown Design Fair, we explore the unique identity of Dubai Design Week and its distinguishing features in comparison to international industry events.

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Business Type	Design event
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Positioned in the bustling city of Dubai, this annual event serves as a pivotal platform for the region's creative talents and actively fosters the growth of its creative ecosystem and industry. Dubai Design Week distinguishes itself through its welcoming, non-hierarchical approach, distinguishing itself through its welcoming, non-hierarchical approach, distinguishing individuals of various ages and skill levels, focusing on inclusive encouragement for anyone with a creative passion.

As the flagship event of the week, the Downtown Design Fair bridges the gap between the burgeoning Middle East design industry and the rest of the world, emphasizing the importance of high-quality contemporary design and craftsmanship. A space where the industry's best can connect with developing talents.

We asked Wenta Design Christiansen a few questions, here are her answers:

To date, what defines and characterizes Dubai Design Week compared to other international industry events?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

Dubai Design Week is essentially a platform for the region's creative talent and an active catalyst for the growth of the creative ecosystem and community. Practitioner's Dubai, geographically positioned between East and West, is ideal for the region's design industry.

As an event, Dubai Design Week – the umbrella festival to Downtown Design – has a rare, inclusive approach, distinguishing itself from other industry events. It actively fosters an intensely interpersonal creative ecosystem creativity. It is very much embedded in the festival's annually staged line-up of installations, exhibitions and activities to foster the exchange of ideas, require audiences and present the possibilities of what can be achieved through design.

Speaking of companies, what benefits and opportunities do they gain from participating in the Downtown Design Fair, which is the highlight event of the week?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

The fair leading fair for original and quality contemporary design, Downtown Design attracts Middle East's burgeoning design industry and the rest of the world. Both East and West.

Downtown Design is a boutique-sized and edited fair with curated sections, that are very much tailored to the development and movement in the regional market, for both professional and public visitors, with a strong focus on calibre design and craftsmanship – not only in terms of product but also in presentation and storytelling. Downtown Design is well and truly embraced by companies that are about to launch products with what our high quality manufacturing stands, designers and craftsmen are working on at great pace.

With this in mind, the fair is also unique in the way it is a place where audiences for contemporary high-quality design will gain a special appreciation for active design professionals, but also catering to SMEs and VIP visitors who are curious about design or looking to discover, buy or commission the latest works from brands to independent designers and studios.

How does Downtown Design contribute to fostering the development of local talents in the region and what steps are taken to facilitate this assistance?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

"Downtown Design consistently produces a dynamic environment where design meets opportunity, that celebrating a decade of its fair, as well as the centre of design in the Middle East—Dingding Foundation Residence between 808 and BIZC audiences and brands, independent designers and studios, including local and regional talent. Downtown Design remains the annual point of connection.

Our initiatives and programmes provide a unique opportunity for designers from across the region to showcase their work to an international audience and are a platform for industry, trade and public to meet, network and engage in a fluid fair.We will be participating with fascinating and innovative projects.

Highlights in Downtown Design 2023 include, the UAE Designer Exhibition – always a favourite of many visitors – that will present society to over 30 outstanding emerging creatives, themed around the future of living spaces, and with a focus on mentorship and social impact.

Stand-alone presentations by MENA, spearheaded by Omar Al Ozaiz – who himself is an alumni of the UAE Designer Exhibition, an experience revolutionary for his creative-family business, presented by Sharjah-based NIT Design Space, renowned-national designer Nasser Al Ali's Nasser Al Ali Studio, and Dubai-based Ayesha Al Ali's collective collection composed of pieces sourced from artisan and small-scale design incubator Tashkeel will unveil the culmination of the 2023 Tabreen Programme (when), continuing the focus on sustainability and addressing the fundamental challenges facing that world today.

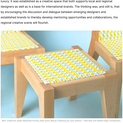
Wafa Al Fadhli, Marwa Bookhatroh, Maryam Dashti & Mohamed Elnagar and Chinara Tashmatova, all are presented within the Curated Exhibition section, a platform that celebrates the diversity of design and a chance to discover, commission and buy, a vital component of the Downtown Design fair.

Throughout the Dubai Design Week exhibitions and installations, visitors can explore projects by prominent talents such as Rossella Wenta Nicole Dunker, who was awarded the Fresh Design Award by the Institute de Monde Arabe in Paris earlier this year. Dunker's work explores the relationship between the human and the environment, and the Venice Architecture Biennale, alongside leading creative talent such as artist Ali Dodgson. Anwar Hassan, who engages with Islamic art as part of her practice, and architect Azlaina Lusman, one of the strong emerging talent scene.

How does the local design scene merge tradition and contemporary?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

"I think this has always very much been an aspect that is rooted in this region, but what is happening now and specifically, and especially considering the environment and changing mindsets since COVID, is that designers are really starting to look more locally and for regional content to their approaches and practices.



That said, however, I think that it is also always a strong demonstration of local and regional talent to look to sources and materials or their surroundings, but with a powerful hunch for innovation – always looking at tradition and heritage with a forward-looking approach. It is very much a fast-paced region and, I think the emerging local talent really enforces that.

Our opening keynote speaker of this year's fair, and global trend forecaster – Lidewij Edelkoort, said something very interesting in an interview last week.

"The region will profit more from Dubai's position than any other one and Beirut is in the DNA of the people."

I think that is very, very true and very true, and it is actually very exciting to see how Dubai and the Middle East are nurturing a new wave of talent that is eager to create contemporary design and craftsmanship in a way that, is leading away the image of assistance that is sometimes associated with the region."

Dubai Design District presents itself as an ecosystem supporting the creative industry. What roles does it play throughout the year? How does it nurture the creative business?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

"Dubai Design District (d3) is a purpose-built community that serves as a hub for the creative industry in Dubai, supporting various sectors such as design, art, fashion, and luxury. It was established as a creative space that both supports local and regional talent and attracts international talent to the region. The district's role in Dubai's design ecosystem is to foster innovation and collaboration. The district provides a platform for established brands to develop design-led marketing opportunities and collaborations, the regional creative scene and flourish.

As a strategic partner for Dubai Design Week, Dubai Design District, a member of TECOM Group PJSC, is positioned as the cornerstone of creativity for both the UAE and the Middle East and along with Dubai Design Week, acts as a platform for designers across many disciplines hosting numerous campaigns throughout the year to enable the participation of both business partners and wider creative community to showcase their work to a global audience."

Design is not just a product, but a carrier of culture and representative of the society in which it takes shape. What values does the design of the region embody that you intend to promote?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

"A carrier of culture – I like that! We intend to promote the region's values of innovation, diversity, and sustainability. Our programmes encourage designers to think creatively and sustainably while celebrating heritage. Designs Dubai is creating a platform of culture, and the design ethos aligns with this goal.

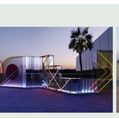
Designers in the region often draw inspiration from various cultures, resulting in designs that celebrate hospitality and multiculturalism. Eco-friendly and environmentally responsible design practices are encouraged, reflecting a commitment to preserving the environment for future generations.

If you were to define an aspect of the Design Week that you would like to develop further in the coming years, what would it be and why?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

"We have several plans to further expand our platforms with new initiatives, connecting the needs of the community, and opportunities for development in the regions creative scene and its ecosystem. I personally would like to look closer at mentorship opportunities for creatives talent in their stage of setting up their studios and launching SMEs, for the further flourishment of the creative scene.

There's a lot of great talent here and, as everywhere on the planet, most people rarely have the opportunity to focus on their craft because they are overwhelmed by administrative tasks (marketing, website, commercial growth etc.), all of which is important and also creates internships, jobs and further the opportunities for the wider community and other building talent."



How do you define the success of the event? What are the expected outcomes and how do you determine that your message has been conveyed and embraced by the participants (meaning everyone)?

Wenta Design Christiansen:

"By a number of things, but it is ultimately on the quality of the fair that we deliver, from the fair experience to the participants and exhibitors and the meaningful outcome that they will have meeting the visitors we attract, which is why the programming is very important to us, to ensure we engage our community and industry at round, to forge meaningful commercial opportunity.

Every year, we strive to put on a strong programme, that is engaging for visitors and that ensures that we are a platform for meaningful connections within the design industry while continuing to act as a catalyst for the creative community.

Connectivity and opportunity are at the heart of everything we do. Strength in life by quality series, the fair provides a gateway to the region through contemporary design. We work in close consultation with participants as well as their target audiences throughout the year, and we see the direct change year after year as companies are setting regional offices up in Dubai and the new demand for contemporary aesthetics and high-quality is growing, bringing further emphasis on the requirement for quality, responsible design to the region.

Downtown Design aims to contribute to the growth and vitality of the design industry – and the creative community – in Dubai, the UAE, and the wider MENA. Each by providing a platform that facilitates a meeting point for industry engagement, inspiration, relevance, and upholds the highest standards of quality in contemporary design.

As already mentioned above, we are dedicated to bringing high quality and contemporary design to the region, and we have been able to further our aspirations on partners with our initiatives, increasing the stature of the market and the changing demands of both our industry and visitors, and opportunities of development in the region's creative scene and its ecosystem.

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