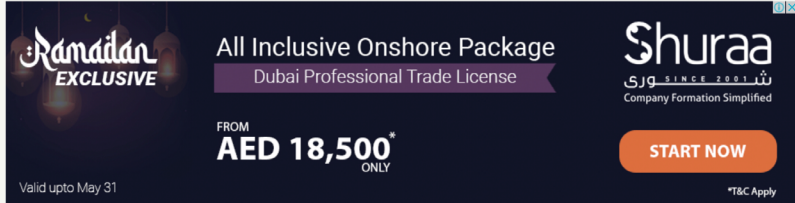


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Decoding the Dubai Design and Fashion Council

In her first interview since her appointment as CEO, Nez Gebreel breaks down her vision and future plans

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By Pratyush Sarup, Special to tabloid!



Nez Gebreel, CEO of Dubai Design and Fashion Council, at her office in Smart Building 1, Studio City on 27th October, 2014.
Image Credit: Clint Egbert/Gulf News

While London, New York City, Paris and Milan bask in their much revered statuses thanks to years of organic growth, false starts and many a catwalk slips, the foundation of the Dubai Design and Fashion Council – aimed at fast-tracking Dubai into the elite clique of design capitals – has kicked off a nature versus nurture debate in creative corridors.

In her first interview since her appointment as the CEO of Dubai Design and Fashion Council, Nez Gebreel explains the intent behind the council: “I see it as a show of faith in the future of our nascent creative industry.”

“The Dubai government wants to help and support its creative sector. This decision acknowledges what the creative community has achieved so far. It also acknowledges Dubai as a global destination for design and fashion.”

Born to a textile designer mother and a diplomat father, who was appointed to the United Nations and awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for his humanitarian services, Libya-born Gebreel graduated from Royal Holloway, University of London and initially worked within the human rights field with the likes of the Refugee Council and Amnesty International, United Kingdom. In 1999, she was coordinating fundraising initiatives for the AIUK on the Eurythmics Peacetour, when Simon Fuller head-hunted her and convinced her to switch gears into the creative industries.

Known within the international industry for her business-minded approach to creative ventures, Gebreel has a knack for changing brand perceptions – she was a key member of the team responsible for developing Victoria Beckham as a successful fashion brand and worked on the re-launch of the Roland Mouret’s luxury fashion label.

At the core of Beckham’s rise as one of the most bankable new generation fashion brands is a carefully thought out five-year plan, she says. “Her success is the result of a singular vision and concise brand message – both of which came from Victoria.”

Gebreel attributes her own success to a humane approach – something the council stands to benefit from.

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"We are dealing with people and their aspirations. We see ourselves having an open door policy for our members. We want to be aware of what's going on around us, be transparent and available to our members and the creative community of the region," she says.

The establishment of the council also signals a dedicated vision towards what needs to be done to help the region's design and fashion industry evolve into one that is taken seriously on an international level. "There is tremendous amount of energy and ambition in our region's creative industry," says Gebreel. Yet they don't know how to take that next step. That is where the council comes in. "We are here to help emerging, small and even business that have been there for a long time but need infrastructural support and mentoring to realise their potential."

Key to the council's success lies in it being accessible. "We want to be as inclusive as possible. Individual and companies will be able to register with us as members to avail our resources," she says, adding that quality, integrity and growth are the core values of its members.

The Vision and Mission statement of the council will be unveiled at its formal launch when it shall be made open for membership. Initially focusing on Dubai, the council aims to extend its reach to the MENA region and beyond. Towards that the council lays importance on conducting research into the fashion and design industry to provide valuable information and data to the public.

Based on feedback from the very community it aims to nurture, on top of the council's priorities is to establish a world-class design institute in Dubai.

"We need to start work from the grassroots level. Education is the most important foundation of any community, industry or country and plans are afoot to have our own in four years," says Gebreel.

In addition to short courses, the design school will offer Bachelors and Masters programmes in design. Scholarships will also be awarded. In addition to endorsing fashion and design events in Dubai, a Dubai Fashion Week focused on the regions' talent is also being planned.

An incubation facility that aims at nurturing talent is high on the council's agenda but Gebreel insists we don't confuse it with a physical space or hard infrastructure. "The council calendar will provide opportunities for designers to really understand their trade," she explains. "The incubator aims to develop them from a business angle, help them in their business plans, PR, marketing etc."

From helping designers put together their business model to how to attract the correct funding and best sourcing manufacturing and production units, the council aims to work as the proverbial red thread, connecting talent to their core market through guidance and access to the best business minds in the creative industry. Members of the Council board – a healthy mix of corporate and creative giants – shall be at hand to offer help.

The council is working towards development of Intellectual Property laws in the region and manners they can be implemented by educating its members and the community.

"A lot about changing perception is about connecting with the essence of what you are working with and for," says Gebreel. "It has to do with emotional intelligence. You also have to be very clear in what your vision is."

"We have great support from the government and all fifteen of our board members are fully engaged. We are sure with everyone's support and goodwill we will make a positive impact on how the world sees Dubai and the region and how the creative industry here works."

Meet the members

The Dubai Design and Fashion Council is chaired by Dr Ameenah Al Rustamani, group CEO of Tecom Investments, the company developing the Dubai Design District (d3). Laila Suhail, the CEO at Dubai Festival and Retail Establishments, the organisation behind Dubai Shopping Festival and Dubai Summer Surprises, will act as vice chairman. Nez Gebreel is the CEO. The board members are made up of the who's who in the design industry. They include:

- Patrick Chalhoub, CEO of Chalhoub Group
- Egyptian designer Azza Fahmy of Azza Fahmy Jewellery fame
- Fashion designer Reem Acra
- Mohammad Al Shael, executive director of commercial licensing at Department of Economic Development
- Robert D. Booth, CEO of real estate at Emaar Properties
- Iyad Malas, CEO of Majed Al Futtaim Holding
- Khalid Al Tayer, CEO Retail of Al Tayer Group
- Ashok Sawlani, former chairman of and present honorary member of the managing committee at Dubai Textile City

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- Farida Abdullah Kambar Al Awadi, president of Association of Professional Interior Designers in UAE (APID) and managing director of Cinmar Design
- Ali Jaber, Dean of Communication and Information Studies at the Mohammad Bin Rashid School of Communication at American University of Dubai
- Raja Trad, CEO Leo Burnett and Publicis Group of Companies Mena
- Gassan Harfouche, group CEO of Middle East Communication Network (MCN)
- Nisha Jagtiani, the director of Landmark Group

Pratyush Sarup edits the design site designcarrot.net. You can also follow the site on twitter @DesignCarrot.



Clint Egbert/Gulf News Nez Gebreel has a knack for changing brand perceptions

Image Credit: Clint Egbert/Gulf News

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‘Production seems to be a paradoxical challenge here, as the UAE is probably the best-equipped country in the Gulf when it comes to industry. We can produce and provide everything, from porcelain and plastic to wood and high-end camel leather, but the challenge is that there aren’t enough artisans to work with artists to produce a designer collection,’ says Zammit. But he remains optimistic. ‘We initiated some dialogue between the necessary authorities and the industry, and I’m confident that the nation’s vision for excellence will match the requirements of product design,’ he says.

Gersigny points out that because design is still relatively new in the region, many designers still face difficulties in being able to make the leap to practising full time. ‘Here in the UAE, they are disguised as journalists, architects or marketing executives. At Tashkeel, we see our support as key to the acceptance that design is a profession that is self-sustainable and even profitable. We’re also bringing awareness to the wider public, through our international residency programmes and professional fellowships.’

Gersigny is hopeful about the direction in which things are heading, saying there is a huge potential for growth. Eventually, she’d like to see ‘fewer slick spaces and more arenas for discourse, innovation and freedom of thought – more mess and more grit with unprecedented and dynamic output’. *

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Wallpaper* Middle East Revealed celebrates the region's design talents

DESIGN / 20 SEP 2014 / BY ROSA BERTOLI



Installation view of 'Wallpaper* Middle East Revealed', presented in association with Dubai Design District (d3) at this year's London Design Festival

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Wallpaper* Middle East Revealed celebrates the region's design talents

DESIGN / 20 SEP 2014 / BY ROSA BERTOLI



The show includes Emirati designer and artist Latifa Saeed's 'Braided' chair and ottoman, featuring interlocked linen cushion tubes

Multidisciplinary, internationally educated and highly skilled, a new breed of Middle-Eastern creatives have built a thought-provoking narrative around the region's cultural identity for an exhibition at this year's London Design Festival. Presented in association with Dubai Design District (d3), 'Wallpaper* Middle East Revealed' features interdisciplinary design curated from seven Middle-Eastern countries, bringing together a dozen creatives working across furniture design, fashion and photography.

Wallpaper* editor-at-large and the exhibition's curator Suzanne Trocme was drawn to the rapidly developing creative identity in the Middle East. Geopolitical shifts, growing media interest and a flourishing of design events in the region, she says, are actively advancing this development.

The show includes a multifaceted range of talent, whose work contributes to mapping the area's cultural identities. Although diverse in practice, the twelve designers share a chameleon-like ability to adapt to new disciplines (all of them have at some point changed their creative path). Dubai-based Khalid Shafar, for example, started his career in marketing and communication before his reincarnation as a designer. Beirut-born Nadine Kanso's design production, meanwhile, is divided between her Nadine K lifestyle line (including home accessories, apparel and artworks) and her jewellery brand Bil Arabi.

Similarly, these creatives to interpret their cultural symbols as sophisticated contemporary forms. Emirati photographer Lamyia Gargash's works explore architecture and its ever-changing and renewing aspects, documenting abandoned spaces in both public and private buildings throughout the UAE. Aljoud Lootah's 'Unfolding Unity Stool', meanwhile, echoes some of the traditional Arabic motifs that she regularly explores in her fashion and art works.