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Can you build a creative community from scratch with the simple wave of a magic architectural wand boosted by injections of petrodollars? This very question would obviously seem instantly absurd anywhere else in the world. But in Dubai, the city-state that has gone from mirage to reality in under forty years, the idea should at least be given the benefit of the doubt.



Dubai Skyline, way back downtown from the Design District

“Of the seven emirates making up the United Arab Emirates, Dubai is the poorest in oil, and in fact, it is the one that is best preparing – and providing a model for the whole region – for the post-oil

economy”, claimed François Cusset (1) in 2007 in “*Questions pour un retour de Dubai*” (Questions for a Dubai comeback), a postface to the brilliant essay by Mike Davis “*Fear and Money in Dubai*”. Today, after the sure-fire levers of tourism and shopping, art and design appear prominently in the strategic priorities of this small – but powerful – emirate. Cyril Zammit, Director of Design Days Dubai (the fair dedicated to collectible design, which celebrated its fourth anniversary in spring 2015), has also been appointed Design Director of the Dubai Art Group, a structure placed under the patronage of HH Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who chairs the Dubai Culture & Arts Authority. Following a path opened by Art Dubai and Design Days Dubai, the first Dubai Design Week (DXBDW) recently took place between 26 and 31 October in the Dubai Design District (d3), which used the occasion to unveil the (almost) finalised Phase 1 of this ambitious construction programme.



Cyril Zammit visiting the Brilliant Beirut exhibition ©DXBDW

Incidentally, it should be said that d3 has a very good communications campaign; the district aims to accommodate no fewer than 180,000 creatives in the long term, and freely draws upon the Shoreditch model in London for injecting “design & dollar appeal” into this free zone. The fact remains that the planning strategy here is not about converting industrial warehouses which do not exist – unlike in Al Quoz where they have already been converted into art galleries, with significant success no less – but rather about building a brand new district on the sands of the desert right next door, a district supposedly flooded with if not hijacked by creatives.

Expected in 2017, Phase 2 of d3 was conceived as an architectural reinterpretation of the container created by Foster + Partners. Visible on site, the model suggests a bias towards eagerly-anticipated simplicity in contrast with the escalation of buildings boasting their “engineering prowess” that have been so characteristic of the city's skyline to date. These were the same buildings that the Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury – who opened the programme of talks at the DXBDW – also qualified in no uncertain terms as “stupid”, before clearly stating his own challenges. *“My job is not to build buildings, but situations. Working with developers may also be synonymous with producing political acts.”*



Bernard Khoury introducing his book Local Heroes at DXBDW

In these criss-crossings between expressions of design and real estate development which are gaining momentum around the world, Dubai is probably not as close to the Beirut of Bernard Khoury as it is to the Miami of Craig Robbins (founders of Design Miami/ and CEO of the Dacra real estate development company), since the capital of Florida has cleverly capitalised on the aura of design creativity to sell real estate space to large luxury groups and to “Made in Italy” furniture brands.

With its airport now a major air hub and its future status as host city for the World Expo 2020, Dubai is not looking to simply highlight regional designers – still rather limited in number, apart from a few names such as Khalid Shafar or Aljoud Lootah discovered last March by Design Days Dubai – it is doing everything in its powers to establish itself

as *the* Middle East hub for international design. François Cusset was right again. “[Today, it means Dubai is] no longer the farthest reaches of the Mediterranean or South East Asian zone, but the ideal intersection (or hub, the Anglo-Saxon term used for major connecting airports) for the most dynamic trade and business area in the world.”



Koujak-Jaber (also known as "Gruyère building" by Victor Bisharat, 1964. Photo by Serge Najjar, 2013, part of the Brilliant Beirut exhibition

The Global Grad Show brought together some of the most high-profile projects by graduates of the Royal College of Art or ECAL, while Tashkeel, one of the few local structures – in fact probably the only one to date – capable of offering the facilities of a Fab Lab, and three annual residences for providing practical support for young designers from the UAE, exhibited a new version of the *Soundweaving* installation presented last year in Vienna by Zsanett Szirmay and Bálint Tárkány-Kovács. For the occasion, the Hungarian embroidery from the original project had been replaced by the geometric patterns of Afghan carpets woven by women supported by the Fatima bint Mohammed Fatima Initiative (FBMI).



One of the six Abwab pavilions by Loci Architecture + Design in the Dubai Design District

In a foretaste of the Expo, and especially out of a clear desire to develop relations with its neighbours in the MENASA region, d3 and Dubai Design Week welcomed Abwab in late October, a very successful series of six national pavilions (Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates) with polycarbonate panels for walls filled with sand created by the local agency Loci Architecture + Design. A few metres away, the exhibition Brilliant Beirut with design and scenography by the designer Rana Salam inaugurated the section Iconic Cities, destined to become a recurring event for the next editions. It holds up a magnifying glass to the architectural daring favoured by the Lebanese capital, rather diametrically opposed to that prioritised in Dubai. It is disturbing indeed to see the photo of the famous Egg by Joseph Philippe Karam – a half-destroyed and never rebuilt concrete sarcophagus, yet in its day an alter ego of the Dubai Mall, at least in terms of its intended use – a few metres away from the Dubai scaffolding, where construction teams work day and night to finish the glossiest glass buildings in the design district as quickly as possible.



Rana Salam, curator of Brilliant Beirut exhibition ©DXBDW

The third largest port operator in the world, Dubai today envisages itself as a platform not only for containers, but for designers too. Hence no doubt, this pretty semantic coincidence: the six Design Weeks invited by the trade show Downtown Dubai (Beijing, Helsinki, Istanbul, Melbourne, Mexico City, San Francisco) were included in the "Destination" section, while the installation by the Brazilian interactive design studio D3 (pure coincidence but delightful homonyms!) founded by Edson Pavoni and commissioned by the Coletivo Amor de Madre gallery of São Paulo was called "A Place to Departure". So (with a French accent!) we can rhyme "*semantique*" (semantic) with "Dubai Creek"...



Edson Pavoni (D3 design studio, Sao Paulo) introducing the interactive window A place to departure commissioned by Coletivo Amor de Madre

(1) Intellectual historian, Professor at Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

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