



Creative economy: why Dubai is set to become the region's design hub

Events such as Downtown Design provide a platform for the region's trade professionals to discover original, high quality designs from all over the world

WHAT'S THE VALUE OF DESIGN? Design is the ultimate expression of strategy. It defines experience, it creates master-plans for new communities, it innovates better ways to live. Design is the difference between failure and success, and when you live in an emerging city like Dubai, design is the opportunity.

Downtown Design has, over the last five years, quickly established itself as the region's leading trade fair for high quality design. But for events like Downtown Design to have long term value to the market they inhabit, they need to bring opportunity and value to both exhibitors and visitors.

The business conducted during that one week not only benefits brands and buyers, but has a broader impact, helping to establish Dubai as a commercial design hub.

With design as a key driver of the UAE creative economy, events like Downtown Design and Design Week are

integral, allowing international brands access to regional buyers.

And while the creative economy has grown so has the fair, by over 350 percent in the last five years to 10,000 sq m of international brands, 150 this year, 72 of them brand new to the event and the region, with a significant

“THERE IS A PROVEN LINK BETWEEN INVESTMENT IN CREATIVITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT”

boost to the lighting, furniture and textile sectors.

Kettal and Moroso, both market leaders in their respective territories, are a case in point: Kettal manufacturing outdoor furniture in Spain, Moroso producing high-end furniture in Italy, both exporting globally. What began with a ‘toe in the water’ presence at the fair, has grown exponentially, with a doubling of their presence over the past two editions. They needed to experience first-hand the potential of the regional market in order to do this.

Growth drivers

The surfeit of new opportunities is not just anecdotal. There is proven demand for brands across the design sectors to satisfy. Across key business districts, such as DIFC, Business Bay and DWTC, it’s estimated that there is approximately 9.9 million sq ft of office space under construction and due for completion by 2020.

Demographic growth plays a part. Oxford Economic forecasts that Dubai’s population will increase from 2.6 million in 2017 to 2.9 million in 2021, pushing demand for residential units, and according to STR’s June 2017 Pipeline Report there are over 94,978 rooms in 300 projects in the construction phase in the Middle East and 871 hotel projects under contract in the Middle East and Africa.

Low oil prices and a higher cost of living may have impacted some industries, and while the creative industries haven’t emerged unscathed, they continue to grow. Design after all, is the biggest investment for



▲ Good design applies to everything from furnishings to infrastructure

an emerging city – building infrastructure, communities, business districts and hotels.

Cue the upcoming Expo 2020 and the UAE Vision 2021. Global design brands have already woken up to this; seeking new sales channels where their traditional markets are stagnating. International trade asso-

ciations are sending more delegations each year, and with policy-backed support to promote Dubai as a design hub, an ecosystem provided by the Dubai Design District and advocacy by way of the Dubai Design and Fashion Council, it’s not just market driven – it’s a key governmental priority.

“DESIGN IS THE BIGGEST INVESTMENT FOR AN EMERGING CITY – BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE, COMMUNITIES, BUSINESS DISTRICTS AND HOTELS”

Homegrown talent

One scoot around the main international design weeks (Milan, Paris, London) and it’s easy to get the sense that Dubai is seen as the honey-pot for hungry international brands. But in order to build a stronger, more robust future for the design industry, it’s crucial to support our homegrown talent. Nurturing young designers, giving them a platform to explore the market and make strong industry connections, will help them develop into the first generation of commercial UAE design brands. There is a proven link between investment in creativity and economic development. Fostering this culture of creativity and innovation is key to sustainable growth and ‘Made in the UAE’ exports.

It’s a good time to be working in the Middle East design industry. We experience this first hand at the fair. Demand for space in the event outstrips supply each year, despite the expansion of our footprint. The product offering has matured. We’re not the mainstay of superlative luxury, but excellence in quality, originality and innovation. Our buyers, after all, demand it. Projecting credibility is essential, and as we face the rest of the world to toot our horn – there is substance to back it up. We’ve replaced the gold plated credenza with the energy efficient, air-purifying lighting fixtures that are cleverly recessed in the wall so you can’t even see them. This is the progress train – and we’re glad to be on board. **ED**
Downtown Design takes place from November 14-17