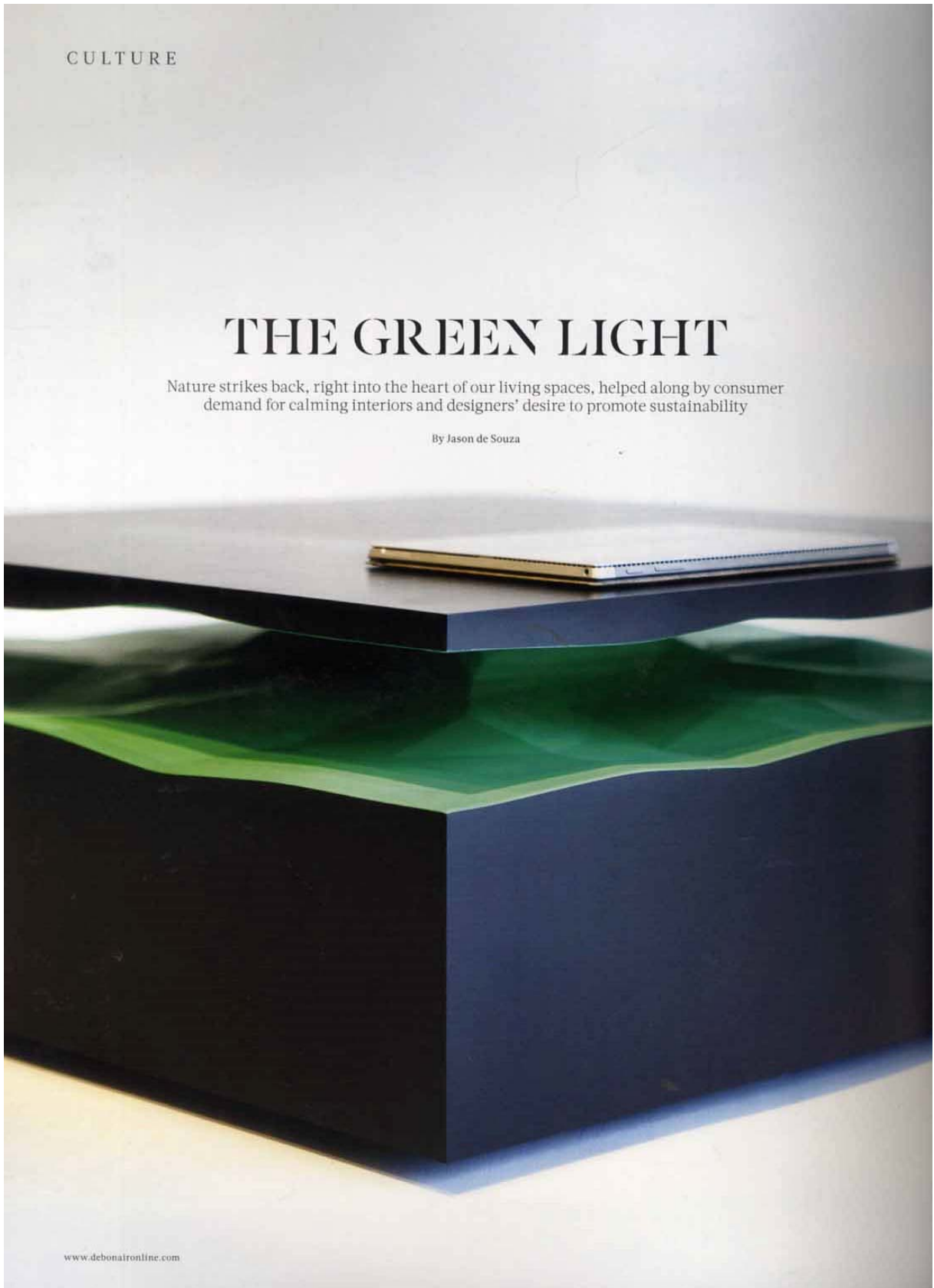


CULTURE

# THE GREEN LIGHT

Nature strikes back, right into the heart of our living spaces, helped along by consumer demand for calming interiors and designers' desire to promote sustainability

By Jason de Souza





FROM THE VERY START of his existence, man has sought to transform nature; to tame it, and impose his will on the world around him. We do so by seeking shelter from the elements, by improving his situation, or to leave behind a permanent — if arrogant — legacy. And nowhere is this more evident than in the cities of the UAE. Here, chrome edifices germinate futuristic skylines seemingly overnight, and orderly grids rapidly displace the shifting sands equally — even as we screen out the world around us with bottomless media feeds in echo chambers of our own making.

Perhaps that's why nature, now controlled and subjugated, suddenly becomes so attractive. Man settled down thousands of years ago, but we embrace the uncertainty of a nomadic lifestyle. We processed food to ensure security, now we embrace slow, seasonal produce. Shaved faces and pomaded wigs represented the apogee of pre-revolutionary France, but we grow out our beards and let our hair down, literally. This yearning for simpler days plays out in the interiors space too. We once built homes to keep the elements out — we now look to bring them back into our living spaces. Organic forms and rusticity, found objects and handcrafted artefacts — these aren't just the buzzwords of the moment, they offer a comforting respite from the self-inflicted turmoil of the rat race. ▶

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► “In a world filled with an increasing presence of technology, we are also starting to see a counter-effect of a human instinct to scale back to basics once again,” agrees Emanuel Lidberg, design manager at the Kährs Group, one of several brands tapping into the zeitgeist at the Downtown Design fair this month. “Much like the increased awareness of the food we eat and the products we consume, nature-inspired and natural interior design is more important than ever before.”

More than 150 international premium and luxury design brands will showcase their visions of the perfect life on the d3 waterfront as part of the Dubai event from November 14 to 17.

Lidberg elaborates: “A current trend we are seeing is having large windows, covering a whole wall from floor to ceiling. This not only allows for an influx of natural light, but also blurs the lines between the nature outside and the interior space — creating a sense of innate, natural comfort.”

He says we’re seeing more muted nuances of smoky, rich and hearty earth hues in natural, sustainable and tactile materials and contrasting textures — much as you would find when walking in nature. Lidberg’s own response is two new collections, Lux and Lumen, which are the 160-year-old marque’s first wood floors with an ultra-matte surface. “The finish in powdery and natural hues give the feeling of untreated, newly sawn wood.

“Other than the reaction to the open, airy and light-centred contemporary architecture, the floors have something emotional to offer as well. When you walk into a room with this flooring, it’s almost as if weight comes off your shoulders.”

Fair director Rue Kothari expects to see different approaches to the trend at the show. She says bringing the outside in is becoming more prevalent across all design disciplines. “In architecture, for example, it’s less about creating artificial light, and more about playing with space to encourage light to fall naturally in ever more creative ways.”

Materiality is a strong movement among today’s designers. “Exploring the versatility and beauty of nature via innovative new techniques is redefining how we employ these materials to create new design objects.”

Kothari offers the example of companies such as Apical Reform, who are exhibiting again this year, and have employed the latest software to sculpt wood into organic forms. “The results are outstanding. The appetite for this kind of work is always substantial here in the Middle East, where natural materials like wood, marble and stone not found in the local environment are considered more rare and exotic,” she says, offering another explanation for our appetite.

If Broga headstand photography earns more Instagram likes when captured on hardwood floors, so too has the mindful vogue for inner peace worked its magic on our interiors spaces. We don’t embrace lifestyle trends in isolation; their effects carry over to other parts of our lives.

Priyal Patel, head of business development at Studio Cast Glass, which is making its debut at Downtown Dubai with its Rizo line, says natural elements quieten our habitats (albeit in a controlled fashion) and by extension settle our psyches, something Lidberg also refers to.

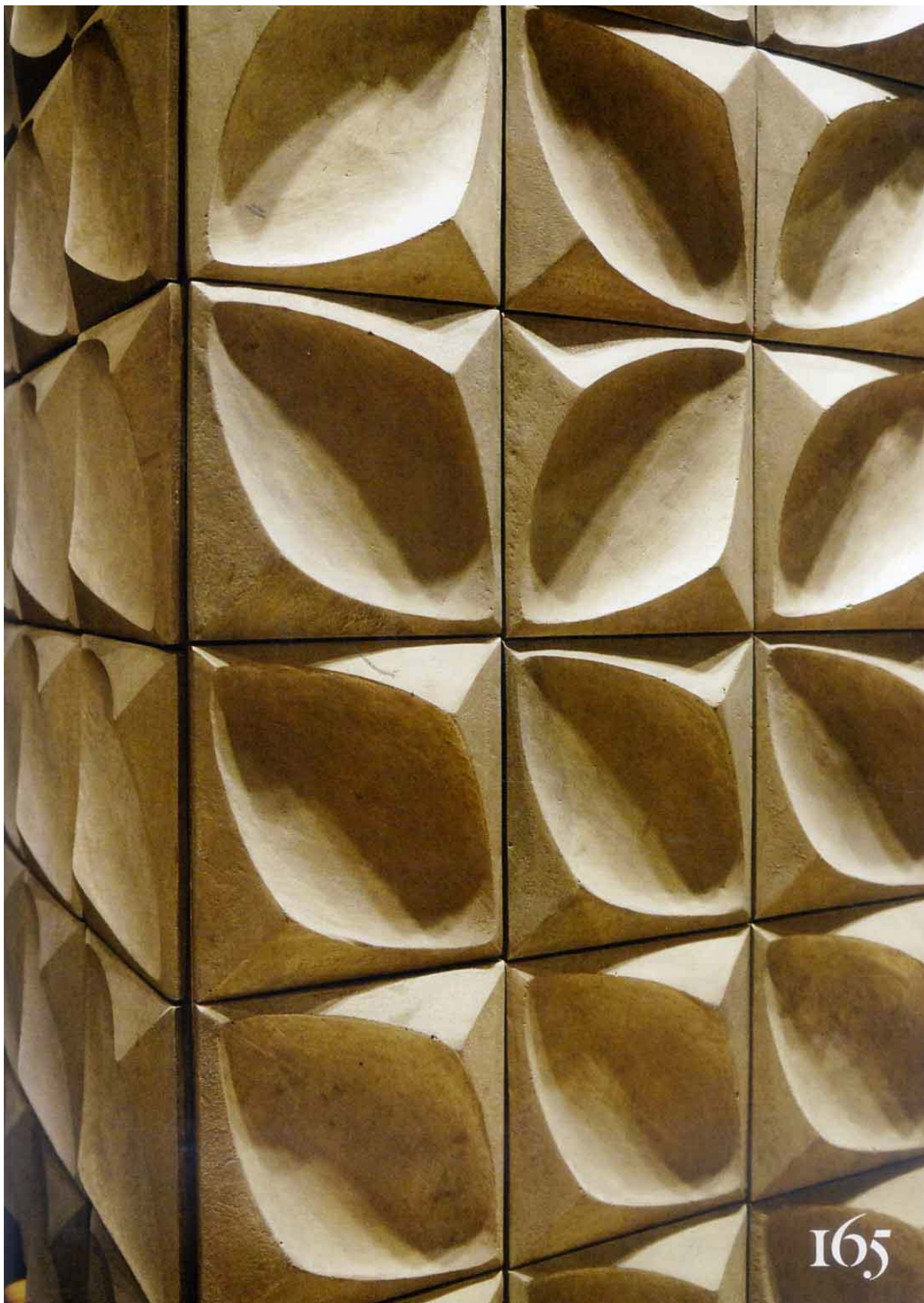
“This trend draws its inspiration from nature’s design and the composition of the untouched world,” Patel says. “Earthy browns, rich metallic golds, opals, jet black and the like come together by the use of organic forms nudged into subtle textures to create a strong design aesthetic. A natural look is thus achieved by giving a sense of calmness to the living space.”

The Rizo collection focuses on creating bespoke living concepts in the form of furniture, wall coverings, lighting and architectural accents. “The 2017 collection is an alchemy of materials with designs that alternate between the classical and a great example of how to bring a natural luxe look to your interior with effortless style,” she says.

On show will be a line that blends materials such as natural coal with crystal ►

Previous spread: Apical Reform’s Jaw table doubles as a sculptural statement piece; Rue Kothari, director of Downtown Design. This page: Kährs Group’s Lux and Lumen collections are the brand’s first wood floors with an ultra-matte surface. Opposite page: Studio Cast Glass’ *Nine Metamorphosis*.

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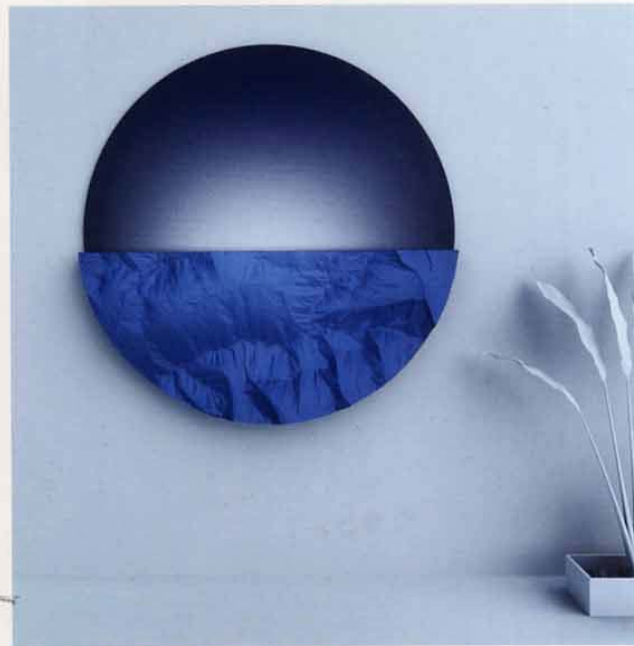
► and metallic accents for fine pieces of art. “The uniqueness of coal’s atomic structure and the sheer malleability of glass offers innumerable possibilities, thus enabling us to create a versatile line of exquisite pieces.”

Amrish Patel, founder of Apical Reform and AR Gallery at d3, extends the idea further. “I think we were gravitating towards serenity and calm anyway over the past few years, and then I think the socio-political climate really pushed us,” he says. “Any creative — artist, musician, filmmaker, designer — their best works are in response to what’s going on. And when you see icebergs melting, wildfires and hurricanes — they destroy lives, and then measure that evidence against a world leader who does not believe that climate change is a real thing, you have to take what you know best and turn that into something that instigates conversations.

“Surprisingly, art and design can lead discussion on difficult topics with relative ease, creating a safe environment for the participants. That is what led to us exploring nature.”

The India-headquartered firm’s Terra collection of interior products and home accessories combines materiality with that environmental messaging. Its Jaw centre table takes its inspiration from the topography of a cliff, fusing wood and steel for a monolithic work that doubles as a sculptural statement piece. The Terra light, meanwhile, balances neatly between the materiality of earth and the vastness of the Universe, drawing its cues from the terrain of the earth so that a customisable base becomes the metaphor for our planet with the lit orb representing the moon’s path around it. And a splendidly symmetric credenza, *Locoma*, comes imprinted with the terrain and contours of a valley imprint, offering a moment of reflection on the greater matters of sustainability and the state of our ecosystem.

Consequently, demand for sustainable furniture and interiors products is on the rise, says Patel. “People are concerned about the earth and the future and thus trying to do their bit. People are making themselves more aware of products,



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manufacturing, manufacturers and technology, and applying that to their spaces.”

Lest we tumble down the rabbit hole of presuming ourselves on some sort of superior path, Kothari jolts us sharply back to reality. Unlike other markets with more stringent regulations, she says, “there isn’t necessarily demand for things that are sustainable here in the Middle East”.

Her view is that architects take sustainable development seriously, and while there are policies that govern and safeguard that, inside factors such as energy efficiency and the scarcity of natural resources can determine the design of domestic spaces such as the bathroom and the kitchen. “Brands like Axor are committed to developing products for the bathroom that not only are aesthetically pleasing, but use less power and water, while delivering a better experience,” she explains.

“Designers themselves want to develop products that are sustainable and have less environmental impact. People respond to products that they love in a more visceral way — the fact that that particular product has eco-credentials is a bonus.” ■

*Downtown Design will run from November 14-17 as a key part of Dubai Design Week.*  
[downtowndesign.com](http://downtowndesign.com)

Opposite page: Kährs Group’s Emanuel Lidberg says large windows blur the lines between the nature outside and the interior space — creating a sense of innate, natural comfort.

This page: Apical Reform’s Terra collection combines materiality with environmental messaging.