

# ألف

## Alef. magazine

THE AGE  
OF ELEGANCE

*AMBASSADOR DE LUXE*  
Patrick Chalhoub's golden touch

*IMMORTAL BEIRUT*  
Still the capital of style

*SLEEPING SPLENDOR*  
Kuwait's forgotten architecture

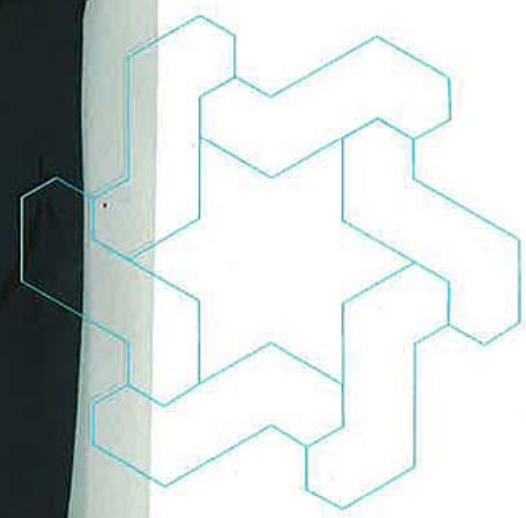
*FASHION SPECTACULAR*  
Solar flair in Maghreb

*BOOM TOWN*  
Dubai's thriving dance scene



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TH	1,000 THB
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FR	10.95 Euro



Right: Ceramic housewares have been used in Afghanistan for centuries, used at every meal. Below: Turquoise Mountain has set up a resource centre in the village of Istalif, the centre of Afghanistan's ceramics industry.



## AFGHANISTAN'S ARTISANS

**A pioneering initiative set up by the Prince of Wales to 'help breathe new life into Afghanistan's unique and incomparable art and architecture' is already reviving its unique traditional skills.**

WHEN HAMID KARZAI, President of Afghanistan, expressed concern that after years of conflict, the country's unique traditional skills were dying out, and Kabul's old city was being flattened by warlords and drug barons to build mirrored glass towers and wedding-cake houses, the Prince of Wales decided to act. He set up an Afghan equivalent of the UK's Prince's Trust – called Turquoise Mountain, after the great Afghan capital destroyed by Genghis Khan – which is pioneering a new approach to redevelopment by combining cultural heritage with education and income.

Several projects are breathing life into urban areas, by investing in the regeneration of Kabul's medieval centre, saving historic buildings and constructing new galleries for traditional artisans. It has pioneered Afghanistan's first Centre for Traditional Afghan Arts and Architecture, gathering some of the greatest masters in the country to train students in woodcarving, calligraphy, carpet-weaving and ceramics. The centre is also developing new Afghan designs and promoting local handicrafts through exhibitions and media campaigns to open new markets and restore parts of the Kabul museum collection and public spaces.

Commerce is once again thriving, with stalls piled high and tiny jewellers' shops selling silver and turquoise. But most of the buildings are derelict, with rubbish strewn everywhere and no sewage or running water. The empty old merchants' houses still have their carved wooden *jalis* and movable shutters. In a sweet seller's former home, a collapsed staircase leads to an enchanting room of carved wood flowers and peacocks, moulded plaster niches and coloured glass. Replacing such a magical enclave with shoddy brick and glass doesn't bear contemplating. As one local put it: 'We old citizens of Kabul suffered so much that protection of this area would be like dropping water in the mouth of a thirsty man.'

Despite three decades of war, a positive note could be the prospect of Turquoise Mountain being a contender for the Aga Khan Awards. Having secured donations amounting to \$4.6m to date, a gift catalogue of Turquoise Mountain products will soon be available to purchase online. [www.turquoisemountainarts.org](http://www.turquoisemountainarts.org)

—Yvonne Courtney



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### A. The high life

Emaar Properties recently unveiled the Armani Residences at Burj Dubai, the tallest skyscraper in the world. Located on levels nine to 16, the properties are scheduled for completion in 2009, and will neighbour the forthcoming Armani Hotel Dubai. Each floor has its own elevator access and front entrance lobby, ensuring complete privacy of access. The apartments represent Armani's first foray into residential design, offering a slice of his renowned Zen-like fusion aesthetic. Sophisticated tones, shapes and materials – including zebra wood, leather wall coverings and Venetian plasterwork – convey a sense of privacy and intimacy, set off by an exclusive range of Armani Casa furnishings. Amenities include 24-hour room service, concierge, plus access to the library, spa, gym and pool. *La dolce vita* indeed.

[www.emaar.com](http://www.emaar.com) [www.armanicasa.com](http://www.armanicasa.com)

## ENTER TRAFFIC

Designer fashion and furniture are plentiful in Dubai. But if there isn't a recognised brand behind the designs, they are unlikely to get a look-in with the emirate's tight network of retailers. Until now.



Above: Traffic's interior is designed to inspire visitors as much as the products they find inside. Right: The library has space for 1000 titles. The tall chairs look out on to the neighbouring street scene.

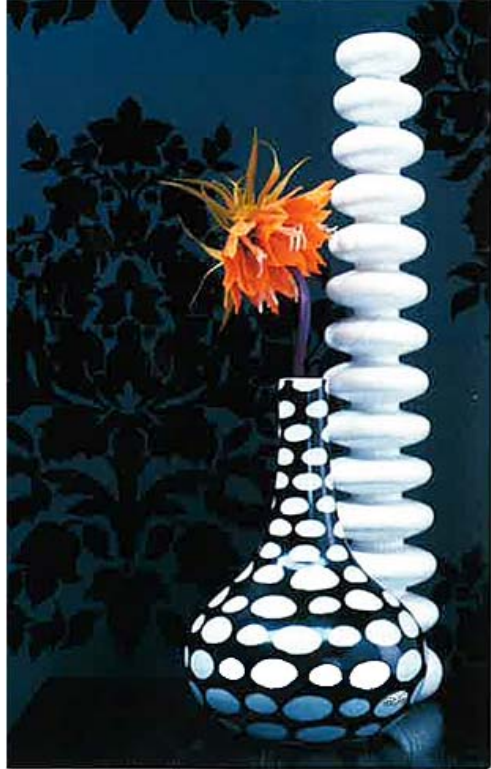


RECENTLY OPENED IN Dubai, Traffic is the UAE's first independent design gallery. Part exhibition and event space, part gift shop, part library, it's located in a neighbourhood street, rather than the sanitised confines of a mall. Its floor-to-ceiling windows bathe the 7000-square-foot space in natural light, revealing an interior refreshingly free of marble and mosaics. The floor is a seamless white epoxy slab, while a wire mesh ceiling gives an industrial vibe.

Traffic was set up by Rami Farook, a UAE national for whom design is a lifelong passion. He conceived it as a place where designers and design fans alike can hunt for individual pieces that complement their lifestyle. A member of the Sheikh Mohammed Establishment for Young Business Leaders, Farook has several years' experience in his family's manufacturing firm. He is already developing a number of contract projects via the gallery, including the furnishing of a new boutique hotel, set to open in Dubai in 2009.

Traffic boasts an impressive display of more than 300 items – from furniture and lighting, to interiors and fashion accessories – by both renowned designers and up-and-coming talents from around the world: current names include Marc Newson, the Bouroullec brothers and Jasper Morrison. Add a library stocked with design books, magazines and directories, and you have a welcome alternative destination for the region – plus a much-needed source of inspiration. [www.viatraffic.org](http://www.viatraffic.org)

—Yvonne Courtney



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### B. Cityscape takes a green tack

New towns are hard to plan, hard to build and notoriously hard to predict. Cityscape is Dubai's annual architecture and urban planning extravaganza for the region's booming property development industry. Room after room overflows with architectural models, demonstrating buildings and schemes, all vying to be taller, bigger, more ambitious than the last. This year's VIPs included architect Zaha Hadid, to promote her 'Opus' building for Omniyat Properties, and film star Patrick Swayze, for reasons which were less clear. The fact that the UAE's ecological footprint is now the largest per capita in the world prompted organisers to compile a conference programme focused on environmental issues, energy efficiency and eco-friendly buildings – increasingly seen as major issues in the region.

[www.cityscape.ae](http://www.cityscape.ae)

### C. Small, but perfectly formed

Retail therapy in Dubai means one thing: malls. So a store tucked away in a quiet residential street is a rare, not to say brave move. In Dubai's Umm Suqueim district, a fabulous modernist two-storey villa is the setting for IF Boutique. Designed by local architect Omran Al Owais, the building's clean lines were exactly what IF Boutique owner, Maya Shehede, was looking for, after an arduous three-year search. 'I wanted somewhere that inspires serenity and confidence; that didn't feel like someone's home, but made you feel at home.' IF Boutique has been a pioneer of cutting-edge fashion since the 1970s when Shehede's family opened the first store in Hamra, Beirut. A second followed in New York's SoHo, the first boutique in the area. Selling designs by the likes of Martin Margiela, Ann Demeulemeester and



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Comme des Garçons, such conceptual clothing required a more gallery-like environment for a discerning clientele. Business is brisk and Shehede believes the time was right to establish a niche fashion store, which wasn't previously catered for in Dubai. More will surely follow.

IF Boutique, tel: +971 4 394 7260

### D+E+F Furniture fest

Furniture imports to the Middle East exceeded \$6 billion last year – putting the region close to parity with mature markets like Europe and the US. Index, Dubai's long-established interiors trade fair (which took place in early November) has been the nucleus of the region's industry for years. Boasting 1500 exhibitors showing flooring, furniture, lighting, textiles, wallcoverings, kitchens, bathrooms, accessories, art and more – clearly its maxim (as with much in Dubai) is biggest is best. At this year's event, Southeast Asia was keen for a larger slice of the action and featured a collective display, 'Asean Fusion' showing mid-to high-end designs. The Middle East market has always been important to Italy, and Federlegno-Arredo, its national trade body, represented 120 companies. Index has enjoyed nearly 20 years of dominance, but other operators are starting to make their mark – including Interiors UAE, due to be launched in Abu Dhabi next Spring. While Index caters to residential and commercial interiors (allowing the public to visit at certain times), Interiors UAE will be aimed at the booming contract and retail trade. Clearly, competition in this lucrative market is hotting up.

[www.indexexhibition.com](http://www.indexexhibition.com) [www.interiorsuae.com](http://www.interiorsuae.com)



## ARCHITECTURAL PLATFORM

Founded just a year ago by a group of passionate international design professionals, Dubai's dynamic Architectural Association (aaUAE) is fast gaining a reputation for its thought-provoking events. Besides stimulating debate about the UAE's architecture, the forum provides the design community with a much-needed social network. 'Architects want to see results fast, so being in Dubai is great, but while its emerging skyline is a good experiment, it's still too early to criticise,' explains aaUAE President, Hisham Youssef. An Egyptian New Yorker, now based in Dubai, Youssef is Senior Design Manager at Gensler, the design team responsible for the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC).

The rate at which buildings are going up is a matter to be considered, reflects Youssef. 'Safety is not compromised – but the design can be. But, of course, design is in the eye of the beholder.' Citing Foster+Partners' master plan for the Masdar Special Free Zone in Abu Dhabi – set to be the world's first carbon-neutral and waste-neutral city – fellow aaUAE board member Kashani Wijetunga stated: 'Abu Dhabi has taken a leadership position in articulating a more sustainable form of human development.' During its first year, the aaUAE was invited to collaborate with a number of prominent local organisations; it was Knowledge Partner at Tatweer's International Design Forum, and Supporting Association at Cityscape Dubai, chairing the second day of its World Architecture Congress. Its own programme of events, sponsored by the likes of Poltrona Frau, Bene and Delta lighting, has included various lively debates, such as 'Is the 21st Century City Livable?' and 'Everything gets Connected Eventually (?)', where urbanites argued as to whether Dubai was evolving in a similar way to cities like Los Angeles. 'So, you're not a "starchitect"?' by Gensler vice-chairman, Walter Hunt, was an amusing take on the business of architecture.

The aaUAE has also helped bring the Pecha Kucha Nights to the Middle East. Pecha Kucha (pronounced peh-chak-cha) is an international network of events spread over 80 cities around the world, which form a unique forum for artists, architects, designers, fashionistas and photographers to show their work and cross-pollinate experimental ideas. The '20x20' format, open to all, allows each of the dozen presenters 20 images, each shown for 20 seconds – giving several minutes of fame before switching to the next participant. This keeps the talk concise, the interest level up, and gives more people the chance to be involved.

For the inaugural Pecha Kucha event last December, the aaUAE-proposed Jordanian architect, Hani Fallaha who has developed a clever refugee camp design as a solution for the growing problem of displaced people across the Middle East; and brother-sister outfit Lamia and Ahmed Bensouda, who showed a concept tailored for an equally pressing issue: a modular and sustainable labour station that can be deployed at both urban and remote locations. The Architectural Association is now finalising its 2008 programme, with various bold plans including an Architecture Week, which would undoubtedly give an element of gravitas to Dubai's PR machine. It is also putting together a database of architects, designers and suppliers to provide a recommended contacts list for industry colleagues.

[www.aauae.org](http://www.aauae.org) [www.pecha-kucha.org](http://www.pecha-kucha.org)

### A. In a whirl

Thirty years ago, English firm Spiral Staircases created a bespoke acrylic staircase for the last Shah of Iran to match the lavish interior of his Kish Island palace. Having carried out a number of projects across the Arabian Gulf – including the Dubai Creek and Emirates Golf Clubs, palaces at Al Ain and an island off the coast of Abu Dhabi, and a hotel in Cairo – the company is now teaming up with UK interior design consultancy, Capital Interiors, which has a base in the UAE, to get a slice of the action within the region's relentless property boom. High-profile clients include Christian Dior, Playboy, L'Oréal and the Sultan of Brunei as well as many historic buildings including a 16th-century tower in England and a minaret in Abu Dhabi.

[www.spiralstairs.co.uk](http://www.spiralstairs.co.uk)



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## Design Discourse

In a region that is pretty poor when it comes to contemporary design and innovation, did Dubai's International Design Forum mark the beginning of a design awakening in the Middle East – or was it simply a PR-boosted declaration of intent?



'SOME MIGHT ARGUE THAT DUBAI is all about expansion rather than depth,' proclaimed Mehdi Amjad, CEO of Omniyat Holdings, one of Dubai's more progressive developers. He was addressing the several hundred design professionals and business players who had descended on Dubai for the hotly anticipated International Design Forum (IDF). What everyone wanted to know was whether the IDF was a signal that the Emirate was finally putting design on the agenda, above its more typical Disney-style criteria.

'The Arab world is a place rich in promise, but it has a responsibility to champion its own designers to become competitive, commercial and forward thinking,' said Khalid Al Malik, CEO of Tatweer developers, who backed the event in a joint venture with the Saudi Research and Publishing Company. 'We must use design as an integral tool in our dialogue with the world.' The IDF talks and debates tackled every-

The IDF opening plenary session (above); dj kreemy, aka Karim Rashid, entertains (above right).

thing from product to city design, technology to sustainability, with an impressive roster of guests, including Rem Koolhaas, Karim and Hani Rashid, Marcel Wanders, Shigeru Ban, Michael Young, Oliviero Toscani, plus regional stars such as Bernard Khoury and Rasem Badran.

While the design industry is a crucial part of the UAE's expansion plans, IDF participants all agreed that regional design talent will only flourish if given greater educational and vocational opportunities. Moreover, said Oliviero Toscani: 'Local politics hamper creativity. There is no chance to grow creatively if there is no freedom of expression. I come to Dubai and I see the same imagery I saw in the US. I see junk everywhere. What happened? People tell me that in this

region they can't say they want to be a designer – we have to change that!'

Karim Rashid didn't mince words either, arguing that the problem in the Arab world is that people sit back and wait for someone else. Saudi architect Nadia Bakhurji pointed out that the region was traditionally rich in design, but a vacuum had appeared where these skills appeared lost. Now they are returning, but in Saudi Arabia, as elsewhere, architects are struggling to find an identity, partly due to religion and culture. 'At one time it was almost taboo to be considered a creator, because of its religious connotations.'

Sheikh Majed al Sabah, founder and CEO of Villa Moda, argued: 'People are afraid to push the envelope. Our designers need to perform consistently. Only then will Arabs gain the credibility to become truly global.' Paula Antonelli of MOMA, New York, drew attention to the wide variety of the ideas expressed. 'It is important to find a common ground,' she said. 'Architecture and design has always been about positive compromise. It was like that in ancient times and it is like that today.'

—Yvonne Courtney