

Arabs got (design) talent

Esquire design columnist **CYRIL ZAMMIT** on the visibility of region design stars



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABDULLAH TOUK

THE TALENTS ARE UNQUESTIONABLY HERE, SO IT'S TIME TO DULY RECOGNISE THEIR PRESENCE"

It's safe to say that the long-awaited moment has arrived. This month marks the commencement of numerous design spaces and events across the region, offering a platform to showcase the abundant but often under-exposed design talents in the region. I am personally very pleased to witness the emergence of two significant new platforms.

Firstly, the inauguration of Design Space AlUla marks an important milestone, as the first venue in the country entirely dedicated to design. This unique space provides not only exhibitions and workshops but also intriguing archives for design enthusiasts. Its inaugural exhibition, *Mawrid: Celebrating Inspired Design*, delves into the design thinking process behind ten recent AlUla-inspired creations spanning design, architecture, and urban planning. The opportunity to explore the sketches and creative processes of designers is a rare treat, and I highly recommend a visit before it ends at the end of May.


Additionally, the first cohort of the design residency, comprising Bahraini-Danish studio, Hall Haus (Bahrain/Denmark), StudioLeo Orta (France), Studio Raw Material (India), and Leen Ajlan (Saudi Arabia), will unveil their public realm interventions and urban furniture creations after five months on site.

Situated in the heart of AlJadidah Arts District, Design Space AlUla is a striking structure crafted from corten steel, polished concrete, and glass, conceived by Giò Forma Studio, the same studio behind Maraya, the mirror-clad venue seamlessly blending with its AlUla surroundings.

AlUla, having established itself as an art hub, is now asserting its position as a creative and community-focused design platform. Fostering regional talents, providing visibility, and equipping them with the tools for successful careers is the primary goal.

Elsewhere, on February 24, the inaugural Design Doha Biennial will help contribute to this vision. Notable not only for its scale—featuring six major exhibitions and 38 commissioned works—but also for its thematic focus on celebrating regional design excellence. The main exhibition, *'Arab Design Now'* curated by Rana Beiruti (founder of Amman Design Week), explores how local and regional designers harmonize contemporary design with traditional methods rooted in the region's heritage.

M7 will host nearly 80 designers from Morocco to Iraq; the UAE to Syria; and Palestine to Algeria on two levels. The Biennial will also include a talk series, workshops for entrepreneurial development, and exhibitions from the Gulf countries, including Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and extending to Uzbekistan, featuring a world premiere *'tapchan'* (traditional Uzbek seating) by Lebanese designer Nada Debs in collaboration with a local wood master. While the main events are scheduled from February 24 to 28, several exhibitions will continue to captivate audiences until the summer.

There is a genuine interest for the talents in regional Arab design scene, and the time is now ripe to guarantee their visibility and acknowledgment. What began over a decade ago with events like Design Days Dubai or Dubai Design Week marked an initial milestone in showcasing and recognizing regional design. By nurturing local initiatives and leveraging the influential capacities of well-established regional institutions, there is a high potential to substantially heighten awareness—on the condition that this evolution occurs organically, steering clear of importing franchised platforms from external origins. The talents are unquestionably here, and it is time to duly recognize and magnify their presence. 

Cyril Zammit is design consultant and design expert based in Dubai. Follow him @cyrilzam; cyrilzammit.com