

The future is digital but it needs real materials

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CYRIL ZAMMIT on future Cyril



Last month was pretty intense. Intense, but enlightening. It's always the time of the year when art and design are thrust into the limelight, and there has rarely been a more interesting time to dissect and digest the wider issues at play in the industry.

While there is a rush for our future to be totally engulfed in the digital sphere, the pull of the physical still remains. Our access to the fancy new Metaverse(s) of our choosing still depends on a certain level of materiality, despite the prediction of a world detached from our dear old planet.

Case in point, I was recently in AlUla, Saudi Arabia. Beside it being the region's current destination du jour, it also revealed to me that materiality is the source of everything.

The richness of the area comes from its large palette of materials that have enabled the local community to survive in the middle of a very challenging environment. The ancient Nabatean civilisation mastered carving, sculpting and developed the language which eventually became Arabic calligraphy. They used sand, rocks and palm leaves to leave a trace for us to read today. To help preserve those ancient skills, the Royal Commission of AlUla has developed a programme hosted in Al-Deerah, the oldest female school (founded: 1964) in town where students learn, develop and create new objects using primary materials, locally sourced.

This is just one of example of cultural foundations working to help preserve traditional craftsmanship in all human societies, be it weaving, carving, tile making, painting, stitching, printing, engraving, enamelling and much more.

I write this en route to Uzbekistan where the Art and Culture Development Foundation has invited me for an educational tour of the country to learn about the local craft and design scene. Too often considered as dying and non-regenerative art form, for me, craft is the noblest of all form of expressions combining natural material and human skill.

Alongside values and cultural beliefs, materialism is the base of any society. Through materials we can either build or destroy. It is key of our survival. During the recent lockdowns, we realized how much we all depend on 'things', be it food, construction items or tiny tech components.

Modern life has become dependent on rare materials that are slowly becoming scarce on our planet. So what's our solution? The Moon? Mars? People are working on it.

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Materialism is also one of the main topics exhibited in Dubai's new Museum of the Future. In several rooms you can see, hear and touch new materials that are either 3D-printed or, surprisingly, made from basic clay—one of the oldest materials used

by mankind. The combination of old and new is important because it reminds us again that we must preserve what we were given in inheritance.

It seems fitting then that we are discussing materialism as we observe the Holy month of Ramadan. It is a time when we are all asked to put aside the desire for more and understand that the true values of the human kind are a subtle mix of empathy, introspection and humility. ☺