

# C O M F O R T S H O M E S

Through a balance of whimsy and practicality, **OMAR AL GURG** has become a gentle force in the emergent GCC design world. The inspired Emirati designer invites us into his modern day Majlis

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Kid mohair and wool double breasted jacket; Kid mohair and wool trousers; Silk tie, all by BALLY. Slim poplin shirt, by CALVIN KLEIN. Leather penny shoes, by MALONE SOULIERS. Traditionnelle tourbillon green platinum watch, by VACHERON CONSTANTIN



alking into Omar Al Gurg's house, it's hard to know which sense to embrace first. The soft and

warm voice of Dusty Springfield is playing over the speakers, while her face is projected large across an entire tawny-brown living room wall. The soft brown carpet beneath is reminiscent of fine desert sand, and practically everywhere you look is punctuated with artwork and design objects - most of them designed by him.

This is not Al Gurg's home. The 27-year-old designer transformed this Jumeirah 1 bungalow in Dubai into his showcase house back in January 2022 - partly a way to showcase his work in situ to potential clients, partly as an escape.

"This is my safe space. It's sort of like a modern day majlis," he says as a response to the look of curiosity spreading across my face. Dressed in an immaculate khandora, he welcomes me in, shoes off, and habitually offers some refreshments. "There is no time zone here. You feel you are out in space." He's right.

I first heard of the young Emirati back in November 2021, when he premiered his first furniture creations at Downtown Design. These were not one-off limited edition pieces, but part of a practical and affordable series that embodied his simple intention as entrepreneur and artist: to improve peoples' lives with nice and functional objects. I was involved in the curation of the design fair, and have enjoyed watching him continue to carve a name for himself in the design world since then.

Should you have to introduce him in three words, they would be: intuitive, pragmatic and quirky. His vision for design sticks to the fundamentals of the discipline (form follows

function) and is the result of Al Gurg's own experiences, and self-confessed discomfort.

"When I was doing my [UAE] National Service, I noticed that I didn't have anywhere to hang my clothes," he says. His solution was to come up with the concept of Spike - a large, cone-shape wooden stand with holes and adaptable pegs. It looks like a desert cactus, and was the piece that first made him famous in Dubai's design circles.

His designs are the result of a gut feeling, it may end up raw but his intuition guides his creation process. "I create things that I would use. Things that have a problem-solving purpose," he says, "and I think other people would use them too."

To save space he created Gene, an interlocking two-piece table/stool in teak and walnut; and for versatility he created NU, a set of concrete building blocks that can be used as a bench, a table, a shelf or - in the case of his living room - a place to stack vinyl records. With his brand Modu Method (Modu), he has already built an international client-list, shipping his designs abroad to Italy, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

**MODU (SHORT FOR 'MODULAR')** brings with it a sense of quirkiness, however, on first impression Omar Al Gurg is reserved. Impeccably polite, instinctively hospitable, softly spoken - almost shy. His family name carries weight in Dubai, with his grandfather an important diplomat and entrepreneur atop a family tree continuing to add branches to the emirate's growing success story. He admits being a family person, spending as much time as possible with them.

His hospitable nature is characteristic of a prominent Arab family, the open hospitality



Jacket in micro-pattern virgin wool; Trousers in micro-patterned wool with cashmere, both by BOSS. Geometric-jacquard wool cardigan, by ETRO. Overseas moon phase retrograde date watch in steel, by VACHERON CONSTANTIN



Wool caban jacket; Mint shirt; ValenTie, all by VALENTINO. Patrimony retrograde day-date watch in platinum, by VACHERON CONSTANTIN



Wool caban jacket; Mint shirt; Trousers; ValenTie; Rockstud boots, all by VALENTINO



**I CREATE THINGS THAT I WOULD USE, THINGS THAT OTHER PEOPLE WOULD USE – THINGS THAT HAVE A PROBLEM-SOLVING PURPOSE”**

constantly welcoming people into the family home, or Majlis. That is why he created this house, to build up a community where people can be socially active. He describes it as a palette cleanser where you come, switch off from work and freely exchange ideas - or even play some board games.

According to Omar, the Al Gurg family has always been a DIY one - never hesitating to take a hammer or another tool to fix a broken satellite dish on the roof, or uproot a tree in the garden. Since he was young - beside being on the hyperactive side - he would travel extensively with his family experiencing different cultural capitals, visiting museums with his aunt, and being introduced to photography by both his father and sisters. He grew up with the purpose of “doing more with my time” and not letting the day pass by without a purpose.

The practicality and adaptability he embraced as a child made him better appreciate the things around him, especially the ones he did himself.

His leap into design came naturally. After several years studying architecture in Belfast (Northern Ireland), Al Gurg returned to the UAE to fulfil his National Service duties in 2019. It was there that he started to embrace

a level of discipline, even though it would occasionally go against his quirkier impulses.

Today he wakes up early, goes to the gym, then to work at the family business, before jumping back to Modu - his creative world.

There’s an element of Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde to Al Gurg. On one side, he is the kind of guy who will gladly go to the cinema by himself. He loves to be alone and to work alone; but on the other he loves being surrounded by people, welcoming them into and hosting them in his safe space. But here, as we continue our chat, while sitting on NED, another one of his creations, I start to get it. To use a design analog: his line is contemporary, but there is this strong intangible connection to Mid-Century design.

**AL GURG’S DESIGN WORLD IS TIMELESS.**

It’s built to create sentimental value with each piece, but also to develop a storyline too. “The more you interact, the more you develop an attachment to something,” he says. Due to the modular essence of his pieces, they can be used anywhere with multiple purposes. “I want to make pieces that last forever.”

Mid-Century design never imposed its style, but instead added convenient, sophisticated and practical items for a happier lifestyle. That was the initial direction of Modu, a brand you “add to your life and take along with you”. Al Gurg explains how he pays a lot of attention to details when the production is launched. He decided to produce his collection in the UAE, a challenge that he likes to take on because “once the makers have understood you need more refined objects than their usual mass production, they appreciate the journey with you”. He expresses a lot of respect for makers. He also expects the scale of growth of his brand to allow him to remain manufacturing in the UAE for the foreseeable future.

Armed with his architectural background, Al Gurg became interested in observing how it interrelated with human behaviour, or how he puts it with a smile: “how to manipulate people’s feelings with a building.” But it was a reticence to work on large-scale projects that turned him away from architecture. “I wanted to be an architect, but honestly, I am

Prince of wales deconstructed blazer; Cashmere turtleneck sweater; Leisure fit trousers, all by BRUNELLO CUCINELLI. Patrimony retrograde day-date watch in platinum, by VACHERON CONSTANTIN

I Can't Stand the Rain

Ann Peebles

Cedar shirt; Cedar trousers, both by  
HOMME PLISSÉ ISSEY MIYAKE.  
Patrimony retrograde day-date watch in  
platinum, by VACHERON CONSTANTIN



Brown shearling cardigan;  
Grey wool-blend suit,  
both by ZEGNA. Overseas  
self-winding watch with  
brown rubber strap,  
by VACHERON CONSTANTIN



Thob, OMAR'S OWN.  
Patriomny retrograde  
day-date watch in platinum,  
by VACHERON CONSTANTIN



## HIS FOCUS IS TO MAKE GOOD DESIGN ACCESSIBLE. IT ISN'T AN EXERCISE IN EXCLUSION

too impatient to wait all the time that is needed for a building to be complete." Hence his pivot towards design. "I want instant gratification!" he laughs.

Looking around us, the colour palette is very 1970s. A pinch of nostalgia of a time when he wasn't even born. "It was a very comfortable period...aside from the tight jeans," he laughs, "People wanted to chill out and enjoy life. Beside a collection of contemporary design magazines and some Modu pieces - everything else sticks to that period. There is this presence of the sepia colour palette of an ageing polaroid. "I like to put a sepia filter on top of everything. When I see something, I like it to calm me. Sepia adds warmth." He plays with colour, but in a consistent manner, using a proper family of colours.

We talk about his favourite designers, and it is no surprise that he immediately brings up Charles and Ray Eames - the husband and wife duo most known for their transformative impact of modern furniture design, but who also worked as artists and filmmakers. "I love everything that they did," he says, "from the toys to the houses they designed, and even films." He brings up *Power of Ten* (1977), a film that deals with the relative size of things in the universe ("Basically, zooming in and out on Google Maps before Google Maps existed.")

Speaking of zooming out, twice a year Al Gurg switches off and "actively runs away from people". He uses that time to (re)connect with nature and visit other cities to "walk around aimlessly without any plan". Alone or not, he again describes it as a "palette cleanser" allowing his brain to reset and detach from everyday routine.

Among his achievements is a trek to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro - an adventure provoked by determination and, towards the last part of the ascent, resilience. "I remember feeling really sick towards the top and wanting to quit," he recalls, "but I didn't want all of that effort up until then to be in vain." A life lesson. Al Gurg is someone who prefers the journey over the destination.

"I VERY MUCH CONSIDER MYSELF a 'Jack of all trades, and master of none,'" he says of his involvement in the production process for Modu's designs. He likes to be involved, but accepts his limits and content to defer to the skilled makers. He is happy watching them work, absorbing what he sees as part of a learning phase to improve his knowledge for his next creations.

The trouble with success in design is that, unfortunately, when you create something with a demand, it can generate people copying your work. "At first it shocked me, but I quickly learnt that there was nothing I could do, so why let it bother me," he says with remarkable maturity. "I know that the quality we produce, and the story behind each creation is there to distinguish my work from a cheap copy." This is why each piece of his is given a name - Spike (the cactus-like stand), NU (the interlocking set of concrete blocks) - it gives them character. It is part of a story. "When I send a piece to a buyer's home, I try to make sure that the furniture will meet its new family and become part of their story."

When it comes to limited-edition design, Al Gurg is not in a hurry to produce any at this stage - but he's not ruling out the option. "I don't want to produce a limited series of things and say to people 'it is now or never.'" His focus, for now, is to make good design accessible. It is not an exercise in exclusion.

While Al Gurg is proud of being Emirati, his Arab identity isn't the source of his creative inspiration, but more part of its subconscious. "I think it shows through it, but doesn't dominate my work," he says as we sit cross-legged in his 'modern day Majlis' surrounded by an aesthetic that balances contemporary and tradition. A room fit for purpose. "At the end of the day, I am driven by convenience."

As we end our chat, the dusk sky outside has turned a striking shade of orange, adding its own touch to the universe of Omar Al Gurg's colour palette. Evidently, a sign from above, while Dusty Springfield plays out 'Stay a while' projected up on the wall. 🎧

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