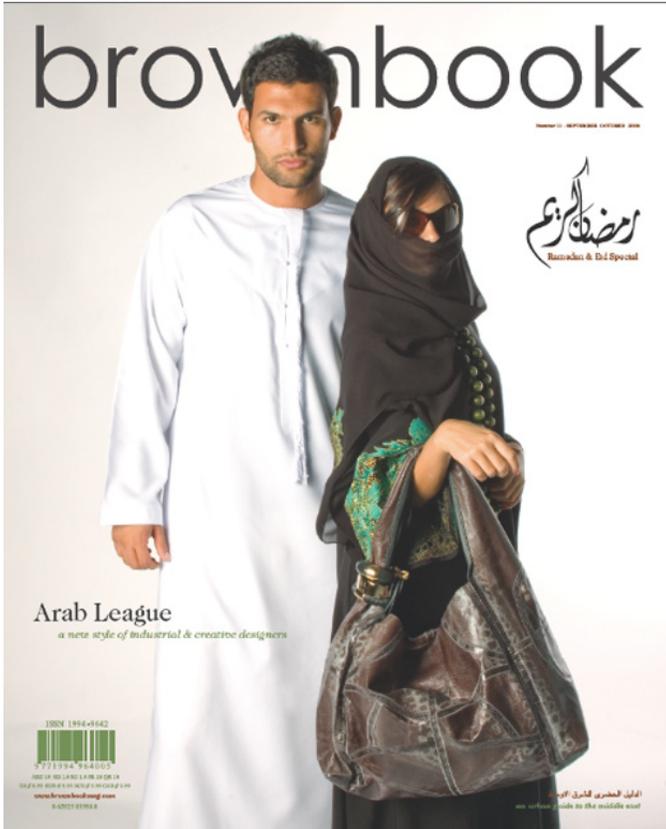


## The New Avant-garde in Dubai Radically Challenges East and West



Fervent embrace of avant-garde art and architecture in Dubai among other cities of the United Arab Emirates has radically challenged perceptions of Middle Eastern Culture worldwide. The “Dubai effect” can be strongly felt in cities across the globe—including Los Angeles—where new attitudes, discourse, and resources are emerging for artists and architects in the wake of a new global intelligence that is cutting through centuries of misunderstanding between the East and the West. Contemporary California architect, professor, and theorist Stephen Phillips and renowned Dutch photographer Monica Nouwens surveyed a diverse group of Middle Eastern artists and architects in Los Angeles to get the candid story of these exciting changes as they affect the LA scene.

Image, style, and fashion have always been central to LA’s media frenzied lifestyle. Enchanting, hip, stylish and cool—Los Angeles is a tourist hotspot with extensive beaches, palm tree-lined avenues, soaring downtown skyscrapers, an array of theme parks, vast wealth, and an energetic nightlife. Not entirely unlike Dubai, Los Angeles was built afresh in the desert almost instantaneously. It has attracted an extensive multicultural population alongside a vast array of developer interests, and has proven one of the most compelling cultural centers for art and architecture in the world.

Los Angeles shares much in common with Dubai. In fact, Los Angeles and Southern California houses the largest Middle Eastern Community in the United States. According to the University of Los Angeles (UCLA), Middle Eastern Americans are widely spread across Southern California, and are by and large, a highly educated, upwardly mobile, and a prolific group of people that include politicians, literary activists, business and community leaders, educators, scientists, doctors, lawyers, artists and entertainers. Perhaps the most politically active Middle Eastern and Iranian American community in Los Angeles is in Beverly Hills where Jimmy Delshad, a Jewish-Iranian immigrant is



the Mayor of one of the richest and most established communities in the United States.

Middle Eastern Americans in Los Angeles have strong cultural pride and are committed to preserving, researching, and studying the wealth of culture and history of the Middle East, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Levantine Cultural Center, and UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies are only a few of the well-established institutions that provide community access to Middle Eastern Culture in Los Angeles. These institutions among others, offer strong support for art and research, and provide great investment in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman literature, scholarship, and the arts. Although the dominant Middle Eastern American concern in art, social politics, and literature is the critical reappraisal of Orientalism in Western art, thought, and imagination—there is now also budding interest in avant-garde art and architecture as seen through the eyes of the Middle East.

Contemporary cities like Dubai have radically altered the way the West sees the Middle East, which is affording new opportunities for Middle Eastern artists and architects to pursue global avant-garde practices. As



Dubai has increasingly become the most compelling new venue for contemporary art, architecture, tourism, and business in the world, stereotypes of the Middle East and Middle Eastern Americans is beginning to wane. In the face of change, Westerners can no longer simply-mindedly continue to harbor mystique for Middle Eastern Culture associated with 19th century fables of The Arabian Nights. Instead, they are being forced to wake-up and acknowledge an evolution in Middle Eastern world interests. For under the leadership of his Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Dubai has become a model of contemporary image, style, fashion, and design unparalleled in recent years.



In light of changes happening in Dubai, back in 2004, the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department (LACAD) chose Dubai as its cultural sister-city. Los Angeles realized it had much to gain from strong interrelationships with the United Arab Emirates. Dubai has rapidly created a wealth of artistic cultural interchange between Western cities and the Middle East, affording new networks for global relations to emerge everyday. New opportunities for social and cultural communication between Dubai and Los Angeles are already showing an impact on the lives of a future generation of Middle Eastern American artists and architects living in Los Angeles. As Publisher and Creative Director of Beautiful/Decay magazine and the first Middle Eastern American artist to exhibit at The Third Line gallery in Dubai, Amir H. Fallah recalls very few of his friends and colleagues back in 2004 even knew very much about Dubai and the economic and cultural boom happening there. It was not until he visited Dubai in 2005 that Fallah really became aware of the developments occurring in the region. "Dubai is one of the most open minded and forward thinking cities in the Middle East," Fallah discovered. "Not only was I greeted with excitement and encouragement, there was also a large demand for the arts to develop and expand. Since that trip I've seen the city go from one art gallery to having its own art district and art fair. I think the opportunities are endless in Dubai. The people of Dubai are excited to create a dialogue with other large cities to further expand its footing as a must see cultural destination."



Fallah among many other artists, architects, and business people of multi-cultural decent in Los Angeles have become extremely optimistic that the increased interest and opportunities they are seeing in Dubai will prove to change cultural and societal perceptions in both cities for the better. Successful Iranian-American art dealer and curator Leila Khastoo for example, hopes to facilitate a strong exchange between Dubai and Los Angeles so that even more people will pay attention. Khastoo believes, "Dubai holds a tangible potential for growth in the creative sectors," and she foresees her curatorial work bringing, "an integrative aesthetic to the current art market." Khastoo is interested to organize exhibitions in Dubai that allow for crossovers and contradistinctions with artists from many continents of different generations. Dubai offers enormous opportunities for artists, and in her recent visit to Dubai, she was astounded by the resources available: "I was dumbfounded by the amazing technical facilities within arms reach of any interested local artist," she observed. "Opportunities are there for everyone," she explains; "it's just a matter of being progressive."



Middle Eastern and Iranian Americans are sensing a renewed optimism through the increased interest and growing awareness of Middle Eastern Culture and its heritage due to the impact Dubai and other progressive Middle Eastern cities are having on the world. “Dubai’s success in the art world,” Fallah explains, “is changing the tides in the Middle Eastern community; there is more support now than I have seen in the last decade. More Middle Easterners are getting excited about artists coming out of that region and are interested in going to Dubai and seeing it first hand.” As Los Angeles based writer and curator of Iranian descent, Yasmine Mohseni explains: “I think the fact that there even is a cultural exchange between LA and Dubai is fantastic!” In Los Angeles, “there is a thirst for knowledge here for everything that is from the Middle East,” and art as she contends “is, and always has been, a fantastic way to create a dialogue between multiple cultures and bring them together.” By creating a more interconnected and international multi-cultural dialogue, Middle Eastern and Iranian Americans hope to “dispel stereotypes and assumptions one culture can have about another,” Mohseni explains. For Mohseni and young Iranian American writer, Khadisha Oskoui—hope for the future lies in changing worldviews. Oskoui’s greatest hope is that the people of Dubai and Los Angeles will learn from each other and be places of mutual respect regardless of their different histories, cultures, and background. Interaction benefits everyone, as Italian educated American-Iranian architect Michele Saei explains of his experience building in Europe, China, and America. “Social and cultural interaction invigorates every society and helps each society to see themselves in a new way,” he observes.

The road to cultural awareness and acceptance however is not easy. And as President of LA Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, Mohamed Sharif, an Egyptian from the United Kingdom and Assistant Chair of the Architecture Department at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles realizes, there is already a critical backlash forming by Western architects uncomfortable with Dubai’s powerful embrace of avant-garde art and architecture. Dubai is an architectural

extravaganza—the most exciting in the world—boasting the world’s tallest building, largest future theme park, and the most buildings over 100 stories in any one city. Dubai’s contemporary architecture scene is astounding. Not only is the city building some of the most radical and innovative architecture designs today, but it is also setting a powerful agenda for energy efficiency and sustainable practices the world has yet to achieve. Regardless of Dubai’s innovative accomplishments and intentions however, Western architects and theorists are already assessing similar to one recent author in Log magazine, that Dubai’s “unbridled exuberance” is all iconographic “folly” and “fantasy” in need of saving by rational western architects with their sophisticated urban plans. Some Western architects and theorists seem to believe world design standards can only be set in the West, and are perhaps not ready to accept there is a global intelligence emerging indiscriminate of any historic cultural agenda delimiting East from West. We all share in mutual dialogue, internationally benefiting from the wealth of knowledge and artistic exploration happening all over the globe, and it is the foresight and intelligence of leaders in the Middle East who are putting some of these most innovative global ideas to action.



Vast changes are happening, and Dubai is challenging Western and Eastern viewpoints alike. A new global economy has begun to restructure not only the physical landscape, but also international self-understanding. Images of Dubai's avant-garde architecture and stylish contemporary living are radically complicating worldviews. They are generating multi-cultural awareness globally, in addition to setting high standards of avant-garde interest and practice. For those of us who relish cultural dialog and are interested to further international relationships, changes happening in Dubai are making a great difference here in the United States. Dubai is opening more minds to contemporary art and architecture, and the city is inciting a global discourse that is creating new standards for greater social awareness.

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