

Downtown Design

Art and Design: The Thin Red Line

The visionary team behind Art Dubai and Design Days Dubai has launched the first edition of a unique trade fair, Downtown Design, to showcase how trenchant design is evolving in the region.

BY AYSWARYA MURTHY

FAIR DIRECTOR CRISTINA ROMELLI GERVASONI is excited about the prospect of bringing together people who are passionate about quality, materials and design under one common roof in Dubai. In Poltrona Frau's showroom at The Pearl-Qatar, where she presented Downtown Design to the Doha audience and invited local stakeholders to Dubai to experience the event, she talks about throwing the spotlight on quality-driven companies — whether they are involved in furniture, decor, textiles, lighting or flooring — that are changing the way we think about design. “We have invited about 40 companies from all over the world — Italy, France, United States, Turkey, Iran, Czech Republic, Denmark and more - to exhibit their products and concepts and tell people the behind-the-scenes story of their company and their design philosophy,” she says. The companies participating were carefully handpicked by Cristina herself and had to meet some stringent specifications.

“Quality was the focus, obviously. But aside from there we were keen to invite companies that own the rights of what they produce, who invest in product development, who are the sole producers (i.e they have no suppliers) of whatever they make and, most importantly, those who are the first movers in the market. Whether it is today or fifty years ago, we are looking at companies that introduced a style or a philosophy for the very first time in the market and started a trend,” she says. A tough set of criteria, and only the best of the best were given the opportunity to be part of this “rare occasion”.

The companies that made the cut include Cassina, Cappellini, De Castelli, Turkish brand Gaia&Gino, Vitra, Preciosa Lighting and Poltrona Frau, a 100-year-old company with a rich heritage that even today still hand-produces every single piece of furniture.

“The company opened its own museum in Italy this year. Some of its products are so iconic, and they are still in production today, 50 years after they were first introduced. So that’s the kind of caliber we are dealing with,” Romelli Gervasoni points out. But it isn’t just about pedigree. At the other end of the spectrum we find companies like Atelier AK, a new Dubai-based venture that was looking forward to being launched at the fair. “Though they are young, their vision and designs are very international. They will be launching a line of furniture and home decor products made from high-quality camel leather. Similarly, another new company we invited, Discipline, was launched only last year, and is already being distributed by the likes of Harrods.” Romelli Gervasoni is particularly proud about hosting the Temporary Museum of Milan, the most important furniture fair in the world, which was exhibiting outside of Milan for the first time in years and also brought with it eight companies showcasing their products. “Three Danish companies — Republic of Fritz Hansen, Carl Hansen & Son and Louis Poulsen — hand-make a chair from scratch over the four days in one of our more exciting live installations,” she says. Talks by the likes of eclectic designer Ora Ito and CEO of Emaar Properties Robert D Booth were some of the other highlights of the fair. There are similar exhibitions on a larger

scale in Milan, New York, London and Paris, but Cristina says they had decided to invite only an exclusive few for a good reason. “If we had 200 companies all bringing down their products, the fair wouldn’t have the same impact. The customers wouldn’t have time to appreciate the designs and the companies wouldn’t get to understand the market and the customers better,” she says.

For her Doha and Dubai are not in competition with each other but complement each other and help companies to be much more present in the region. “The opportunities in the region are exploding, and these companies are looking for big projects like office buildings, airports, hotels, auditoriums and the like,” she says. For architects, interior designers, contractors and the whole chain of professionals in the design industry, this was a great opportunity to see what’s going on and to get a feel for the market. She also hopes that the event will give local design-oriented companies a boost. “Unfortunately there aren’t many big companies here currently who are at the cutting edge of design. It’s going to be a challenge to nurture companies that produce products with brilliant design with great value and quality and are also inspirational to other talented people in the region,” she says. ■

Downtown Design was held from October 29 to 31 in Dubai.



A NEW THOUGHT
Clockwise from left: Fair Director Cristina Romelli; The Proust Geometrica armchair from Cappellini; Regina II, designed by Paolo Rizzatto for Poltrona Frau; Celato by De Castelli.