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DUBAI REVIEW



Project designs: Staying ahead of the curve

Green goals

As confidence returns, Dubai interior designers see good business across the board, reports NIKKI BUSUTTIL

The heady euphoria of the 1990s and early 2000s has left a magnificent mark on the seemingly ever expanding skyline of Dubai. However, the heydays of that time have definitely subsided in a tangible way in the emirate. Dubai has experienced some difficult times, after having played a leading role in the world of architecture and design, while other countries in the Middle East region have caught up and been taking off at an impressive pace. For the last four years in particular, little has progressed as the full force of the global economic slowdown greatly impacted Dubai.

Firmly entrenched in Dubai, with no intention of abandoning the region, architecture and interior design firm dwp (www.dwp.com) sees the future potential of a comeback in the design industry there, along with an all-round optimism for the Middle East in general.

"Although, in recent years, we have witnessed a regression in the number of projects and developments directly located in Dubai, this is by no means a saturated market for design. It is only natural after a major worldwide economic crisis that tempered caution remains in the air, when it comes to growth and investment, yet we do not anticipate this to be a permanent fixture on the Dubai landscape for design," noted Brenton Mauriello, group CEO of dwp | design worldwide partnership.

The design firm has seen a dramatic increase in projects in Saudi Arabia, particularly over the last year, which have kept both its Dubai and Bahrain offices busy during the slowdown, in terms of masterplanning, architecture and interior design projects.

"We are, however, seeing a return to business as usual in certain key sectors in Dubai. Given our continued commitment here, clients in Dubai are keen to work with us on their forthcoming projects, as we have established experience in this market and they benefit from our international network of talent, within our vast and varied design portfolios," commented Linda Van Der Walt, regional business development director for dwp in the Middle East.

RENEWED OPTIMISM

Experience is certainly what counts for Dubai in terms of design since developers



Hospitality projects: Moving towards international look

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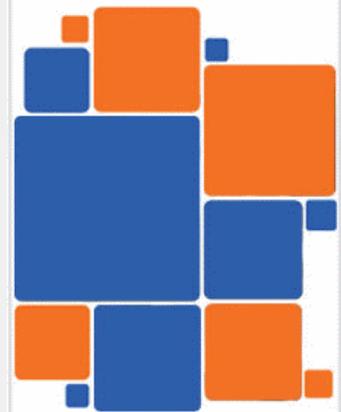
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and clients in this country have vast experience themselves accumulated over the last 20 years or more. They are aware to an exacting degree of the benefits and value to their projects in having the right design consultants as partners. Dubai could be considered far more cosmopolitan than other regions in the Middle East, given its history, which leads to a more educated and international clientele for design consultants. Clients tend to be open and ready for a more international approach, to stay ahead of the curve, having already adopted change as a norm in the last few decades.



There does seem to be a renewed optimism in the Dubai marketplace and it is therefore, once again, starting to be considered a secure investment by international prospectors. In Dubai, dwp is seeing an increased demand for the review and development of corporate spaces and working standards, to bring their corporations in line with advanced workplace trends worldwide.

“Corporations in Dubai have realised the benefits of creating increased communication and collaboration in the working environment, in increasing their bottom line and future growth capabilities,” adds Linda. The design and build of such projects, together with the interior designer leading the project, is now an accepted and common trend for Dubai too. During the boom, clients tended to favour turnkey solutions, where the project was contractor-driven. This resulted in projects being delivered that frequently did not resemble the designer’s vision or clients’ expectations for the agreed upon design, in addition to an extensive use of substituted inferior materials by the contractor – ideal neither for the design firm, nor the client.

HOSPITALITY PROJECTS

Furthermore, the Arab Spring boosted Dubai’s hospitality sector exponentially, as the UAE was quite unaffected, and therefore considered a safe working and holiday destination. Visitor numbers increased, since those who would have normally visited Syria and Egypt, in particular, have made Dubai their destination of choice, leading to an increase in the development of new hotels and the refurbishment of existing hotels. In terms of hospitality development projects, for hotel, restaurants, bars and clubs, the designs requested by Dubai clients are moving towards a heightened international look and feel.



Retail sector: Dubai continues of attract international brands

“We have noticed that our Dubai clients are more inclined to desire less of the heavy Arabic features and dark materials that other Middle East countries favour and opt rather more for the European-style hotel design trends,” according to Linda. Cultural sensitivities, however, still play an important role, and such considerations need to be maintained, when planning the public and VIP areas of such developments, which generally requires a market-experienced design firm.

In keeping with these trends, retail malls are also currently capitalising on the renewed excitement for the future of Dubai and are undergoing expansion. Dubai continues to attract international retail brands, as it continues to be viewed as an advanced and luxury destination.

HEALTHCARE SECTOR

These are not the only areas of growth for Dubai though, as international standard healthcare and education projects are still a general priority in the UAE, as a whole. In a very positive turn of development, rather than just simply bigger, taller, faster, grander, as witnessed in the past for Dubai designs, sustainable design is now a focus in Dubai. With any luck and more concerted efforts, the future looks greener for Dubai, but not just as an idealistic intention. Globally, there is an increased awareness and evidence to support the premise that green buildings and green environments offer greater long-term financial performance, not to mention the vast amount of literature and reports on the superior health and well-being benefits for green building users.

In effect, confidence is gradually being restored to Dubai, and the impact is already gently rippling through the design world. Design firms, such as dwp, who have the experience locally, with an international outlook, are well-placed to remain the consultancy companies of choice for future development.

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