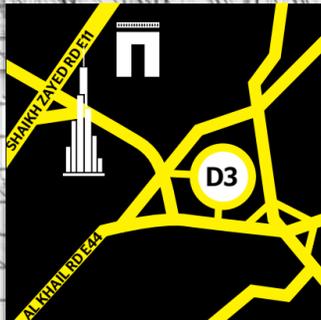




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DESIGNS ON DUBAI

Dubai Design District, or D3, will do what the DIFC did to Dubai, making the city international headquarters for multinational fashion or design conglomerates

Sujata Assomull

Sometimes the marriage of commerce and creativity can be a good thing. In 2013, Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, unveiled his vision to create a purpose-built design district that could nurture emerging local talent and provide a home for the region's creative thinkers. We are now seeing that vision become a reality.

Built at a cost of \$1.1 billion, the 21.5 million square feet facility — a community for design — will be home to galleries, workshops, studios and, of course, fashion stores. It has been positioned as key to the city's 2020 vision — the year Dubai plays host to the World Expo. By then D3 will have its own hotels, serviced apartments, residences and restaurants — all contributing to D3's financial eco-system. It will be a city within a city. Of late, there has been a flurry of activity in the style space as last month alone there has been Fashion Forward Dubai and Dubai Design Week, both supported by D3.

The city's thrust on culture got renewed after the financial crisis of 2010, when a conscious effort was made to re-emerge as more than just the money capital of the Middle East. Any great city of the world, be it London, Paris or New York, are known for their culture as much as their commerce. And this is probably why Dubai is now investing in opening its own museums and opera theatre. The city is already home to the largest luxury mall in the world, but it wants to be known for more than spending; it wants to be known for its style. And though most cultural hubs are not purpose built, they evolve — such as London's Shoreditch, Paris' Le Marais or New York's Meatpacking district. So the design hub has had its sceptics. Design districts are about organic growth that does not have commerce as its centre, but culture. With the UAE as a country being still young, it is developing its own idea of a design culture, so a hub does seem a bit premature. Which is why after the soft opening earlier this year, some members of the international Press questioned the future of D3 and felt it was a concept being forced.

And in some way their observations were correct, as D3 is not a design hub that can be compared to Shoreditch or the Meatpacking District. Trade has always been something Dubai has understood, so it makes sense for Dubai to link commerce to this creative hub. So it is purpose-building a design hub that is true to the heritage of the city. Dubai cannot run away from the commerce tag, even when it comes to being creative, and perhaps accepting this will make D3 a success. It will help Dubai evolve its own creative language.

With phase one complete, it will house 500 companies and 10,000 professionals. Already companies such as Christian Dior have moved in and Hugo Boss and Moncler's regional offices will also be headquartered in D3. Designers are currently setting up their studios, and design consultancies are now putting finishing touches to their offices. It seems the industry is excited about their new home. Commerce is driving creative companies to see D3 as their new home.

"We chose D3 because it is set to become the hub of creativity, design and all things fashion and style. Many of our clients and potential clients will also be there eventually, and we foresee that it will be a vibrant place for us to conduct business. It is not only going to provide a platform, but also will become an exciting environment, which will inspire yet more creativity, and foster talent. We want to be in the heart of this new wave for Dubai," says Dipesh Depala, co-founder

of Qode. The Qode is a Dubai-based multi-faceted agency that offers luxury brands public relations, events management, and social media with clients such as H&M, Berluti and Sephora. Fashion is very much part of its core.

Like many other boutique creative agencies, their offices are at JLT, and Depala says: "The new office is very geared up for the functions of the Qode. The showroom will receive stylists and editors on a regular basis to view collections. We will also conduct trunk shows for not only our clients, but also for project clients, and our space provides the perfect platform for the brands to conduct these. The new office is three times the size of our JLT operation. That is the main difference, and the space we have will allow us to offer many more services to our clients and potential clients."

As a design centre, it has taken design being a part of its DNA very seriously. Founder of Viktor Udzenija Architecture and Design, Viktor Udzenija says: "Phase 1 is almost full, and more and more people are thinking of moving here. I look forward to the next stages of development and the newly launched wing designed by Norman Foster, a company I've worked for for almost seven years. Dubai is a very vibrant city and creativity is one of its core elements, always pushing the boundaries and challenging innovation and development. There couldn't have been a better place for a design-oriented development than here in this city." It has given Viktor Udzenija a space that he can finally call his own, and is his company's first official office space. A designer known for his cutting edge contemporary chair he exhibited at Design Design Week and his "Little Rocker" Marble chair, Udzenija has gained critical acclaim. "It is a showcase of our design language and quality standards and is a great first introduction to our work to the clients and people that we work with. It is a space designed in accordance with latest sustainability standards and we have been awarded the Best Sustainable Initiative Award 2015 at this year's Commercial Interior Design Mena awards. The original space was shell and core with floor to ceiling windows along one entire elevation. It allowed us to fully utilise our creativity and express ourselves in a holistic way," says the designer.

The hope is that this space attracts international headquarters to D3, which is an ambitious endeavour. But even it does become the Dubai International Finance Centre of Design in the region, it will prove you can purpose build a commercial hub for design. It has been over ten years since the Dubai International Financial Centre opened its doors. And it has truly become the Wall Street of the emirate. As a city, Dubai is truly a gateway between the West and the East, so it has a location advantage that few other cities in the world can offer. Building on this, the DIFC is now home to 21 out of 25 of the world's top banks, six out of 10 largest insurance companies and six out of 10 of the world's top law firms. The DIFC is a 110-acre federal free zone complete with its own court. Purpose built like D3 to be a city within a city with art galleries, restaurants, cafes, salons and The Ritz Carlton also count the DIFC as their home. Dubai International Finance Centre Investments reported a revenue for US\$222 million for the fiscal year 2014, so while it still has debt to clear, the future of the DIFC seems bright. D3's real success will come when it manages to become the international headquarters of one of the multinational fashion or design conglomerates. Then even the sceptics will have to be quiet.

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