

Carving a new niche

SUJATA ASSOMULL SPENDS SOME TIME GETTING TO KNOW THE THINKING OF **VIKTOR UDZENIJA**, ARCHITECT, DESIGNER AND COLLECTOR, WHO IS TOTALLY UPBEAT ABOUT DUBAI

Among the first companies to move into Dubai Design District (D3) was Viktor Udzenija Architecture and Design. The company was started three years ago by Viktor Udzenija, who first came to Dubai when he worked for world famous British architecture firm Foster + Partners. Udzenija topped his class at the prestigious Technical University in Munich, Germany and was handpicked to be a part of Foster + Partners. The last project he worked on for the company was Index Towers, and it is this building he still lives in. Known for his eye for detail, his passion for quality and his very clean take on architecture and design, Udzenija has become one of Dubai's leading names in the field. His own house has been covered by some of the top design magazines and his personal design collection is almost as well known as his own work.

The office is a testament to Udzenija's aesthetic. You are greeted by a couch shaped like golden lips from Italian Design house Gufram, well known for their conceptual pieces. It's a design house he is partial to, and he has used

their products in several of his projects. Also in the reception area are two handpicked pieces of art. A limited edition print by Saudi artist Abdunnasser Gharam from his Inshallah series, which has the words, 'Have a Bit of Commitment'. An admirer of the artist's work, Udzenija believes it is "sort of fitting for a workspace". The wall features two photographs by Richard Allenby-Pratt from his *Abandoned* series. Like Udzenija, Dubai-based British photographer Allenby-Pratt is a good example of an expatriate who has embraced Dubai, made it his home, and in turn found that the city has nurtured his career to reach new levels.

In the three short years since Udzenija started his company, apart from interior design projects he has worked on several important architectural projects too. On his list right now are two towers near the Dubai airport, Mamzak, as well as projects in Croatia and Turkey. The mock-ups of these projects have a semblance of art inside his 1400 square foot office.





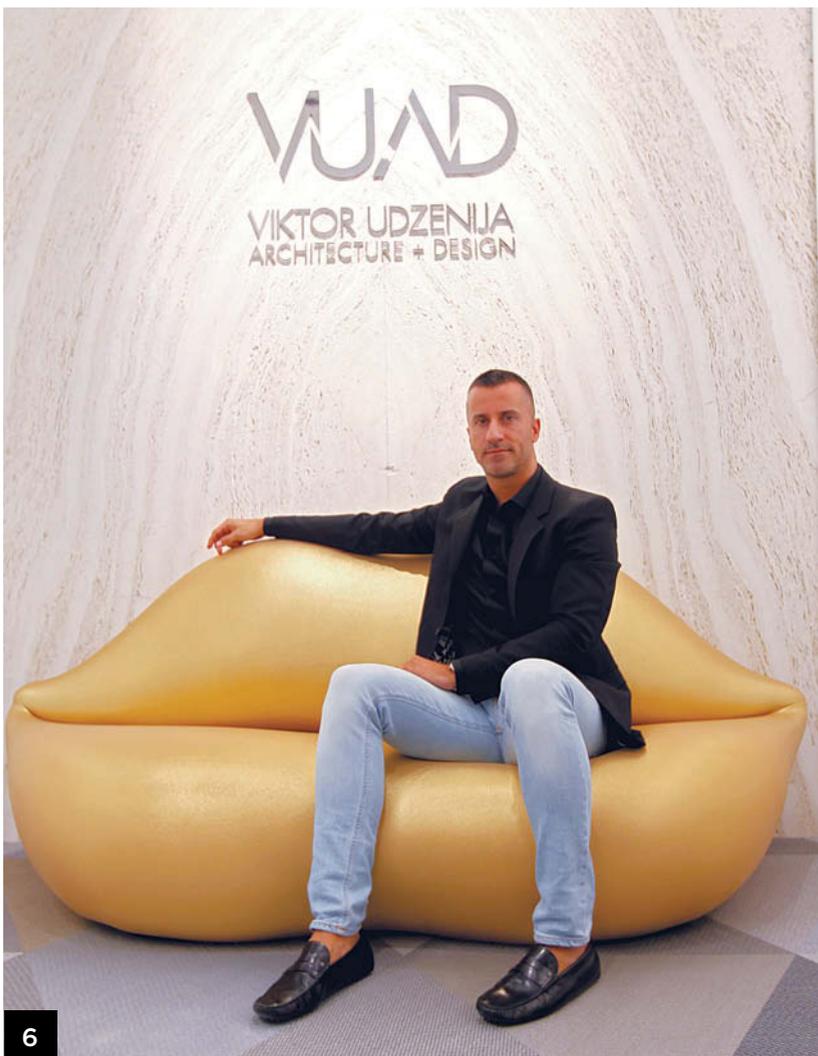
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1. The limited edition Little Rocker, by Viktor Udzenija.
2. One of the works from the *Abandoned* series by British photographer Richard Allenby-Pratt.
3. and 4. Curio details resting on the bookcase which is made from recycled aluminium by Swiss design firm Lehni.
5. Gufram Cactus coat stand. 6. Viktor Udzenija himself. Couch by Italian design house Gufram. Note, also, the flooring in a geometric pattern made from recycled material.

The first thing that strikes you is the floor – made of recycled material, its geometric design works as a counterbalance to the office’s clean lines. The green theme is something very important to Udzenija, be it his bookcase made with recycled aluminium by Swiss-based design company Lehni, or desks by another Swiss firm known for its use of environmentally friendly products, Vitra. “And of course,” he says musingly, “LED lighting is a must”.

The architect is also a designer himself, and taking pride of place in the office is ‘The Little Rocker’ chair, that was made for the Carpenter’s Workshop Gallery and first showed at Dubai Design Days 2014. The Rocker is an exploration of a childhood memory. This fully functional decorative piece utilises technological advancements in the use of marble. Both white and black designs of the Little Rocker are limited editions that are exclusively available through the Carpenter’s Workshop Gallery in both Paris and London.

Udzenija also participated in the first edition of Dubai Design Week last year and is very happy with how design is creating a niche for itself in the city. “Dubai is hoping to be at the forefront of anything finance, fashion, hospitality... It has the means and just as importantly, the ambition and enthusiasm, so it will succeed.” A firm believer in Dubai being a leading global city, Udzenija says, “It really annoys me when people say things against Dubai, just because it’s a new city. Have they forgotten that before New York was New York it was New Amsterdam? It is the young and talented people of Dubai that make this a flourishing city. For me Dubai is most definitely the place to be.” It is the vibrant mix of people that first attracted Udzenija to Dubai, and he says that the strictly bling-bling reputation that Dubai has, has more to do with the tourists than the city’s actual tastemakers. “The new generation are so well travelled, they know and understand what good design is.” Udzenija is constantly travelling to design and art shows all over the world, be it the Frieze or the Biennale. And that is what he believes is the lifeblood of good design. “Sometimes with home-grown designers, that is the one element they are missing: exposure.” And on that note, Udzenija picks up his blazer from his Gufram Cactus coat stand, as he leaves his office to pack for a series of meetings in several cities in Europe. ✿