

# THE *Beautiful* EDGE

*Dubai-based architect **Viktor Udzenija**'s recent work emphasizes strong contemporary lines and natural light to create enigmatic designs*

*Words by REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR*







An interior view of a penthouse in Dubai Marina designed by Viktor Udzenija





An interior view of Udzenija's design for a penthouse in Index Tower, Dubai, featuring a Patricia Urquiola chair and a stool by Philippe Starck


**M**area, the new two-star Michelin restaurant from New York, has opened in Dubai's International Financial Center (DIFC) with much fanfare. The décor of Marea, which means, "tide" in Italian, resembles the look and feel of a luxury yacht. There's the vibrant onyx bar that echoes the one in the New York location; warm and subdued lighting, contrasts of rich, natural materials, such as the Palissandro marble that defines the flooring and staircase; an impressive ceiling installation of mouth blown Bohemian glass bubbles that rise from the depths of the club lounge to encircle the elevator, and there's custom-made artworks by Massimo Agostinelli. In the same Italian vein, in the private dining room situated on the floor below, is a most magnificent blue Venetian glass chandelier serving as the pièce de résistance and surrounded by walls dressed in rose gold silk moiré. In the adjacent dim-lit lounge, an utterly modern scene unfolds with modern design pieces encompassing a splash of colour. All of this has been done by Viktor Udzenija, a Dubai-based architect, formerly with Foster + Partners, who runs his own space now in Dubai Design District (d3).

The Croatian-born architect and designer graduated top of his class at the Technical University of Munich in Germany. He was then faced with a decision – one that would ultimately lead him to Dubai. He

could have pursued a postgraduate education at Harvard Design School or take up a job at Foster + Partners in the firm's London office. It was the latter that Udzenija chose and soon after he was assigned to the company's Group 5 division, working on several projects in the Middle East. He moved to Dubai and soon was working on projects such as Index Tower in Dubai and the Central Market in Abu Dhabi – dream projects for a young graduate. The plan, like it is for most in the UAE, was to stay for just one year in Dubai. But due to the financial crisis, his time was extended to three years and then in 2013, when his time at Foster + Partners came to a close, he decided to stay in the Middle East on his own and founded his own design studio in 2013 called Viktor Udzenija Architecture + Design. In 2015, Udzenija was one of the first tenants to move into the newly inaugurated Dubai Design District (d3).

The designer's portfolio now encompasses a vast range of projects, both regionally and internationally. He works on residential and commercial projects as well as creates large and small-scale design objects. "I am trying to create environments that are visually inspiring and also offer a positive energetic output," he says. "I approach each project from scratch in order to understand the needs of the client. I need to understand the location and the environment and our own feel and energy about a space to understand what needs to be done." The end result always encapsulates certain the elements of Udzenija's ➤





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*Viktor Udzenija*

An interior view of  
Udzenija's work for the  
Jumeirah residence  
featuring a detail of the  
marble inlay flooring and a  
chair by Rick Owens



A man with short dark hair and a light beard stands in front of a wall with a wood-grain pattern. To his left is a large circular porthole. He is wearing a black blazer over a black t-shirt, with tan-colored sleeves and a tan waistband. He has a watch on his left wrist.

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*Viktor Udzenija*

Viktor  
Udzenija  
at Marea  
Dubai



DNA. These are: functionality, attention to detail, quality and innovative approaches to handling materials. “My aesthetic is very contemporary with a heavy focus on natural materials and textures and mixing materials together in new ways as well as trying to develop new ways in manufacturing those materials, whether it be stone or wood or other surfaces,” he says. “I like to mix traditional motifs and craftsmanship as well as the latest technologies. It’s very important to ensure that our work looks contemporary and looks towards the future and not the past.”

Udzenija’s designs are also about fantasy. “I want to make you dream and transport you to another space, a place where you will feel at home and relaxed.” His Little Rocker, which was exhibited in Dubai and sold by Carpenters Workshop Gallery explored childhood memory through a decorative and fully functional piece. Made in Carrara marble and crafted with the latest technological advancements in marble manufacturing, the piece came in white and black editions. “The moment anyone – from any background, race and culture – sat on that piece it turned their world upside down. They fell in love with it,” he says.

For a residential project in Jumeirah Udzenija infused his signature emphasis on light, clean lines and material to create from scratch the structure of an old Emirati home endowed with a contemporary look and feel, referencing local amenities, such as a traditional Arabic courtyard. “The building wraps around a central plot or courtyard where the inhabitants can roam around freely and in full privacy. We focused heavily on the materials and used marble inside the home and beige travertine in different areas, including outside where it was used for its calm beauty and the lightness that would reflect the light and the heat in order to keep it out of the house. Inside, we incorporated stone cladding to help cool the space.”

In the Middle East the environment drives much of Udzenija’s work. With today’s technology his team was able to create large glass windows for the Jumeirah home that previously had not been done due to the harshness of the environment. “A big focus of mine is on environmental

studies. I like to open up a façade towards nature while still making sure the heat of the desert sun in Dubai is kept outside as much as possible.” In the courtyard, covered in grass, also has a large swimming pool. For Udzenija, all elements need to work together from “an aesthetic point of view, a performance point of view and an environmental point of view.” He adds: “The goal is to create a project that is friendly to the user and friendly to the environment or let’s say translates it in a much more habitable way. The Jumeirah house is custom-cut to the local way of life here but I have evolved it into something more contemporary.”

The designer’s creative influences stem from contemporary art, cinema, and his extensive travels. “I like to be brave,” he says. “When I have this impulse and an inner voice telling me something feels right, then I will go for it.” In 2017 d3 and Fashion Forward approached Udzenija and Dubai-based fashion designer Rami Al Ali to create a large-scale installation for the community that was mobile, dynamic and habitable. They came up with The Eye, a sprawling large circular yellow structure. “The inspiration came from both of us and I wanted to create something inspired by the dynamic work of d3. The twisting shell is inspired by the eye of the tornado or eye of the storm hence its name The Eye. It was meant to detract you from your daily stress,” he explains. “The Lattice work of steel sculpture is also inspired by the thread used in the textile industry reflective of Rami coming from fashion.”

We’re sitting in Marea. Waiters are busily rushing around preparing for dinner. The blinds on the large window emanating natural light have come down and the dim-lit artificial lights have been switched on. Still the space exudes, like all of Udzenija’s work, a magnificent sense of calm – a feeling it seems challenging for the designer to maintain as he jets off to London, Prague and New York, among other locations, for his international projects. “Due to globalization and advancements in technology I think everyone feels connected on a much deeper scale than before,” he says. “The entire creative industry has merged into this one superman entity.” It’s hard to think of Viktor as anything less than superhuman. His beautiful edges are transformative. ■ [viktorudzenija.com](http://viktorudzenija.com)



An interior view of  
Marea Dubai

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AJITH NARENDRA