

LIFESTYLE

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Looking up!

Dariusz Zandi reveals how his 25 years of work reflect in modern Dubai

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Architect, town planner, artist, author, gallery owner and indefatigable off-roader - Dariusz Zandi tells Shalaka Paradkar how he can see his 25 years of hard work bear fruit in the face of modern Dubai.

Outside is a gritty landscape of industrial warehouses, smokestacks and disembowelled machinery. Inside is a shaded retreat - a cobblestone courtyard perfumed by the heady scent of a Rangoon creeper in full bloom.

The Courtyard is surrounded by narrow strips of facade, each distinct from its neighbour and traversing a variety of architectural styles and periods. It faintly resembles a medieval Mediterranean town, transplanted to the heart of Dubai's warehouse district of Al Quoz.

If one facade is an ode to Moorish architecture, another is like the entrance to an Egyptian tomb. There is a traditional Gulf windtower house and what looks like the fortified gateway to a fort. All of them co-exist happily within the space of The Courtyard, as this assemblage of buildings is called. Much like the many talents of its creator, Dariusz Zandi.

If his training as an architect inspired this creative jumble of a building, his love of the UAE and indefatigable exploration of it yielded many of the materials that make the facades so arresting.

Timber hulls from the shipbuilding district of Jadaf are now reinvented as balconies. An abandoned Sharjah bakery contributed the kiln tiles.

Carved mashrabiya (filigreed) screens and wrought-iron railings from old houses were rescued and recycled. It's a complex and intensely satisfying mélange. The photographer in Zandi is happy with the results as well. As is the entrepreneur.

The Courtyard was born of his vision to create an artistic hub. Zandi abandoned his day job as a town planner with Dubai Municipality to pursue his dream, creating a place where all the arts could coexist in harmony, and he was rewarded for his passion.

He started the project not knowing how he was going to finish it. It consumed his energies and finances for the better part of four years, before finally being unveiled in 1998.

Today, the trademark barrel-vaulted complex is recognised as a lively hub of art and design; its high ceilings and expansive spaces led the way for many warehouses in the vicinity to be gentrified as art galleries.

Clustered around the Courtyard is an eclectic mix of cafes, furniture retailers, design studios and art galleries. Zandi's office is on the upper level of the Total Arts gallery in the same complex.

While waiting for him, I study the space - there are Moroccan artist Houda Khalladi's canvases of alpine flowers and printed instructions for a good life. "Focus on better, not bigger," says one. "Learn CPR" and "Become someone's hero," advise the others. And perhaps the most useful - "Carry jumper cables in your trunk."

Zandi materialises, spry and cool, dressed in white linen from head to toe. Fifty-four going on 24, he has the energy and enthusiasm of a tightly-coiled spring. It's rather enviable.

"Photography is one of my biggest passions," he says, gesturing to a wall full of picture collages. "I have been a photographer since childhood, having taken my first pictures when I was 8. My camera has been like a faithful companion on all my trips."

These trips have been a big part of his life too. Zandi has authored four volumes of Off Road in the Emirates (Motivate Publishing), the definitive guide to some of the UAE's most secluded and unspoilt destinations.

After speaking to him, one gets the urge to pack as much as possible into life. In the space of a few weeks, he has been skiing in northern Iran, wrapped up the shooting of a set of nine short films, organised a show for 16 contemporary UAE artists, found moments for photography and also found time to break his leg.

If you want an example of how to live life the way it is intended (without getting injured if you can help it), then Zandi is it.

I

I love leading the best possible life - for myself and for the people who work with me, without compromising on quality. As professionals, we spend half of our lives at the workplace. We have to be happy at work and enjoy what we do. At the same time, you have to let other people enjoy their lives as well.

I like giving back to society. Something in return for all the blessings, good deeds and good things that people have given me in my life.

I think life is boring if you do not take chances. And once you succeed, it just feels so good.

I always feel good when close to nature, amid things that are not man-made. I am at my best in the outdoors. That's why I do not stick to the city, but venture into the countryside whenever the opportunity presents itself.

I am a fatalist of sorts. If something has to happen, it will. If you need help, there will be somebody out there to help you. That force is what we call God.

I believe nothing is impossible. The Courtyard is an art complex bang in the middle of Al Quoz, an industrial area. When I chose the place, people thought nothing could be done here. See how wrong they were!

Me

Me and growing up:

I am the youngest of five children, with two older brothers and two sisters. I lost my father, Mohammed Kazem, when I was barely 18 months old. I only knew him through a couple of pictures that we had of him. In those days, it wasn't customary to take many photographs.

My mother, Hajar Khatoun, raised us almost single-handedly, working as a midwife to support our education. We were lucky to have such a mother, because she was educated and was very understanding. I believe she raised us in a good way; all of us have done well in life. Helped by her efforts, we managed to complete our education.

I stayed in Tehran, my birthplace, until I was 19 and then followed my older brother, Iraj Zandi, to New York in the late 1960s. He had been living there for a while and was studying to be a surgeon.

I followed him - partly to do further studies, but mostly because I have always loved discovering new places and seeing new things. I completed a bachelor of science (architecture) in 1976 and bachelor of architecture in 1977.

Me and Dubai:

I first arrived in Dubai in 1978. It was to check out the site for an urban design competition for a section of the Dubai Creekside, the area between the Sheraton and Deira abra station.

The area used to be just a one-lane road, more land was being reclaimed and a plan had to be designed for this newer stretch of waterfront. At the time, I was working as an architect with Jaffar Tukaan and Partners in Amman, Jordan.

It was my first time in Dubai and I simply fell in love with the place. Dubai, with its souqs and windtower houses, reminded me of my childhood spent in one of Tehran's oldest quarters: the Bazaar.

Dubai was also an exciting place for an architect, rich in opportunities and possibilities. So that is how I ended up doing the master plan for the Deira Creek Corniche project.

Immediately after this, I returned to Jordan to continue working and then went to the USA for my post-graduation in urban design. The Deira Creek Corniche project became a distant memory.

After I finished my Masters in architecture and city planning from University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in 1980, I decided to travel around the world. That brought me back to Dubai once again.

Just out of curiosity, I approached the Municipality to ask what had become of the Deira Creek project. It had been built and they were pleased with the outcome. They asked me if I wanted to work as an architect and urban designer in the town planning department.

I agreed, cut my trip short and decided to give myself six months to a year with Dubai Municipality. At the end of the year, I could resume my round-the-world trip because the ticket would still be valid.

A year passed, then two and now it's 26 years and I am still here. Still fascinated and in love with Dubai. I have been involved with all aspects of the development in Dubai - in the cultural, logistical and architectural domains. It's just as enjoyable today as it was the first day I came here.

Seeing the city grow over 25 years has been very interesting for somebody like me, who was responsible for the early plans for some of these projects. In my time at DM, I handled two master plans for Dubai city at the start and end of the 1980s.

Me and town planning:

A couple of assignments have been particularly memorable. For instance, I was once asked to design a massive plan for a new township in Jebel Ali. It started from Port Jebel Ali and stretched all the way to Ghantoot, up to the border with Abu Dhabi.

I did it as an academic exercise and filed my report in 1981. I thought it was long buried and forgotten. But just last year, I heard (the) plan was the basis of the massive new Dubai Waterfront project.

It's the same area, but a much more complex programme and many more people. It's a new design, but the concept is essentially what was (planned) 25 years ago. Of course, there are huge developments in that area now, such as the Palm.

City planning is like that. There are no instant results; you develop the concept and under the right circumstances and (in the) right environment, it becomes a reality.

It's like planting a seed and waiting for the tree to emerge, which it will in the right conditions. A city is organic; it grows at its own pace - sometimes slow, sometimes fast. In this case, it took 25 years.

Another memorable project was an exercise I was given in 1981. I had to plan the best possible route for a Dubai bypass road. So I surveyed the area and finally put in lines of pins on a map of Dubai. We termed it a 'proposed bypass road'.

Twenty years later, it was finally built and is now Emirates Road. So it's really amazing how these things work. You do it and forget about it, but many years later the city comes alive.

Me and The Courtyard:

I had the opportunity to rent the land here and develop it for the uses I had imagined - a home for the arts, a studio and an artistic quarter.

I was inspired by my time spent in Soho, in New York, where I had a studio in what was once a garment factory. My friend and I were some of the first people there in the early 1970s to take a factory and turn it into an art workshop and studio.

So thanks to that experience, I wasn't afraid of a neighbourhood full of factories and warehouses. My over-riding thought was to do it with creativity. I loved the risk and the juxtaposition of art and industry. It was a challenge.

However, getting my dream realised was a long and arduous process. Acquiring the land and designing the building took over a year. I was keen on doing the building myself; there are lots of things that I like doing myself simply for the learning opportunity.

So I got the bulldozer and started digging the floor. The construction went on in phases, determined by cash flow.

When you have the intent, it becomes such a strong force. Lots of people first sit, calculate and then decide against doing something. But I never sat and calculated.

Instead, I dived headfirst into (the plan for) building The Courtyard. Many times while building The Courtyard, I had no money in the bank and nothing to continue. Then a couple of days later, without me having to even worry about it, the money would turn up from somewhere.

Finally, the building was completed in 1998. We inaugurated The Courtyard on March 21, 1998 - incidentally, the first day of the Iranian New Year and the first day of spring: new beginnings all around. A lot of important people graced the occasion. I felt blessed because since the moment it opened, it drew a good and enthusiastic response.

All the difficulties and hard work paid off when I saw people's reactions of awe and wonder. The Courtyard showed that you don't have to follow what is around you. You just have to do the best you can.

Me and off-road exploration:

I have always been curious, I still love to travel and explore things. It's a bit like finding more about yourself. As a child, I would explore the villages outside Tehran with my uncle, Mash Abutaleb.

Off-road exploring is close to my heart. In my childhood, my uncle was a big influence on me. My nephew, my cousins and myself would go with him into the countryside to visit their farms and orchards and ride on the horses and donkeys. We spent our summer vacations in farm houses.

I started off-roading 25 years ago, when it was all unexplored territory. We had very little information about the region. The few maps that existed might show a little patch of green - an oasis or a farm in the mountains - and we would find a way to get there.

The first car that I drove was an old Land Rover that belonged to a friend. I didn't own a 4WD, so I would go with my friend, Nasser Abulala, an architect who worked with me and was equally enthusiastic about off-road exploration.

We would take his father's car and he got a lot of tongue lashings for the many times we damaged the old car. We went to places where in those days there was not even a track, leave alone roads.

A lot of the tracks in these remote areas were literally created by us. And we went to places that were not even on maps, there was no GPS those days and no guide either.

We had a feeling of real exploration: going to places nobody else had seen, except for a few Bedouins. Naturally, we got lost many, many times, but found our way back using the basic equipment we had - usually just a compass and the stars.

I also learned survival skills in the wilderness: how to navigate, find your way and repair your car. We were always in a single car, and a lot of the times when the car broke down or you lost more than one tyre, you just had to return on three tyres.

The UAE then was hardly as built-up as it is today. Many times when we reached some village, we were surrounded by curious villagers who wanted to know what we were doing there and how did we get there.

Once we were even chased by some gun-wielding (people) in Oman. One of our scariest experiences was being stranded in the mountains in summer, with a tyre blown out, out of petrol and with failed brakes.

The UAE is filled with such interesting contrasts. Whether it's the rolling sand-dunes near Al Ain and Liwa, or the clean beaches and rugged mountains. People who appreciate these wonderful gifts of nature can spend a lifetime discovering these places.

Myself

The Courtyard was one of the first galleries to bring Iranian artists to Dubai. How does your cultural identity influence your work?

I feel more like an international kind of person because I love the places that I've seen and stayed in. Wherever I've stayed, I have contributed something of value to that place.

Yes, we've had a lot of Iranian artists exhibiting in our gallery. But we have had others, as well. Recently, we had an exhibition of 16 contemporary UAE artists. We have shown the works of Houda Khalladi, from Morocco, and before her, the works of Rolf Lukaschewski, a German photographer.

The Iranian artists we have shown are doing great work and we just gave them the space in Dubai. For instance, we showed the works of Turkmen artist Aneh Tatari as well as the works of Reza Deghati, an acclaimed National Geographic photographer.

Paulo Coelho wrote in The Alchemist: "When you want something badly enough, the whole universe conspires to give it to you." Has that been true of your life?

That's true; your basic necessities are clothes, house and food to eat. It's not difficult to get those. If you have an open heart, God will help you live and survive.

The most important thing is to create something of value and do the things that you were sent to do. Once you are happy with your work and think you have done the right thing, everything else will fall into place.

A week ago, I was skiing in the mountains north of Tehran. Incidentally, I broke my leg there. Today, I am here in blistering temperatures. Just the thought of spending May in sub-zero temperatures was the big attraction.

Then I worked everything else around that intent. After all, it is in your power to choose what you want to be and where you want to be. So my skiing trip came about just like that.

I broke my leg, but I accepted the fact. I said to myself, "Good, this has happened to me. Now I have learned what not to do the next time I go skiing."

How do you manage to make time to nurture your many passions? Do you sometimes feel you are spreading yourself too thin?

Life is very short ... or it can be very long. But in that time ... you have to do what makes you happy and do it well.

Don't do things just for the money or because they are expected. That's also how I select the projects I take up. They have to be interesting, so I can stick with them, put in my best and produce work I can be proud of.

One of the latest projects I did was a documentary series about Dubai's heritage architecture. I don't claim to be a film-maker, but it was the subject that interested me. I had some knowledge about it and the film was wrapped up to my satisfaction and the client's. Again, it was a project I took up only because it was interesting.

Any regrets in life at this point?

I hardly have any regrets because I have a rather fatalistic attitude - whatever bad that happens had to happen. I treat failure as something that happened for the best, so I never look at it in a negative way, more as an event from which I had to learn something.

My life has had its share of painful times. Everybody hits bumps, but life is about getting over those, believing they were meant to happen so you could move on to the next, hopefully happier, place.

When you have to go through the trauma of losing a loved one - that process of losing and crying and breaking and falling to move on to the next successful phase, to the next positive thing - all that contrast is (what life is about). If you don't have downs, you can't have ups. The contrasts are what make life interesting.

My first marriage (to Afsaneh Jalilzade, an Iranian) ended, but it taught me a lot about relationships. My marriage gave me a wonderful son, Arash, 15, who I see regularly (as he and his mother live in Dubai).

What would you like your legacy to be?

I would consider The Courtyard a part of my legacy. It is the best representation of my personality, experiences and philosophy - not just about design, but life as well.

The Courtyard best shows my belief that whatever one undertakes, it must be done in the most creative and interesting way possible. If there are 10 ways to reach a place, I will try all 10 routes. The reward is the journey, not the destination.

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