

In his Jumeirah Beach loft, Dariush Zandi puts style into sustainable

The eco-warrior and former architect Dariush Zandi's JBR apartment proves that sustainable living doesn't have to mean sacrificing style.



An open-space layout and uncluttered decor maximise the apartment's 180-degree views and high ceilings. Duncan Chard for the National



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"I like to learn from the past," says Dariush Zandi, entering his Jumeirah Beach Residence loft. "If, for example, you look at old Middle Eastern Islamic towns, the houses, the souq and the mosque were all interrelated and within walking distance. I believe that unless you walk or you cycle, you cannot make connections." As a former town planner and architect for Dubai Municipality and the creator of The Courtyard in Al Quoz, Dariush has put this maxim into practice, in design as well as in his lifestyle choice.

"When thinking of urban planning, you have to ask yourself certain questions: is it a car or a pedestrian city, and what importance do you give to each? A good example is where we live. Jumeirah Beach Residence has wide sidewalks and small streets. Everything is within walking distance - the bank, the supermarket and the beach. It's one of the reasons we love it here."

Another reason is the 180-degree view from the apartment, which overlooks the Palms, Jebel Ali and Jumeirah, and bathes the space in natural light throughout the day. It's something that both Dariush and his wife, Shaqayeq, an acclaimed artist, have enhanced in their decor and interior design. There is an absence of barriers and clutter, and the open-space layout is a deliberate choice.

Dariush decided to retain the rawness of the space by capitalising on the high ceilings. The mezzanine-level bedroom floats without boundaries, save for a unique "curtain" of wooden ribs. Salvaged, like many items in the loft, the ribs were part of an old yurt, a Central Asian tent.

"We've been visiting Jadaf shipyard for years. I've been photographing the place for about 25 years and salvaging bits and pieces from my visits to add to our home," he says. "I love the integrity of each piece and the value of them."

Dariush is a veteran of loft living. In New York, he was one of the first people to renovate warehouse spaces in Soho in the mid-1970s, and he waxes lyrical about the city's planning. "Of the international cities I've visited, I like the planning behind New York the most. It has a very clear plan in that it's a grid system. There are diverse neighbourhoods and within each are good services. There is no necessity to have a car. There are cycling and jogging lanes and a good distribution of parks and playgrounds, public art and food distribution. I believe in the modern systems of connection and providing the platform to inform and connect people. It should be a priority."

Connecting with people is something Dariush does with zeal. With this in mind, he rented a piece of property in Al Quoz 15 years ago, from which he created The Courtyard, a forerunner to the crop of art galleries currently making the area one of the most frequented and talked about in the city.

"The Courtyard was a single plot of land in the middle of an industrial neighbourhood with a lot of restrictions. I was doing what I thought was right; I felt I had to create a street for people to have contact and also provide water and greenery to help them communicate. Now birds come and there's a habitat which is welcoming and sunny. I've learnt that if it feels right, it propagates like a seed. That's what sustainability is all about - give a seed nutrition and it will grow naturally."

Dariush is well used to planting seeds, both at his farm on the outskirts of Tehran as well as metaphorically. He and Shaqayeq recently welcomed art patrons to their home during Art Dubai, as much to showcase their apartment as to educate others on works by the emerging Iranian artists Mostafa Dashti, Reza Derakhshani and Fereydoun Ave, and the American abstract artist Aharon Gluska.

Shaqayeq's work is also on display in their home. Adjacent to their loft is her studio, where she is experimenting with recycling some of her canvases by repainting them and infusing them with new life. The visual effect of these folded artworks is striking, as is an installation of dead plants.

"I kept collecting withered plants and bushes from along The Walk at Jumeirah Beach Residence," says Shaqayeq, "and unconsciously I wanted to preserve them. The idea fermented and I have preserved them with candle wax and they seem to have been reborn."

A love of all things natural is echoed in a collection of objects on a table top, among them camomile flowers, walnuts and rose buds, which symbolise the recent festivity of Persian New Year. "It's a non-religious festival and we display seven things to celebrate springtime. For example, there's a bowl of garlic bulbs, a collection of herbs and so on, and we serve the traditional menu of sabzi pollo and mahi (vegetable rice and fried fish) at this time," explains Shaqayeq. Somehow, these organic decorations give even more charm to the ambience of the home, which is furnished in soothing shades and earthy colours.

Recycling is close to the couple's hearts and their apartment is furnished with what others would describe as flawed items: melded scissors salvaged from a warehouse fire in Al Quoz, a wooden board formerly from a ship, which forms the kitchen workbench, and a 120-year-old tent structure suspended above the living area to form a decorative chandelier.

It's clear that Dariush and Shaqayeq are eco-warriors who have embraced this lifestyle choice for more than three decades, long before it gained celebrity endorsement or became politically correct.

"Once you select eco-consciousness, you can be yourself," says Dariush. "It's quite simple. Either you care or you don't. Training is part of it - you have to believe in it and open yourself to the reach. It extends to what you eat and what you buy. For example, the car we are driving is very old, but the next one we buy will definitely be a hybrid, unless we buy an electrical one."

It's refreshing to find this sort of holistic approach in a city known more for excess than responsibility, but Dariush is no stranger to charting new paths for others to follow. He's written a best-seller, *Off-Road in the Emirates*, and while he's explored new territories literally, he's now more interested in the psychological ones.

"At our farm we're part of a community and connected to the local village. It's this realisation that brought me back to the idea of a proper neighbourhood. Doing things for others makes you feel whole. I believe we should be taking back cities and reworking them for our own greater good."

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