



Agata Kurzela



Ellen Bishop



Ellen Edwards



Robert Reid

Under one roof

WOULD DUBAI BE BETTER OFF WITH A DESIGN CENTRE?

Design centres are powerhouses of commerce. A building with commercial space solely devoted to the various facets of interior design trade, design centres are one-stop destinations. Centres typically include showrooms that exhibit furniture, fabric, lighting, wall covering, flooring, sanitary ware, antiques and accessories in one space.

Most large cities have design centres: New York's D&D Building, Chicago's Merchandise Mart and London's Chelsea Harbour represent just a few. Commercial Interior Design magazine asked local interior designers whether a design centre in Dubai would be advantageous to the regional interior design industry and they answered with a resounding "yes"!

In comparison to other cities, the Emirates can be challenging to navigate, as locations are not identified by numbered street addresses. Such a system can make supplier showrooms difficult to discover and locate. While electronic navigation systems help, they're not always reliable. Ellen Edwards, VP-interior design at RSP said about finding showrooms: "I have lived here for quite some time now and became accustomed to the 'landmark' references provided with location maps. In the beginning, it was difficult to find my way around."

Adding to that, American University of Sharjah interior design professor Robert Reid said: "Designers who have lived here for some time figure out how to get around and find the limited

variety of showrooms we have in the area, but a lack of a dominant showroom district and the Dubai traffic make the effort painful at best." Moreover, Reid finds the resources limited in Dubai compared to other international locations.

Not only are the suppliers difficult to find, their locations are spread throughout Dubai. Edwards recalled: "I try to club trips to certain areas in the city together, but if I have to visit several showrooms all over town, it becomes a real pain due to time constraints. I do not have time to go around visiting different showrooms all week long." Agata Kurzela, senior architect and interior designer at AK Design agreed: "The inefficiency of the 'drive around FF&E' cannot be justified from neither the efficiency nor from the budgetary, with an exception of high-end private commissions."

Even upon locating showrooms, designers cite that finding parking adds another layer of frustration when visiting suppliers. "Lack of parking provision in the area can be a strong enough deterrent to avoid a visit," recalled Kurzela.

While a dedicated design building or district would reduce travel time by condensing multiple suppliers in one location, it would also present new opportunities to both the designer and the vendor. Close proximity of showrooms would expose designers to new products merely by walking through the building. Designers could also investigate new suppliers in the centre, whereas the current situation would require

a separate excursion - one that would likely never happen.

"I can imagine going to a design centre for a casual browse to get an idea about the current industry trends. There might be an added benefit of being able to take clients along to the centre," Kurzela pointed out.

Likewise, interior designer Ellen Bishop of Bishop Design Associates explains that designers don't often have time to visit all of the fairs and exhibitions around the world. She described: "I believe we would benefit greatly from being able to find it all under one roof. Also, it is sometimes difficult for us to get enthused within the four walls of our office, so if there was a place for us to go for inspiration, that would be amazing." Clearly, product exposure in one location would dually increase creativity for designers and sales for vendors.

Reid interestingly pointed out that the lack of a design district encourages design complacency. It discourages travel by designers to independent showrooms, he said, which in turn leads to "repetitive solutions by designers." Reid explained it is less stressful to go with what one already knows instead of wasting time driving back-and-forth across the city trying to find new options. "This lack of a design centre ... leads to lost opportunities for designers, suppliers and ultimately the client," he added.

However, Bishop also cautioned that if a design centre in Dubai were to come to fruition, it would have to be sizable and offer a substantial range of products to prevent designers from selecting the same products and design solutions as a consequence of variety shortage.

A centralised design centre would give the designers the crucial opportunity to try out actual samples rather than rely on on-line imagery and catalogues.

Kurzela noted that most of AK Design's product information reaches them in a purely visual form, either via internet or supplier presentations. Regarding this method, she noted: "There is a significant loss of information that happens in the process. Good design goes beyond mere image manipulation; awareness of scale, tactile qualities, subtlety of detailing and in [the] case of furniture, comfort level should be taken into account during the design process."

Additionally, a design centre would prove to be an educational hub for students, from being a pivotal source of samples for school projects, to nurturing a new generation of interior designers. Reid explains: "Many vendors and suppliers take a very short-sighted approach and refuse to assist students with samples, not recognising that these students are the future of our industry." He also noted that an aggregation of showrooms consisting of knowledgeable staff will allow students to develop self-confidence in dealing with suppliers and vendors.

A localised design centre would also provide a resource for furthering social growth within the interior design industry. Kurzela explained: "It would be great to have some networking areas along with a dedicated design library. A space for training courses would be highly desirable. I would love to see a workshop geared up to [assist] designers with prototyping and exploration of new technologies." Likewise, Bishop noted that it would enable suppliers and designers to connect and meet more frequently.

A clear win-win situation, a centre devoted to increasing efficiency and sales, while fostering greater connectivity within Dubai's interior design industry would create more time for what designers do best: design. 



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