

Interview with interior designer Areej Al Karbi, conducted at the designer's majlis on 02.12.2023 by Prof. Katarzyna (Kasia) Dzikowska

Contact information: katarzyna_dzikowska@hotmail.com www.kasiadzikowska.com

Speaker Name	
Kasia Dzikowska	Please introduce yourself.
Areej Al Karbi	I'm Areej Al Karbi. I'm an interior designer. At the moment, I'm working as an architect engineer.
K.D.	What creative training do you have?
Areej Al Karbi	I was in Zayed University for four years. It was a mix of visual art and interior design courses. After that, I had intense training for one year as a trainee in a development company. I did an internship and then a one-year training program with Miral. They're the company working in Yas Island, developing multiple entertainment places and amusement parks. At the moment, I'm continuing my training at KEO, which works with interior architects.
K.D.	How long you've been in the creative industry?
Areej Al Karbi	For two years now. I don't count university because I'm an interior designer, I need to practice my work. Now, it's going to be two years of working heavily and sites and projects.
K.D.	How have you developed your career so far?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>After I finished university, I went and got training connected to my practice, I got in multiple 3D modeling courses, including Novice and Recap. Both of them are something I haven't learned in university, and I didn't know that the field needed these two. Those two programs made me realize that engineers, interior designer and architects work alongside each other.</p> <p>The engineers and architects will create the building and as a designer, I can enter the building within the 3D and see the plumbing system, the AC all those things. And organize the space. These skills helped me in multiple projects that I have done, my university projects have been helpful also.</p> <p>For example, Etihad's renovation was great. We worked in partnership with Etihad Airways to redesign airplane furniture. And then readapting them to exist within the university space. Another project that was significant was Manarat Al Saadiyat senior project. A lot of people came to me and offered multiple opportunities and job offers because of this exhibition in my work. They were intrigued by the things I had done, the company I was working with, and the experience I've had in a short time after my graduation.</p>
K.D.	What had the most significant impact on your career so far?

Areej Al Karbi	<p>As I entered art college, most of the people around me were sceptical thinking there's no jobs in the creative industry, that there is no future. They kept telling me, you can get six months training and then you're going to be an interior designer. But it's also not true. The work is really, it can be stressful, you can't sleep without finishing it sometimes. It's something that you work on 24/7.</p> <p>Graduating, having a training position right after my graduation, and then having a full time job directly after that, is something that impacted me. I didn't let other people convinced me that I can't do it. I persevere.</p>
K.D.	Do you think that perseverance is important for creative people?
Areej Al Karbi	Yes. Of course. These days people have become more interested in the creative industry and being an artist. Before they thought that everyone can draw or design. It's more that, if I'm designing, I have a degree and I have a creative eye. I can design something for you that will impact your life. Let me know what issues you have in your house and what is your personality. I can implement it in your house.
K.D.	Do you think that the view of creative professions is changing in Emirati society?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>Yes, a lot. I've been interested in art and the creative industry before going to university. But it was weird when I told someone I'm going to go to an exhibition. They would think about museums, old pieces, stuff like that. But now, when you go to exhibitions and art events it is insane, the amount of Emiratis that are there, full families, I have never seen that.</p> <p>These days people are more interested. My sister is a teacher, I've seen her students work in the creative industry, they don't want to work with regular, traditional jobs. They know what they want to express and they know how to express it.</p>
K.D.	Describe your creative process.
Areej Al Karbi	<p>When I'm working on something, the first thing I look at is: 'What is the issue? What does my client have that they need to change or they need to implement?' Then I work with it to find a solution within the existing place that they have.</p> <p>I want to get to know the client and see what color they like, what color irritates them, and what fabric they like. I have all of this information, then leave it behind and then go to study a site, exploring where the sun goes, where the wind goes, the sound. This allows me to have each room in the correct position and each furniture in the right position. I always work with the plan and I keep reviewing it with the client and let them imagine how they going to walk in their house. I do multiple collages showing how the project is going to look like. The next stage is the 3D modeling. I always do a video of the 3D with sounds and the surrounding environment for the client to visualize what they going live with their houses.</p>
K.D.	Tell me more about the technical aspect of your work. Is lot of it still done by pen, on paper. Is it more digitalized?
Areej Al Karbi	As a designer, you have to work with both. I can't just start with the computer and 3D. I always have to draw and I always have to sketch. If I didn't sketch and I didn't draw, then whatever I'm going to do in the 3D or 2D, it's not going to be accurate.

	<p>I always start by sketching the plan and doing a diagram of the rooms and positions I am going to work with. It is a lot of diagrams, sketches, handmade collages, cutting papers and materials. Then I always jump to the 2D and I keep preparing plans with furniture for the client to visualize. Lastly, I go with the 3D. I always work with creating the existing place, visualizing how big or small the place is. I work with furniture and the small details and I add them and I do a video.</p>
K.D.	What influences your style?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>The one thing that influenced my style is my walks around Abu Dhabi. When I started doing my senior project, I was looking for a topic.</p> <p>One thing that I don't have is my grandparents; I don't have this older generation influence. I was looking around Abu Dhabi and then I realized there's nothing for a senior citizen in the city, unless there is a festival for them to do some heritage activities.</p> <p>Then I went to Al Ain and I saw how they preserved vintage and aesthetically pleasing traditional heritage buildings. Back in Abu Dhabi those kinds of places were demolished. I took my dad and I went all around Abu Dhabi and he told me about buildings that used to be here.</p> <p>After this walk, I was looking at the architecture and realised it was modernized, there's no character in the buildings. It hit me that we're losing a sense of ourself as Emiratis within our heritage. That is why whenever I do a project, I always have this touch of our heritage. It can be a fabric, a material, it can be a pattern. But in every furniture and every house I design, you get to see the touch of connection with the heritage.</p>
K.D.	Heritage is important to you.
Areej Al Karbi	<p>Yes, it's really important because at a point of my life, I lost touch with it. I was not impressed by wearing the Kandura. I was not impressed by old songs. I was modernized. When I started sitting with the older generation and I did a survey with 60 citizen, it was really amazing what they said, how they spoke, how everything had a meaning for them. Before that, I didn't see myself as a local because of the practice I was doing. When I went back and touched the heritage I was with, it made me realize who I am as a person.</p>
K.D.	The reconnection with the tradition is important in your work?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>Yes. The more I worked with the traditional materials, the more I realized that the environment we live in actually needs these materials. I don't want to get materials from another country because it was created in response to the environment and the climate of the place. For example, I use a lot of palm trees and Ghaf wood that could be implemented in our practice, I use a lot of sand in my projects. It could be something small like an object or something larger like the floor.</p> <p>The older generations have created these materials for us to use, this is what's suitable for the environment. This creates a connection and makes me more creative to play with material and have it modernized for everyone's contemporary needs.</p>
K.D.	How would you summarize your role as a as a interior designer?

Areej Al Karbi	My role is to give everyone a piece of what they want to see and feel. Without interior design, you're going to go to anyone's house, it's not like this is this person's unique house. You don't see a lot of personal touch. Each house looks the same these days. Even the architecture starts to look the same. As a designer, I want to give people a personal touch in their home. It could be from the outside, could be from the inside. Something that will give the house personality.
K.D.	Why do you think our homes are starting to look the same?
Areej Al Karbi	I think it is because people are choosing fast-working materials. They want to have minimalist items and they want everything to look cohesive. I think the more we go with modern material, cohesive look, and minimalistic approach, the more every country in the world starts looking the same.
K.D.	How vital is interior design for society?
Areej Al Karbi	I think it's really important. It's not pretty little furniture in your home, it's more than that. It's us studying the environment. If there is wind, if there is going to be fog. I know how to work with your materials to make them last longer. I know how to make you feel comfortable in your own space and solve issues in your house so you can keep everything for longer and to not feel bored with your interior. You can't you can't just bring anyone who doesn't have a degree on this and then start demolishing walls.
K.D.	Which part of the UAE are you from and how does it affect your work?
Areej Al Karbi	I'm from Abu Dhabi. More specifically on the outer corner of the city. It affects my work because Abu Dhabi has developed a lot in a short time. The places I grew up with, are not the same. They feel a bit out of touch. It inspires me when I go back to well-known, older places, Hamed Center or Ibrahim Restaurant.
K.D.	What is your connection to the desert?
Areej Al Karbi	My connection in that desert is something that I can't be separated from, especially living here. If you're getting bored, the first option is to go to the desert, camp in the desert, You get together with your family. They're going to always choose the desert. When you you're feeling some mood swings or are sad, you can literally put your foot in the sand and you're going to feel much better. The desert looks empty but is not. People are there, you're connecting with the environment, you're connecting with your family. So whenever I think of the desert, I always think about family.
K.D.	How much does connection to the desert affect the feeling of being an Emirati?
Areej Al Karbi	I lost touch with myself when I stopped interacting with the Emirati culture. When I went back to the desert, I went back a fresh perspective, looking at what the older generation has done. The

	<p>way people used to live. After that, I start talking with my dad about what they used to do, how they used to spend time.</p> <p>Whenever I feel like I'm going to lose my sense of creativity, I always go back to the desert. It affects my work, I've created bookshelves, and seating areas that are inspired by the desert, how the shape is, the material.</p>
K.D.	So is desert an integral part of of being an Emirati?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>Of course, it is. If you're going to think about the UAE you're always thinking about the desert and every Emiratis knows we started from nothing to something. Because Sheikh Zayed - may his soul rest in peace - started from nothing, from the desert. Even when multiple people have told him that you can't even plant one thing here.</p> <p>We see the UAE right now, it's amazing and mind-blowing. But UAE is the desert. We've lived there and we know how to handle the environment and the climate. It's easy for us to go back. It's not as hard.</p>
K.D.	What are your childhood memories of the desert life?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>My childhood memory of the desert? It's kind of funny, but we always go there and have sleepovers. It's not as comfortable, but we did that. We also have multiple activities. The most famous of them is you going to tie a carpet to a car and then have kids sit on them and then go to drift with them. Most of my memories in the desert is about connection with my family, having fun, playing together and there's no bad memories.</p> <p>And the stories you tell in the desert, they're always different. They're always fun. They are always scary. It's kind of a happy memory for me.</p>
K.D.	Storytelling around the fire?
Areej Al Karbi	Yes, the fire at night will start to get cold, fire will always go down, but the stories keep being told. Stories about Um Duwais, which are old myths to scare kids. Humarat Al Galila. Really scary stories but if we say them here, they are not as terrifying. In the desert, you will start imagining things. In the morning it's nothing but nice, everyone is having fun. At night, it can be terrifying. Having that connection with everyone and seeing how they, laugh, talk and get scared together. It's really amazing.
K.D.	How those memories differ from your current experiences of Desert?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>When I was a kid, it was about the play. Now, I go back to the desert and I start seeing details. When I touched the sand when I was a kid, I thought the sand was just beige. Now when I touch it, it's more like multiple materials that are mixed together.</p> <p>I go to the same place multiple times and it's always different. Dunes are different, the environment is different. Whenever I go back, what stays the same is my dad saying stories</p>

	about his childhood. I think about it. I'm really thankful that he give us the opportunity to have a connection with the desert.
K.D.	What the desert mean to you?
Areej Al Karbi	I want to say home, I'm going to say home. As an Emirati. It's really comfortable. I don't like the ocean and the sea. Desert is always calming. Even if people are around and it's really noisy. I feel good in the desert, I feel more connected. It always gives me creative ideas on new furniture or a new gypsum wall.
K.D.	Does the desert play a role in your practice?
Areej Al Karbi	Yeah, of course. I always work with beige colors, the kind of beige that comes from the desert. In furniture, walls, even in the windows and curtains. The cut of the curtains and how they fall are like lines of the desert. At the moment, I'm implementing heritage techniques and materials, when you mix al teen, sand with water, and create creating a house with it. This is something I really want to experiment on and see how long would it take for me to implement it in my future work.
K.D.	What does the desert mean to you?
Areej Al Karbi	As a creative, I identify myself as 100% with the desert. Whatever I do is related to it, whatever I think, what material I use, what colors I like. The desert means a lot to me. I like to go to the desert. Even on the drive there, you're going to see houses built 50 years ago, still being there as a part of the environment.
K.D.	Do you think that the desert is treated as a symbol?
Areej Al Karbi	It is a symbol. People have seen it as related to us. It is a symbol of activities that we still practice, like drifting and camping. As Emiratis, we do a lot of fun in the desert. It's something that we want to be associated with. We have a connection.
K.D.	The connection is strong in all of the Khaliji people?
Areej Al Karbi	Yes, because we have experienced living in the desert and how we live our lives, we're more capable of living in the desert. But I think it's at the moment I've seen a lot of other nationalities come to the desert and they enjoy it. So I would appreciate if everyone come and experience the desert.
K.D.	Do you think that other nationalities enjoy it in the same way as Emiratis?

Areej Al Karbi	I think if they went with a local person, they would have a similar experience. I wish that they could experience the same thing as we do. Some people think this is not that much fun, but with the company and with everyone having a good time, it's the experience of life.
K.D.	If you would have to describe desert in one sentence. What would it be?
Areej Al Karbi	You can create something out of nothing in the desert. I think this is the sentence I would go for.
K.D.	Does the desert have personality?
Areej Al Karbi	Of course the desert has personality. If you go to the desert in mid-summer, the desert will be harsh, nicer to you at night and in the morning. Daytime it's not nice because it's really hot. In the winter, the desert is lovely, cozy, comfortable to be in. It has kind of a motherly feeling. When you go to the desert, you feel hugged.
K.D.	Is the desert still authentic?
Areej Al Karbi	<p>It's will always be. I would never think about myself or any Emirati without a desert. It will always be authentic. I have an emotional connection with the desert, I feel I'm alone there. I can be solitary with my thoughts.</p> <p>Whenever you are in the city, you can hear a lot of noise. Overthinking. Multiple things that happening. Whenever I go to the desert, I can hear nothing, but myself. I start to have a calm, comfortable feeling there. I can stay for hours just sitting and looking ahead.</p> <p>Whenever I think about it. it looks like an art piece. The colors work together really well, the sky and the sun. I always think of it as such a magnificent piece of art that makes me serene. Whenever I look deep into the desert, it makes me realize that I really needed for me to progress as a creative. I go to the desert to get inspired, literally to paint, sculpt, and implement a lot in the work I do.</p>