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THE UPLIFTING ISSUE

The Future of Fashion

Beirut Institute Summit

For its third edition in Abu Dhabi (October 13th - 14th), centring around the theme of how to prepare for the 2020s, Raghida Dergham's Beirut Institute Summit is hosting a panel of five international speakers discussing 'The Look of the Next Decade: Transitioning to a Circular Economy and Positioning the Arab Region in the Global Industry of Fashion, Design, and Architecture.'

Interviews: Nadia Michel

THE MODERATOR

— **Thalia Dergham**

Senior Strategist at Wednesday, London



You're based in London working with Wednesday, an agency that has developed some of the most influential ad and branding campaigns – including ones for Calvin Klein and Mr. Porter. Do you foresee any agency in the Middle East ever being able to be as effective and powerful?

I would say the strength of Wednesday is that it approaches the industry as a global agency. We aren't creating content or campaigns we think will resonate with one geographical demographic, but rather we aim to understand the attitudes that are shared by individuals in major cities globally, and connect with them as they go on a journey

to project their own version of these themes where they live.

In the Middle East, there are certainly agencies that are incredibly specialised and talented within the luxury space. The trend we are seeing with these very powerful global agencies; they don't exist in one city, they are more so a network of talented individuals in different fields working together when something inspires them. I think this would be a really interesting opportunity – for agencies East and West to pair up and become more powerful together.

What are some of the current industry challenges for fashion, design and architecture in the Middle East?

My first instinct here is to say stigma. I think there is a deep misunderstanding of the approach to art, culture, and design in the Middle East from those who haven't engaged with it. Observers believe that it is a more surface level approach based off of luxury signifiers and wealth. But those who are in the industry know that the level of talent in these spheres in particular is stronger in the Middle East than anywhere in the world. If you think about the history of the region, the history of commerce and design and, combine that with the meaningfulness behind the art of today, it is probably richer than anywhere in the world. There is tension and from tension comes emotion and aspiration, the true drivers of luxury. So shifting that global attention to see the Middle East as creators, not just buyers of this world is probably the biggest challenge.

About the circular economy, is this something you see genuinely happening in the West, or is it more of a buzzword? Are the big brands really changing their practices in a significant way?

This is genuinely happening but on a smaller scale via many different avenues and approaches. So even if there isn't one big successful example of how people have definitely changed their habits, there are smaller, everyday examples that show that behaviours and values are changing.

What are people saying about the Middle East in the fashion industry? Is it even on their radar?

When I was working at Net-A-Porter, the Middle East was the most important region in the global expansion. It was crucial for them to understand the approach to luxury in the region. It is certainly on the radar for luxury fashion globally.

How important are discussion panels, like the one you're moderating at the Beirut Institute Summit?

Discussion panels to me are the most important forum for facilitating the cross-pollination of ideas. Without this cross-pollination we become static and only receive affirmation from those who share our own values and opinions. Of course, this is the biggest killer of creativity. Beirut Institute embodies exactly what its namesake city is also beloved for; it is the meeting place of contradiction, and only through contradiction do we make progress. ►



PANELIST

— **Nada Debs**

Founder and Creative Director at Nada Debs, Beirut

Your furniture and accessories are heavily influenced by Japanese culture and craftsmanship. Do they have something to teach the rest of the world when it comes to sustainability or a circular economy?

Yes, the influence of Japanese culture comes in the fact that they value craftsmanship and craftsmen are considered masters of the arts. We see sustainability and a circular economy in terms of supporting the craft heritage of our region so that the pieces being made would be passed on to future generations.

Japanese people often wrap their lunches in a beautiful, reusable handkerchief in lieu of paper bags. How does this compare with our culture in the Middle East?

In the past, we had ceramic pots to preserve jams, but today we use plastic and glass instead. I don't believe that we have a culture of a circular economy in the region.

What are some of the ways you apply the principles of a circular economy in your own business?

When we first started our furniture design business, we used to take antique pieces and add craft to it to give it new life. We also introduced vintage fabrics from different cultures and upcycled them to create a collection of cushions and bags. We enjoy giving new life to existing pieces by adding a craft element to it.

Do your clients really care about your practices? Or do they just want the final product, without any backstory?

Our clients care very much and are often interested when there is meaning to what we do. It draws them to purchase our pieces.

You collaborated with Fratelli Rosetti on a shoe collection in the Spring of 2019. Did this topic ever come up?

This topic did not come up with the collaboration with Fratelli Rosetti but it is something of importance to instill this concept. With our new collaboration with storyteller Salim Azzam, we have used some recycled veneers to create the collection. It is always on our mind to use waste from our furniture makers such as wood dust or small leftover wood pieces. We keep them on the side for future design ideas.

Why did you agree to be a part of this panel at Beirut Institute Summit?

I believe there is a growing industry in design in the region and we have a lot to offer whether it is fashion, design or architecture. I felt that it would be important to raise awareness that this is an industry that can help the economy as well as provide more jobs.



PANELIST

— **Natasha Franck**

Founder and CEO of Eon, NYC

EON has plans to digitally label garments with though the CircularID™ Standard and your partners already include H&M and Target among others. When will it kick off?

In partnership with brands and retailers, Eon will begin introducing digitized products in January 2020. These products will be the first to leverage and implement the CircularID™ Standard – creating the digital backbone and system for circular economy.

What sparked your founding of EON?

I believe our transition to a circular and regenerative future is crucial for the health of our future. It'll require we change our economic model to reduce consumption and waste. By digitizing products and connecting them to the Internet of Things – it's possible to manage these products intelligently – continuously reusing and recycling them to reduce the need for new natural resources and the production of waste.

What does it entail, in terms of technology?

Eon partners with brands and retailers to create Digital Identities for physical products. A Digital Identity connects products to the Internet of Things – making it possible to store, access, share and generate data about physical products. There is an unlimited amount of data that can be stored in a product's digital identity.

Do you envision that anyone cleaning out their closet will scan each discarded item and decide what to do with it accordingly?

Yes, when complete with a digital identity – a customer can efficiently connect with the product and access data about the product. This would make it possible to resell, donate or recycle the product easily – and capture more value. ➤



PANELIST

— **Michel Abboud**

Founder and Principal at SOMA Architects, NYC

SOMA became globally renowned in 2010 with the Park 51 Islamic Center in NYC, close to ground zero. What caused this consternation do you think?

It became the centrepiece of larger concerns like freedom of religion, tolerance and bigotry. Opinions were split between the groups that perceived it as a provocation, and the groups that wished it to become a symbol of tolerance and social healing.

There is a lot of criticism about LEED certification and how it may not go far enough. Are there some things you'd like to see in the architecture world that might encourage a more circular economy?

To achieve a circular economy in the life cycle of a building, we have to start with the manufacturing processes of construction materials. And, as every component would need to be able to be repurposed, we would need to rethink the way we design and develop new techniques that could offer a second life to the waste produced when a structure is replaced. Architects can have a key role in this process if they adapt their design thinking with this goal in mind.

How do you foresee the next ten years in terms of architecture in the MENA region?

I believe the market will continue to grow and the emergence of new cities like Neom in Saudi Arabia are testament to governments creating new markets while at the same time building an identity that is more and more open to cultural diversity and global integration.

PANELIST

Ahmed Khyeli

Fashion Designer, London

Within two years of launching you got Lady Gaga and other celebrities to wear your gowns. Could you have risen so fast if you were based in the Middle East?

We are so connected today through social media and the internet that I think it would have been possible from anywhere. Celebrities are always looking for something special, so I think that should be the focus. If you just put a lot of love and passion into creating something of value, people will notice that and give you a lot of love back.

What does a circular economy mean in couture?

It's already a one-on-one personal process of producing garments. We don't mass produce. That in itself prevents waste found in other processes of manufacturing garments. A couture garment is one that you invest in to keep and pass down to future generations.

Do you intend to make ready-to-wear?

Yes, I am in the process of preparing for the launch of Khyeli's first ready-to-wear collection this autumn. While this opens the brand to a wider audience, craftsmanship and timelessness will remain a vital part of our approach.

PANELIST

— **Céline Semaan**

Designer, Advocate, Writer and Founder of Slow Factory and the Library Study Hall, Brooklyn, NY

How is the Middle East faring in terms of recycling fashion?

The Middle East has a lot of catching up to do in comparison to Japan or the West. According to the World Bank, "In low-income countries, over 90 per cent of waste is often disposed in unregulated dumps or openly burned." We want Slow Factory to serve as the first community and innovation centre to educate, shift paradigms around waste and effectively turning it into new resources that can then be introduced into supply chains and the economy.

What are some of the major global changes you expect to see over the next decade?

We already know that there are less than 60 years of arable top-soil left for agriculture, and that by 2030 most gold mining will be done above ground from electronic waste, that by 2050 we estimate there'll be more plastic in our oceans than fish. With these daunting stats, we can move towards regenerative systems, agriculture and a shift in paradigm when it comes to managing and handling waste. Waste will become a main resource, and waste will need to be explored and transformed into renewable form of resource. In the next 10 years, we would need to prioritize peace and circularity in order to preserve and protect future generations of all creatures on this planet. 🌱

