



HIGHLIGHTS FROM SESSIONS

PANEL

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

How can the fashion industry transition into a system built on sustainability? How do we manage the lifecycle of luxury products through circular business models? How do we position the Arab region to stand as a strong force in global design? How can policy makers support local designers and elevate the Arab region as a hub for creative talent?

Date- Monday | October 14, 2019

Moderator- Thalia Dergham, Senior Strategist at Wednesday

Panelists:

- Nada Debs, Founder and Creative Director East & East
- Natasha Franck, Founder & CEO of EON Group
- Celine Semaan, CEO of Slow Factory
- Ahmed Khyeli, Founder of Khyeli
- Michel Abboud, Founding Principal of SOMA Architect

Nada Debs, Founder and Creative Director East & East:

Growing up in Japan studying interior architecture in the US, working as a furniture designer in the UK, I moved back to Lebanon 20 years ago and there is a big gap in the craft industry in our part of the world. These craftsmen are marginally surviving and not many of them want to continue this type of livelihood. The craft of our region, which is a big part of our identity, shouldn't be neglected. My mission became to celebrate eastern craftsmanship through contemporary design. We, as Arabs, still don't believe there is a viable craft industry like we had many years ago. Craft is human energy, requiring skills made by the human hand, it requires attention and passion, it's a spiritual and peaceful act. We are not giving value to the skill, we treat it like a trend, something easily disposable. We should consider this labor of love as precious, and something to pass on to the next generation. We have over 400 million people in the Middle East that we can cater to. Our craft has the



potential to cross borders so let's invest in our craft and people and carve the way for future generations.

--

The fact that I came from abroad helped people to see it is possible to change the perspective of local work. Collaborating with other nationalities and brands helps to bring confidence. Deep down, we have a problem in believing in ourselves, it's deeply ingrained in us. Through design, I am trying to advocate this.

Natasha Franck, Founder & CEO of EON Group:

We work with global brands and retailers to power a circular economy. We have reached a global consumption crisis. And this model of production and consumption is what we call the linear economy. We make waste from those products. Global waste is an issue to solve that comes out of cities and the overwhelming impact of that waste on our environment. This global resource consumption isn't sustainable. When we look to design solutions, the transition from a linear economy to a circular economy is where we see the solution. This means when you are finished with your shirt, that product doesn't go in the landfill. It is made of cotton and water, it gets reused and recycled to make new cotton ultimately, that's the paradigm of a circular economy. We need digital identification – we create this for physical products, like a Facebook page for that product. By creating this identity, it is possible to bring accountability to the entire product cycle. It's an exciting time for digital identity where every person and product will have a digital profile. It's about how can we use technology to design a better, more sustainable and more equitable future. We are starting to see this in mass today. It's a must for the business of the future.

--

There is a gap between the design and the actual systems that can manage that product through a circular economy. It's a design and a systems problem. Once you can identify a product as biodegradable or recyclable, then you can sort and separate them such that you can have that material be circular.

Celine Semaan, CEO of Slow Factory:

We look at a way for regenerated design, working deeply in the circular economy. Our mission is to re-architect a new way of manufacturing what we like to call 'DE manufacturing'. We collect waste and turn it into new renewable resources. We have 60 years left of topsoil on the planet, including cotton and other harvest. And when we look at the waste in our ocean and land, we have an infinite amount of waste and it's a new infinite



resource we need to look into today. We are at the nexus of science, design and innovation. Decentralizing how we are working with waste is very important. We aim to educate and change the paradigm around waste and circularity. Technology exists out there, it's just not yet infiltrated in our market because it lacks the cultural element. We need to start looking at how we can infiltrate technology through everyday people's paradigm and meet them where we are.

--

Technology exists out there, what is missing is how do we infiltrate it into culture and make everybody want to buy something that's made out of recycled material? We've done tremendous research on how to introduce innovations into culture and the one thing we found is if it isn't embraced culturally, it's not going to work. Technology alone won't bring innovation to where we need to see it, especially in the Middle East. Through culture, we can really innovate and bring recognition, awareness and a cultural shift in embracing new technologies and trying new things that are going to benefit both the planet and the people.

Michel Abboud, Founding Principal of SOMA Architect:

To position the Arab world as a strong force in design, we have to develop the awareness and tools around technology in architecture. Arab governments and institutions should fund a technology based on an art and design technique. If those protagonists don't think outside the box, then how can we expect the Arab world to have a seat at the table in the world of global design? The Middle East is a merchant-led economy whereby the developers don't give the opportunities to the local firms and when they want a certain project, they refer to this elite group of foreign architectural design firms, which is a negative circular economy. I propose what I have been implementing. I was the first Arab architectural firm to win an award for projects in Beirut – I wondered why. When I built my skyscraper in New York, I was the only Arab architect to do so. We should all think about that. I push the technology side in using advanced digital software in producing architectural designs, through parametric design which is a movement in its early days, but it will develop into AI where it will become a tool to create the designs as well as open a door to endless possibilities in the world. And it should be developed by the Arab world.

--

Desert sand has so far been unusable in the world of construction. It is one of the largest commodities in the world but it's too fine to use in construction. But based on my research, there is something called finite – a product allowing you to turn desert sand into a material that can replace concrete, at 50 percent of carbon footprint with endless life cycles because



it's biodegradable and reusable. It's the perfect candidate for the Arab world to reach a circular economy and it's something that should really be explored.

Ahmed Khyeli, Founder of Khyeli:

In terms of fashion, there are four indisputable fashion capitals: New York, London, Milan and Paris and it's because of their creativity, their skill, craftsmanship and innovation. And in no way are we lacking as a region of creativity but maybe the refinement of the others in terms of standing out at a global scale. That needs to start at a very early stage in education, where people are allowed to explore the idea of creativity and making things. We need to shift to the way we look at it because, even as a student, I always thought of my career path as something that has to be a bit more serious and people tend to neglect the importance of design in that sense. We need to integrate this in our educational system.

--

It's really important as a designer to know how things are made to be a better designer. In terms of the education and the transition between school and university— university is the beginning of your career so there needs to be a very clear idea that is given to people of what a single profession is like, not just a dream of what it is like. Aside from that, if we want to stand out as a region for design, we need to be bringing something different and, to do that, sometimes when it comes to education, we are stuck in an organization that produces the same unit of many. We need to develop that to be a bit broader and more open for people to explore their own unique set of skills so, once you are out there, you are unique and not replaceable.