

# LEADING *the way*

**T**he classic professional biography often reads as an impersonal enumeration of titles and self-glorifying attributes. Not so for Nez Gebreel, CEO of the Dubai Design and Fashion Council (DDFC), a governmental organisation recently mandated to position the Emirate as a global hub for Design and Fashion in the region and to nurture local talent. Although Nez holds a long list of impressive qualifications, in her bio on the DDFC website, she chooses to use language that holds herself accountable to her position. “We are here to create, we promise, we will do everything”. We haven’t yet met Nez, and already her refreshing approach to leadership makes her stand out.

And stand out she does. Stepping into A4 space in Alserkal Avenue in two-tone brogues and a black bandage dress that sculpts her seven month pregnant figure, Nez appears the embodiment of quiet maturity - the kind that makes others want to listen and trust. As we sit down to chat, Nez playfully confesses to bouts of “baby brain”, a condition also known as forgetfulness in pregnancy. “Lack of sleep” she explains, pointing to her belly. However, once we get talking about Dubai and all things design, there is no apparent trace of fatigue, and Nez’s internal glow starts revealing itself as more than maternal love. Nez is impressed by the city and speaks genuinely about it. Every day at work, she says, she experiences the dedication of Dubai’s rulers and major commercial players to grow the design industry and to collaborate with each other and with the local design community to achieve that goal. She admits: “I was one of those sceptics of Dubai. But I’m now inspired by the human commitment I see everywhere to developing this city”. When even the sceptics are impressed, then something must be right.

But Nez is not out to impress, she’s out to do a job - meticulously and thoroughly, true to her Virgo sign. “We plan to grow the DDFC from the grassroots up. We will be revamping Dubai Fashion Week and collaborating with Dubai Design Week at the end of October.” In the field of education, the DDFC harbours big plans. Two key studies - the MENA Design Study and the Design Education and Workforce Planning Study - are set to provide a good review of the status quo in the design professions and help the DDFC and its partners identify key areas to work on. “Working on these studies allowed us to forge important relationships, especially with

*Nez Gebreel, CEO of the Dubai Design and Fashion Council, comments on the exciting creative future of local design*

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Dubai’s Knowledge and Human Development Authority. The goal is to help design graduates but also designers who have a business and need support,” Nez adds.

In practical terms, designers can look forward to quarterly Majles and monthly talks covering a wide range of design issues. The DDFC is also collaborating with Style.com/Arabia on a yearly fashion prize for Arab designers and has partnered with the prestigious International Woolmark Prize. And there’s more in the DDFC pipeline: first, an accelerator program to identify the most promising talent for each design sector and pair them with a commercial partner - Emaar, Al Tayer, D3 to name a few - to assist in the successful development of their brand. Soon, the DDFC will be launching a membership program to offer aspiring and established design professionals a wide array of resources, from tailor-made marketing advice to full-fledged mentorship and, in 2016, a ‘Designed in Dubai’ label, where candidates selected across strict criteria of design concept, production and quality will be awarded the label to use on their website or product. The aim here is twofold: elevate and officialise the status of talented local designers and educate the public. Says Nez: “The people of Dubai love their city and if you’re an intelligent buyer, chances are you would love to buy a beautiful design product that is also locally designed”.

When asked what makes the strength of Dubai in terms of design, Nez responds without hesitation: “Innovation. Energy. Looking at things in a different way”. For all this positivity, Nez remains realistic about the challenges that face design start-ups: “The DDFC has a mandate to elevate the design industry. Once designers are open to collaborate with us, that’s when we start turning vision into reality”. Her unapologetic tone is the same one encountered in her bio, and we get a sense of exciting times to come for Dubai’s design community.