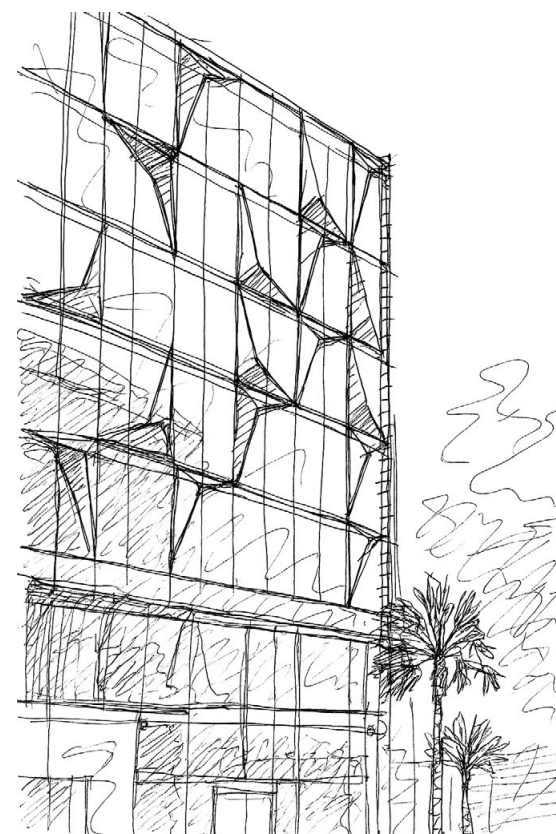


SHAPING CULTURE THROUGH DESIGN:

An Exclusive Conversation with Natasha Carella

From 4 to 9 November 2025, Dubai will host the 11th edition of Dubai Design Week at Dubai Design District (d3), under the patronage of Her Highness Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The festival will gather more than 1,000 designers and brands and feature over 30 large-scale installations, alongside commissions, exhibitions and immersive activities. Highlights include Downtown Design, the Middle East’s leading contemporary design fair, and Editions, dedicated to limited-edition art and collectible design.



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Dubai Design District, or D3, is a purpose-built hub for creative industries, hosting studios, galleries, and festivals, and serving as the core venue for Dubai Design Week



Elen Levitt
Art curator of *World Arabia Magazine*
(art expert and advisor, collector, founder of ArtLevel company)



Natasha Carella
Director of *Dubai Design Week*

ELEN LEVITT: Dubai Design Week 2025 coincides with the UAE’s Year of Community. The program highlights design as a social connector, a cultural tool, and a form of care for collective living. How do you personally interpret the idea of “community”? Is it about people and environments, or about creating new systems of dialogue, trust, and cultural cohesion?

NATASHA CARELLA: Community is best understood as both place and practice; a gathering of people, but also the creation of systems of care, trust and exchange. It lives in the relationships we build, the stories we share and the structures that shape how we live together.

When we place this in the context of design, community becomes more than a social idea. It becomes something that can be shaped, modelled and made tangible. Design has the ability to convene people in shared spaces, but also to encode cultural memory in form and material. It can create encounters between strangers, enable new dialogues across geographies and suggest new ways of belonging that extend beyond the physical.

This is the perspective to bring to Dubai Design Week 2025: community not as a static identity, but as a living infrastructure. You see this reflected across the programme, from commissions that reimagine how we gather, to exhibitions that treat detail as a language of cultural memory.

ELEN LEVITT: Over the past years, Dubai Design Week has transformed from a showcase of objects into a living fabric of the city. Would you say that today it represents not only a space of things, but also of human stories — where connections between disciplines and cultures are born?

NATASHA CARELLA: Design is never just about objects or aesthetics. It’s a way of thinking, a cultural language that tells stories about who we are and how we live. At Dubai Design Week, we approach design as a cross-disciplinary language, one that brings together architects, makers, technologists, educators and storytellers in conversation with one another.

This is particularly important in a region where narratives of design have often been filtered through external lenses. Our role is to expand

those narratives; to show that design from West Asia, South Asia, Africa and the wider Global South is not peripheral, but central to global conversations. By platforming these voices, design becomes a cultural statement: it reflects identity, honours heritage and proposes new ways of addressing shared challenges.

For us, design also works as a bridge between generations as well as local perspectives and international networks. That’s why the programme moves fluidly from exhibitions to installations to fairs. Each one is a different entry point, but together they create a collective narrative about how design shapes how we live now, and how we might imagine what comes next.

ELEN LEVITT: Art and design increasingly speak on equal terms. For you, is this a dialogue between two independent languages, or a shared narrative expressed in different forms?

NATASHA CARELLA: I don’t see art and design as fixed in two separate camps, nor as a single merged language. They operate in dialogue depending on context. What they share is a responsibility to reflect and shape cultural narratives.

In Dubai Design Week we see that dialogue constantly in motion. A piece of collectible design carries the same conceptual depth as a work of art, while an installation may move fluidly between architecture, craft and sculpture. What matters is not which label we attach, but what ideas are being expressed and how they resonate with audiences.

In that sense, art and design are different forms of storytelling. Sometimes they speak in their own registers, sometimes they converge, but together they create a richer, more layered cultural conversation. And that is precisely what we want Dubai Design Week to be; a platform where those conversations happen openly, across disciplines and across geographies.

ELEN LEVITT: Last year, the Edition art cluster appeared at d3, which many saw as a symbolic turning point. Could this be considered the beginning of a new era — when design moves beyond utility and becomes a carrier of meaning, philosophy, and depth?

NATASHA CARELLA: Editions launched in 2024 as the region’s first fair dedicated to limited-edition art and design. Its debut showed the depth of interest across disciplines and geographies and confirmed that this is not a passing gesture but the start of something lasting.

Set alongside Downtown Design, it creates a distinct but complementary space where audiences encounter photography, ceramics, prints, works on paper, design and artist multiples together. In the last edition, we saw strong sales, a younger audience entering the market and regional talent presented alongside international names; evidence that art and design can be presented together in ways that are both accessible and rigorous.

Editions has quickly become a structural part of the ecosystem. It expands the ecosystem of Dubai Design Week, establishes a new tradition of art and design in dialogue, and makes collecting more approachable while still presenting work of the highest standard.

ELEN LEVITT: Since its inception, the Abwab program has brought together more than 180 designers, serving as a platform for cultural dialogue from Asia to Africa. What kind of legacy has this program left in the region, and how is it felt on today’s design scene? This year, Abwab takes on the theme In the Details. Why do you think details — ornament, texture, gesture — become keys to memory and identity, and how can they allow us to read culture in new ways?

NATASHA CARELLA: Abwab is a special commission that embodies the ethos of Dubai Design Week. Conceived as an open call, it offers a platform for designers, architects and creative practitioners from across West, South and East Asia as well as Africa to experiment, connect and present work within an international context. Since its inception, it has commissioned more than 180 designers, leaving a legacy of cultural dialogue and underscoring that regional design is defined by plurality, adaptability and imagination.

Each year Abwab is reimagined through a new theme, ensuring it remains responsive to cultural and global conversations. This year’s theme, In the Details, invites designers to focus on material intelligence, precision and cultural nuance through the lens of ornamentation, an aesthetic and conceptual tradition that has shaped architecture, objects and textiles in many parts of the world. Historically, ornament was a language of meaning and identity, a way to encode cultural memory, symbolism and philosophical ideas into form and structure.

Yet under modernist influence, ornamentation was often dismissed as frivolous or even backward. Abwab asks designers to challenge that perception. It reframes ornamentation not as embellishment

but as embedded knowledge, a visual system of storytelling that deserves renewed attention. In this way, Abwab becomes both a platform for design and a quiet act of cultural reclamation.

In that sense, Abwab is not just a special commission but an evolving process. It reflects Dubai Design Week’s commitment to open calls, to amplifying voices from the Global South, and to positioning design as a cultural tool for understanding who we are and imagining what comes next.

ELEN LEVITT: In 2025, Urban Commissions turn to the theme of the “Courtyard.” In Arab culture, the courtyard has always been the heart of the home and of community life. How can contemporary designers reinterpret it today — transforming it into a model for new forms of urban living?

NATASHA CARELLA: Urban Commissions, Dubai Design Week’s design competition, is an annual programme that provides a platform for architects and designers to experiment with ideas for the public realm. Each edition responds to a specific theme, encouraging proposals that investigate how design can enrich civic life.

For 2025, the competition centres on the theme Courtyard, a spatial typology deeply rooted in this region yet resonant across many cultures and climates. Courtyards have long served as places of gathering, reflection, climate control and community life, offering a balance between openness and enclosure, privacy and exchange. This year, designers and architects were invited to reimagine the courtyard as a form of communal urban infrastructure, drawing from its historic role as an inclusive and adaptive space while addressing the needs of contemporary cities. Proposals considered how courtyards, and urban built environments more broadly, could foster interaction, movement and pause, while integrating climate-responsive strategies such as shading, airflow and cooling, and dissolving boundaries between public furniture and communal architecture.

By revisiting the courtyard through the lens of public furniture and modular design, we’re asking how this ancient form can respond to modern urban needs, particularly in cities like Dubai, where public life is still evolving. The selected commission will not only be an architectural gesture, but also a prompt for conversation around access, comfort and social cohesion in shared spaces.

ELEN LEVITT: Dubai Design Week is organized by Art Dubai Group with the support of Dubai Design District and the Dubai Culture & Arts Authority. Can this be seen not only as an organisational fact, but as a strategy — to combine resources and build an ecosystem where design and art operate together, shaping a shared cultural language for the region?

SINCE ITS INCEPTION,
THE ABWAB
PROGRAMME HAS
BROUGHT TOGETHER
MORE THAN 180
DESIGNERS

Abwab (“doors” in Arabic) commissioned
180+ designers from 30 countries since 2015.
Dezeen

Image courtesy of Press Office



Downtown Design 2024.
Entrance



Francesco Rota
DESALTO
Dubai Design Week 2025



Iwan Pavillion
Ithra
Dubai Design Week 2024



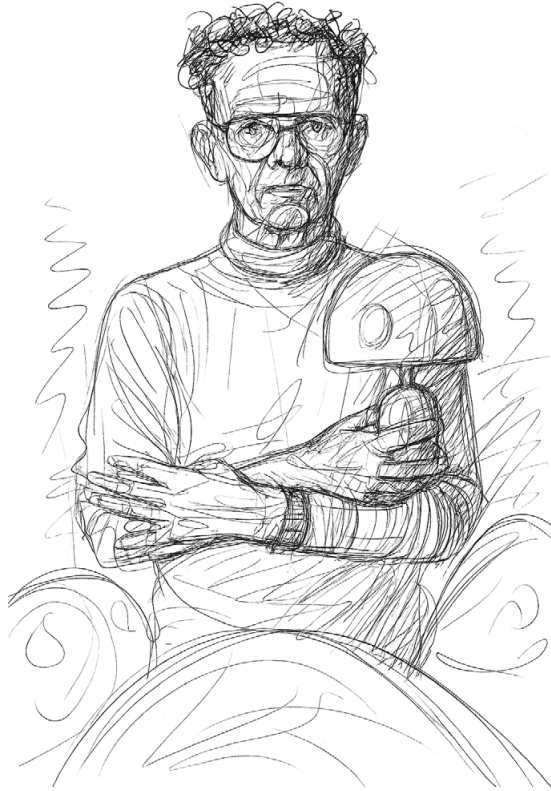
⬆
Dastan Gallery
Editions 2024



⬆
Yazan Abu Sakameh
Editions 2025



⬆
Mosaic Factory
Downtown Design 2025



⬆
Downtown Design 2025.
Tom Dixon

NATASHA CARELLA: Dubai Design Week is shaped through collaboration. The support of Dubai Design District and Dubai Culture provides the framework that allows the festival to grow, but it also ensures that we remain connected to a wider cultural strategy for the city. These partnerships bring together infrastructure, resources and knowledge in a way that creates long-term impact rather than a one-off event.

Dubai has cultivated a network of stakeholders, from government and cultural organisations to academic institutions, brands and civic groups, who work collectively to strengthen the design economy. This layered approach reflects how the UAE has always viewed culture; as something developed with communities, embedded in place and built on sustained engagement rather than temporary gestures.

In this sense, the way Dubai Design Week is organised also plays a role in this vision. It aligns public and private partners to create an eco-system where design and art sit alongside one another, shaping a shared cultural language for the region and positioning Dubai as a place where creativity is understood as central to civic life.

ELEN LEVITT: Natasha Carella, you were closely involved with Art Dubai for many years and now lead Dubai Design Week. How do you keep the agenda fresh and diverse, ensuring a multiplicity of voices while avoiding the risk of uniformity?

creasingly from the Global South, are visible on an international stage. These platforms are not only opportunities for participation, but they are also ways of embedding inclusivity into the fabric of the festival.

What matters to me is that Dubai Design Week remains open: to disciplines, to geographies, to generations. By keeping that openness at the centre, we avoid uniformity and instead create a space that reflects the plurality of design and the many roles it plays in society.

ELEN LEVITT: Can we say that Dubai Design Week, which began as a platform for showcasing objects, is now actively shaping a new market — where design becomes part of the art scene and a new language of regional culture?

NATASHA CARELLA: Dubai Design Week did not begin as a simple showcase of objects. From the first year it included commissions like Abwab and Urban Commissions, which were about experimentation and cultural dialogue. What is true is that the festival has continued to evolve. Each edition expands the scope through new platforms, partnerships and themes, ensuring that it reflects both regional voices and global conversations.

This evolution has created space for design to be understood in multiple ways: as cultural practice, as civic engagement and, increasingly, as part of a growing market. Platforms like Editions and Downtown Design show that there is

IN 2025, URBAN COMMISSIONS TURNS TO THE THEME OF THE ‘COURTYARD’

NATASHA CARELLA: The programme stays fresh because it is always in motion. Each year we re-shape it through open calls, commissions and partnerships, bringing new voices into dialogue with more established names. This balance is intentional; established designers bring rigour and credibility, while emerging practitioners bring urgency, experimentation and new ways of thinking. Together, they create a rhythm that avoids repetition and keeps the festival evolving.

Equally important is representation. From Abwab and Urban Commissions, to the UAE Designer Exhibition, our programming is structured to ensure that voices from across the region, and in-

demand for design as both cultural statement and economic driver. Rather than design becoming part of the art scene, what we see is design asserting its own agency, shaping new markets while also contributing to the cultural language of the region.

Dubai Design Week 2025 reaffirms that design is a living infrastructure — not a static discipline, but a dynamic framework for memory, identity, and community. It is through this lens that Dubai continues to define its role as a global hub of creativity and cultural dialogue.

Elen Levitt, Art Curator of World Arabia Magazine

