

ARABIA

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THE POETICS OF DESIGN:

Inside Patricia
Urquiola's Vision



ARTISANS

ROOTED



IN CRAFT

The Design Journey of Nada Debs

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She hardly needs an introduction when it comes to her impact on both the design world and Middle Eastern culture. Nada Debs, with her sharp sensibility and deep connection to her heritage, has transformed the interior design landscape in the region, inspiring a new generation of designers from the GCC. Marie Claire Maison Arabia sits down with her to explore her mission, upcoming projects, and the inspirations that continue to fuel her creative journey.



Growing up in Japan, studying at the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States, and journeying across the globe have all left indelible marks on Nada's design philosophy. Her work is a symphony of cultural connections, each piece a harmony of diverse influences. She calls her approach "handmade and heartmade", a fitting description for creations that transcend time and borders to touch the soul.

In her bustling Gemmayze studio, Nada leads a team of designers who, like her, believe in the magic of the human hand. Together, they engage in a dance of creativity, collaborating with artisans to ensure each project exceeds expectations. Nada's studio is a place where geometry and materiality come alive, where patterns and textures tell stories of ancient philosophies and contemporary life. For Nada, design is more than form and function; it is about feeling.

She sees the role of the human hand in crafting as a way to evoke a sense of belonging and connection. Her designs, whether in pure, unadorned forms or through intricate juxtapositions, convey the timeless beauty of craftsmanship. They are tactile stories, rich with the heritage of the East, yet speaking a modern language that resonates today.

Nada's belief in the importance of human stories and connections is evident in every piece she creates. Her work is a celebration of identity, a bridge between cultures, and a testament to the enduring power of design. Through her creations, Nada invites us to experience the world anew, to find comfort and beauty in the craftsmanship that tells our collective story.

For this reason, I sought an interview with her to delve deeper into her personal journey and explore her latest design creation, "The Swirl". ►

ARTISANS

What does "The Power of Design" mean to you? It is a very strong statement that reflects your whole life and career. Tell me more.
For me, the "Power of Design" is a kind of acknowledgement of our identity. We can use design to define who we are. I only realised this when I first moved to Lebanon and immersed myself in the crafts that were both a source of pride and insecurity for the Arab world as modern times approached. Despite this, these crafts still make us proud. When I entered the market, I experimented with various crafts, which allowed me to find my niche and feel welcomed by society and people. So yes, "The Power of Design" is a mantra for me as it allows people to be connected. This approach to design and architecture has allowed me to secure many public projects, as I represented modern Arab culture through my craft.

Do you think that design and creativity have the "power to cure" or "make someone feel better", and why?

Yes, absolutely. I see them as a form of remedy. When I arrived, there hadn't been much progress, and I decided to change perspectives. I modernised the traditional forms and added external patterns in a contemporary way. It was a subconscious project—a "happy pill". That vision emerged from the pain of being lost; I merged it with the furniture I designed. My concept is "East and East", removing unnecessary frills and focusing on the craftsmanship of motifs. This has become a philosophy of design for me.



Tell me more about your new creation, "The Swirl". What inspired you, and did you perceive a demand in the market for this coffee table?

The whole project began as a celebration of 20 years of Nada, but it didn't stop there—it started with a single table. We began by swirling the marquetry on the table and then explored using different



techniques and phases of craftsmanship. The aim was to highlight the artisans who worked on it. Each table tells a unique story through its intricate design and meticulous craftsmanship.

What fascinates me about "The Swirl" is its craftsmanship and the techniques used to create it. Can you tell me more about that?

The more challenging the process, the more I love it. Each texture and pattern has its own story. For instance, the pleated design was done at a different angle, reminiscent of Issey Miyake's pleating techniques, which my mum used to love. Another design, "One and Zen", combines Arabic and Japanese influences, using the mother of pearl to create a cultural fusion. The patterns are inspired by nature—flowers and birds—blending organic and geometric forms. I also have a deep appreciation for the very traditional designs; even in their most basic form, they are stunning. Each piece of "The Swirl" reflects a mix of cultures and a dedication to craftsmanship.

If someone were to ask you to exhibit "The Swirl", where would it be and why?

I would exhibit "The Swirl" in a dark room, in a theatrical space, placing it in the centre to create a dramatic focal point.

You are the President of the Jury for the prestigious Design Award organised by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris (which, by the way, is one of my favourite architectural works). Tell us about this experience. What will you assess in order to choose the winners? What is a "wow factor" in design for you? And lastly, what do you hope to see in the pieces submitted for the award?

I'm looking forward to this incredible opportunity. Thinking back, I won an extra category during the first ceremony when India Mahdavi was the jury president. In the beginning, I was not mentioned, but India created a new award to recognise my contribution, as she felt I had reshaped Arab culture through my designs. I feel honoured to be the President of the Grand Prix Award, which recognises the significance of contemporary design. Initially, within Arab culture, our focus was on importing designs, but I believed in local production and the role of women in design. Being appointed as the jury president is a surprising and significant honour for me.



When assessing the pieces, I will focus on their impact on the region and their emotional resonance. I look for designs that express emotion, address conflict, and raise cultural awareness. Designs should push boundaries, reflect identity, and make creativity stand out. They must evoke emotion and provide a sense of safety and belonging. This can often be achieved through patterns and geometry.

What are the three design elements or pieces that you can't live without?

A light, a desk, and a carpet.

Lastly, what is the one piece of advice you would give to anyone thinking of building or refurbishing their own house?

Please make it personal. ■