

POSTMODERN FURNITURE INSPIRED BY THE LOCAL EMIRATI HERITAGE ELEMENTS AND VOCABULARY

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ABSTRACT:

The United Arab Emirates is considered an eminent market in the gulf region in many areas including furniture and furniture design industry. This is evidentially true when considering the number of specialized international exhibitions locally held each year such as INDEX and INTERIORS UAE in Abu Dhabi and elsewhere across the country. Every year, these international exhibitions invite well known international experts in furniture and interior design of hotels, residences, and offices. They show classical, modern and postmodern styles inspired by the western styles, for example, the French styles such as Louis XV, Rococo or the English style such as Jacobean, Queen Anne, Robert Adam, and American styles of furniture design as well. The postmodern styles are always evident, however, most of which derives its origins from western heritage and styles and no local inspired designs can be found.

Postmodernism trend gas been applied to a whole host of movements, in art, music and literature that reacted against "modernism," and are typically marked by revival of historical elements and techniques. Since 1949, the term Postmodernism has been used to describe dissatisfaction with modern styles especially in architecture and has led to the postmodern movement in architecture, interior design and furniture design. Postmodernism in architecture has been marked by, among others, the re-emergence of surface ornament, historical reference in decorative forms, and non-orthogonal angles and has been marked in furniture design by the revival of classical styles with a new reading of the details and use of colors and ornamentations.

It has been observed, through a survey of vendors and manufacturers of furniture in the UAE, that no one is producing postmodern furniture derived from the local heritage of neither the UAE nor its cultural elements. Despite of the richness of the local culture and heritage and the wealth of vocabulary and details of architecture and interior design, no designer has yet examined that source to produce furniture designs.

The local heritage architectural elements such as doors, arches, muqarnas, castles, barajils as well as the folklore elements such as local fashion, jewelry are among those neglected elements.

The outcome of this research it to create postmodern furniture derived from the local Emirati heritage but with modern materials and manufacturing techniques.

The aim of this study has been to disclose and identify elements of a local identity that can strongly characterize Emirati furniture, which should enable the local design to be internationally recognized.

KEYWORDS:

Furniture Design, Heritage, Design Education, Folklore Elements, Postmodernism, United Arab Emirates.

1 INTRODUCTION:

Local identity is the result of the people's culture of a particular place. It is very important to preserve the local identity in order to preserve the history and create a continuum for the society which should be proud of his past and his culture heritage.

One way of achieving this is by reviving the folk art and utilizing it as a source of inspiration for new designs. Design is a strong driving force for

adopting certain trends by adding value to regular objects; accordingly, it can be used to help the people connect to their rich heritage by embracing designs derived from their culture and folk arts.

This research looked into postmodernism movements such as historical revivalism as a possible way to bridge the gap between culture heritage and contemporary design.

Furniture design students are required to be inspired in different ways, one way is to look

into the culture heritage of their local societies. Students were asked to reflect on the elements of

2 POSTMODERNISM

2.1 Postmodernism in Design

The term *Postmodernism* describes a range of conceptual frameworks and ideologies that are defined in opposition to those commonly associated with ideologies of modernity and modernist notions of knowledge and science. Postmodernist approaches are critical of the possibility of objective knowledge of the real world, and consider the ways in which social dynamics affect human conceptualizations of the world. In contrast to the modernist paradigm, postmodernist thought often emphasize idealism, constructivism, relativism, pluralism and skepticism in its approaches to knowledge and understanding.

Postmodernism postulates that many, if not all, apparent realities are only social constructs and are therefore subject to change. It emphasizes the role of language, power relations, and motivations in the formation of ideas and beliefs. Postmodernism's origins are generally accepted as having been conceived in art around the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the stultifying legacy of modern art and continued to expand into other disciplines during the early twentieth century as a reaction against modernism in general.



Figure 1: Portland building, Portland, Oregon 1983 by Michael Graves as an early example of Post-modern movement in architecture

2.2 Postmodern in Architecture

Postmodern architecture did not become a movement until the late 1970s and continues to influence present-day architecture. Postmodernity in architecture is said to be heralded by the return of "wit, ornament and reference" to architecture in response to the formalism of the International Style of

culture heritage and incorporate them in their postmodern designs.

modernism.

Influential early examples of postmodern architecture are Michael Graves' Portland Building in Portland, Oregon (Figure 1) and Philip Johnson's Sony Building (originally AT&T Building) in New York City, which borrows elements and references from the past and reintroduces color and symbolism to architecture. Postmodern architecture has also been described as "neo-eclectic", where reference and ornament have returned to the facade, replacing the aggressively unornamented modern styles.

In his book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (published in 1966), Robert Venturi was instrumental in opening readers' eyes to new ways of thinking about buildings, as it drew from the entire history of architecture—both high-style and vernacular, both historic and modern—and lambasted overly simplistic Functional Modernism.

Charles Jencks in his book, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, classified postmodernism into different approaches: Historicism, Straight revivalism, Neo-vernacular, Adhoc urbanist, Metaphor metaphysical, Post-modern space.

The historicism led to: radical eclecticism then postmodern classicism and eventually to postmodern eclecticism.

2.3 Postmodern furniture design: Modern Classic Revivalism



Figure 2 (b): more Michael Graves postmodern furniture.

This golden age of modern furniture of the 1950s began to wane in the 1960s, until innovation began to wane and slip into eccentricity. Only a very small minority really understood and appreciated the design, the quality, and the timelessness of the era's best furniture. In the 80's and 90's the contemporary style seemed to denote anything that was not obviously traditional. In the midst of a ubiquitous blandness, an almost ironic phenomenon began to gain momentum, a fifties revival appeared on the magazines pages among a growing cult of urban collectors and dealers and at big furniture companies who reinvented their midcentury classics as well increased marketing and production of other items that has never been discontinued. The modern design revival at the end of the century has been seen as the best that came so far. Postmodernism in furniture design: a striking alternative to modern 50's revivalism characterized with playfulness and humor and risk taking approach to design. Its proponents were dissatisfied with modern architecture especially the international style. They brought back color and ornament often with historic reference to add local content, metaphor, ambiguity and interest. The eclectic style was easily imitated, but its inventors delivered what they promised. There have been many experiments in postmodernism in the 80's such as the Memphis group, the high tech movement which focused primarily on the structure, material and technological processes as well as regionalism and craft revival spearheaded by Frank O Gehry with his basket weaving techniques.

There are many examples of postmodern furniture that used classical styles; also there are many examples of postmodern furniture utilizing heritage based vocabulary. This research is looking into utilizing heritage elements to create postmodern furniture. With special focus on the Emirati heritage, the research is tying contemporary furniture design with traditional elements therefor emphasizing the local identity in the United Arab Emirates.

international.

3 HERITAGE AND FOLKLORE:

The word heritage includes the physical inherited elements that define a lifestyle and the physical means of production along with nonphysical inherited elements such as morals, habits and traditions.

Folklore on the other hand is more difficult to identify, as it is the case with most of the

sociological sciences that are affected by the political, scientific and cultural background of those studying it. However, there is an academic consensus that defines the different aspects of folklore. Accordingly, it is generally defined as the collection of habits, traditions, morals, arts, crafts, skills that have been produced by the society over a long line of experiences that it has been spontaneously dealt with, governed by and learned among that society. In other words, it is safe to say that folklore contributes to the articulation of the identity of a society and its cultural character.



Figure 3: Robert Venturi, Sheraton, Chippendale, Biedermeier, gothic revival and art nouveau chairs, 1984 for Knoll

3.1 Folklore fields:

Folklore can be classified into four categories as follows:

1. Literature
2. Traditions and habits
3. Beliefs and popular knowledge
4. Material culture and folk arts

The fourth element is the field that is closely related to the purpose of this study. The material culture and folk arts are one of the most important fields of folklore because it is tightly connected with every day public life. Culture is defined as the sum of the inherited elements physical or nonphysical, which shapes everyday life and behavior. Accordingly, the material culture is the physical part of the culture as a whole. This is usually manifested by the conversion of raw materials to a specific object that serves a particular purpose.

Material culture is an important pillar of the

Emirati folklore since it constitutes the creative component of it, for example; the handcrafts such as leather, wool, wood, poetry, metals and palm fronds.

3.2 Importance of Preserving Heritage

Vocabulary:

Culture heritage and folklore shapes the culture identity which distinguishes different nations and people from each other because the identity is always formed through accumulations of the interaction of people with their very own environment. Culture heritage and folklore is an important source to understand the different eras of the society and an indication of its development. It is the link between the past and the present.

Folklore is the soul of nations as much as the history is its recorded memory. One of the best ways to preserve the UAE identity is to utilize it in tourism and economics.

One of the best examples of folklore in the UAE is the popular art and one of its best examples is jewelry.

3.3 Preserving the Emirati Identity Through Furniture Design:

One way to preserve the local identity is to use it in the touristic field, but a more effective way to preserve it is to utilize it as an economic drive. There is always a need for authentic concepts to generate design ideas for the different fields of architecture and interior design. The rich heritage of the UAE could generate very rich design ideas which in return will enhance the potential of economic growth based on the profession of design.

Heritage elements should get integrated into the modern life not as an antique but as source of inspiration. Devising furniture design that reflects the Emirati heritage in a contemporary way through the use of contemporary materials and techniques would integrate the culture on a level that is different from just collecting antiquities. This will strengthen the connection between the past and the present while preserving the modern qualities of the present.

The purpose is to use the material culture and folk arts to produce contemporary furniture.

Despite the rich culture, it is clear nowadays that this approach has not been used in furniture design as much as it should.

In fact, what happened since the forties and fifties of the twentieth century was a steady decline of the related crafts to the extent of total disappearance. Many reasons have contributed to this loss:

1. A sudden invasion of readily available imported furniture that is cheap with acceptable quality.
2. The change in economy to oil related jobs and the fleeing of the talented craftsmen to the more secure income in the oil industry.
3. The change of the income increased the purchasing power which led to the aspiration of getting imported furniture even if it is more expensive and do not reflect local culture.
4. The lack of documentation of the traditional craft of furniture making which made it difficult for local designers to be inspired by it.

3.4 The Current Status of Postmodern Furniture Design and Making in the UAE:

Lately, the heritage related crafts have suffered greatly because of the almost total abandon of those crafts by the local craftsmen. Those crafts can be categorized into three categories:

Totally abandoned crafts, crafts creating antiques and the third category is the continued crafts. Furniture industry can be considered under the third category; however, it is not wide spread. Only individuals and no institutions are still involved in this industry.

Furniture industry has a strong potential to flourish if backed by strong design.



Figure 4: the work of furniture designer Khaled Shafar, using the traditional "iqal" and the palm tree trunk as composition elements.

The number of specialized international exhibitions locally held each year such as INDEX and INTERIORS UAE in Abu Dhabi and elsewhere across the country show very little evidence of using the traditional Emirati folk art in design. For example, for the last two decades most of the post modern furniture exhibited is French or English styles.

However, some individual attempts have been identified among the flux of available styles; for example, we can see the work of one designer, Khalid Shafar where he used the local "Iqal" to produce a screen and the use of the traditional palm tree to produce table and coat hangers (Figure 3). His work can also be classified as post modern since he has simplified the

traditional icon and converted it to something new.

3.5 Elements of Design:

What we chose for this research was the revivalism of vernacular styles. The resulting furniture would be classified under postmodern furniture style.

3.5.1 Categories of used heritage elements:

Clothing and fashion such as the "Eqaal and Ghutra" for men and the "Burqaa" for women, jewelry, architectural elements, botanical materials such as palm fronds (Phoenix dactylifera), local boats such as the traditional Dhow.



Figure 5: Some of the Emirati iconic heritage elements that has been used in this research; jewelry, boats, burqa, etc..

4 DESIGN EDUCATION AND THE LOCAL HERITAGE

As educators we believe that one of the ways to change a situation is to improve the educational process that affects that situation. By introducing the problem to the students and providing them with enough background information, students get involved in a realistic task of designing furniture based on actual heritage elements. While providing proper follow-up of the students' progress, we provide them with inspirational material to help shape and reshape

their design output.

Following the new revivalism line of post-modernism, the students study the traditional folk art, analyze it carefully, and then extract the elements that composed it.

Through skilled manipulation, students were able to produce several prototypes of usable furniture units. Limited only by their imagination and the lack of proper manufacturing facilities, the results reflect, in a very strong way, the effect of the traditional elements and in the same time, carves a design style that responds to the rich heritage of the UAE.

4.1 The assignment:

The students in the furniture design class have been asked to produce different furniture pieces that are founded on the Emirati heritage elements. Student started by choosing one folk arts or heritage item according to their own preference. A background research to fully understand the chosen item has been conducted

through text and sketches.

According to the analysis done in the first phase, each student designed the furniture item then was asked to produce a simple scaled model with simple materials to test the success of the given design. After agreeing on the proposed design by the studio professor, students were requested to build a full scale piece.



Figure 6: sample of the boards expected from the students after completing their assignment. The board shows the visual and textual analysis of the selected item, and presents the proposed design as colored orthographic projections with some photos of the approved study model.

4.2 The product:

The following includes samples of the produced student work



Figure 7: Metal perfume containers converted into a table with glass top.



Figure 8: Traditional women burqa has been converted into a coffee table, using the curvy lines to shape the vertical support elements.



Figure 9: Another design utilizing tradional “Burqa”



Figure 10: “Henna” patterns, women traditional makeup applied to hands has developed into very sophisticated designs. Those paterens were used to decorate chairs.



Figure 11: UAE fabrics and textiles



Figure 12: Traditional eyeliner bottle design used as a decorating pattern on chairs.



Figure 13: The traditional "iqual" and "Ghutra" converted into a pattern for a coffee table. The feeling of the cloth is used as a side element of the table.



Figure 14: Architecture elements utilized as inspiration for ornamentation in this design for a console.



Figure 15: The traditional emirati boat has a very strong visual image and has been utilized to create a coffee table.



Figure 16: One of the most treasured plants of desert is the palm tree which has been traditionally used for all life purposes. The palm frond has been converted into a chair.



Figure 17: The traditional "iqal" and "Ghutra" inspired in this side table.

5 DISCUSSION:

This experiment is a pioneer one following a new curriculum review to the interior design program. The students who undertook this exercise were junior students which this course is an elementary furniture design course to them; accordingly it was difficult to expect their outcome. In the beginning of the assignment, most students were just copying elements, which were not well appreciated by the instructors. Several attempts were done until a reasonable outcome has been achieved. The goal was to let the students deeply analyze the design elements and to be able to produce new designs based on their analysis.

The success of the projects was dependent on the creativity of the individual student along with the analysis. It is important to state that this experimental assignment was done in a relatively short time of only 10 weeks with one weekly meeting with the instructors.

An elective advanced furniture design course has been added to the curriculum to fix the shortage encountered.

The researchers believe that it is possible to use the heritage elements to inspire new designs. And they also believe that this could be emphasized by commercializing the outcome.

Both directions combined would help save the rich Emirati heritage and folklore.

6 CONCLUSION:

In this research we presented a solution to the heritage conservation connectivity issue in the United Arab Emirates by introducing the folk arts as a design inspiration to furniture design students.

Theoretically, what the authors achieved is classified as post-modern design because of the derivation of new styles from heritage elements. This approach has been recognized since the Eighties of the Twenties Century and has been practiced by many designers since then.

Students work clearly and strongly reflects the local Emirati identity which strengthen their sense of belonging to their land and connects the old with the new in a fashionable way.

The authors believe that this can be easily commercialized which would provide incentive to continue this line of production.

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