

## Narrating Egypt's new story through design



Architect Karim Mekhtigian is a leading designer with a knowledge and take on design that looks both to past and present.

By Heba Elkayal/Daily News Egypt June 18, 2010, 4:54 pm  
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Karim Mekhtigian is an Armenian-Egyptian who for 15 years practiced architecture and design in Paris. Ten years ago he came to Cairo to work on one project, which quickly led to other commissions, prompting him to consider moving back.

Today, with two additional partners, his design firm Alchemy has a reputation amongst Egypt's design cognoscenti for delivering some of the country's most original architectural projects and product designs.

Alchemy have set the bar high in a city where design is a burgeoning creative field, thanks in large part to Mekhtigian's experience and cross-cultural approach to contemporary design.

From Mekhtigian, one can guarantee a practical take on design that has fluid forms and meaning to the concept of the product without confusing the design with superfluous detailing.

"In general we started Alchemy by having the urge to elevate a little bit the perception of absolute beauty. It's about beauty, elegance, a brand that is created in Egypt — this is one of the stories, for example. My aim was to create an Egyptian brand and to tell different kinds of stories," he said.

Alchemy is currently helping to tell the story of a city that hopes to develop its design craftsmanship with a respectful recognition of the past, yet without the overly romanticized clichés of Orientalism present.

"Of course a brand is related to a certain culture, a certain concept, certain know-how, etc., and this takes a lot of time, this takes years. So Alchemy has its own way," Mekhtigian said.

Several pieces designed by Mekhtigian and Alchemy were selected by the Italian designer Paula Navone, who curated the +20 Egypt Design exhibit in Old Cairo's 18th century landmark Bayt El-Suhaymi.

A low-seated wooden armchair lacquered in white is pierced with a geometric design, playing with a conventionally modern chair shape by juxtaposing a dramatic Arab-inspired motif onto it. The chair's almost masculine shape has been softened ever so subtly with the pierced motif.

Mekhtigian has helped develop furniture design for local producers that, in a manner previously more industrial, once churned out pieces for brands and orders abroad.

"The industrialists wanted to start having a corporate image, a design image, they used to do things they were asked to do. They never thought of having their own brand or their own name. They were just suppliers, so when we came and told them you have to stop only being suppliers, because people come to Egypt because of cheap labor (but now you have China being cheaper) they come because we can offer them something that they can't be offered elsewhere."

Mekhtigian designs not only for his firm, but also for local brands that have received a revival due to the urgency emphasized by local designers. Mekhtigian has redesigned a traditional takouka coffeeshop table in stainless steel and saturated colors for Mohm, a regal high backed chair called the Mawlana Deshret lounge seat for brand Karassi + Karassi, and an entire bedroom range, coffee table and bookshelves entitled the White Desert Collection for La Roche for their line Hid'n.

"In general I work as an art director for branding, each different brand has a different story so it's according to the story and the concept that I manage and organize my work. Alchemy is a completely different story from Hid'n because it's custom made for each client so it doesn't interfere," he said.

Whereas Alchemy blends locally inspired design fusing it with contemporary materials such as stainless steel and plastic, Hid'n is a collection whose philosophy is to uncover and translate all the hidden facets of Egypt's topography.

"Hid'n is a fresh new brand that we've worked on after all this new wave of 'wanting design' and wanting designers to work with industrialists. It's about clean lines; the surprise of opening [panels in the furniture] and finding new things, new finishes. The philosophy of Hid'n is about discovering what you don't see."

The furniture is very simple in appearance, whereas the metaphor is a complex one.

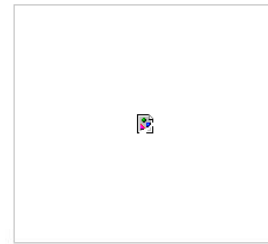
"It's also a little bit Egypt because everything is hidden, it's related. [Examples are] the veil, the mashrabiya: this filtering of the vision is something that is part of our culture and it's interesting to use it as a language, as an alphabet throughout our daily life, so that is also one of the concepts of Hid'n," explained Mekhtigian.

The White Desert collection was about creating products for Egypt and the local industry during a workshop that brought local industry with both Egyptian and foreign designers.

"One of my subjects that I developed during this workshop was that of the Egyptian topography transforming into a certain product, so it came into the Hid'n collection naturally because it was the right products we can start with," he said.

The collection includes a lounge chair whose seat dips down and whose arm rests rise up and out like the dunes of a desert, a coffee table with a dip in the center, and bookshelves whose vertical lines are like undulating waves. The collection has a sense of poetry about it, and yet is so discreet in its narrative of Egypt.

Twenty of Mekhtigian's designs were incorporated into the exhibit at Bayt El-Suhaymi, an accomplishment which he speaks modestly about, preferring to recognize the overall achievement for Egyptian design with this new initiative.



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"I think +20 is very important, the place, the space, where it is, the people involved etc. We used to dream about this many years ago. And now it's happening, it's a start and I'm really very curious and excited to see what it's going to be. It's the only way...we need to communicate, we need exposure, and we need in a certain way so it's a good and right way of doing this," Mekhtigian said.

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