

cheap chic



A touch of leather can add class without breaking the bank: The One's Fina beanbag will work in any room, adding extra seating and a dash of devil-may-care style, Dh399, www.theoneplanet.com

inside



A fresh start

Before making your next supermarket run, take some time to clean your fridge inside and out, then make it a monthly habit **hh6**



Shifting sands

Al Nahyan was nothing more than sand lots a few years ago, but is quickly transforming into one of Abu Dhabi's more desirable areas **hh7**

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editor's note

The Nile gets a dash of style

When the great and good of Cairo mingled with members of the international design community at a chic party in Cairo's Old Town last week, it was more than just a social occasion: its organisers had hoped that it would be nothing less than a breakthrough for design in Egypt.

It may just have been that: in a country that has been long on artisanship and big on furniture manufacturing capacity (cue curly-whirly baroque-style European repro for the most part), the handful of talented, locally based furniture designers and interior architects (notably Karim Mekhtigian and Cherif Morsi) were little more than voices in the wilderness.

But last week's event, +20 Egypt Design, a government-backed initiative organised by Design Partners – the company that transformed Milan's Zona Tortona into a major design hub – was quite a revelation.

It placed the work of Egyptian designers alongside that of several hand-picked European companies in an exhibition that spanned three exquisite side-by-side historic houses just off El Muiz Street. There were talks, too, by such luminaries as Gabriele Pezzini, the design director of Hermès, and Mario Trimarchi, a leading designer for Alessi.

The choice of Paola Navone as the exhibition's curator and art director was a stroke of genius, as she harnessed her long-standing fascination with the mix of old and new, west and east with her talent for creating evocative spaces.

She mixed products from Mekhtigian, Morsi, Shahira Fahmy, Dina Shoukry and other local talents with the work of Philippe Starck and Patrick Jouin (for Kartell), Ray Power (for LZF lighting) and pieces from Moroso, Alessi and others – and then added spice to the mix by trawling the local bazaars for traditional furnishings, metalwork and glassware. The result was captivating – and demonstrated the enormous difference that context can



Taktouka side tables designed by Karim Mekhtigian for Mohm are displayed with traditional chairs and glassware from a Cairo bazaar in the 17th-century Suhaymi House – part of the +20 Egypt Design exhibition organised by Design Partners, which was curated by Paola Navone.

make in showing products to their best advantage.

"This is something we have been dreaming of doing for five years," said a happy Mekhtigian the day after the opening party. "Egypt needs a story to tell [in design]; we need to stop being proud only of

the pyramids and mix all of the layers we have, old and new."

Like him, Maurizio Ribotti, the principal of Design Partners, he emphasised that the event was only a start.

"We must remember that business is a process, not an action,"

said Ribotti. "It will take time to develop this on both a local and international scale. But everybody who has been involved is very, very happy with how it has gone."

With the protagonists committed to staging a bigger and better event next year, and government

backing guaranteed, the prospect of well-designed Egyptian-made contemporary furniture looks brighter than it ever has.

★ Sandra Lane
@ View more photos at www.thenational.ae/houseandhome

cult shop cinnamon, bangalore

A world of contemporary spice

If you like it, buy it, because these witty, modern yet traditional pieces won't stay long

"I always wanted to start a store, but I only wanted to sell things that I like. And I have stuck to that philosophy," says Radhika Poddar, the understated owner of Bangalore's equally understated lifestyle store, Cinnamon.

Since it opened in 1999, Cinnamon has become the shop of choice for a certain kind of customer – the kind who prefers minimalist, quiet chic to the highly coloured bling of many Indian homeware designers.

Cinnamon's stock is made entirely in India, but most of its accessories have a modern edge and a New York feel to them, such as the bowls made of concentric metal rings, striking large bronze sunflowers and silver tealight holders. A witty, quirky sensibility is also apparent in zip-up pouches made of coconut shells, classic metal chai glasses in bright colours that tinkle as you drink from them, and plates with an image of a demon on them (the demon keeps away bad luck according to Indian custom).

There are also sleek classics that would not look out of place in *Elle Decor*, but which are actually designed by craftsmen in the heart of India, such as silver and Perspex candlesticks, and Murano-style glassware in greens, blues and reds. Prices range from Rs175 for a chai glass (Dh14) to about Rs1450 for a candlestick and Rs6000 for the large glass vases.

"I think what sets us apart is our design philosophy. Everything in Cinnamon is designed by me and my team. I focus only on Indian crafts, because I think they are



All the modernised Indian crafts are designed by the store owner Radhika Poddar and her team in a collection that is carefully curated.

amazing, but I try to give traditional crafts a contemporary look. This isn't easy because many of the craftsmen don't want to innovate, so I need to work with them very closely. Some pieces, such as our specially woven saris, can take as long as a year or two to make," says Poddar. Cinnamon holds 10 special shows a year, of items ranging from crockery to fashion. A recent show featured china designed by the leading Indian artists Jogen Das and Arpita Singh. "Some of our buyers bought plates which they framed and hung on their walls."

The store's collection is carefully curated, with only one or two of each piece. Stock changes very rapidly, and if you like an item you should buy it immediately, because it may not be there next week. "We stick to a very limited selection, because our kind of customer likes us to do the editing for them. Each piece in my collection has a story to tell."

In the decade since Cinnamon

opened India has changed dramatically. Economic growth has fostered a newly prosperous and well-travelled middle class that is enthusiastic about home design. "People are now willing to pay for good design and spend more money on their homes," confirms Poddar. "They are also a lot more experimental."

The new interest in design has meant a flood of new homeware shops in Bangalore but Poddar is not worried about competition. "I don't really look at what other people are doing. What sets us apart is our design philosophy, our edited collection and a new range every month. I have had offers to expand, but I want to stay small. I live in my own world, the Cinnamon world."

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??? ask the expert

Avoid the biggest buying traps

Q I have been looking at houses to buy for a few months now and it seems to me that the quality is not always what I would expect. And, of course, I have heard so many stories about shoddy building, bad plumbing, leaky roofs ... in this part of the world. What should I look out for when I go on viewings, especially with homes that are still under construction?

A For a start, not all buildings are shoddy. Some are – it does happen – not just in the UAE but everywhere. A lot of buildings here are up to decent standards. Any building in Dubai has a 10-year warranty anyway, so if it is a new building and problems do appear, you can get them fixed. However, there are things to keep a look out for when viewing properties.

Look closely Keep an eye out for water marks and cracks. Ask the owner as many questions as you can about the property. Look out for signs that repairs have been made on the place; if so, ask to check receipts to see what work has been done.

Watch for water The biggest issue is water. Check for proof of service contracts to see that the place is being maintained. If you are still concerned, get a survey done. Many companies can do a property survey to ensure that everything is in top condition.

Beware of cracks Here, the houses are based on sand, so cracks often occur. Everyone gets cracks; if the crack is over the plaster it's fine, it is considered only cosmetic, but if you can see

into it you will need to investigate. If you learn that such a flaw is due to the structure, step away and look for something else.

Pay attention to the light When choosing a property pick something with the maximum amount of light – or if you have the chance to arrange what rooms you want where, arrange them so that the sunlight will come straight into the kitchen in the morning so you can enjoy it during breakfast. And if you want a closed kitchen, do something with a partition instead; that way you can have either the option of it being open to have a more European look, or closed, to keep cooking smells inside.

Buying off-plan This is trickier because there is nothing concrete that you can see; if there are any problems, you just won't know until the property has been handed over. It's a slight gamble, so if you are planning to buy a place under construction, go to a master developer such as Nakheel or Emaar – or in Abu Dhabi, to Aldar or Manazel.

Use a proper agent Always ask agents for their Rera card (to show they are registered brokers). If they make an excuse for not having it, don't believe it – just go somewhere else. And never go for freelancers. This is one of the biggest purchases you will make in your life so make sure your money is in good hands.

★ Ola Salem was speaking to Gregory Antioch, a residential specialist for Cluttons Middle East, 04 334 8585
↔ If you have a question for our experts, please e-mail them to homes@thenational.ae



Always look around – check for water marks and cracks in particular.