

## FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

# Fresh designs for selective clientele

Two local designers provide unique perspectives on space

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CAIRO: Hedayat Islam and Dina Al-Khachab both have rapt expressions on their faces. They're perched in front of their computers, musing on their designs, occasionally editing each other's ideas.

The two women are partners in Eklego; a design firm conceived by Islam in 1997. Three years later, Al-Khachab came on board. Together, they wanted to explore the interesting things that could be done with space in two main areas; architecture and interior design as well as product design and manufacture.

Since then, they've carefully crafted spaces to which they have given identity through furniture and structures, along the way taking into account such values as concept, function, culture and craft. They discovered that not only did they get a kick out of creating spaces, they acquired a very selective clientele.

"I like the process of creating things. I really like buildings, [the] architecture of things. [As a child] I wanted to make things when I grew up," says Al-Khachab. She feels a vital part of the creative process is communication. "It is a very different way of communicating something. When you realize that you communicate something without talking about it, without writing about it, but by creating a product, or a space, it is a nice feeling," she adds.

"It is like an adrenalin rush, when you see a product improving, or [being fashioned]," says Islam.

Both partners have a strong academic background that provides the basic foundation, as well as the inspiration, for their creations. Islam has a master's degree in Islamic Art and Architecture from the American University in Cairo, in addition to a degree in interior design from the New York School of Interior Design. Al-Khachab has a bachelor's in Architecture from McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and she's done extensive research on the architecture of legendary Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy.

That same eagerness to discover and learn is what drives them to experiment with new design concepts. "We try to only come up with different things from the material we use. We don't have problems with paying for prototypes that don't sell. We do things because we are curious; not always because we want to sell. That way you end up with a much larger variety of ideas. We're always trying to discover new things,"



Islam (L) and Al-Khachab (R).

says Al-Khachab.

They both see design as a form of personal expression. "We're pretty eclectic.

It not just about style when it comes to design, but also your own experience, places you've been too, things you've seen," says Islam.

With a keen sense of the functionality of their products, Islam and Al-Khachab prefer to be minimal when it comes to color or decoration, leaving those choices to the discretion of their clients.

Their business may be grounded in creativity, but it's still a business, with all the practical challenges that accompany a start-up. "[The main challenge is] the bureaucracy. It is so complicated because it is very difficult to understand when you are right and when you are wrong. There are no books. There is a law, but the law is not a hundred percent clear. Now they are trying to clarify ... but it is [still] not clear enough," says Islam.

For Al-Khachab, the difference is painfully clear when she compares it to the situation overseas.

"Abroad, there are tax breaks. It is very obvious when you can [benefit from a] tax break and when you cannot. Here it is not," she muses. "Also you are surrounded by [many] companies which are not working properly, so there is no one to learn from. You do not know who is doing it right and who is doing it wrong. There is no certification, or no small business aid. It is all trial and error," she says.

Some challenges are a little trickier than others. Specifically, for the design business, copyright issues can be a major headache.

"Even if it is unintentional,

we do encounter [this problem] a lot," says Islam. She does get some comfort, however, from knowing that it can be difficult to rip Eklego off, mostly because of the care and attention the company puts into their product.

"They can come here and take pictures as much as they want but they won't come out with the same product. They will never get the right details," she says.

And like any business, collecting what you're owed often comes down to a matter of hoping your clients do the right thing. "There is no body to protect people like us, or our competitors, or anyone. If the client decides not to pay, it is very difficult to get your rights," says Islam.

Luckily, the problem relates more to service-oriented businesses according to Al-Khachab, rather than design since it is an expensive and selective field.

"All service-oriented businesses in general, except for lawyers, do not get recognition here. Anywhere in the world, it costs more money to get a designer than not to get one. It is maybe more obvious here because 90 percent of the population do not pay for designers. But abroad also, many people do not hire interior designers and architects. It is an expensive way of doing things," says Al-Khachab.

"We are also very passive. Maybe there can be a system where interior designers can get certain rights and in exchange do certain works in public government spaces," says Islam wistfully. She has an eye on a more esthetically pleasing mugamma', the over-centralized hub of Cairo's administrative affairs and uber-symbol of

the prevailing bureaucracy. "There is a whole [field] called environmental psychology. If there were more [care taken with design in public] places, people would operate in a more productive way," adds Islam.

Getting a little appreciation can be tough. Both Islam and Al-Khachab worry that the artistic value of their work takes second place to craftsmanship; people tend to worry more about function than form.

"What we face with a lot of clients is that they do not appreciate your creative process as much as they care about the good carpenter you will give them, or the good painter. We try to really pick clients who will want to explore and encourage our creativity. [We do not want] to be used as a service channel," says Islam.

Not that the craftsmanship isn't vital. Islam and Al-Khachab are currently outsourcing their production, and their selection and training process is exacting. The craftsmen they work with typically get six months of training before they are assigned a project. Once that happens, the two women will just keep asking the craftsmen to redo it until they get it right. If it takes seven attempts to perfect a product, then so be it; time is secondary to quality.

Most of the process is local, except for raw materials such as wood and stainless steel. At its heart, lies Islam and Al-Khachab's commitment to corporate social responsibility, through encouraging local craftsmanship.

"They are working with [us] because they are excited to learn from us, and to teach us how to work with their materials," says Al-Khachab. "When we opened the showroom and invited all the people we work with, they [had these huge smiles on their faces.] They were so proud. They were here to receive all of our guests. There was a team spirit. Those are people we'd never work with if we did not work in interior design," she says.

Although they don't yet have a workshop, the business plan for one is already on the table. It will allow them to expand and, although they have just started exporting on a small scale, the workshop should open up new opportunities, and a new client base.

Their current clientele is extremely diverse. Islam reels off the list: "We have young couples who are [newly] married, all the way down to older couples who are retiring and are looking for a fresh take on life. We have bachelors who want

the typical bachelor's pad."

Dealing with this diversity is also part of what makes their business fun. "It is very interesting dealing with people, because your design derives from the client. We are not commercial. If

someone comes and tells us; 'I want a classical house, would you do it for me,' we won't do it. We are not that business-oriented," says Islam. "It is a hindrance, because it lowers your audience base," she laughs.

