

Taking the horse to water

Lack of commitment or youthful lethargy?

As Ramadan comes to an end and we prepare for another school year, I've been thinking about my experiences as an interior design professor here in the Middle East. Coming from an American context, specifically working as a designer in Manhattan, the contrasts were striking.

Design is a field that thrives on critical thought, the questioning of established norms and a strong self-motivated work ethic. In the last year, I've seen that these traits are not exactly commonplace among students here. My initial semester, I taught freshmen in their first design studio. For students with little to no experience in design, it was certainly a challenge. Some rose to it; others did not. However, at a basic level, many seemed quite unaccustomed to working hard. And the task of inculcating a studio mentality into incoming students was made all the more difficult by their educational backgrounds, which seemed to emphasise rote memorisation and right and wrong answers and to devalue independent analysis and criticism.

In the spring, I led a field trip to Barcelona, a city overflowing with world-class architecture and design. To my horror, most of the students were more interested in shopping than in much of the art or architecture we saw.

There's a saying about horses and water that applies here. One incident stands out in particular. At the Fundació Miró, a fantastic museum displaying the work of Joan Miró and emerging contemporary artists, a student actually came up to me and asked, 'So what are we supposed to be doing here?'

To be fair, the student in question was not in the interior design programme. But for me, the incident distilled much of what I had experienced as

a professor in the classroom, in the Middle East in general, and on this trip in particular, into a single disheartening moment.

During the year though, several students, including a few first-years, did produce truly beautiful, rigorous and innovative projects. Certainly, the students here are capable of producing excellent work. The challenge seems to be getting them to actually do it. I've found far too few individuals with the high degree of self-motivation and initiative one would expect from students who are truly invested in their own education.

Of course, I have to occasionally remind myself that these are undergraduates, some of them in their first year. Even so, becoming a successful designer is never a given. As a fellow professor was fond of telling his studio, 'there are students in design schools all over the world who are working incredibly hard all the time; they are your competition'. So true.

But interior design education in the Middle East is still relatively young. And as new graduates enter the profession, some interesting things could happen. The fact that nearly all my students are women is perhaps unsurprising. But within the context of the traditional gender roles in the region, a profession dominated by women becomes quite fascinating.

Interior design is a multibillion-dollar industry that wields considerable influence over the environments we inhabit. If these young women ultimately enter the regional design workforce, they have the potential to create a powerful female cohort of homegrown designers uniquely positioned to shape many of the physical, and thus socio-political, spaces in which we live. Quite intriguing if you ask me.



Motivational teaching

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