Retracing the Al Quoz art trail

DUBAI'S INDUSTRIAL SUBURB IS THE EPICENTRE OF CREATIVITY

By Carolina D'Souza
Staff Reporter

DUBAI

It isn't about packaging. If it were, then the dry, desiccated row of warehouses in Al Quoz wouldn't be the hub of art in Dubai. Notwithstanding the decelerating economy, the art scene in this industrial suburb continues to advance.

Nine galleries opened in the past five months in Al Quoz, which now has a total of 33 art shops. Another one will open in the coming months.

The largest space is being utilised by Alserkal Avenue that houses 20 creative spaces including art galleries and a private art museum and auction house. Plans are in place to expand the Avenue by 2014.

Robust is one way to describe the Al Quoz art scene. To the outsider that is. What do insiders have to say about the burgeoning space that is being dubbed as the epicentre of art in the region?

Dariush Zandi, founder of Total Arts gallery at The Courtyard, says: "The gallery is 15 years old. When I first designed The Courtyard — that houses several galleries and spaces including Total Arts — the complex stood by itself in the desert."

Today several warehouses — both industrial and art-related, stand side by side, erected on the same expanse of desert which Zandi calls as "empty".

One could call him the first settler who sowed the seeds of an art hub. He doesn't deny the reference.

Inexpensive venues

"After I set up, other gallery owners and artists starting to rent warehouses. What draws them is the same aspects that drew me — inexpensive large spaces that can be transformed into artistic venues," Zandi said.

Abdul Moneim Bin Eisa Al Serkal of Alserkal Avenue, the Developer and Patron, describes the Al Quoz art scene as the highest concentration of art galleries within one space. "I've seen many similar neighbourhoods that formed on its own such as Wynwood [Arts District] in Miami or Soho in New York. The Al Quoz area has a strong potential to become the cultural centre for our community."

Of the changes, Al Serkal says that there has been growth despite the economic downturn, and increased international interest. "For the first time, two art galleries from the Gulf — Green Art Gallery and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, both situated within the Avenue — showed at Art Basel, the top art fair in the world."

The interest is palpable, and going by the opinion expressed by Ahmad Al Bachan, Manager of Art Sawa, the recession hasn't affected interest in art. He says, prices in Al Quoz have not dipped "for the last three years. Every year is getting better."

The growth has been evident, said Kurt Blanckenberg, the Director of The Mojo Gallery.

"Al Quoz has gained legitimacy and momentum as an art destination. Every city needs an area like this which is culturally led and adds another layer for both residents and tourists. The art scene here has its own character; it lends a feeling of exploration and discovery to the experience of viewing and buying art."

Further adding insight to the uniqueness of the place is Jareh Das, Communication and Artist Liaison at Etemad Gallery.

"It presents a cluster of galleries in a vastly industrial area; you really have to seek it out. Lots of first-time visitors are astounded by the scale and variety of gallery spaces here."

Going by the facts mentioned by Das and other gallery insiders as well as the overriding optimism, it wouldn't be incorrect to predict a promising future for emirate's art hub.

METAMORPHOSIS

A transformation from industry to artistry

DUBAI

By Carolina D'Souza
Staff Reporter

Apart from galleries, the Al Quoz art scene has a few surprises.

Two of these are The Fridge and The Cartoon Art Gallery. The former is a music agency and the latter is, as the name suggests, a hub for cartoonists.

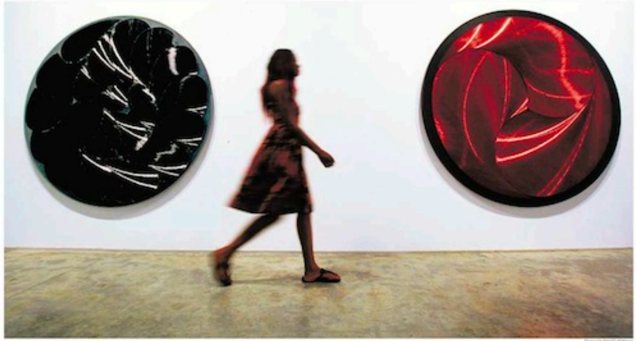
Anne Cabanel, PR and Marketing Manager at The Fridge, said: "Al Quoz seemed like a perfect fit because it is where the lifeblood of Dubai's artistic community is situated, plus the size of the warehouses that gives us space to hold concerts and workshops without the worry of disturbing the neighbours."

The response since their opening four years ago has been positive, she said.

"People constantly comment on how surprised they to find such a wealth of musical and artistic experiences in the most industrially dense area of Dubai."

Adding diversity to the Al Quoz art scene is The Cartoon Art Gallery, the first of its kind in the UAE and the region. It opened a year ago with a mission to foster cartoon art from around the world.

Noura Masri, the Manager of the gallery, said: "We wanted to fit in a place where we are surrounded by art lovers, artists and a creative atmosphere. We wanted to create a venue that cartoonists and animators as well as art lovers would be drawn to." She added that the area has unintentionally grown organically into a creative hub.



Francois Nel/Gulf News

Oh my, Gulay
- Artist Gulay Semercioglu's exhibition titled 'The Line of Life' is currently on at Gallery Etemad, a warehouse space converted into an art gallery, at Al Serkal Avenue, in the Al Quoz industrial district in Dubai.

Francois Nel/Gulf News

Art angels
- Jareh Das (above) of Gallery Etemad and Noura Masri (left), Gallery Manager at The Cartoon Art Gallery.

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Kurt Blanckenberg | *Director, Mojo Gallery*

Lost in your quest for art? ArtMap shows you the way

Initiative was born out of a need to build cultural awareness

DUBAI

By Carolina D'Souza
Staff Reporter

Since the first issue, we have included a close up map of Al Quoz as it is one of Dubai's key arts hub which has become more so in recent years with an influx of galleries opening, and the strength of locations such as Al Serkal Avenue."

Aleksei Afanasiev | *Development Manager at ArtintheCity*

Al Quoz has been in the ArtMap, a tri-annual publication that serves a guide to the UAE's arts and culture scene, since it first came out in March 2007.

Speaking to Gulf News, Aleksei Afanasiev, Development Manager at ArtintheCity, an initiative by the Jamjar and an umbrella project that unites arts and culture in the UAE, says: "Since the first issue, we have included a close up map of Al Quoz as it is one of Dubai's key arts hub which has become more so in recent years with an influx of galleries opening, and the strength of locations such as Al Serkal Avenue."

He explains that the ArtMap was developed out of a need to build awareness of the UAE's arts scene and to help people find the galleries.

Back in 2007, construction was in full force and it was difficult to find many venues, not just art galleries. When asked whether it was difficult listing galleries in Al Quoz, he said: "With our offices in Al Quoz, we've come to know the area well. We are constantly editing the maps to keep them updated."

Francois Nel/Gulf News

Colour your world
- Aleksei Afanasiev (above) hands out the Dubai Art Map as the facade of Gallery Etemad (above right) is bereft of any indication that it houses some of Dubai's best artistic creations.

Dubai expats to trek 'Savage Mountain'

Atiq-ur-Rehman/Gulf News

Fantastic Four
- From left: Mahmoud Malek, Jasem Malek, Shahid Bhatti and Mohammad Tahir Rafiq, will go on a 15-day adventure trek to K2 Base camp and Gondogoro la Pass in Pakistan.

Adventure aimed at raising awareness and funding for underprivileged children in Pakistan

DUBAI

By Janice Ponce de Leon
Staff Reporter

For many expatriates in the UAE, the annual leave is the most sought-after prize after a whole year's toil.

Many plan it early with rest and recreation, family and friend visits, and exotic getaways in their itinerary. But four Pakistanis considered none of these when they planned their vacation for this year.

Mahmoud Malek, his son Jasem, Tahir Rafiq, and Shahid Bhatti will embark on a 15-day journey to the K2 Base Camp in Pakistan on June 30. It may be an adventure for many, but for them, it's all in the name of charity. The team aims to raise awareness on the cause of The Citizens Foundation (TCF), a non-profit organisation that operates 830 schools in Pakistan for underprivileged children.

Deadlier than Everest

Located near the Pakistan-Chinese border, K2 is the second highest mountain in the world standing at over 8,600 metres above sea level, just more than 200 metres shy of the height of Mt Everest. It has earned the moniker 'Savage Mountain' for its reputation of being more dangerous and deadly compared to Mt Everest.

The team, however, will not summit the mountain but will aim for just the Base Camp perched at 5,100 metres.

From Islamabad they will fly to Skardu, followed by a seven-hour jeep ride to Askole. All activities from there onwards will happen on foot for the next 13 days. "It's gonna be a difficult and challenging walk. We will be doing most of the walking at night because most of the avalanches take place around midday when the sun is hot and the snow starts to melt. It becomes very dangerous to cross the area," Mahmoud, a chartered accountant, told *Gulf News*.

The average daily walk may take six to seven hours. But the Gondogoro La Pass crossing may take at least 14 hours.

"This is a high octane adventure—walking and camping on glaciers, crossing numerous glacial rivers and streams some with bridges and others without, skirting crevasses, ascending steep 60 degree, snow-covered mountain slopes to the top of the Gondogoro La Pass and equally steep, rock strewn descent to Hushe, and [pitching] tent in -10 Celsius temperatures," he added.

Mahmoud is no stranger to treks like these. Last year, he and his group made a similar trek to the Mt Everest Base Camp also for the benefit of TCF.

"The advantage of the Mt. Everest Base Camp track is that the track is very well laid out. It's a well-trodden path. This is gonna be a lot tougher in the sense that from Askole, there are no villages after that. It is completely barren landscape," Mahmoud said. But it would all be worth it, the father and son said, as it is just their simple gesture of giving back to their country. "Being in Dubai in a British school, I have access to some of the best universities in the world. But [for] these children, to go to high school is already an achievement and that's really no fault of their own."

Improved road safety through better night visibility

Company in partnership with authorities to ensure safe roads

DUBAI

By Dina Aboul Hosn
Staff Reporter

Improving road safety through better nighttime visibility is an ongoing challenge in the UAE, where the weather conditions affect the reflective material on the roads, an expert said.

In a very hot weather, the asphalt on the road sweats, producing black liquid particles that are caught by car tyres and stamped over the reflective material on the roads, which considerably shortens their lifetime, Rik Nuyttens, Vice-President of the International Road Federation (IRF) based in Switzerland and Regulatory Affairs Manager of 3M Traffic Safety Systems Division EMEA Region, said. On a recent visit to the UAE, Nuyttens met officials from road and transport authorities in different emirates to discuss their safety requirements, and how 3M, innovator and producer of high-end reflective material, can help develop products to meet these requirements.

"Our concern is how to make road marking perform better and serve longer, as reflective material consists of glass beads that disappear under the black asphalt, and night visibility will be gone," Nuyttens said.

Durable

"We have products that last for six to eight years and are very durable, but again, when covered by asphalt, they lose their effect," he said.

Another concern of the company is improving the visibility of road signs to keep up with the development in roads, vehicles, and driving conditions.

Asghar Khan/Gulf News

We now have many senior citizens behind the wheel, and since in most cases they don't see as well as younger drivers at night, it may be harder for them to read road signs."

Rik Nuyttens | *President, IRF*

"One of the main issues that need to be tackled is that we now have more senior citizens behind the wheel, and since in most cases they don't see as well as younger drivers at night, it may be harder for them to read road signs," Nuyttens said.

As a driver approaches a road sign, he should plan his exit from a distance, but failing to see the sign from a distance results in last minute decisions and sudden swerving, which is the highest cause of serious traffic accidents.

"We don't have this problem in Dubai as the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) use good quality signs that can be seen from a distance and which have big letters that can be read as easily and as soon at day and night," he said.

Street lights will help you see the road from a distance, but it is your headlights reflecting off signs that enable you to see signs and road markings at night, Nuyttens said.

Speaking from the dark room in 3M's Media City office, where the difference between various reflective materials can be seen and the best for each road can be selected, Nuyttens said he recommends using florescent colours on road signs, as these help get the sign message across.

The company, along with police and road authorities in different countries, studies the effect of implementing safety solutions by measuring the number of accidents before and after implementation.

ENFORCEMENT

Tougher laws

According to Rik Nuyttens, road safety can be improved by following a three-way strategy that starts with early education.

"Law enforcement by police bodies must also be very strict, and we believe that increasing fines and tougher enforcement go hand in hand when it comes to preventing road accidents and increasing safety," he said. Ensuring the safety of vehicles is a crucial step towards traffic safety, which means passengers should wear seatbelts, children should be restrained in child car seats, and airbags should be obligatory in all cars. And finally, the infrastructure should be improved to provide best driving conditions, starting from better roads and road signs and not ending with improving night visibility, Nuyttens added.

— D.A.H.