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RESTARTING FROM DESIGN

Talking to
Pallavi Dean

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An interview with Pallavi Dean

Sara Monsurrò

SM: You certainly have a wide experience of the world: you were born in India and raised in Dubai, you studied in Dubai and in the United States, you worked in London and now you are back in Dubai. How has this influenced your personal and professional identity, and what would you say you have taken from each of these environments?

PD: The most powerful influence on my work has been my multicultural background. I am Indian but I have never lived in India; the UAE is my home, but I am not Emirati; and my husband and kids are British. This has taught me that life is richer and more vibrant when cultures collide. It is a cultural tension. Three cultures have collided to shape me as a designer and a person: Indian, Emirati and British. They have often pushed and pulled me in conflicting directions, creating what are sometimes quite raw emotional tensions. Thankfully, as I get older, I am coming to terms with this. I feel so fortunate to have this rich, vibrant, diverse background. Cultural tension is giving way to cultural balance.

SM: You founded your studio in 2013 with the name Pallavi Dean Interiors; in 2018 the name changed to Roar. Does this change reflect a deeper change in the outlook, objectives or structure of the studio? What are the elements of continuity and discontinuity between the two phases?

PD: I have always recognized that the more heads there are, the more creatively flourished the studio is. We are the sum of all the parts. So, as the studio started to grow, it became important to reflect our collective strength in our name. We wanted a name that was fierce and feline – we are a studio of 17 women and only one guy! The name Roar sends a powerful message about the DNA of the firm: our energy, our strength, our personality.

SM: Your career also includes teaching at the university. How has the interrelation of theory and practice influenced your way of working?

PD: I always aim to incorporate practical and theoretical research into my designs. A recent example of this is the Dubai Head Quarters of the Japanese pharmaceutical company Takeda, for which we collaborated with Herman Miller's workspace specialists on Space Allocation Modelling (SAM Analysis) in a bid to maximize the utilization of the floorplate.

The pandemic has also led us to rethink the way we approach design. We have done some research on post-Covid design, producing three papers on the future of interior design, identifying short-term and long-term changes and highlighting game changing trends for hospitality, education and office spaces.

SM: Today your work is mainly based in the UAE and especially in Dubai. What are the advantages of this environment, in your opinion? And do you see any disadvantages in it?

PD: I would say 70% of our work is based in the UAE. We are working on hotels in Morocco and Islamabad, and on a few projects in Saudi, Qatar, Bahrain, India – I view us as a regional studio with international reach.

Geographically – Dubai is so perfectly situated in the middle of Asia and Europe – the location is a key advantage. In seven hours, we could be either in London or in Singapore. The government has also created a fantastic ecosystem and infrastructure for SME like us to thrive: creating and nurturing a design district was a key step in the right direction. In addition to this, we have access to great educational institutions here: the dialogue between industry and academics flourishes and I think it is in this connection or overlap that lies the real design magic.







SM: From your previous interviews it seems that you place much importance on working environments in which ideas circulate freely not only in formal, but also in informal social contexts. Have you concretely realized in any of your works this ideal of space that allows for both individual work and free, social exchange of ideas? I am thinking in particular about the new Research Technology and Innovation Park at the American University of Sharjah.

PD: Yes, the American University of Sharjah's new Research Technology and Innovation Park is a great example, as we wanted the design – both through its circulation and space planning – to reflect the development of problem-solving innovations, which is at the core of the institute's mission.

It is designed to encourage a dialogue between academia and industry in order to generate innovative ideas and produce thriving new enterprises: the campus – spanning over 25.000 m² – encompasses two large atriums, several leasable offices for start-ups and incubators, anchor offices for blue-chip tenants and the AUS RTI Head Quarters. The majority of the space is dedicated to co-working areas for the AUS students working on entrepreneurial ideas, including maker-spaces, exhibition spaces and an auditorium alongside ancillary zones such as meeting rooms, seminar and multipurpose halls, a gymnasium as well as a creche.

The physical space encourages interactions and connections and we strongly believe that our role as architects and designers is to orchestrate this human connection.

SM: About your work, it seems that you are willing to take any aspect of the human or natural world as a source of inspiration: the Yarmouk River Valley, the *falaj* (an ancient Arabian irrigation system), and even influences from the Far East. Are certain sources of inspiration especially important to you, or are you equally open to all influences?

PD: I am definitely open to all influences. Designers are curious beings; we are people who can never switch off to inspiration. I think of myself as an antenna: ever ready to tune into the inspiration from a book I am reading, a place I have visited, a walk in nature or quite simply listening to my own stillness post-meditation.

But, as most artists will tell you, inspiration can be fickle: some days it flows naturally and, some days, I just have to put in the hours until it arrives. By this I mean that I patiently research, exploring art, turning to nature, revisiting things I have seen during my travels. The more diverse and varied my research, the stronger the result will be. Eight years of training at architecture school exposed me to many genres and styles, and subliminally they have all influenced me and my work, I am sure of it. >







SM: Well-being, empathy and attention to the requirements of the user are at the heart of your design work. How do you manage to stay true to this philosophy?

PD: We work with a psychologist on all our projects to help define the clients' needs and to create the most effective spaces for them. As you rightly said, we put a large emphasis on well-being, and we approach design from a place of empathy and with the aim of nurturing the client.

SM: Another guiding principle in your work is the consideration you have for environmental themes and for the individual's need to remain in contact with nature. This attention to the environment and the personal well-being of the individual are in stark contrast to the stereotypical view of urban development in the UAE, its continual expansion and continual struggle with the limits of human nature and its surroundings. How does your approach relate to that reality, and, on the other hand, how much is being done, in your view, to change the stereotype?

PD: The idea of bringing the outside in, in recognition of our inherent need as humans to be in contact with nature, has always been at the forefront of Roar's practice. Daylight reduces fatigue; greenery reduces drowsiness; Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory proposes that exposure to nature is not only enjoyable but can also improve focus and concentration. The current pandemic has reminded us of our too distant relationship with nature; I believe that, going forward, biophilic design will become a must in most interior design projects.

Roar likes to work with local craftspeople and local environmental ideas wherever possible, we are very conscious that they should be baked into the cake, rather than just decorative add-ons. Promoting health and wellness is central to any design brief.

SM: Would you like to tell us about any of your more recent works, or perhaps a work still in progress?

PD: I am currently working over 15 restaurants for Expo 2020 Dubai, opening later this year, and a Community Hub at ICD Brookfield Place, also in Dubai.



