

# New dimensions

**A**T A TIME WHEN DESIGN IS CHALLENGING ALL FORMS OF SYMMETRY and pushing the boundaries of creativity, Dubai's International Design Forum (IDF), holding its first event to exchange ideas between international and Arab designers, couldn't be better timed. **Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary** reports

Design is pervading every aspect of our lives.

As the UAE forges ahead with its rapidly-changing skyline, construction is taking place at a heady pace. Infrastructure is being infused with state-of-the-art upgrades. Transportation and communication systems are being enhanced with the help of cutting-edge technology. The importance of design has never been more significant than right now.

An international design initiative has been created to bring together the world's leading designers, artists, architects and other creative persons. Under this initiative, the first annual International Design Forum (IDF) was held in Dubai in May this year.

Dialogue and synergetic exchange of ideas between international and Arab designers was the central theme of the forum. It was organised by Moutamarat, a joint venture between Saudi Research and Publishing Company and Tatweer LLC, a Dubai Holding Company. (Moutamarat is dedicated to developing a knowledge platform for the Arab world and the IDF is one such venture.)

Amid panel discussions and conferences, the forum dealt with three major tracks – industrial design, urban

design and design connects.

Elaborating on the chief purpose behind organising such a forum, Khalid Al Maliki, CEO of Tatweer, said: "The IDF is based on the central belief that design improves lives. Its objective is to determine how the challenges faced by the Arab world might be met by new design solutions. The IDF integrates the Arab perspective into the international design calendar as the first design celebration from the Arab world."

"The Arab world is a place rich in promise, but it has a responsibility to champion its own designers to become competitive, commercial and forward thinking. We must use design as an integral tool in our dialogue with the world."

Among many talent artists and design persons who participated in the three-day forum, Friday had the opportunity to speak to two leading personalities – Paola Antonelli, the curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City and Carlo Ratti, architect and director of the SENSEable Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Together they discussed the generic issues of design, its impact on civilisations and cities, and the future of design.



"We must use design as an integral tool in our dialogue with the world," says Khalid Al Maliki, CEO of Tatweer.



## Q&A WITH ANTONELLI

**Design is an integral part of our lives. What does design mean to you in the holistic sense?**  
People should look at design in a holistic sense. Very often you hear definitions of design such as problem solving, form v/s function, etc. Good design is about giving meaning to objects. It has to be functional and designed well, but it also has to evoke emotion and meaning. It has to teach you something. Even an insignificant paper clip can teach you something if you know what to observe. I consider design as one of the highest expressions of human creativity.

For centuries, civilisations – such as

Egyptian, Babylonian, Parthenian, Roman and Indus Valley – have been creating designs. From each culture, I learnt they were great at doing what designers do best, ie, take existing resources and use them to achieve a higher goal. They all gave meaning to their creative expression. Design is about being true to yourself.

**We continue to use and adapt classic shapes such as domes, arches, pillars, etc, that we have inherited from ancient cultures. What legacy will present-day design elements represent?**  
Interestingly, we continue to use arches and domes exactly the same way. However, modern technology has advanced so far that we now build

**One of Carlo Ratti's design works in Italy.**

## URBAN DESIGN



ARSHAD ALI/GULF NEWS

different shapes and structures that were unimaginable in the past.

For example, Cecile Balmont, a renowned Sri Lankan engineer, who is currently working with Ove Arup, a global design and business consulting firm in the UK, believes it is possible to achieve any design. It doesn't have to be symmetrical and it could be unbalanced or tilted. And that it is possible to achieve what was thought impossible.

The China Central Television Headquarters in Beijing, created by architect Rem Koolhaas, challenges all forms of symmetry. It isn't a traditional tower, but continuous loops of horizontal and vertical sections. (It is a symbol of the continuous and interconnected nature of television programming.) To actually make an irregular yet stable structure like this in a seismic zone like Beijing is a triumph of modern design.

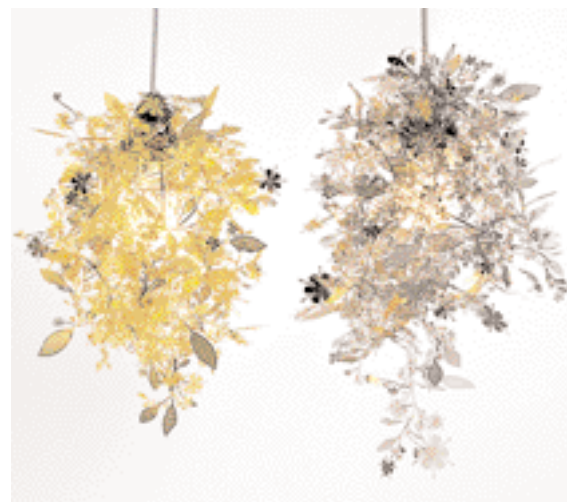
This is the moment for experimentation, and engineers have become as creative as artists. It is difficult to predict the future ...

**Today, urban design seems to compete with human beings. Most cities have skyscrapers that overpower and overwhelm the populace. Earlier, houses and structures were designed to blend with their surroundings. Comment.**

In a place like New York, where I live,

**Above: Paola Antonelli ...**  
(above) "Design is about being true to yourself."

**Right: Garland Light** by artist Tord Boontje, part of Reinstallation of The Museum of Modern Art Galleries for Architecture and Design in New York.



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tall buildings do not compete with people. It is such a soaring emotion to walk down Sixth Avenue ... I think it is really got to do with how you put things together.

Elsewhere in the world, there is a competition between tall buildings and its populace. Every time you talk to people in Dubai, they speak of the tallest, largest and biggest structures. You hear the same in Shanghai and Kuala Lumpur. This is a form of extreme architecture, and I don't know how long this trend will last.

The way buildings interact with the

people has a lot to do with planning streets. (This is why city mayors have become more important.) Street culture enables people to deal with all kinds of buildings - tall, small or big in the best way.

**What about buildings that are not eco-friendly, do not use biodegradable materials and use energy resources indiscriminately? When design is creative but not sustainable? Sustainability should become everybody's responsibility. Eventually, it will happen. Societal pressure will largely influence this.**

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## URBAN DESIGN

Politicians and policy makers need to work on it too. Right now, consumers, clients, tenants, etc, are becoming powerful as they dictate terms to corporations and companies. There will be a day when builders and architects will give in to these demands.

**What is your idea of a good, sustainable design that is also contemporary, creative and functional?**

The Wind Tower in Dubai. I stood under the wind tower; it was amazing. The structure has inspired many architects.

**How do science and design meet? You are organising an exhibition on Science and Design at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008. How do you see the two finding common ground?**

Science and design meet in technology, and technology is the link that makes them talk to each other. Sometimes it is interesting to put designers and scientists together, and witness the exchange, especially when they do not have the interpreter, ie, technology.

Scientists and designers are idealists. Technologists are very pragmatic. Scientists and designers want to change their perceived status in society. Powerful ideas will result from their dialogue. The two also meet in

engineering. Scientists and designers need to talk to each other directly.

**What is your job as a curator of such an important museum?**

My main job is communication. I have to find a way to communicate with an audience. This is a varied and huge job. I am lucky to work at the Museum of Modern Art where large groups of people visit to see the works of Picasso, and stay on for one of Paola's shows running at the time. (She organises contemporary design shows at the MOMA.)

I have to find a way to make people understand the power and beauty of contemporary design. Most people think they don't understand design. This isn't true. We live with design. One has to explain it to them in an engaging manner.

**This forum has been a very interactive event. What are your thoughts on it?**

I found it very interesting. There were architects and developers in the plenary session, and their ideas very different from each other. I think it is important to find a common ground. Architecture and design has always been about positive compromise. It is about using the resources you have. It was like that in ancient times and it is like that today too.

**What are your views on the urban designs of Dubai?**

There is so much to be done about infrastructure. For example, after the Metro is up-and-running, will there be tunnels to connect people to buildings? Surely people won't wait for the train in the sun? Architecture is doing very well, it is infrastructure that needs planning.

## Q&A WITH RATTI

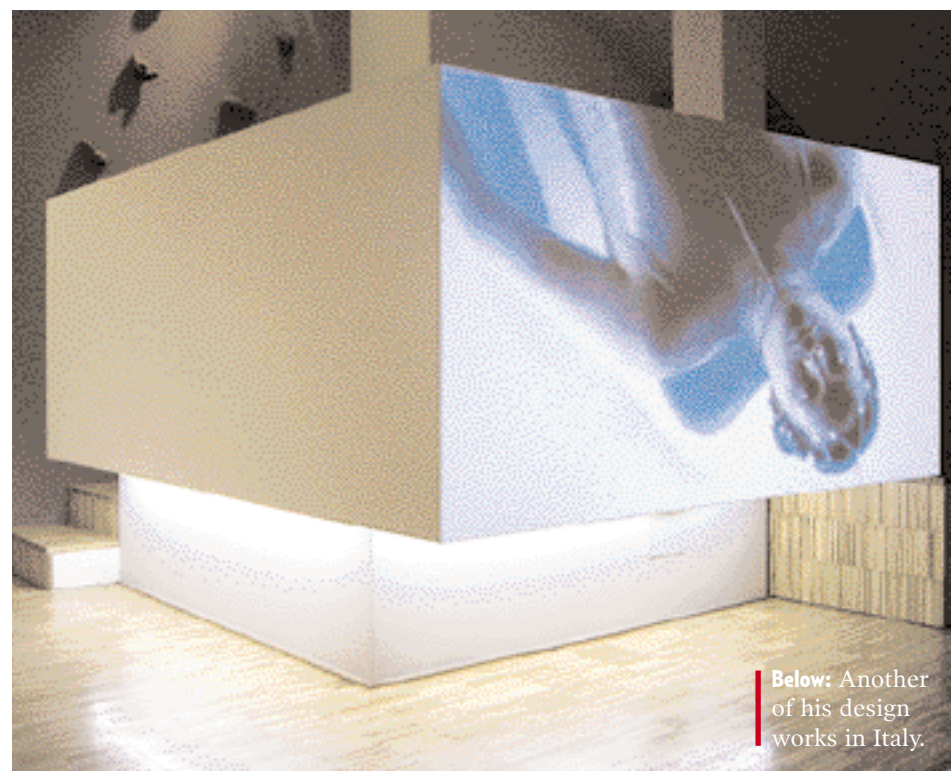
**At the SENSEable Laboratory, you have done a lot of work in the fields of space and design.**

**What is the difference between the theoretical and practical aspects of design?**

Surely, creating a design on a purely academic basis is very different from real life, where design deals with people and functionality.

At the laboratory, we try to comprehend how sensors and hand-held electronic devices have changed our perception of cities today. It's about creative re-thinking, and exploring this interface between people and technology. This is one part of my role.

On a practical level, I run an architectural practice in Italy, where I am working on a new commercial project. I plan to design a gateway to the World Expo 2008. It is a big building made with pixels of water,



Below: Another of his design works in Italy.

PHOTO COURTESY CARLO RATTI



"Designs will arise from other areas such as engineering, even art," says Carlo Ratti

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Back at the laboratory, we worked on a recent project where we used mobile phones to capture the pulse of Massachusetts. We were able to do this by monitoring information that can be acquired from a mobile phone. We were able to track movement of people, traffic jams and how the city lives. Never before has something like this been done. This is an example of how theory is translated into practice.

**Is the transition from theory to practice a difficult one?**

They are different processes. In research, you need to explore several possible avenues. Often, broadening the possibilities. Whereas, when you design the actual building, the process gets narrower till you get one final format you are happy with.

However, the two complement each other. First you get into research and try out everything. Then you narrow the possibilities. The former is analytical and the latter isn't experimental.

**You subscribe to the concept of space syntax. Can you explain it to our readers?**

The space syntax is a concept that originated in London with Profs. Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, from the University College of London, around 20 years ago. The idea behind it is to understand how people move in a city. Initially it was done by looking at how the city shaped, inferring from this shape how people might be moving. Today we can do something incredible from really seeing how the city moves in real time. It can have applications for anything from traffic to public transport.

**When you design, does this concept inspire you? Can we compare it to the grammar of language?**

In the past, there was implicit grammar brought in by materials, knowledge, way of building, culture, etc. There was a certain method to the process. Now we've lost it owing to a number of reasons, perhaps technological.

Observably, the same technology through computing can be used to bring back that lost syntax.

**What does design mean to the modern world?**

I see designers turning into hybrid beings, where they possess varied skills and employ various design procedures. It is the thrill of creating places, and seeing how technology will help the transformation. Designs

**The three-day conference**

threw up interesting ideas on the synergy between design and urban living.

just be an architect. You need to be inspired by cross-disciplinary thinking.

**What is your impression of Dubai?**

Every time I come here it looks like a new city. It's growing so fast; it's incredible. We are creating designs for many countries from Asia to Europe and America. I would be delighted to work here because it has such an exciting atmosphere.

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will arise from other areas such as engineering, even art.

**What kind of institutions should future architects enrol in?**

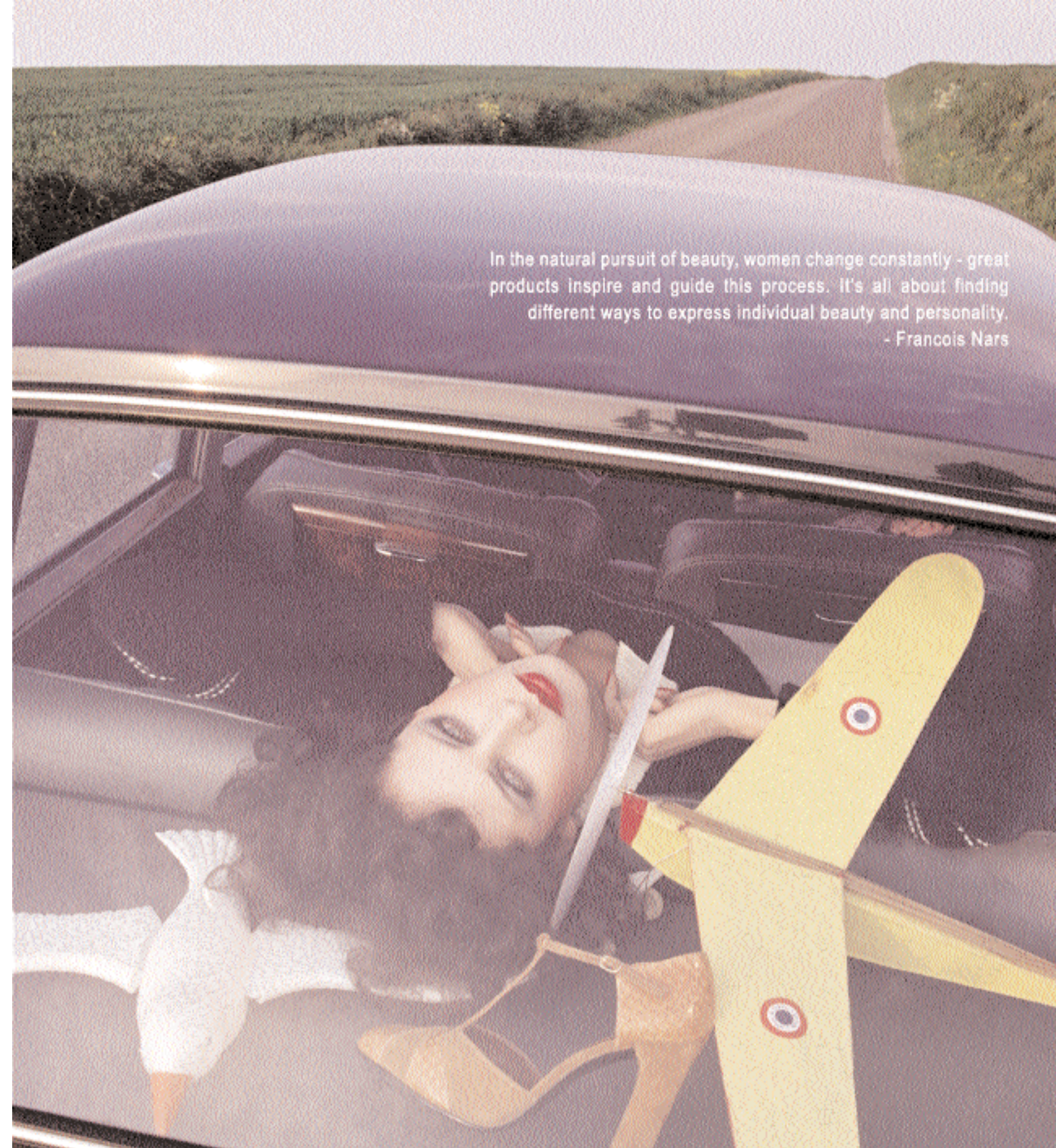
I think there should be no architects. I have two reasons for this statement. Firstly, architecture schools tend to generate stereotypes. The way you learn about architecture is really about copying same models. It is too much of academia in the negative sense. Secondly, architecture as we know it today is not going to be the same in the future. Rather, it is about how you can think about this augmented way of living, bringing people, technology and space together. To do this, you cannot

**What future can design create?**

The change will not come from designers. It will arise from broadening the scope of design.

I like the way creativity was expressed during the Renaissance period through people like Leonardo da Vinci. He was a scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, painter, sculptor, architect, musician, and writer. He expressed himself through different disciplines.

It would be interesting to see this sort of creativity coming from the strict boundary of design. The future belongs to creativity that is about reinventing the processes. ■



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