



confessions of AN EMERGING DESIGNER

By Hafsa Lodi

LOCAL DESIGNERS SHED SOME LIGHT ON THE TRUTH BEHIND THE GLAMOROUS WORLD OF FASHION.



In a country where women live for having the newest, the latest and the best, you'd think local fashion designers would be scarce, select and exclusive. For some of the Emirates' high-maintenance residents, stepping out of the house for simple tasks like buying groceries can become a fashion show in itself. But the yearning to stylishly stand out in the mall, on the streets and at social gatherings, creates the perfect environment for budding, emerging, aspiring and upcoming fashion designers. Recently, a number of these have crept up in the Emirates, and more continue to pave their way into the industry, attracted to the prospect of fashion shows, photo shoots, press coverage and popularity. "A lot of girls get into fashion thinking that its' all

about glamour. Sorry to shatter the myth but its 95% hard work and about 5% glamour," says Dubai-based designer *Wafa Saifi*. Starting a fashion line is bound to bring about bundles of stress and strain, but budding designers in the Middle East, despair not—the following guidelines put together from personal experiences as an emerging designer in Dubai, along with constructive words of advice from more established designers in the region, will shed some light on the process and help you in achieving your fashion design dreams.



Wafa Saifi

TAKE A COURSE

You'll find that the seas of soft, silky satins, trails of tulle and taffeta and gorgeous glittered gowns that clutter your fantasies are not so easily translated to a sketchbook or sewing machine. Whether it's a spur-of-the-moment decision or a lifetime longing to pursue fashion design, the industry is not one to be entered because of a fleeting feeling—passion, skill and dedication are the ingredients to making it big.

Grana Khan, founder of *Le Grana Clothing*, advises students to study fashion design if

they want to take it forward as a serious career path. "Learning how to draft patterns gives you that tailoring and fitting edge over other designers," says Grana, who studied pattern drafting at The International Academy of Design and Technology. Before relocating to Dubai, Grana gained lots of experience in the field by volunteering, interning and working with various fashion houses in Toronto, Canada. "Fashion is a business and you have to take it seriously—you need experience and formal training to be able to build a business that's sustainable,"

says Chathuri Samaraweera, founder of *Anaya*. In the Middle East, Esmod Dubai and Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar are two of the most known schools offering degrees in fashion design, but there are also a handful of institutes that offer part-time courses and diplomas in design. Grana explains that the skills learned while studying fashion design are invaluable—knowing how to sew and drape fabrics, draft patterns, deal with different textures, create a cohesive collection, work with Photoshop and Illustrator and distribute and market yourself, she says, will give designers a major edge over those who may have a passion for fashion, but lack the necessary tailoring techniques.





HAVE A VISION

Fashion design is not for all fashion enthusiasts. To start out, you need a clear vision. Look for a hole in the industry, and fill it. Avoid producing something that looks like it's already available on the high street. Put yourself in a buyer's shoes, and imagine what you would look for in a new designer's collection. Create a signature look, whether it's in the fabric, pattern or cut, think outside the box, and be innovative. Take Alanoud Badr, for instance. A "blazer addict" for years, the Dubai-based fashion consultant and blogger recently launched her own line of women's blazers, under the label *Lady Fozaza*. She loved the structured aspect of blazers, and how they can be a "finishing accessory" to many outfits, but found that the ones available in the market were boring and uninspiring. "I thought, if only I could have this one in pink, this one with shoulder pads or that one with leather, and before I knew it, I designed whole collection and a newfound passion was born," she says. Though only a few months have passed since the launch of her *Lady Fozaza* blazers, they already have a place in the closets of celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Lily Cole, and were also spotted in a recent Amr Diab music video. Alanoud advises aspiring designers to tell a story through their designs and stay close to key trends, while giving them a personal touch.

Lady Fozaza



PUT YOUR PLANS ON PAPER

A step often overlooked by aspiring designers, illustrating your vision is crucial to the design process. To avoid making multiple trips to the tailors, make illustrations clear and informative, and if you aren't confident with your drawing skills, turn to other mediums to better represent your vision. "Use whatever helps you illustrate your point best—sketches, photographs, or mood boards," says Grana.

Often, new designers focus on making their illustrations look pretty on paper, and forget about the not-so-trivial technicalities. Without the inclusion of the correct notions (buttons, zippers, etc) and measurements, your design could turn disastrous, and your fabric could all go to waste.

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Le Grana Clothing



Le Grana Clothing

If your brand is well-received, its success will speak for itself, and as your clientele grows, it's likely that press coverage will as well

WATCH YOUR DESIGNS COME TO LIFE

Scour the local markets and find fabrics that reflect your vision. Examine the texture, colour, thickness and stretchiness of the cloth before making your purchase, and think about how it will fall when worn. If you will be catering to bulk orders, keep quantity in mind when buying fabric. Conveniently, fabric is not too expensive in the Middle East, and designers have a choice of types from all over the world.

In the vicinity of every fabric market, there are also plenty of tailors and dressmakers, and because we may seem to have the luxury of being spoiled for choice, the production stage often appears to be relatively easy for emerging designers. (In most places in the Western part of the world, on the other hand, fashion designers themselves must be skilled in sewing and pattern drafting.) Nonetheless, the production stage is the period that will bring you, the designer, horrible headaches and distress, and will often leave you feeling disheartened and depressed. “The hardest part of the production stage is finding a contractor that can really make or break your collection,” says Grana.

Though tailors and dressmakers are anything but scarce in the Middle East, it takes time and strong spirits to find one who can replicate your vision in reality. Find someone who specializes in the types of clothes you want to create. For instance, if the theme of your collection is peplum skirts or dramatic drapes, avoid taking your fabric to a tailor who only has experience with making Eastern-wear and kaftans.

SELL YOURSELF & REAP SUCCESS

Since self-proclaimed fashion designers are now a dime a dozen in Dubai, it's crucial to be able to market and publicize your brand. “It's really important to get out there and network. Today you can also have a great presence online without spending much, with tools like Facebook and twitter,” says Wafa. “You need to be assertive—getting meetings with buyers isn't always the easiest thing but persistence helps!” Before contacting buyers, make sure you've prepared your brand to be professional and presentable. Invest in a good photographer and model, and make sure shoots are styled to display your product in the most positive light possible. First impressions

are important, and as a designer, you will be judged on what is presented in your lookbook. Write a brief description of your line, or better yet, look into getting represented by a PR agency. It's not easy to put on a one-man-show as an emerging designer, but because of start-up costs and investments, it's the only option for many. Chathuri advises upcoming designers to start publicizing by reaching out online. “Fashion blogs are an interesting phenomenon in Dubai and for a new designer, it's the best way to spread the word across,” she says.

Chathuri describes the feeling of seeing her garments on glossy pages in print: “Fashion magazines are very focused in what they publish. The editors truly understand their readers and cater to their specific needs, so to be featured means that your product has been chosen to be something that

connects with their readers and consumers. That's when you realize you have achieved something real!”

If your brand is well-received, its success will speak for itself, and as your clientele grows, it's likely that press coverage will as well—but don't expect to make the front pages overnight. The industry is tough to break into, and once you're in, the pressure to keep impressing may make it hard to stay afloat. After all, there's a reason why Heidi Klum tells *Project Runway* designers, “In fashion one day you're in, and the next day, you're out!”

Before you commit to a career in fashion design, make sure you're prepared for a journey of sketching, erasing and sketching again, visiting fabric stores in the sweltering heat, making constant runs to the tailors and sending countless press e-mails. Who knows—maybe one day you'll find your designs gracing the pages of this very magazine. ▀



Anaya Collection

