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WOMEN IN ACTION

A Women Design Project in UAE

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Keywords

Women, Sense/Time-Based Design, Meta-Languages, Design Participating Practices, Women Leadership, Dubai Women's Museum.

Abstract

When dealing with women, stereotypes always exist. They manifest, mainly in two kinds of attitudes: the first resort to outdated models and the second address feminist models. Years ago, me and my colleague, the architect Indu Varanasi have been called to create a design-driven experience to promote the dialogue between different generations of women and female leaders in UAE. The setting was the Dubai Women Museum, founded by doctor Rafia Goubash, where is located the main collection of women stories and objects in Emirates.

The project *HERstory. A women design project in UAE* aimed to promote a different kind of approach, the one that considers female thinking and practice as an inclusive model. *HERstory* project was a result of plural desires: of meeting and speaking with the women in the UAE, who are trying to change their world; of investigating their forms of dialogue, confrontation and expression; of using design as a tool for building dialogue, listening, creations. The idea was to build a strong contact between women living in UAE, asking them to use their senses as a meta-language for an authentic communication. The project, and the final exhibition, was curated and designed by Politecnico di Milano together with the architect Indu Varanasi (IRDesign) and sponsored by Iguzzini Lighting Middle East.

1. HERstory

HERstory was born from the encounter between Anna Barbara (architect and professor of the School and Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano) and Indu Varanasi (founder of IRDesign in Dubai) with Rafia Obaid Goubash, the founder of the Women's Museum in Dubai. *HERstory* was born as a desire to use the practice of design as a tool for bridging women and the language of the senses as a meta-communication able of making different cultures and generations dialogue. Specifically, the mediation was to take place between women born and living in the UAE and foreign women but residing in the country for a few decades.

The project consisted of:

- a *sense_based* workshop focused in creating five couples of women – one leader/pioneer in her field and one artist – to experiment a sort of telling/listening practice through senses in order to go deep in the relation between them;
- the development of the relation (reported into the final catalogue);
- the creation of five artworks, video and installations collected into an exhibition held at Dubai Women Museum (Barbara & Varanasi, 2018).

2. The Beginning

HERstory was born in 2017, through the dialogue with the founder of the Museum who spent an important part of her life in putting together pieces of this female story, the history of her country from its origins to now.

Two important issues emerged from these meetings: the first is that stereotypes have been built around women living in Middle East, which are in fact their first obstacle on the international profile and on the other hand the need to highlight the existing and possible extra-family alliances between women, who have been working and acting in the country for years with commitment and low visibility.

HERstory is inspired by the researches and practices developed by the *Vanda Group* at the Politecnico di Milano, founded by Ida Faré, Gisella Bassanini, Sandra Bonfiglioli, Marisa Bressan and a number of students and researchers who have studied and graduated with them around the nineties (Bassanini, 2005). From that experience was evident, from the beginning, that the contribution of women to the design of spaces, as architects, but also as teachers, artists and researchers should be explored in *HERstory*, not focusing on the final artistic results of the works, but on the practices and the experiences lived by the women involved.

HERstory is the project that starts from that “wisdom of starting from herself” at the center of women’s work which, in the relationship, attributes new meanings. The whole project is permeated by this subjectification that becomes plural to be shared: a practice of thought and design which is activated in the workshop by sensory, narrative, listening, memory, revelation exercises (Diotima, 1996).

3. The Place Built by Women for Women

From the beginning there was the thought that the Women Museum was not a simple museum, but the cardinal point of a past history, and above all the future one, of that country. So, the

curators proposed to develop a project with the museum that would narrate the relationships that arise between women. The Women's Museum started out as a project to create a curated collection of artefacts and information about the role of women in the emergence of the UAE in a way that would also reflect on the multi-cultural nature of the population. However, in essence, the museum is designed to embody the culture of the host country, the culture of the people, their work, and their ethics and values, which define them. The museum has become an authentic source of information for visitors, who are made aware of the long journey that the country has covered in a very short time. The museum has also become a rich source of research material for governmental and international organizations.

Women's Museum in Dubai is a peculiar place built by women for women. They are places of encounter, support, collection, recognition. They are places not for herself but for us, as Virginia Woolf would say, "a room for myself", and all the other personal selves. The museum is not a monument. It is an architecture that goes beyond time. It is a place of living memories where stories and objects exist and resist any attempt of "museification". The exhibited pieces, not fixed artworks but fragments of a polyphonic storytelling, are presented there. They are moving, flowing from one room to another in a continuous combination of meanings.

The museum is an unfinished space – a curatorial choice of the founder, as women leave meanings open. In their personal biography's women leave space for other stories; stories coming

from their friends, housekeepers, stories made for dressing up, as young daughters do with their mothers' elegant clothes.

The museum is a place of narration, not of performance. It is a space for an alliance between women, all, in the UAE. It is their version of facts, their narration of the story and what brought them here. The Dubai Women's Museum is a place that reminds the Eileen Gray's projects, in the attention for details, bodies, movements of things, daily biographies. In fact, this is not a space born as a museum. It was a house and its domestic origin is preserved, linking itself to "that art of living" that reminds Charlotte Perriand's House of Tea, in a small side room at the entrance, whose configuration is born from the gestures and rituals of the Arab tradition of serving tea (Bassanini, 1990).

4. Sense/Time-Based

At the peak of a digital revolution, we became aware that somethings have changed, and the female opinion is still on the side-lines.

We are now living in a time in which digital innovation should be driven by women, because of their ability to think, build, live that way, since the time everything was analogue and only a few things were digital.

The iconic words of the digital world – sharing, clouding, multitasking, etc. – are the ones that have belonged to a female glossary for thousands of years now.

The Women's Museum is a time-based exercise displaying *Kairos*, the female form of time, which is not linear but narrative.

It is perceived in its compressions and expansions triggered by emotions, putting moments together in sequences. *Kairos* cannot be measured; it is a qualitative time.

The museum nestles in the old Dubai *souq*. Nestled between traditional buildings and narrow streets, smelling spicy scents and humidity, illuminated by an unrepeatable light that creates a choreography of shadows.

The Women's Museum is a sensory place of smells, materials, fragments of the past but also of the future. A place of light cuts, a privileged view of the *souq*. The artificial light is warm and moulded, underlining the stories like a finger following the lines of a story. And then there is silence. A sacred calm making us whisper instead of talking, making us move smoothly and listen with attention.

Senses use a metalanguage able to access complex communication forms, not necessarily verbal but mainly emotional.

Places like the Women's Museum promote another kind of aesthetics: one that uses all our senses going beyond the purely visual level. More intense, less predictable, they are the places of memorable human experiences. They are not welcoming nests or self-pity rooms but places of strong dialogue, heart-breaking authenticity, places of identification.

Attention to the senses and to time, as well as to people, is a reference that has been explored from Lina Bo Bardi who, in her Brazilian works, builds relationships and stories through the spaces and the urban. Bo Bardi considered museums

A corner of memory? A mound for illustrious mummies? A repository or archive of human works which, made by humans for humans, are already obsolete and must be administered with a sense of pity. None of this. The new museums must open their doors, let in the fresh air, the new light. There is no continuity between past and present. (Miotto & Nicolini, 1998)

5. Scope

Raising a house. Choose the roof tiles and the brick floor, imagining facades, loggias and stairs, perspectives, gardens. As far as I knew, a woman had never done it. (Mazzucco, 2019)

One of *HERstory*'s strategic goal, is to showcase the work of pioneering women in the UAE. Those who had done in their disciplines what "a woman never done it" before.

It was immediately understood that the centrality of the project was the meeting between the protagonists, that the documentation collected from time to time as testimony, would be the true substance of the project. The result would have been in words, images, objects, videos, stories...full of meaning and that all this material would have been an integral part of the project as well as the results. In *HERstory* every woman would bring her own social and human experience, every artist her own sensitivity, vision, creativity, to tell the single story. A sequence of narratives, different and unique, but with a common frame: dialogue as an engine of transformation. Therefore, we did not come to the narration of a biography but of an interaction, an exchange and a dialogue between

personalities, which would have led to demonstrate an evident existence of a very strong relational potential among the women of the country (Fig. 1).

6. Methodology

From a methodological point of view, *HERstory* refers to the approach that sees the women architect as the one who not only deals with aesthetic language, but who builds relationships, new languages and meanings, who creates places from the relationships and not vice versa (Farè, 1983).

After the development of the strategies and objectives of the project and the establishment of an operational team of women capable of building, promoting and communicating the project, a phase of research began on the possible figures to be involved. The first strategic choice was to research mainly in two areas: that of women leaders in a sector or eminent figures in the country; that of women in the creative sectors. The disciplines involved were art, curation, textile design, photography, singing, writing. The selection therefore sought across the board in various sectors with the intention of selecting:

- different generations;
- various social backgrounds;
- heterogeneous scientific, artistic and cultural sectors;
- different countries of origin although all resident in UAE.

From a very large selection that included over 50 candidates, the circle narrowed to ten, divided into five couples based on the principle of diversity. Each leader was accompanied by an artist.

I am
I do أنا
أفعل

Figure 1. A. Barbara, I. Varanasi, workshop *HERstory*, Dubai, 2018.

Following the selection, it was decided to promote a meeting through the holding of a sensorial workshop, held inside the Dubai Women's Museum in which the artists and founders put into practice a multisensory dialogue, which did not have the biographical narrative as its objective, but precisely the birth of a new relationship between creative couples that would bring into play the emotional as well as the cognitive dimension. The workshop included a comparison of reactions, sensations, emotions arising from colour palettes, from smells that opened up sometimes forgotten memory scenarios, from clouding of words and meanings. This approach allowed to extrapolate emotional and significant aspects of each person's identity in a way to make them "ingredients" for the works that was then exhibited at the final event. The workshop was followed by an exchange, elaboration and creation phase between the women of each couple, which realized works of art that were the subject of an exhibition-event held at the Women Museum. Five stories, therefore, with five different and absolutely unique narrative modes.

The workshop takes up the "participating practices able to open new connections and a continuous and lively dialogue between the knowledge system and acting". It is the practice of "starting from herself" that works on the experience, on personal biographies, on desires and contradictions, which are personal, but related to a collective and shareable idea (Bassanini, 2008).

7. The Ladies

The idea was to create a transversal dialogue, also transgenerational, avoiding the typical "mothering" of relationships

between women. The practice was that of the classic principles of Anglo-Saxon feminist pedagogy:

- transforming individual creativity into a collective collaboration mechanism, promoting teamwork;
- to separate authority and knowledge;
- to eliminate dichotomies between theory and practice;
- to emphasize ethical and relationship values, overcoming the classic hierarchical transmission of knowledge (Gotti, 2005).

The real protagonist of the project is doctor Rafia Goubash (Women's Museum founder) Professor of Psychiatry, president of Arab Gulf University (AGU) in Bahrain, and currently President of Arab Network for Women in Science and Technology, a network created to help women scientists to achieve leadership positions and to bring women closer to science. Around this pioneer figure in the country, a series of initiatives are born to enhance the work and thoughts of women, including the Women Museum in Dubai which aims to discover and understand the United Arab Emirates society through the life of women – of the past and present – highlighting the various roles assumed by UAE women. *HERstory* is the narration of five stories, those of socially and culturally active women, in dialogue with as many artists. Isobel Abulhoul founder of Emirates Airline Festival of Literature; doctor Najat Makki, visual artist, first Emirati woman to win a scholarship made available by the government in 1977 to attend art courses abroad; Alia Lootah currently part of the team working on the Louvre Abu Dhabi; Hissa Mohammed Hasan the previous photographer and reporter since the

1950 in UAE; Afra Atiq award-winning poet; Sheikha Sanaa Al Maktoum and her mother; Majida Nasreddin, Lebanese artist and member of Emirates Fine Arts Society; Kusum Dutta, Indian born doctor, providing by her work, immediate help to workers and support special need kids and their families; Elisabeth Stoney, assistant professor in Art History and Curatorial Studies at Zayed University at Abu Dhabi.

8. Workshop

The idea that *HERstory* takes from the museum and from the ingredients that the founder, Rafia Ghubash made available, was an essential condition.

The idea was to build a strong contact between women living in UAE, asking them to use their senses as a metalanguage for an authentic communication. The workshop's exercises did not have the purpose of synthesizing, but rather of taking them to a neutral yet intimate level, to be able to narrate without revealing themselves.

The exercise was done in pairs. Both the parties were proactive, so the final result is not a biographical praise of one of them but a synthesis of their interaction. The output was not an artwork about the other woman, but the result of the interaction between them.

The methodology used is called “active listening”, which leads to an interlocution, which presupposes a strong identification able to make “see things and events from a perspective” of the interlocutor as if it were her own (Scalvi, 2003).

The meeting between the leader and the artist has been placed in the presence of the curators and the team, in order to help and encourage and stimulate the exchange between the two

women, so that they have been guided towards an output to be exhibited at the end. The place where they met, was at the Dubai Women's Museum and was interesting to analyse how they sit, where they sit and how they interacted (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. A. Barbara, I. Varanasi, exhibition *HERstory*, Women' Museum, Dubai, 2019.

9. Setting

The setting hosting the encounter between the two protagonists was welcoming and meaningful. The meetings took place sitting at a table. The position was not given: they could be seated in front of each other, on one side, one next to the other or squeezed at the corner as if they were sharing some kind of intimacy. Their position was a geometry that gains meaning in terms of proximity, distance, proxemics.

On the table we placed a set of “ingredients” used to activate emotions, reactions, confrontations. Each exercise contained a kit of elements to be used, rejected, transformed to become part of the future narrative. The value of these elements had a semantic as well as aesthetic, spatial, emotional nature.

10. Exercises

The workshop lasts one day. It was hold in one of the Museum rooms. The exercise was performed by both ladies, because it was from the interaction of the two identities that the relationship emerges. Both participants were active in swapping roles. When both were proactive, their interaction triggers a dimension of deep and authentic meanings.

11. Storytelling

The first exercise started with words, the most immediate way of starting a dialogue. These were then abandoned, during the workshop, with the aim of entering a degree of profoundness where words got so full of meanings that they became artworks. During this exercise they narrated themselves. The value of one’s own description was not necessarily linked to a meaning but also to a sequence, a hierarchy of some values over others, a volume and tone of voice used by a lady to describe some aspects of herself, some spoken but also unspoken things and, above all, some perceived things, how much the other side understood, felt, took back, transcribed... In this exchange there was a gap between what one narrated and what the other one interpreted: this was the foundation of an encounter. If she started with a physical description or talk about her origins, job or other things, this was not a secondary element of one’s own narration.



Figure 3. A. Barbara, I. Varanasi, workshop *HERstory*, exercise storytelling, Dubai, 2018.

The result was a “cloud of words”, a semantic glossary following the encounter until the moment of realization of the artwork or even beyond – duration 10 minutes – (Fig. 3).

12. *Colorscape*

The exercise of the *colourscape* leads to an exploration of the theme of feeling/living which places perception and the body as metalanguages for the construction of the relationship (Barbara, 2000).

The term *colourscape* introduces the idea of a landscape, in this case a chromatic, interior one essential to explore the complexity of our emotional language and helping us express it in its most subjective aspects.

Every person has her own personal colour palette, made not only of tone preferences but also of saturation, intensity, brightness, quantity and distribution. We all build our chromatic sensibility during our whole lives. This is a very articulated language that each of us uses when shaping our environments and when getting dressed, when choosing an object or taking a picture of a certain landscape, whether natural or artificial. The exercise of selecting colours, naming them, comparing and putting them in sequence, working with possible harmonies and complementary tones is a rather primary exercise. Building a dialogue using colours is a deep journey into our emotional as well as visual imagination. From a collection of Pantone colours, each lady has been requested to select a chromatic combination of four-five colours (tones, intensity, saturations, etc.) and quantities. – duration 10 minutes – (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. A. Barbara, I. Varanasi, workshop *HERstory*, exercise colorscape Dubai, 2018.

13. Scent of Memories

When we smell a scent, we get – voluntarily or involuntarily – into a very private and intimate emotional depth. Besides being a *scentscape*, of pleasure or displeasure, a scent is a medium that comes from our memory and is capable of taking us to different places and times evoking memories of people and situations otherwise forgotten. Communicating through scents means revealing a very intimate part of ourselves, talking about our taboos, fears, weaknesses and lowest instincts. It is a nude narrative that can lead us to feel ashamed to the point that we immediately want to cover ourselves with other scents, putting on an invisible dress that tells about an aspirational, yearned for, official identity.



Figure 5. A. Barbara, I. Varanasi, workshop *HERstory*, exercise scent of memories, Dubai, 2018.

A range of primary essences was offered to the ladies who were asked to do an exercise of figurative, verbal and emotional visualization. Places, people, situations, distant memories emerged. Some pleasant, forgotten, moving, but some also unpleasant, belonging to foreign worlds, unwanted guests. We cannot run away from the sense of smell. The narrative flows, the images of our memory come to light or are pushed back because they are too painful.

We offered to both, some fragrances to be smelled in order to take off some deep emotions: memories, the evoked images, the emotions told have been recorded – duration 10 minutes – (Fig. 5).

14. Cont-Act

It was an exercise on the objects of the self, the ones every woman keeps in her bag as an *existens minimum*. What all women carry with themselves is a complex narrative of their relationship with the external world but also with their own creativity, intimacy, strength and fragility.

The request to empty one's own bag is a way of forcing them to build a relationship. It can be premature; it can be decisive. In both cases the request of showing the purse's content is a provocation and the reaction to a provocation always tells us something.

Each of the two ladies showed one or more objects to the other and described it in its physical and symbolic aspects. This object remained all the time in the hands of those who brought it. Sometimes it was passed to others to be hold it in her hands to observe it better. The actions were not taken for granted at all and they will reveal interesting aspects.

In certain cases, we asked them to “open and empty her bag” which is for all women in the world a house-in-house. The bag is not an accessory; it is a physical place and soul of each of us, often inviolable. Some of them refused the exercise, because of shyness or privacy, some accepted because of self-confidence or freedom. However, inexplicably there was always a moment of justification for something that was missed or something that was too much. A bag contains functional, secret, redundant, essential, emotional objects, everything and nothing, in an extraordinary tale about the complexity of everyday life.

Someone did not have a bag to empty, and this was another important point related to being so free to not need to carry anything with her.

Showing the content of another person's bag was an act of trust and intimacy. It was important to study the resistance reaction to perform this action, which each of them posed before such a request, in the ways and, above all, in the gestures – duration 10 minutes – (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. A. Barbara, I. Varanasi, workshop *HERstory*, exercise cont-act, Dubai, 2018.

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Author of *Storie di Architettura attraverso i sensi* (Bruno Mondadori, 2000), *Invisible Architectures. Experiencing places through the senses of smell* (Skira, 2006) and *Sensi, tempo e architettura* (Postmedia Books, 2012), *Sensefulness, new paradigms for Spatial Design* (Postmedia Books, 2019) and many other publications.

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Her interest involves visual and gender identities in communication design field. She studies theoretical aspects of identity systems and their communication components and developed projects of basic and applied research. She is a member of the Ph.D Design board and of "Centro di Ricerca interuniversitario Culture di genere".

She won the "Compasso d'Oro" Design Award as co-author of the project for the multimedia catalogue of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum (Milan, 1995) and received Honourable Mention, Compasso d'Oro ADI (XXV), for the project "WeMi. La città per il welfare". She is author of several books: *La messa in scena del prodotto* (1999), *Packaging design* (2005), *Altre figure. Intorno alle figure di argomentazione* (2011), *Anticorpi comunicativi* (2012), *Un'interfaccia per il welfare* (2017), *Progetto e culture visive* (2018).

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After the master degree in Communication Design, with a thesis about gender stereotypes in the communication field, she joined the research group DCxCG (Communication Design for Gender Cultures) contributing to projects on gender issues

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She's author of books and essays published on national and international journals: she's also part of editorial committees, observatories and European projects. She lives and works in Sicily, which is a continent, rather than just an island.

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Marinella Ferrara

PhD, associate professor of product design in the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano. Since 2014 she has been the head of MADEC, the Research Centre of Material Design Culture in the Department of Design. Her researches are mainly focused on design-driven innovation, design for materials (advanced and smart materials), news technologies integration in product and interior design, Future Design Scenarios. With her research, she has made a significant contribution to methodologies of Design for Materials and historiographical work. Moreover, she deals other research topic like the design in Mediterranean countries, gender issues in design and Design History.

Co-founder of *PAD. Pages on Arts & Design* journal, since 2011 she has been the PAD editor in chief. Since 2015 to 2017 she has been a member of ADI's executive board, and currently coordinates the technical-scientific committee for long-life professional training of design professionals.

Since 2019 she has been a member of the executive committee of *AIS/Design. Storia e Ricerche* scientific journal.

Authors of more than 140 scientific publications, she is a member of scientific committees in international conferences, reviewer for international scientific journals, and research evaluator for academic research application in NL and PT.

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In the research field, she is member of GREDITS (Design and Social Transformation Research Group). She has specialized on Historical and Historiographical Research of Design. Her research work is focused on Pop Art Design, and specifically on the development of graphical Pop Art in Catalonia and Spain as a result of her PhD thesis.

She is currently interested on research projects that seed to make visible the contribution of female graphic designers.

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Francesco E. Guida

Assistant professor at Politecnico di Milano (Department of Design, School of Design, Bachelor in Communication Design), he is secretary of the BSc + MSc Communication Design Courses. PhD in Design and Technology for the Enhancement of Cultural Heritage, he has more than 25 years of experience as a graphic design consultant.

Board member of Aiap (the Italian Association for Visual Communication Design), actually he is coordinator of activities and researches for the Graphic Design Documentation Centre (Aiap CDPG). Since 2013 he is a member of the editorial committee of *AIS/Design. Storia e Ricerche* journal and since 2014 of *PAD. Pages on Arts & Design* journal.

Starting from 1997 his contributions on graphic design and visual communication are published in journals, books and conference proceedings.

His main research activities are in the fields of visual identities, speculative and experience design, and graphic design micro-histories.

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Chella Quint

She is a Brooklyn, US-born, Sheffield, UK-based designer, writer, performer, researcher and founder of the Period Positive movement. In between performing feminist sketch comedy and studying for an MA in Education, she coined the term 'period positive' to describe the zeitgeist of her zines, art and craftivism, and developed the concept into a well-known desing initiative and campaign to find long-term solutions to menstrual illiteracy. She launched the first annual Period Positive Week in May 2019.

She has recently joined Lab4Living's 100 Year Life and Future Home project at Sheffield Hallam University. Her doctoral research explores ways to navigate aging and lifecycle changes where embodied shame can be a barrier to agency in co-design. She co-hosts the annual Sheffield Zine Fest and her zines are held in a number of international zine libraries and collections. She performs and exhibits regularly at science, literary and comedy festivals.

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TI SENTI POCO BENE? AIAP HA TUTTE LE SOLUZIONI PER TE. SCOPRILE.



Aiap CDPG, the Graphic Design Documentation Centre. Working to collect, catalogue, archive, enhance and promote any documents related to graphic design and visual communication. These documents (originals as well layouts of projects, books, posters, prints, catalogues, correspondence, photographs) help reconstruct the history of graphic design in Italy and support research and educational activities, as it is the CDGP's intention to make these documents widely available.



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