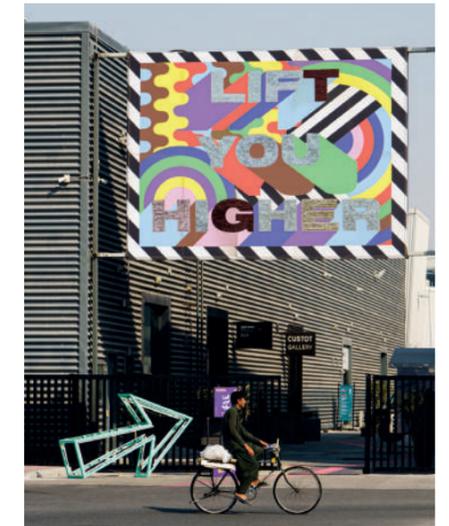


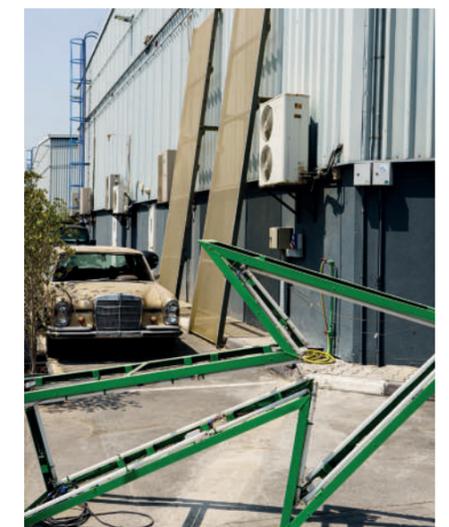
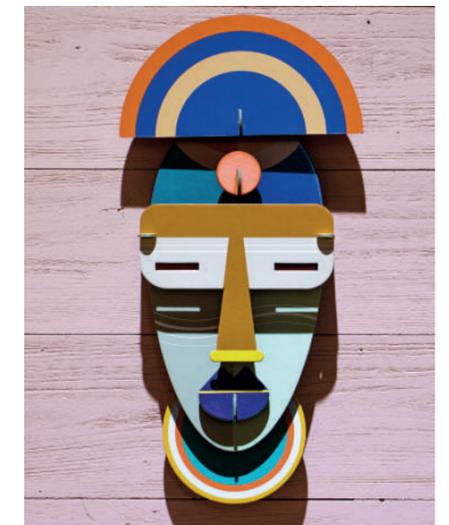
Creative arena
Mosque of the
Late Mohamed
Abdulkhalik Gargash
in Al Quoz

Welcome to Al Quoz

The independent creatives of Alserkal Avenue have helped the once-industrial neighbourhood of Al Quoz become a benchmark for urban regeneration, all the while defying Dubai's stereotypes. Twenty minutes from Mandarin Oriental Jumeira, Dubai, this fashionable arts hub is part of a push towards a more culture-driven economy by 2025. Words and photography by Chris Schalkx



The repurposed
marble factory of
Alserkal Avenue has
become synonymous
with Al Quoz'
creative rebirth



Clockwise from top left: Cinema Akil; art at The Courtyard; Lakwena Maciver's *Lift You Higher*; The Courtyard wall mask; giant arrows invite visitors to explore; Lakwena Maciver mural on Alserkal Avenue wall; vinyl at the Effe Gallery; The Flip Side record store

When my taxi dropped me off in Al Quoz, I thought I was lost. I had followed directions from my creatively inclined Emirati friends on the promise of one of Dubai's most thriving art scenes, but instead found sand-swept sidewalks, grumbling trucks and low-slung warehouses. I was wedged between Jumeirah and Downtown, and yet this was, in many ways, the polar opposite of a razzle-dazzle Dubai I thought I knew.

But first impressions can be deceiving. Moments after arriving, I spotted them: a gaggle of green smoothie-toting artist types, emerging from a graffiti-covered warehouse. A group not unlike the folks I'd seen in Brooklyn or Berlin's Kreuzberg, zipping past on electric scooters. I followed their trail and, like an oasis in a cultural desert, came upon the district's main calling card, Alserkal Avenue.

Since 2017 this repurposed marble factory has become synonymous with Al Quoz' creative rebirth. Home to almost 70 design studios, galleries, ateliers and performing art spaces, it's now one of the most flourishing breeding grounds for Dubai's next-gen creatives.

But Alserkal Avenue isn't alone. All around the district, city tastemakers have gone about infusing this unused real estate with creativity. So much so that, last year, the government's cultural arm designated Al Quoz as a cultural 'free zone': a creative district where tax incentives, lower rents and flexible visa policies for creative entrepreneurs aim to accelerate the city's goal of becoming the region's biggest cultural hub.

On Alserkal Avenue's exterior wall, a kaleidoscopic mural by Ugandan-British artist Lakwena Maciver reads: 'The best is yet to come' in gold-foiled letters. The maxim fizzles across the district. Everyone I meet is full of big ideas for Al Quoz, pointing me to fresh arrivals further lifting its creative cred. Time to hand over to five local creators who know Dubai has even more boundaries to push...

Corrugated cool
The Edit concept store
and art gallery on
Alserkal Avenue



THE COFFEE ROASTER
Leon Surynt, owner of Nightjar
Coffee Roasters

When I first visited Al Quoz 14 years ago, the area was all metal workshops and cement factories – industrial and dusty. People used to say: "You get lost in Al Quoz." It wasn't until the Alserkal family worked their magic that it really started taking off.

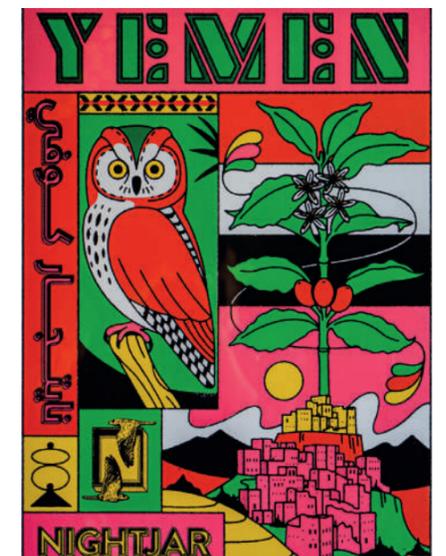
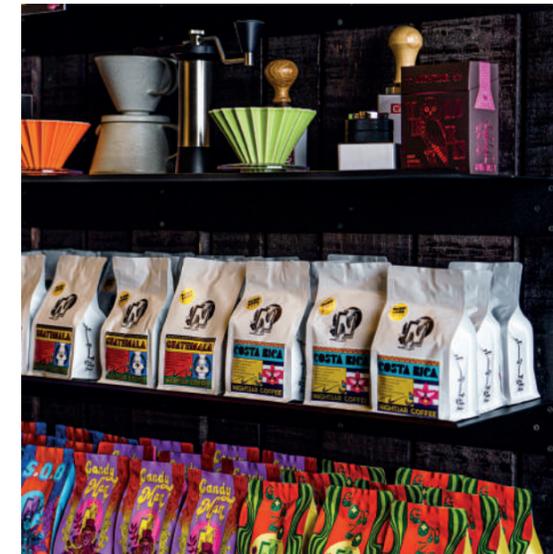
Nightjar joined in 2017 when the Avenue extended. We started out supplying our beans – sourced directly and fairly from farmers in Brazil, Rwanda and Burundi – to hotels and cafés all around Dubai. We opened our café a year later.

It was a risky endeavour. Even now, Al Quoz is still off the beaten track. But we thought: "Build it and they'll come." And they did. We now serve more than 15 types of cold brew, kombucha and herbal tea on tap as a

low-alcohol alternative for cocktails and beers – a hit with the local community of crossfitters, yogis and clean-eaters.

With the government's support, Al Quoz will rise even further. They know that small businesses can't afford high-rise offices in the Financial District. And, after all, cultural development starts with young creatives – be they architects, hairdressers or avant-garde film producers – having room to bloom.

**"We thought: 'Build it and they'll come.'
And they did"**



INSPIRE



THE CERAMICIST
Preeti Pawani, owner of The Mud House

When it comes to spending free time, Dubai is big on shopping and entertainment. But it's lacking activities for those wanting to explore their creative side. I can see this slowly changing in Al Quoz, where new workshop spaces run the gamut from soap-making classes at Âme, to photography courses at Garage Studio.

I picked up pottery-making at the beginning of the pandemic. Clay is so important because pottery has taught us so much about ancient civilisations. But I found the city studios a little intimidating – too focused on perfection. That's why I started The Mud

House, a place for everyone, whether they are an expert looking to advance their glazing, or a first-timer who wants to give the wheel a spin.

With pockets of creative initiatives launching here, Al Quoz felt like the right place for me, not just because of its affordability, but also for its central location. As the city centre has moved further south, we've become the heart of Dubai – Jumeirah is just a short drive away. My neighbours still fix cars and air conditioners, but I'm sure those warehouse complexes will also turn into another creative hub soon.

“As the city centre has moved further south, we've become the heart of Dubai”

INSPIRE



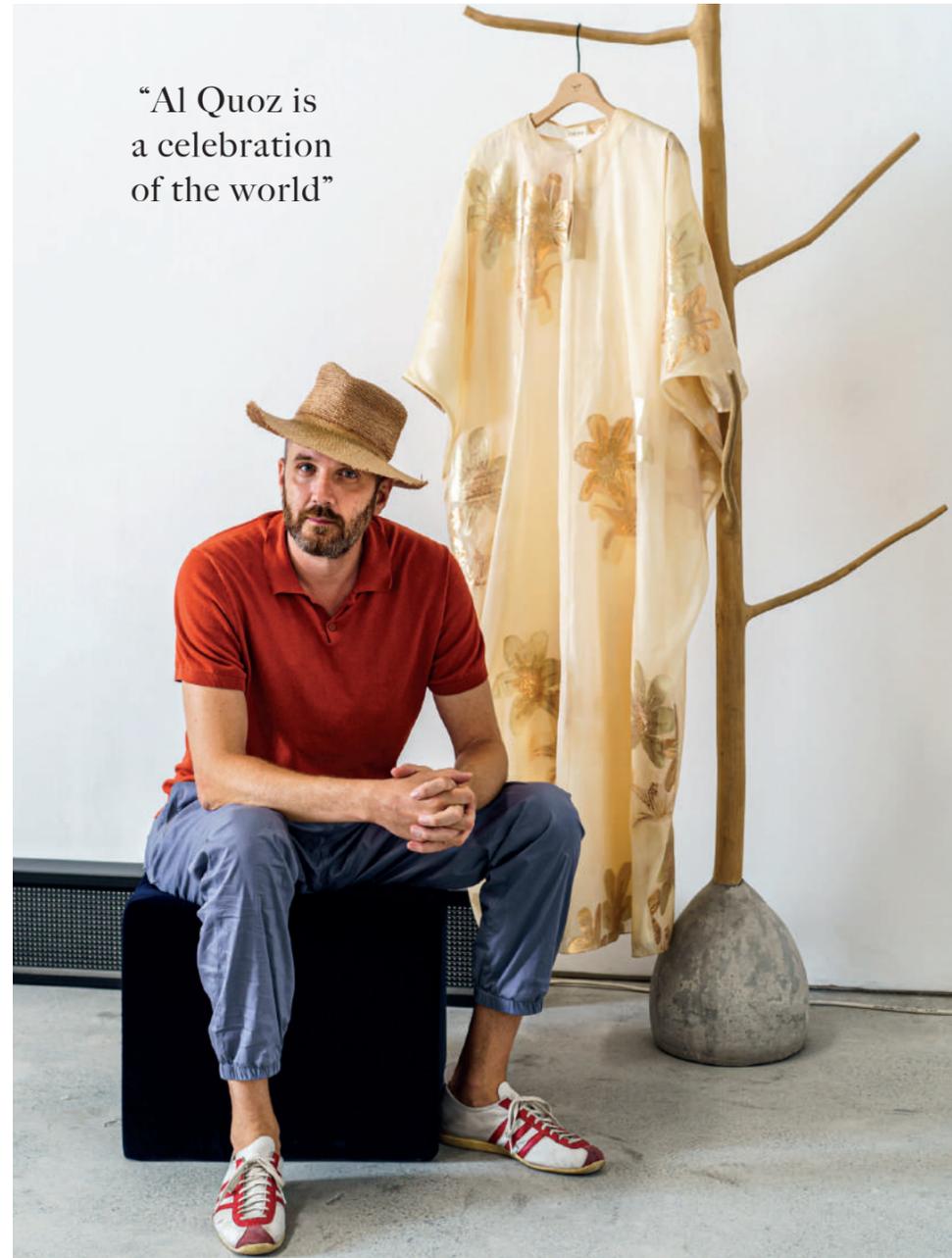
THE DRESSMAKER
Nemanja Valjaveric, co-founder of CHI-KA

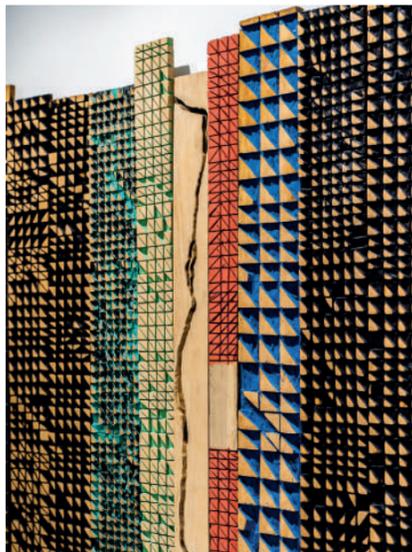
We brought back a few kimonos from Japan almost a decade ago. Local friends began wearing them as abayas, outerwear garments worn by women from around the region. This sparked the idea for CHI-KA, where we combined hand-painted Japanese kimonos and simply reinterpreted them as abayas. Almost ten years later, we have our own design atelier. You can find us on the pages of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

We don't look at CHI-KA as a fashion story, but as one of culture. We're inspired by the love affair between the Far East and the Middle East, and the many invisible bridges between them: the way they treat femininity, elegance and the relationships between the private and the public.

The grassroots initiatives popping up around Al Quoz have created a new, and wildly diverse, creative fabric of Dubai. My neighbour, DJ Shadi Megallaa of record store The Flip Side, is Egyptian. My other neighbour is Emirati. If I sit down at the picnic tables in front of New Zealander-owned Nightjar, I can strike up conversations with Russians, Singaporeans and Swedes. And that, to me, makes Al Quoz a celebration of the world.

“Al Quoz is a celebration of the world”





“It’s important that we provide emerging talents with a platform where their work can be celebrated”

THE CURATOR
Kobi Mintah, co-founder of Efie Gallery

Al Quoz has become a reflection of the inviting nature of industrial areas for cross-cultural exchanges. Galleries here, such as The Third Line and Lawrie Shabibi, present an exciting roster of some of the biggest names in Middle Eastern and North African art to a keen and emerging community.

There has been a global renaissance of African art, and demand for artists from the continent has skyrocketed. But with it, so have the risks: emerging talent has been exploited and undervalued. For us, it’s important that we provide them with a platform where their work can be celebrated. That’s why we launched Efie, Ghanaian for ‘home’. We take family values very seriously.

What we can do here in Al Quoz is incredible. We can reach an international audience from what used to be a ho-hum industrial complex. In art hubs such as London and New York, the narrative for African art has already been laid out. But here, we still have space to construct this narrative ourselves and can bring in leading African artists, such as El Anatsui. And as the area develops, we grow collectively. It’s one to watch, that’s for sure.



“Creatives flock to Al Quoz because they can meet real people”



THE CINEPHILE
Butheina Kazim, founder of Cinema Akil

Dubai is obsessed with perfection. Everything is manicured. We’re constantly surrounded by superlatives. Gritty Al Quoz, however, is one of the few places that embrace imperfection. There’s a sense of reality here. Creatives flock to Al Quoz because they can meet real people. It’s not a single story, but a microcosm of so many different histories, identities and relationships.

With Cinema Akil, I want to celebrate the films that are reflective of this diversity. Even though Dubai has the biggest number of multiplexes per capita in the Middle East, there was no platform that accurately represented the communities that call Dubai home. Iranian, Turkish and Pakistani films –

they teach you so much more about the rich lives of others.

There’s this visceral way of connecting that is unique to Dubai – but the key is to listen. I want to use the language of film to push these conversations, to encourage people to ask themselves: “Who is the person next to me?” and “What’s really happening here?” In a way, it’s a rallying cry for a more conscious way of engaging with fast-moving change, a reality you can’t deny about living here.

Immerse yourself in Dubai’s vibrant cultural scene with a stay at Mandarin Oriental Jumeira, just 20 minutes by car from Al Quoz. mandarinoriental.com/dubai

GET CREATIVE WITH MANDARIN ORIENTAL JUMEIRA, DUBAI

Perfumery workshop

Whether you prefer citrusy top notes or a musky base, this hour-long, hands-on olfactory workshop at the Oo La Lab in Al Quoz allows you to craft your own signature perfume or bespoke candle from more than 25 different fragrance notes.



Cocktail craftsmanship

Join the mixologists behind the hotel’s buzzy rooftop hangout Tasca on a cocktail discovery class and learn how to shake, stir and mix drinks like a pro. In this 30-minute workshop, you’ll discover what secret ingredients make Tasca’s most creative tipples pop.



Chocolate factory tour

Tour the Al Quoz workshop of one of Dubai’s most prolific chocolate makers to learn everything about the fascinating process of turning cacao beans into craft chocolate. A tasting of Mirzam’s signature single-origin bars is, of course, part of the experience.



Pizza-making masterclass

Learn from a true *pizzaiolo* *Napoletano*, chef Fabio Barca, in this one-hour, private pizza-making session at The Bay, the hotel’s beachside brasserie. Master expert dough and perfect pizza toppings and leave with dinner party skills to last a lifetime.