

Be remarkable

Sometimes being very good isn't enough



I'm frustrated!

A few weeks ago I found myself at Zona Tortona, the international furniture fair in Milan, Italy, the world's centre of design. It was remarkable — over-brimming with elegant and tasteful, intelligent applications of art and science.

This is the type of atmosphere many people I meet say they want to achieve in their outlets, but when it comes to the final presentation I find they usually buy safe. What they actually buy is vanilla ice cream, not chilli pepper flavour.

I like vanilla but it's not remarkable is it? It's not going to stand out in Mall of the Emirates or along Sheikh Zayed Road. It's not what talented, passionate designers want to design, either.

The thing is that these days, everyone that sells vanilla well is selling it already, so there's no opportunity to build a strong café, bar or restaurant business by going there again. Copies aren't remarkable.

This is why I am frustrated. I am beginning to think Dubai is becoming the world capital of "me-too" vanilla cafés and restaurants, of the imported American franchise, of the very good copy, but not of the remarkable new idea.

Very good is what you get when you don't take a risk for fear of looking silly. Very good has no soul or passion. Very good never

fails spectacularly. It just dries up slowly and it teaches you nothing for the future.

Remarkable may be a roller coaster, but it's safer and much more profitable when you get off at the end.

Remarkable doesn't cost more money, it just takes more thought.

If you're building a new franchise café chain or restaurant then the design is the critical lead of the process. Rush or under-fund the design and everything else that follows will be a compromise. You'll get vanilla at best.

Designers charge a tiny proportion of what the whole project will cost, so you can afford the best. In the long term, buying cheap or fast design actually turns out to be very slow and expensive.

Typical

Here's what makes me launch into this rant after only a few months of experience in the Middle East.

Recently, I have been approached by companies in Dubai several times, often by major developers wanting to roll out chains of restaurants, and this is what has happened each and every time:

1. A short e-mail arrives from a junior person in purchasing who needs to know my design fee and delivery date by return.
2. I reply politely, asking for a

design brief so I can calculate a fee and delivery date.

3. I get an indication of size — whether I am dealing with a coffee kiosk or a fine-dining restaurant — but this doesn't amount to a real design brief.
 4. I ask when the work is needed. There is often no information. Sometimes I am told the work must start immediately but the deadline is so tight that no one in the world could come up with original work in time. [All good designers need notice. It makes sense — good people are busy.]
 5. Out of politeness rather than expectation, I provide an estimate. This gets passed up the buying organisation, via various levels of middle management, but there is no decision. No-one tells me whether they want plain old vanilla or red-hot chilli with all the extras.
 6. Weeks and months pass with no discussion or feedback until it's too late to do good work and I am forced to turn down the project — there's no point in rushing to do an average job.
- I don't know what happens next, but others have told me that the designer that gets hired is the cheapest person who pretends they can do remarkable work on time. Vanilla will certainly be the result.

“
Very good never fails spectacularly. It just dries up slowly and teaches you nothing for the future
”

THE FIRST
MEDITERRANEAN
LUXURY VODKA.

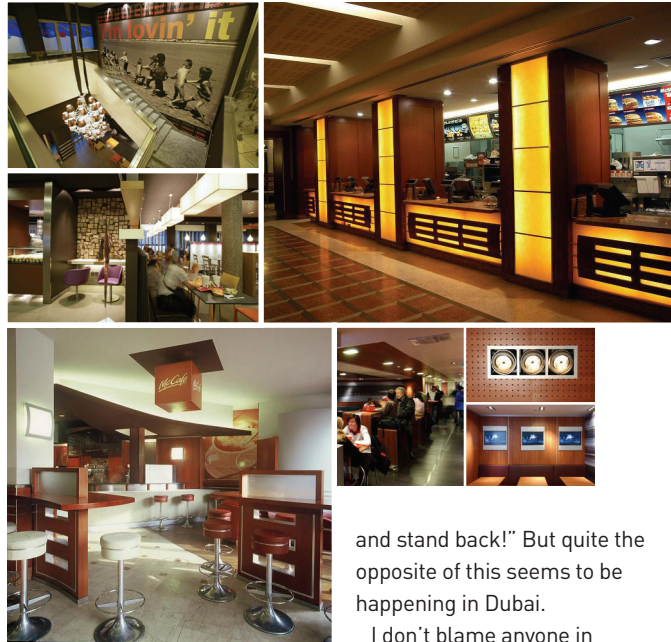


Made from the purest spring waters of the Mediterranean and filtered 5 times to give you the smoothest vodka ever.

Akvinta is produced by Adriatic Distillers, Eurotower building, I. Lucica 2a, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia, +385 (0)1 600 05 80, www.akvinta.com

Those who appreciate perfection enjoy in moderation.

DESIGNER COLUMN



Time for talent

While I was in Milan, I saw a CNN interview programme called *Facetime with Saeed Al Muntafiq*, the boss of Tatweer. In the interview he said that one of the biggest challenges facing Dubai is attracting talent.

He's right. There is way more design work in Dubai than the designers can manage — I'm told even recent graduates are being appointed on large projects.

But how, Mr Muntafiq, are you going to get us on the plane when your purchasing departments are trained to buy our talent as if it is a commodity and are bent on stifling the remarkable by playing counter-productive buying games?

American marketing guru Seth Godin says that if you want a remarkable design then you should "hire a maverick

and stand back!" But quite the opposite of this seems to be happening in Dubai.

I don't blame anyone in particular — the same thing happens in most places outside Europe and the US, but it shows up more in Dubai because there is so much work there.

It's important to remember that it takes authority from the top to be able to produce truly remarkable — and radically profitable — designs.

Designs like The Burj Al Arab, or the various Palm islands have all been driven from the very top.

In closing, I'd like to draw your attention to the vibrant outlet pictured above.

The photos show a restaurant in Milan. It is a McDonalds. Remarkable for a burger bar, isn't it?

Ten years ago the chain got stuck in a safe rut and went out of style, yet this is one of the best commercial designs I saw during my entire time in Italy.

Just a little food for thought.

ABOUT NIGEL WITHAM



Nigel Witham is a chartered designer who has run his own design practice for twenty years. He designed his first restaurant in 1990 and has worked for hundreds of independent retailers and restaurateurs. He has offices in London, India, New Zealand and Australia.

For more information, e-mail Nigel@nigelw.com.