

Crateful design

CAIRO-BASED STUDIO MEEM USES NATURAL MATERIALS TO CREATE FURNITURE THAT SPEAKS URBAN EGYPTIAN

EGYPT: There are over 20 million date palm trees in Egypt, revealed Manar Moursi, founder, Studio Meem. Palm midrib (gireed), a secondary product of these palm trees, is the material Studio Meem has used to create their 'Palm-crate- Off the Gireed' collection.

Moursi further explained that 35kg on average of palm residues are obtained per tree annually and about one million metric tons of date palm biomass is wasted from seasonal trimming.

"Our first product line aimed at finding industrial use of date palm midrib as a substitute for exported wood products and to reduce the waste produced from the annual pruning of the date palm populations," she said.

But what makes the palm midrib so vital to Studio Meem's palm crate furniture is its ties with the urban Egyptian culture.

"From Ancient representations of the Egyptian market to the contemporaneous Cairene street, the gireed crate is undoubtedly the most abundant and widely-used container," she said.

"From simple fruit and vegetable crates to birdcages and chicken coops, to display tables, the crate is used in markets as a storage vessel or transportation basket. It is a vessel which contains within it, not only the products it carries but its own rich cultural histories and meanings."

Although Moursi assured that she sees the contemporary urban street as a dense field of creativity, integral for the studio's design process, it didn't stop her at all from visiting many of the villages on the outskirts of Cairo to work with artisans.

"It is an area that is considered

'peri-urban' by many architects and urbanists - and often neglected. We are hoping to inspire use of sustainable materials in construction and furniture in villages that are quickly urbanising and becoming a part of the larger Cairene agglomeration," she said.

It is in the villages that the palm crates are made. The same crates that Studio Meem use to create bookshelves, side tables, and garden systems.

"Palm crate making is an artisanal craft which is labour intensive and slow. The processes related to crate making involve intricate body movements which are translated to linear grids. Each handmade crate is almost the same but profoundly unique in its dimensions and grid, reflecting a wabi-sabi aesthetic of imperfection, transience and incompleteness," she explained.

The collection seemingly seeks to re-interpret the typical manner and function of these palm crates by contrasting and collaging them with other materials.

"It seeks to question what has been lost in the age of mass-production, over-consumption and disposability, while still allowing the crates to be seen as new objects of beauty and significance," Moursi explained.

'Off the Gireed' has been exhibited for the first time in the Alexandria Library in Cairo including furniture pieces like the Hang bookshelf, Tala & Tamara sidetables, Fold coffee table, the Array bookshelf and Pouf.

"Studio Meem's participation in the 'Design is a Verb Exhibition' at the Library of Alexandria allowed the products to be seen by a wider public," she concluded.

