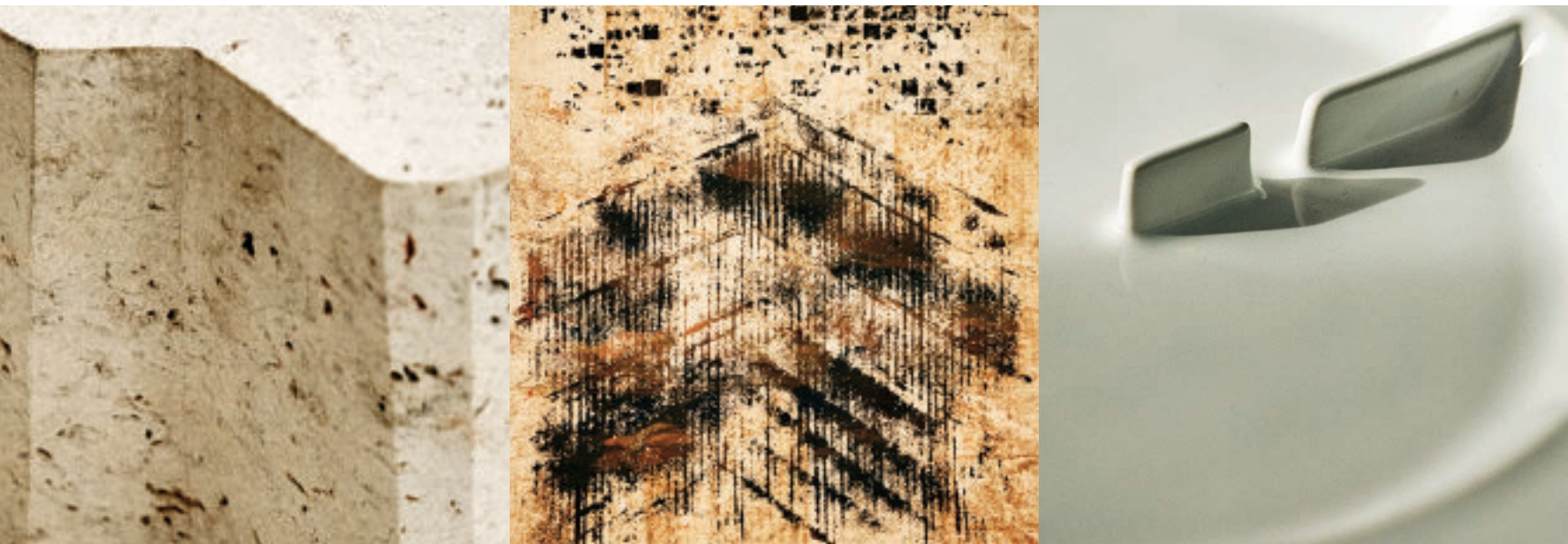




# DESIGN THIS CITY

Discover the local creatives using design to shape the city of Amman in Jordan,  
from product designers and artists to festival founders

Words Debika Ray **Photography** Dave Imms



*Clockwise from left: A detail from the Turbo studio; a detail from Rana Beiruti's office; a mural in the Turbo studio made from Three Stars matchboxes; tableware designed by Sahar Madanat; an artwork in Rana Beiruti's office; a stool by a local designer in Beiruti's office*

**T**his city doesn't present itself to you – you have to dig around," says Saeed Abu-Jaber, co-founder of Amman-based graphic design practice Turbo. Yet, in recent years, the

Jordanian capital has become home to a thriving creative scene, perhaps driven by this unassuming and laid-back nature.

Independent galleries, design studios and cafés are popping up across the historic hilltop neighbourhoods of Weibdeh and Jabal Amman, joining existing staples of the cultural scene such as Darat al Funun, the 30-year-old museum of contemporary Arabic art. Digital fabrication labs have also opened, offering space for budding creatives. Graphic designers, filmmakers and artists are drawing on local aesthetic references; and musicians and artisanal food makers are seeking to nurture a sense of pride in local traditions and produce.

International investors have also taken note. In April, design-led US hotel brand W opened in the city, offering itself as a venue for events such as the trials for the inaugural Dead Sea Fashion Week.

In some ways, this is a natural evolution for a city with a young, diverse population, but artist Yasmeen Sabri also attributes this creativity to the region's history. "If you have the privilege and guts to have a voice you need to use it," she says.

In 2016, Amman hosted its first design week, which drew together these relatively disconnected strands of creative practice, as well as practitioners from outside Jordan, and gave them a platform. "It's about Amman being put on the map," says the event's director Rana Beiruti. "We built it around the pillar of being locally centric but also connected to the outside world."

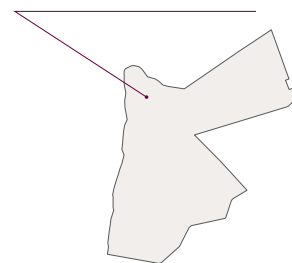
Last year's edition included a stylised vending machine containing copies of design practice Eyen's directory of Jordan's calligraphy artists; *Arid*, an installation by research group Middle East Architecture Network depicting the region's water scarcity; and fashion designer Tania George's latest collection of colourful, printed garments. As well as showcasing experimental and politically potent work by contemporary designers from across the region, the aim is to celebrate Jordan's traditional crafts, such as carpet weaving, dagger making and basket weaving.

This diversity means that it's difficult to pinpoint a distinctive look to the design work emerging in Amman, but insiders point to an innate sense of functionality. "Jordanians have always created products out of a need or lack of resources," says product designer Sahar Madanat. "It's rarely for the sake of trends or fashion."

Beiruti agrees: "Because we have such limited access to raw materials, innovation is so much more apparent here: designers have to make something out of nothing."

Discover some of the city's best creative talents on the following pages...

**QATAR AIRWAYS  
FLIES FOUR TIMES  
WEEKLY TO AMMAN  
FROM DOHA**



## FIVE-STAR DESIGN



When it launched in April 2018, **W AMMAN** brought contemporary flavour to a city more accustomed to traditional luxury hotels. Located in the heart of Abdali – a financial district described as the "new downtown" – the 150m-high tower offers panoramic views across the city's seven hills, as well as a gym, spa, pool and some of the city's top rated restaurants – Pan-Asian Enso is a highlight. Its slick interiors are inspired by the topography of Jordan – you enter the building through a canyon-like corridor designed to resemble the ancient city of Petra. Service is warm and personal, with small touches like a WhatsApp-based concierge service. [wammanhotel.com](http://wammanhotel.com)





#### THE GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

## TURBO

**“We wanted an office space where we could also throw events and sell local products”**

In a double-vaulted raw concrete space on the edge of Amman’s downtown is Turbo – a graphic design studio co-founded by Saeed Abu-Jaber and Mothanna Hussein, and a gathering spot for the city’s creative community. “This place was a risk, for sure,” says Abu-Jaber.

Renting such a large studio space was somewhat of an indulgence – an effort to create an inspiring environment for their practice, which designs everything from branding for independent businesses to music posters, after years spent working for commercially driven agencies.

Importantly, however, the space has been an opportunity for the pair to stretch themselves beyond visual communications, offering a hub for local designers, as well as passers-by who might be unfamiliar with the design industry. Visible through the studio’s glass frontage is furniture by local designers and a typographical mural by renowned calligrapher Hasan Kan’an. The space also hosts print sales, exhibitions, music events, talks and film screenings and, soon, a permanent café.

But more than anything, Turbo’s public room is about having fun. “Playfulness is the main theme,” says Abu-Jaber. “When you stop playing, you stop enjoying what you’re doing.” [turbo.com](http://turbo.com)



#### POSTER ART

A poster design by Turbo for a pop-up shop and exhibition of local product designers held at the studio space last year.

THE FESTIVAL FOUNDER

# RANA BEIRUTI

**“Amman Design Week has sparked conversations about the way we want to live”**

When Rana Beiruti first discussed launching a design exhibition in Amman with the office of the Queen of Jordan, she was adamant that such an event had to make use of neglected spaces in the city to engage ordinary citizens. “I thought to myself, ‘If I can do it in the abandoned bus station, then I’ll do it,’” she recalls. The idea evolved into Amman’s first design week, which took place in September 2016 with a focus on the social impact of design and an aspiration to revitalise underused spaces and run-down neighbourhoods.

“Amman Design Week has sparked conversations,” says Beiruti, who trained as an architect. “People are starting to look at design and say this is or isn’t the way we want to live.” As a public event, she adds, it also momentarily broke down barriers between layers of society. “It brought together people from all backgrounds – they told me that it gave them hope.”

Now Beiruti and her colleagues are launching a new initiative called Platform, striving to embed design more deeply into the city’s consciousness. The team will continue to organise Amman Design Week – now every other year – while Platform will offer educational programmes, talks, workshops and residencies, hoping to keep the spirit instigated by Design Week alive all year round. [ammandesignweek.com](http://ammandesignweek.com)



## DESIGN GUIDE

The second edition of Amman Design Week hosted 150 exhibitors across 50 spaces. The next event will take place in October 2019.









#### THE PRODUCT DESIGNERS

## SAHAR MADANAT

“I hope to help pave the way for upcoming designers and studios here in Jordan”

Jordanian designer Sahar Madanat was studying at university in California and was leaning towards medicine when she discovered a love for product design. She felt that the field had the same investigatory, problem-solving ethos as medicine but also appealed to her desire to combine science and art in her work.

Today, she runs a product design studio in Amman and much of her studio’s output has traces of that early interest in healthcare. Take a collection of tableware that can be used with just one hand, for example, designed to give independence to people with disabilities; or a tray that allows objects to be placed on it without sliding; and an emergency response device that empowers untrained people to tend to someone having a heart attack.

Her practice has now been operating in Amman for five years, but it’s still one of only a handful of product design studios in Jordan. “I came back because I wanted to practice something I was passionate about in my own country,” says Madanat. “Our presence as a studio in the region has created a platform for incoming designers from around the world. I hope to help pave the way for upcoming designers and studios here in Jordan.”

[saharmadanat.com](http://saharmadanat.com)



#### TABLEWARE

One Handed Tableware enables stroke victims and people with disabilities to eat with one hand independently.