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Surface matters: creative solutions for walls and floors
Expo preview: inside the dynamic pavilions of 2020
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Creative solutions

Ten years after arriving in the UAE, Italian-born interior architect Marianna Piccolo is celebrating the milestone with an expansion into e-commerce.

TEXT: CATHERINE BELBIN



Elegant glass partitions invisibly divide the closed office space, adding to the overall sense of openness and supporting a borderless work environment



Marianna Piccolo

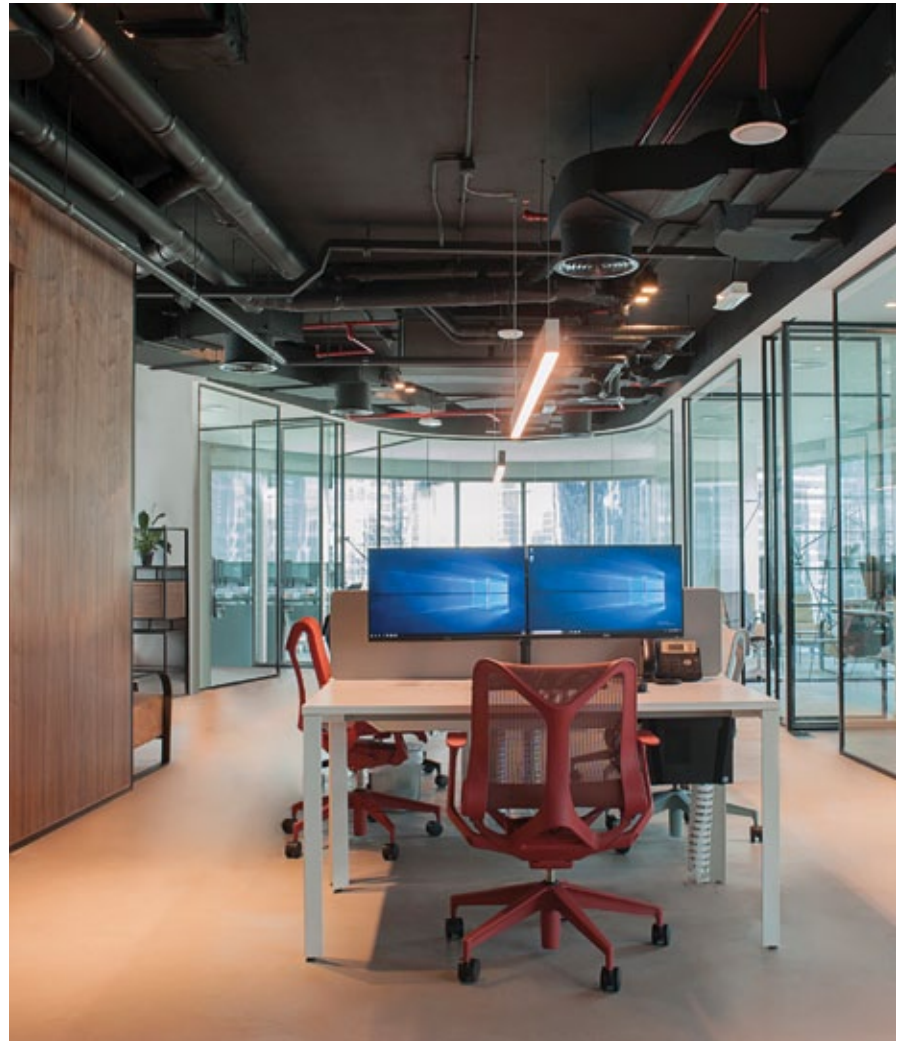
Ten years after arriving in the UAE, Italian-born interior architect Marianna Piccolo is celebrating the milestone with an expansion into e-commerce.

Inspired by her mentor Marco Piva – one of Italy's top architects and head of the **id** Design Awards jury – Piccolo seized the opportunity to work on his projects in the UAE. Within a few years, having gained further experience as an in-house designer for top boutique Aati and for RW Armstrong in Abu Dhabi, the ambitious and intrepid entrepreneurial designer opened her own design studio.

Piccolo has since created chic luxury interiors for clients in the UAE and Paris.

Most recently she launched a new start-up, www.maiolica.ae, a Dubai-based online boutique specialising in tableware from European and Mediterranean countries.

She spoke to **identity** about her inspirations and the driving forces behind her success...



To overcome the unusual shape of the office space, Piccolo created a glass-walled meeting room in the centre. Luxurious furnishings from Herman Miller, Narbutas and Polflex complete the chic look

“Good design lies in the art of ‘subtraction’, residing in simplicity.

Why did you move to Dubai from your native Italy?

After working in Milan for nine years I was inspired by architect Marco Piva to visit Dubai, where his studio was working on a couple of projects.

I wanted to change my environment and I wanted to change my life. I fell totally in love with Dubai, although I spoke no English. I had nothing to lose!

What and who was it that inspired your move from Milan to Dubai?

I had also worked with another architect in Milan, Andrea Crippa, who has a lot of A-list clients and so I already had a good grounding [in meeting] the demands of very rich clients seeking to create very opulent interiors. This was quite different to the projects for Piva, which were more minimalist and pure.

What were the main advantages in coming to the UAE more or less straight from design school, with only a little work experience in Milan?

Working in Milan exposed me to some of the greatest and most talented designers and manufacturers – experts in my field. I arrived in Dubai with ideas and experience from one of the most creative cities, keen to share that experience while exploring a completely new market.

At what stage did you decide to open your own design studio?

In 2015 I decided to open my own studio, initially on Sheikh Zayed Road, later moving to d3 soon after it was launched five years ago. I was inspired to open immediately after the Government announced that we would be hosting Expo 2020. I saw this as a good opportunity and so decided to jump

forward. Being located in the Design District is very convenient as we have many suppliers around us.

What was your first project here under your Mypickone studio?

It was an eight-bedroom luxury villa in Emirates Hills – at that time the proportions seemed gigantic when compared to Italy, but I guess they were still small in UAE terms!

Can you briefly describe your most important project to date?

I mainly work on luxurious high-end residential projects, both here and in Europe. However, we have also done offices, including a recently completed one in Omnyat Binary Tower.

You have worked with some of the leading architects of our time, including Piero Lissoni. How was that experience?

Working with Piero was very special. I learned a lot. He is a very caring and sensitive person and I really appreciate the way that he treats all of those who contribute to his projects. As the local architect for the hotel project in Ajman, I was privileged to work on such a big project so soon after opening my studio.

From Dubai you have worked on projects in Paris – how did you get these commissions and what are they?

Yes, we [currently are working] on the renovation of a period duplex property in Saint Germaine, Paris, through one of our VIP local clients.



A selection of Italian tableware from the recently launched maiolica.ae online boutique

I try to harmonise environments and re-challenge spaces.”

How has the market changed over the past decade?

The biggest change has been the ever-increasing awareness of design. Clients today are much more sophisticated; they have clear ideas of what they want; and they are familiar with the top brands and trends. The evolution is positive and encouraging. I look forward to people appreciating quality as well, as many people still want a particular look but do not truly understand the subtle differences between good and bad quality. But things are improving all the time.

How has social media impacted the design scene?

Today, due to online magazines, Pinterest, Instagram, etc., people are much more aware of new trends, colours and ideas. This has played a huge role in spreading news about design and designers globally, and so clients are more informed.

Recently you launched your own Dubai-based online boutique...

The launch of the Maiolica website coincides with the celebration of my decade in the Emirates. Often, I have realised that I need items for my projects that I could not find in Dubai, so I thought that other people may appreciate having a bigger variety of tableware to choose from, and that's how Maiolica came to life.

What's different and unique about your online boutique selection?

The collection has a strong feeling of the Mediterranean; it's a selection of niche brands, offering unique and artisanal pieces from around that

region. Many of the items are from areas close to where I was born and grew up, in the south of Italy.

Which designers do you most admire?

While I appreciate the work of many designers, my mentor is Patricia Urquiola. I adore her style. Over the past 15 years or so she has developed into one of the leading designers. She managed to break into the design scene and always giving a feminine touch to whatever she does.

How would you describe your style?

My style is eclectic. I like to create colourful and very luxurious homes that are timeless yet furnished with the highest quality fabrics and furnishings.

Personally, my home is more or less all black and white, but I notice that my clients are bolder, more daring and appreciate colours – and so I always try to put a pop of colour into their spaces [as well as] lots of different textures. Personally, I'm more conservative, so I enjoy creating spaces that are different for clients.

What are your future plans?

I have many plans: I hope to develop Maiolica into a complete service where, in addition to selling items, we can also create dinner settings and even provide the chef as well. I really enjoy projects where I can create a whole ambiance for a special occasion. I plan to work hard, while learning how to relax more... 