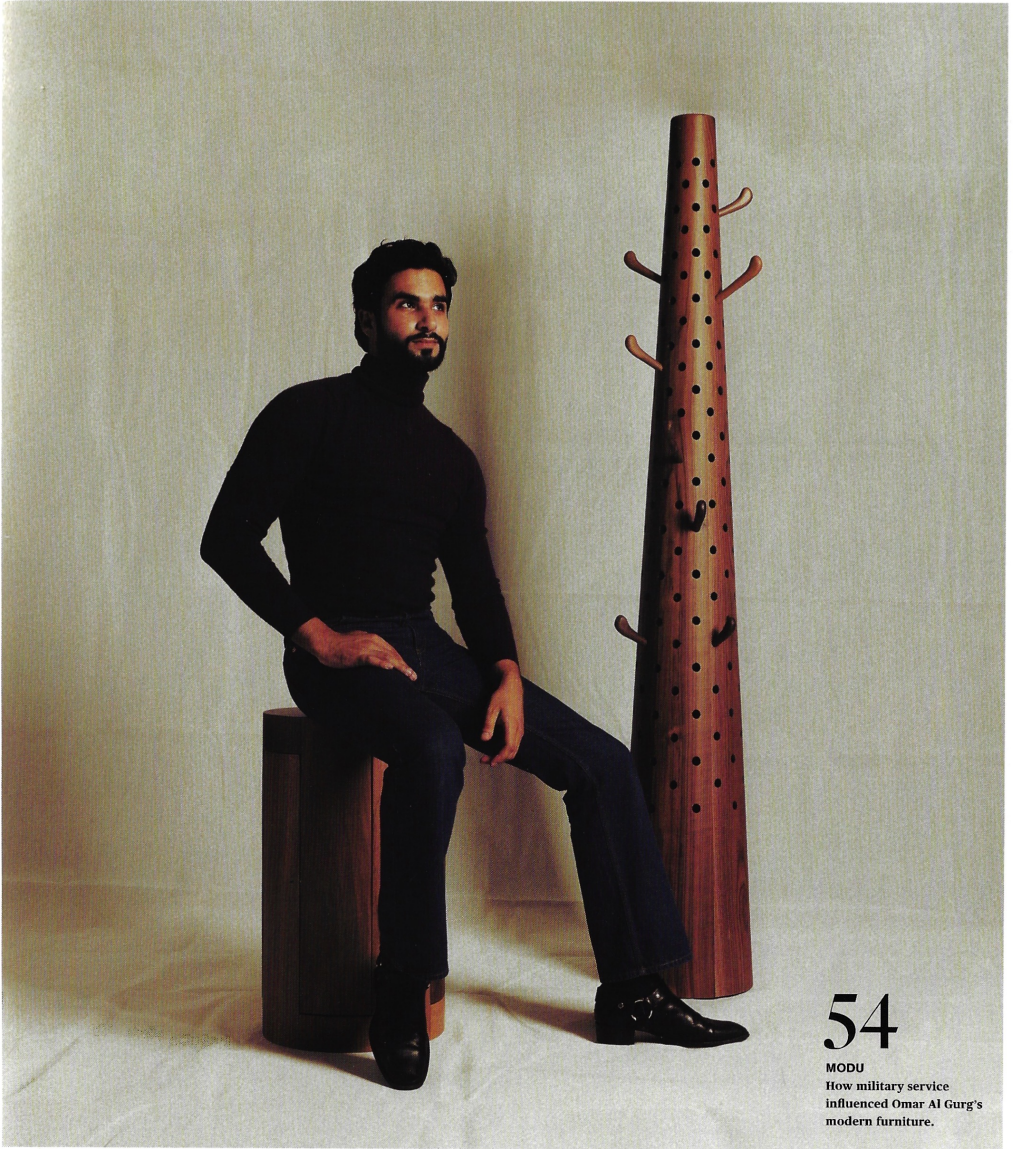


Design

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MODU
How military service
influenced Omar Al Gurg's
modern furniture.



DESIGN

DESIGN FOR LIFE

How Omar Al Gurg's desire to preserve his Emirati heritage led to modular furniture that creates shared experience.

Words by Andrew Nagy

Inspiration is a funny thing. They say that the harder you push, the less likely it is to come. Then, you take your foot off the gas and *Bang!* an idea strikes when you least expect it. That is how it was for photographer and furniture designer Omar Al Gurg, although his thinking time came courtesy of the UAE military.

It should be made clear that National Service isn't exactly downtime—at least not officially. But for Al Gurg it not only offered valuable space away from the norm, but also the minor inconvenience that often births invention.

"I actually enjoyed my National Service," says the 26-year-old Emirati. "I learned a lot and I always welcome any new experience. But I had a problem. There was no place to hang my things. My clothes were just packed away in a bag. So, I began sketching an idea that could help."

That idea, in 2019, evolved during 16 months of service and became known as Spike, a super modular, strikingly handsome coat stand that comes in walnut and ash and features moveable pegs. If you spent any time at Dubai Design Week's 2021 UAE Designer Exhibition, chances are you would have seen Spike alongside Al Gurg's other creation, a side-table-cum-stool named Gene featuring two interlocking pieces in African teak and walnut.

For Al Gurg, Spike and Gene are just the beginning. In fact, he actually still works two jobs. By day with his family business—the real estate division of Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group—and by night plotting and creating for his newly formed design company, Modu. It's a passion project rooted in a desire that we interact differently with the things in our homes. As we spoke, he was working on a versatile stool to be showcased at the Sharjah Islamic Arts Festival. The piece allows the user to stack it together, creating different types of furniture in the process.

"Some days I'll work in my first job until 3pm, other days until six, but then I'll fashion ideas for Modu," he says. After that, it's bed by 11pm and up again for the gym at 6:30am. A love of routine is another gift from Al Gurg's time in the military. "The second part of the day



isn't really hard though," he reasons. "If you're passionate then you're always in that mode of problem solving. 'OK, this doesn't work, let me have a break and try a different idea, maybe I'll look at social media or create something new.'"

That search for newness is an interesting one for Al Gurg, because his love of design actually stems from a desire to maintain his Emirati heritage.

"Photography was my door into the art world, but because I was inspired by composition I also became interested in architecture. I wanted to preserve the heritage of the UAE and learn how to renovate things and help keep them as they are. That's why I went to Belfast [Al Gurg took an architecture degree at Queen's University in the Northern Irish capital]. Dubai has a habit of getting rid of the old. But we're so distracted by the new that we don't look at—and preserve—the old. In Belfast, we would mostly study buildings that already existed. This inspired me."

The road to your calling isn't often linear. Al Gurg discovered this, too. While his love of art and photography aligned with his degree in architecture—and he will likely come back to all those things—he felt a need for something more personal. Prior to studying in Belfast he'd wanted to create giant sculptures that people would interact with. Contact was key.

"I was interested in items that people have a relationship with on a daily basis," he explains. "Where you have to physically touch the thing that you're using and create a sense of value."

Perhaps it's this idea of connection in an increasingly disconnected world that makes the affable Al Gurg and his work resonate so much. This isn't about furniture as mere decoration, but rather something that connects and unites.

"We have a personal experience with furniture," he says. "It creates a community around an object that was originally intended just to serve a purpose. This is my overall aim with Modu. This isn't just furniture. It's a lifestyle."

RACK: OMAR AL GURG; PORTRAIT: MENAT EL ABD