



Johnson's residential penthouse project in Dubai Marina caught the attention of location scouts for the next James Bond movie, Skyfall.

Alfred Johnson's pioneering biomorphic designs

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Six years ago, Alfred Johnson decided that it was time to leave the successful Dubai-based design firm that he had worked for since graduating from college and branch out on his own. He was 25, and flat broke. "I had about Dh800 in my pocket. That was it," he says. "But I wanted to do something new."

Johnson set up his own boutique design company, and has since transformed Alfred Johnson into an award-winning interiors brand that focuses on commercial, retail and residential spaces, as well as furniture design. His client list features some of Dubai's largest companies, including Etisalat, Dubai World Central and Nakheel.

His work has been recognised not only locally but at high-profile international award ceremonies such as the 2011 International Design Awards and the 2010 FX Awards in London. Most recently, he received eight nods at the 2011 Arabian Property Awards.

"That was one of the biggest nights of our lives. It's like our version of the Oscars," Johnson beams. "The judging panel is extremely extensive. Crucially, they don't look at the size of the design firm. They award creativity and original thought process, which is so important for us."

When Johnson talks of such achievements, it is with a boundless, boyish enthusiasm, but also an underlying sense of astonishment, as if he himself cannot understand how this has all come about. One gets the sense that there have been a number of "pinch-me" moments over the past few years, and that the 31-year-old designer is still processing them all.

One such moment came early in 2011, Johnson recounts. "The phone rang in the office one day and one of my colleagues said, 'There's someone on the phone who would like to speak to you about James Bond and your penthouse project in the Marina.' I thought it must be some kind of joke. As it turns out, the person on the phone was a location scout for the new James Bond film. Apparently, they were considering using Dubai as one of the main locations for the new film and were looking for an extremely luxurious penthouse where they could film one of Bond's fight sequences. They had come across one of our projects, a penthouse in Marina West, and wanted to meet us.

"As it turns out, they didn't shoot the film in Dubai in the end, but we were still very excited to be considered."

Johnson links his success as a designer to the fact that he was artistically inclined as a child. "If I read something, I could picture it very vividly in my head. I had this real ability to visualise things. And I read a lot. I was in boarding school in India, so apart from reading your Secret Seven, Hardy Boys and Famous Five, there wasn't much else to do."

After school, he moved to Dubai to attend the Edexcel International college and almost immediately began interning for London Design, a Dubai-based firm cofounded by Christian Mintowt-Czyz and Justin Smith. "They were looking for young, creative people so I got a job as an intern. Eventually, I started working there full time. I had all these ideas in my head and I just wanted to get them out," he recalls.

But it was only once he left London Design more than five years later and branched out on his own that he realised that his true passion was biomorphic design, the fluid, nature-inspired design language made famous by the likes of Zaha Hadid and the US architecture firm Asymptote.

"Soon after I quit, I found myself working on a pitch for a boutique hotel. This was one of the first times that I had no one to communicate with and no one to talk to about whether this was right or wrong, or which direction to take based on what would sell. It was the first time I had an opportunity to really speak my mind design-wise.

"So I created this beautiful biomorphic structure. I thought, even if I lose the pitch, I'm going to at least make a statement and get the person on the other side of the table to say: 'Wow, we've never seen anything like that before.' That turned into a founding stone of our brand. We wanted to be financially sound, but it was always our intention to think outside the box. People use that term very lightly, but we genuinely believe in it."

As a result, Johnson has become a pioneer of biomorphic design in the UAE. The nine retail outlets that he has designed for Etisalat have

embraced biomorphism to varying degrees, most extensively in the Dubai Mall store, which has earned Johnson many of his awards, including a Honourable Mention at the IDA.

He has also taken biomorphism into the corporate sphere and is now focusing on bringing his unique style to the residential market with the launch of Alfred Johnson Privé, a line of villas that blend Japanese and biomorphic design elements.

Johnson is currently working on an architectural concept for a 700-square-metre villa that will be entirely biomorphic in its design for a young Emirati client. "This is going to be a real statement for us in the residential sector. It is going to be a showcase of what we are capable of," he says.

He is also in the process of designing a large-scale residential project in Baku, Azerbaijan. This includes the architecture and interior design of two twin villas, a pool area and a clubhouse, covering a built-up area of 3,450 square metres.

The final prong to the Alfred Johnson brand is his line of high-end, bespoke furniture, all named after formidable women. Johnson clearly loves every piece. His first real foray into furniture came when he was designing the firm's new studio in Al Quoz. "We wanted a conference table that would be epic. We wanted something with drama and imagination and creativity. That's how Medusa came about."

All hand-moulded fibreglass curves, Medusa is indeed a sight to behold, and can be customised in countless ways. "Medusa turned out to be such a great little design that I thought, let's see what else we can do. So we did Carmine, which is an ultra-luxurious CEO's workstation. Then there was Karoline, the coffee tables in veneer and in veneer and natural stone. Then we did Allegra, which is another dining and coffee table. Then there was Sophia and now there's Cara, a bar that was commissioned by art collectors for a private residence in Burj Khalifa."

While Johnson has yet to design any soft furnishings, this is in the cards, so we can probably look forward to a cool, Johnson-branded biomorphic chair or bar stool sometime soon. In the meantime, he will no doubt find more weird and wonderful ways to expand his eponymous and ever-evolving brand.

"I am more interested in being a creative success than a commercial success," he says. "We never want to be a massive commercial entity. We are very comfortable doing what we do."

For more information, visit www.alfredjohnson.com



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