

MAGICAL, MYSTICAL, VIRTUAL



Artificial intelligence is also changing our approach to architecture. For **Hajar Ali**, it is an exciting new tool with endless opportunities. The Singapore-born designer creates desirable, fully equipped living spaces that initially exist only in her mind.

WORDS: Martin Tschechne IMAGES: Hajar Ali

On Instagram, people often ask Hajar Ali which hotel or resort is featured in her pictures – even if the place only exists in her imagination.

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HAJAR ALI

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As an artist, Ali is self-taught. She didn't attend a school of architecture or art school but studied at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore.



"I work with architects. My clients are private property owners or property developers."

HAJAR ALI




She was the first woman to cross the Rub al-Khali, the desert between Riyadh in Saudi Arabia and Yemen – a thousand kilometers of sand and scorching heat. Born in 1979, she has marketed international luxury hotels, traded digital currency on the stock market, visited the fronts during the war in Afghanistan and established an adventure travel agency in Patagonia. Hajar Ali is also a member of the Mensa high-IQ society and the acting editor of the organization's newsletter in her home country of Singapore. When Covid came along, however, it placed constraints on her curiosity.

But not entirely. Quarantined in her home office, she chose to enter the virtual world of artificial intelligence. When she first began experimenting with AI, Hajar Ali experienced what many people do when they start exploring the vast depths of global knowledge, where programs and algorithms assume control and humans willingly step

aside and simply let things happen. And she was amazed. The creative opportunities on offer seemed limitless, and so she decided to make the most of them.

Her first creations displayed the dynamic impulses of a free-associative system, but they were also somewhat surrealistic, with people, spaces and structures, all happily intertwined, creating a vibrant and colorful tapestry. Something of a cross between Max Ernst and a console game. But Ali didn't allow herself to be drawn into the adventure to the extent that she was swept away. She realized very quickly that "Artificial intelligence is shaped by the information humans feed it. It has no will of its own and lacks the capacity to form its own concepts."

Yet it was precisely this potential that made AI such a valuable tool for her creative endeavors. Not that it didn't take work on her part. "I had to dig deeper until the computer offered me something I hadn't expected," she says. Ali is convinced that, while artificial intelligence is the product of a huge, amorphous mass of data, images, texts and formulas, it is also a reflection of the natural intelligence of the person who uses and masters it – a person who is quite willing to go with the flow, but then proceeds to evaluate and sort what they find, and then gives new instructions. Interestingly, as she has to admit: "You have to do some tough negotiating to get →



“You have to do some tough negotiating to get AI to align its output with your specific objectives.”

HAJAR ALI

Inside and outside in harmony: Ali's images condense dreams into awe-inspiring architectures.

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This is how her magical spaces take shape. With the gesture of a storyteller, she invites her Instagram audience to sink into silky-soft cushions, take a seat in an open loggia or retreat to the safety of a grotto, while at the same time enjoying the sight of flowing water, a majestic jungle or a shimmering plain. The rugged outline of a jagged mountain range appears in the distant haze. The heat of the day gives way to the blue coolness of the night. A black concert grand stands against the backdrop of a chalk cliff. Clouds are reflected in the surface of a pool, flames flicker from a sacrificial bowl. Sometimes, something sacred drifts toward the viewer.

AI programs like Midjourney and Stable Diffusion provide a rich database for such narratives – but the more relentlessly Hajar Ali negotiates, the clearer her signature and purpose emerge. Her images distill the essence of her dreams, condensing them into awe-inspiring architectures that are reminiscent of sacred spaces, yet at the same time familiar, with a sense of déjà vu.

Haven't we been here before? Is this the place we came from? Is this where our journey ends? In the blink of an eye, the system through which we normally perceive and organize information falters. What horizons are opening up here? How can a body of water float above the floor of a rocky ravine? Is this what architect Frank Lloyd Wright had in mind when he built his famous Fallingwater house in the Pennsylvania woods? And who since the Russian revolutionary artist El Lissitzky with his cantilevered Cloud Iron Towers has defied the laws of gravity so brazenly?

Hajar Ali shrugs it off. When asked about her role model in architecture, she answers quickly and decisively: Zaha Hadid. But her respect for the architect who died in 2016 is not based on the latter's pioneering achievements in the world of construction. No, Ali admires Hadid, who was born in Iraq and became the first woman to win the Pritzker Prize in 2004, for the single-mindedness with which she championed the jagged vectors and sweeping curves of her designs. Hadid's background in mathematics undoubtedly played a significant role, but the word “fearlessness” also comes to mind when describing her mindset.

Ali recognizes herself in this, for she is a self-taught artist. She never attended a school of architecture or art school but studied at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore. So she understands complex systems analyses and goal-oriented planning, has studied the French post-structuralists Foucault, Baudrillard and Deleuze, has read

Theodor Adorno and the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, and constantly refers to the work of the Palestinian-born American academic Edward Said, whose influential concept of Orientalism offers a trenchant critique of the enduring legacy of colonialism: a cold, condescending attitude on the part of the West towards the cultures of Asia and the Orient. Hajar Ali is a practicing Muslim.

Recently, she strategically relocated from her home to Dubai, to be closer to the practitioners – those individuals who engage in the practical act of building in the aftermath of all the discourse, analysis and deconstruction. She now sees herself and her visions as an integral part of the architectural design process, as she pores over floor and building plans, takes cues from the lines of sight and position of walls, and inputs everything into her AI iteration loops.

“The results are very different to what I share on social media,” she admits. But they contribute to the architectural future she wants to help shape – one that is more sustainable, more courageous and at the same time more spiritual than what the market offers today. New shapes, new materials, a new community. And she has certainly seen enough luxury hotels to have also mastered the art of persuasion.

Ali is very reluctant to discuss the implementation of her visions. So far, she has only disclosed that the fashion designer Diane Goldstein has asked her to develop the concept for a boutique in Los Angeles. She will only talk about other commercial projects once her clients have made them public. But she does say this: “The people who really appreciate the potential of artificial intelligence in building technology are the Qataris. The speed at which they are building is extraordinary.”

Almost a hundred years ago, Rosita Forbes, a British woman, became the first Western woman to cross the Sahara. Contemporaries were amazed and enthusiastic, although some were outraged. A few years later, she described her encounters with courageous women from all over the world in her report “Women Called Wild.” The title itself implies an individual bravely challenging conventional clichés.

“Womancalledwild” is also the name of the internet domain where Hajar Ali can be reached and where she showcases her work. Because when Ali sends AI on its journey to develop habitable spaces, her aim is to provide an alternative to Western Orientalism. It's about the self-confidence of her own culture. About women's rights. About respect.



Would you like to know more?