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Follow The Leader

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Enterprise head honchos

talk strategy, industry-specific tactics,
and professional challenges

Pallavi Dean

Founder / **Roar**

→ **SINCE FOUNDING ROAR IN 2013, PALLAVI DEAN HAS WON MULTIPLE AWARDS FOR HER WORK** across a range of sectors including commercial, hospitality, and residential. She was born in India, raised in Dubai, and spent years working in London, and her designs reflect these eclectic influences. A former professor of design, she strives to implement the latest theoretical and practical research into Roar's designs.



IMAGES COURTESY ROAR

To have multiple passions in life isn't unheard of. But when a business becomes a melting pot of two *seemingly* unrelated interests, what follows could be a success story like that of Pallavi Dean. After all, it is by combining her enthusiasm for the apparently disparate subjects of design and psychology that Dean founded her Dubai-based boutique architecture and interior design studio, Roar. "You know, I always say that designers are part lawyers, part psychologists, and part sociologists," Dean says. "What do we do as designers? We watch human behavior, right? And then we create a vessel or a space that supports that behavior. So, that is the core of what we do, very often."

"I WAS NEVER A PART OF THE CONSTRUCTION BOYS CLUB, AND I STILL AM A BIT OF AN OUTCAST, BUT I CELEBRATE THAT."

Since its launch in 2013, Roar has been the recipient of some of the regional industry's most coveted awards, which includes last year's Boutique Firm of the Year by *Design Middle East*. But it is in Dean's aforementioned description of what a designer's job entails that you will find the underlying philosophy that has constantly driven the firm forward: empathetic design. "When you work with an architect or someone in the design world that has a big ego, you will see that they want to impose their style even before they've talked to the client, simply because they want to create a masterpiece... This flagship, kind of, iconic legacy project that will live on beyond them, and I've always found that to be so narcissistic," Dean says.

"I've also thought that that was so bizarre, because it's not my home, it's not my office. So, why would I impose my signature style? And that's why when you look at Roar's projects, they're so varied. When we say 'empathy-based design,' it's putting the users of the space and the client at the center of it. So, for example, we don't even start our design process unless our clients have had a one-on-one session with an independent psychologist at our briefing sessions. This is where I think psychology and design come together. We feel like we can only create a successful design if we are empathetic *and* hone our listening skills."

Here, as if to confirm what has been apparent all along, Dean states that empathy is an integral part of her leadership style. "But empathy is a two-way street!" she adds. "So when it comes to my employees, I'm happy to give them flexibility and all the trust that I have, but it goes both ways. There will be times when an employee will tell me, 'Hey, listen, it's Monday, but I need to work from home,' and I'll have no problem. But there will also be an instance when, on a Sunday morning, my client from Saudi Arabia calls me and wants a meeting with the team. And I know it's a weekend, but Saudi Arabia's open, so, I will expect my team to show up... There's a lot of talk about unhappy employees, right? I feel like there is such less material out there on how a leader needs empathy as well. So, I try my best to keep honing my leadership style." But as Dean continued to tell me more aspects of how she goes about managing her enterprise, I felt like she already has a rather compassionate understanding of human vulnerabilities and preferences- a lot of which appears to have stemmed from her own experiences. When Dean had appeared as a guest on the *Entrepreneur Middle East Live* webinar series, Against All Odds, earlier this year, there was a line she stated that struck quite a chord with me personally. "I'm a brown woman in construction," she had said then. "I was never a part of the construction boys club, and I still am a bit of an outcast, but I celebrate that." For anyone who has



↑ One of Roar's recent projects is for Mall of the Emirates-based safety deposits vaults renting company **VINTAGE VAULTS**, which involves creating a modern version of a traditional vault.

ever had to work harder than their peers to gain validation and acceptance, these are words that can provide both inspiration and comfort- and I can certainly testify to that.

Dean has no qualms in admitting that that she had to contend with quite a lot of hurdles in getting to where she is now. But the key to dealing with them, she says, was to simply not focus on them. "Everybody needs a sense of belonging, and I think what's really important is if you feel like an outcast in any industry, you have to find your people," she says. "And that's what I did! I surrounded myself with my mentors or similar-minded people and colleagues. But at the same time, 'be so good that they can't ignore you' has been a motto of mine. You can forget about your gender and your race -and I talk about this very openly- and just focus on your craft and what you can bring to the plate, rather than focusing on the down-sides of things." ►►



↑ PALLAVI DEAN, founder, Roar

It's a strategy that has worked out well for Dean- today, with a team that is 92% female, she's at the helm of a highly acclaimed enterprise that has, over the last couple of years, secured a string of high-profile projects including the design of the 25,000 sq.m. commercial space at Sharjah Research, Technology, and Innovation Park, a hub for incubators and accelerators at Abu Dhabi's ADQ Innovation Centre, and several others.

As someone who has experienced the full spectrum of the entrepreneurial lifestyle, Dean is perhaps the right person to ask about the pros and cons attached to it. "I think people should stop glorifying entrepreneurship, right?" Dean says. "But for me, the best thing about being an entrepreneur is complete

flexibility, where I can choose my clients, my colleagues, and the hours I work. To me, that's really important- the people I work with! I've been able to curate a fantastic family here at Roar, and it gives me a lot of pride because they're handpicked. They're the best in class!" But it is here, for the first time in our chat, that I find Dean struggling with an answer to one of my questions. "The worst part about being an entrepreneur... I don't know; I think there are a lot of upsides..." she ponders. "I guess it's the constant worry about making sure you have the right people on the right seats, making sure they're happy, and making sure you are all going in the right direction, and are aligned, I suppose. That's tricky. So managing that, I would say, is a downside..." Dean

"YOU CAN FORGET ABOUT YOUR GENDER AND YOUR RACE, AND JUST FOCUS ON YOUR CRAFT AND WHAT YOU CAN BRING TO THE PLATE, RATHER THAN FOCUSING ON THE DOWNSIDES OF THINGS."

seems hesitant to whine about her job- and I get a clear understanding of why that's the case when she goes on to make this statement: "I can't believe people actually pay me to do what I love- I would do this for free!"

With a leadership style that seamlessly blends passion and psychology, Dean now looks back at her journey thus far with fondness, and this is perhaps most evident when I ask her what she's most proud of her entrepreneurial trajectory so far. "I think the fact that I've built a very successful business, which I thought would just be for my spare bedroom as a freelancer, makes me very proud," Dean says. "And it's received so much international recognition too! At first I thought only the local magazines and newspapers were featuring us, but we've been featured in some of the best industry publications- things that I used to read when I was growing up in architecture school. To see my own journey from this very arrogant young designer in my twenties, to someone who was struggling in their thirties, to now, when I'm in my forties, it feels like I've 'arrived,' if that makes sense. So, I'm really proud of that." But what's next for Dean and Roar? "Yeah, the next big milestone for me is to make sure that Roar is in the position that we can sell it," Dean reveals. "That's the moonshot! We're also doing a lot of work in the metaverse, which I'm super excited about. So, for me, the metaverse is kind of the next frontier, and then selling Roar, eventually, would be great!" ■

BY AALIA MEHREEN AHMED