



Alia Dawood

A trip from London to the University of Cambridge campus with the Iraqi-British architecture student



‘It would be relatively simple to remain in London, start an architecture practice and do private projects,’ says Iraqi-British postgraduate student Alia Dawood, perched on a couch in the entrance lounge of her Knightsbridge flat. ‘But for me, facing the challenges of public space and architecture in the Arab world has meaning.’

Currently studying for a postgraduate degree in architecture and urban design at Cambridge University, Dawood is knee-deep in research for her Master’s dissertation, a proposal for the expansion of public spaces in Beirut. Though she commutes to Cambridge a couple of days a week, Dawood is used to London. Her second-floor unit in a block of flats on Sloane Street is not far from where she grew up as a child in west London. After completing her undergraduate studies in architecture at Central Saint Martins, she momentarily changed course to train for a year at the Royal Drawing School.

A postgraduate student at Cambridge University and a multimedia artist, Alia Dawood is currently researching her dissertation on public spaces in Beirut. Her Knightsbridge flat is where she carries out much of her work when she’s not on campus. ‘It’s pleasant to work here at night because it’s quiet,’ she says. ‘That’s when the street transforms into a magical place’

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While working for Hopkins Architects in Dubai, she put drawing to practice, documenting the city's buildings through a body of work that included photographs, prints, monoprints and drawings. Her pieces were later exhibited at Showcase Gallery in Alserkal Avenue. One of her artworks from that time, a photograph of Dubai World Trade Centre, hangs in the entrance of the open-plan flat.

The place is immaculate. Upon entering, an interior dividing wall is flanked by a spacious kitchen and a formal lounge. At the end of the wall, which separates the space but still leaves it feeling open, is a door leading off to a smaller lounge – or the 'den' as Dawood calls it.

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Dawood is someone who has little time for distractions. 'I tend to put work first. I usually write here at night,' she says, indicating a narrow desk upholstered in faux-alligator skin underneath a window overlooking the street below.

Opposite the desk is a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf packed with large-scale art, photography, design and architecture tomes. Names such as Peter Salter, Frank Lloyd Wright and Jan Saudek stand out on their spines. It's on a red suede couch positioned against an exposed concrete wall, where Dawood usually flips through their pages.

'The Zaha Hadid couch is my favourite, though,' she says, gesturing to the red statement piece by the late architect, all fluid curvilinear forms and soft rounded edges.



01 The proximity of Dawood's flat on Sloane Street to Hyde Park is why she moved there, despite its distance from Cambridge. 'I'm most productive in the afternoon, often after I've been for a refreshing walk in Hyde Park'

02 On Dawood's shelves, back issues of Vanity Fair mix with bulky scholarly books





03 Dawood at the River Cam, which flows along a picturesque area known as 'The Backs', passing a number of the University of Cambridge's grand colleges

‘What she did for female architects is amazing. I don’t design the way she did – it’s very parametric – but I love having a piece of her here.’

Apart from the couch, indications of Dawood’s Iraqi heritage are sparsely scattered around her home. Though born in the country – her parents grew up and met in Baghdad – she hasn’t been back as an adult.

Unable to get approval to carry out field work in Baghdad’s parks, gardens, squares and museums – her initial choice for the project’s focus – Dawood turned to the Lebanese capital instead. ‘Civic space there is scarce. Only 0.5 percent of Beirut is public space – in European cities that figure is 12 percent. I want to find where that is, by taking spaces that perhaps aren’t public and making them public.’

Dawood’s working thesis is to build community areas throughout the city that increase in density as they get closer to the sea, using an urban language she’s created through a study of Dalieh, a piece of coastal land projecting from Beirut’s Corniche into the water. Dalieh – its name referring to a plant that hangs over a rooftop to provide shade under which people can gather – has been used for centuries by fishermen, picnickers and swimmers, but is currently being developed for a private resort.

‘I’m fascinated by the coast. The legal definition is that any land that the high tide touches is public space,’ Dawood says. ‘I plan to create informal structures in Beirut, some placed at the borders of neighbourhoods, that could achieve different things. One of them might serve tea by and for the locals to give people a sense of ownership over their environment. I’m calling them “urban sanctuaries”.’

An intricate hand drawn map of Beirut, with potential locations for her ‘urban sanctuaries’ marked out, is on the easel on a table in Dawood’s kitchen – the part of the



flat she spends most time in. ‘My kitchen is my studio. This is tidy actually,’ she laughs. ‘When I have a deadline it’s messier.’ The kitchen shelves are crammed with her architecture papers, a few clay models she baked for a project at Cambridge visible among them. ‘I never get much done early in the day when I’m here and not in Cambridge, and I tend to work very late. Sometimes it’s 4am and I don’t even realise.’

Rather than remain in the familiar surroundings of London, Dawood plans to go where her work takes her. For her next stop, she’s considering Riyadh. ‘My husband is from Saudi Arabia and works there,’ she says. ‘There’s so much to do, especially in terms of public space – so many untapped sites. I want to document the urban fabric of the city, really do worthwhile work. It’s my civic duty as an architect.’

04 To Dawood, the Zaha Hadid couch is more of a ‘sculptural object’ than a simple furniture piece