

Outdoors is the new 'in'



Travellers from the Middle East are often mesmerised by the high streets of Paris, Germany, London, New York, Hong Kong and Mumbai, searching the streets of Berlin for those small, family-run cafés or for designer brands adorning the Champs-Élysées. They yearn for similar retail experiences closer home.

If only they looked closer at their heritage of traditional bazaars and souks that are culturally akin to high streets. In days gone by, these were the nerve centre of retailing in the Middle East. The vestiges remain. Dubai still has its Deira Souk and Meena Bazaar,

next door is the Sharjah Souk and further afield we have the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, Khan el-Khalili in Cairo and Downtown Beirut in Lebanon.

Shoppers in the region still find outdoor markets fascinating in a scenario dominated by plush, multi-focal malls. Maybe it's the super-saturation of climate-controlled, glitzy malls that is now drawing them in growing numbers back to the open environment of the streets, especially during the cooler months of the year.

It's got the makings of a new retail trend of pop-up markets, which are mushrooming across the UAE. The likes of ARTE (Artisans of the Emirates) and Ripe Markets popularised the

format, with others following closely in their footsteps, including Market Outside the Box (MOTB), Street Nights, Urban Market, Marina Souq and Le Méridien Village Craft & Farmers Market, which run every weekend – and even on week days – during the winter season in the UAE.

Even the super-regional biggies are getting into the act, with malls now offering an 'outdoors-in' ambience. There's the Virgin Megastore outlet at Yas Mall, the flurry of restaurants and cafés overlooking the Dubai Fountain at The Dubai Mall and The Beach stretching along the coastline of the Jumeirah Beach Residence (JBR), to quote a few examples. They merge the rustic souk with the sophisticated high street in a heady mix that revives old world charm with a touch of the west.

Rupkatha Bhowmick made a tour of some of the UAE's popular pop-up markets as well as outdoor shopping malls that developers in the region are now evolving, such as Meraas' City Walk, Majid Al Futtaim's Al Mouj Muscat, United Development Company's man-made island The Pearl-Qatar and Hamat Property Company's Riyadh Park. Her report:

Retail is slowly moving outdoors

Let's begin with a designer's view of the concept of outdoor retail that is picking up in the Middle East. "Most mall developers we're working with today urge us to create an alfresco effect because people just love dining in the open, soaking in the ambience. Even entrepreneurs want to set up unique and quirky pop-ups that tell the story of a brand," says Davide Padoa, managing director of London-



“Pop-ups create this sense of urgency, stimulating on-the-spot purchase decisions. So developers should think of adding innovation with pop-ups instead of simply housing them in empty spaces.”



Davide Padoa

based design firm Design International.

“JBR was dominated by F&B concepts. City Walk took the next brave step, creating an outdoor mall and reaping the benefits of its calculated risk. The concept is catching on, especially among western expatriates familiar with high streets looking for similar spaces in the UAE where they can spend quality family time when the weather is generous. Even the local population is warming up to outdoorsy malls and pop-up markets,” he elaborates.

Padoa cites the example of Inditex, which frequently updates the collections of its

portfolio of brands, irrespective of whether the products are sold, creating that urgency in shoppers to get their hands on the latest offerings. “Pop-ups create this sense of urgency, stimulating on-the-spot purchase decisions. So developers should think of adding innovation with pop-ups instead of simply housing them in empty spaces,” he suggests.

He feels the pop-up format can be leveraged by young entrepreneurs looking for a location to popularise their brands as well as by community and super-regional malls, pointing out that pop-ups can be used in three ways.

“First are the young entrepreneurs who like breaking rules to conduct business in a different way and are inclined to setting up quirky pop-ups. Next are the established businesses aspiring to create a buzz in the market by leveraging the pop-up format. Finally, we have the top tier businesses who experiment with pop-ups for important product launches to gauge consumer responses before making a bold move. For example, Chanel and Burberry opened their first stores at Covent Garden as pop-ups before converting them into permanent locations,” he asserts.

As for the weather and its impact on the concept, Padoa opines, “The main difference between the Middle East and the US or Europe is the seasonal pattern. The winter months are fantastic in the



Arese - Garden Promenade

Middle East, while summer is the time for fun in the US and Europe. So the concept thrives in both contexts, the only difference being the seasonal pattern. This region still has some way to go in exploiting outdoor retail. The key is to change the mindset of staying in climate-controlled, indoor environments and stimulate people to venture outdoors."

Pop-ups have a great future in the region

Marcus Käss, art director of design firm Schwitzke & Partner, Dubai, also feels outdoor retailing hasn't made sufficient headway, the limiting factor being the region's



Global Village



Marcus Käss

extended, hot summers. "There's no point looking for a 12-month window. It's not possible even in Europe and the US, with their harsh winter. Cafés and high streets there flourish during summer but winters are bleak. Switch the seasonal sequence and it's the same in the Middle East. Dubai enjoys a more privileged position, with almost seven months of pleasant weather," he observes.

"The street culture is what makes London, Paris, Berlin and Istanbul so attractive. People from here, who travel widely, yearn for something similar at home, which is why outdoor markets and restaurants are witnessing boom times. Dubai has some particularly attractive outdoor locations, including the cafés and restaurants overlooking the Dubai Fountain and JBR with its outdoor seating that draws the crowds. More recent developments like City Walk, Boxpark and The Beach are

To-dos while creating pop-ups

- The design of a pop-up has to be unique to immediately catch the attention of passersby
- The location of a pop-up has to be carefully selected to attract the target audience
- Storytelling is crucial for a pop-up to describe the brand ethos clearly
- Pop-ups must create hype to popularise the concept leveraging social media and other channels

also getting a lot of attention. It's a cultural lifestyle shift we are witnessing," Käss comments.

He feels it could be a case of ennui, with malls offering similar brands while people are looking for something new. "This desire for a fresh retail experience draws them to edgy pop-up markets. Of course, shopping malls do allocate spaces for budding entrepreneurs to operate kiosks and pop-ups but these spaces will have to be more affordably priced and flexible," advises Käss.

"Dubai can easily create a boulevard or high street like in Hong Kong where the outdoor retail scene is quite exciting even though some parts of the year see heavy rainfall. Every shop in residential or commercial buildings in that city has an open facade facing the street. So people walking down the streets can easily navigate in and out of the stores without getting

drenched. Hong Kong has a high population density yet the system works quite well," he continues.

"In some parts of Europe, retail spaces are located between blocks of buildings connected by temperature-controlled walkways so people can enjoy being outdoors even during winter. Smart city planning can definitely be done here as well," Käss suggests. "For example, shopping malls can be situated at the underground level, with high streets above, the two being connected."

"Of course, the retail scene will also have free-standing malls like the Galleria Mall on Jumeirah Road with their diverse tenant mix. But developers looking to create big shopping malls with a distinctive character or smaller ones to bring in footfall must think out-of-the-box, maybe bringing in concepts like food trucks," he concludes.

Global Village: becoming bigger and better

Global Village is one of the UAE's oldest and biggest outdoor concepts, launched in 1997. The cross-country cultural collaboration of retail and entertainment began along the Creek, opposite Dubai Municipality, later moving to Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Road, where it is currently located next to Dubailand. A bigger and better village had a



Ahmad Hussain bin Essa

grand opening on November 9, 2015 and will run until April 6, 2016. That's the slot it occupies in Dubai's crowded retail-cum-entertainment calendar, partly coinciding with the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF).

"It's a unique multi-cultural park that's great for a family outing, with entertainment, rides, retail and a range of F&B options. The retail experience differs from your typical shopping centre, taking you on a cultural journey around the world," says Global Village CEO Ahmad Hussain bin Essa.

The village started as a small outdoor concept with kiosks representing 18 countries, with the inaugural season attracting around 500,000 visitors. Today, it has 75 countries represented in 32 pavilions, with Japan and Russia being new additions this year and Indonesia and Palestine returning. It has around 3,500 retail outlets and 100 F&B kiosks – 30 of which are local SMEs screened from around 500 applicants – with

visitor numbers expected to cross the five million mark. Those are staggering numbers!

The entertainment side has been augmented with new and spectacular rides that include the thrilling Loop Fighter, Crazy Golf for children and Cape Fear Ghost Train for families. In addition, concerts and stage, street, stunt and cultural shows are spaced out during the entire duration of this seasonal extravaganza.

"You gauge the success of an outdoor destination like Global Village by guest satisfaction levels," says Essa. "We have designed a guest journey map that tracks a visitor in three phases: what she intends doing when she arrives at the village, the destinations she visits and her experiences during the tour, and, finally, her post-tour impressions. The mapping helps us identify popular areas and those that need improvement. Our response to the feedback is what ensures repeat footfall. We find visitors coming to the fair at least three-to-four times every season."

Ripe Market: a pioneer of the outdoor culture

Ripe Markets operates in Zabeel Park and Al Barsha Pond Park in Dubai and Mushrif Central Park and The Collection, St Regis in Abu Dhabi. "The market is more than just about shopping," says founder Becky Balderstone, "bringing together locally-grown organic produce and hand-made crafts. We bring the community together to support



Becky Balderstone

local SMEs in a family-friendly setting where they can relax on lawns, soak in the sunshine, dine and, of course, shop at a wide variety of vendor outlets."

"When I came to the UAE, I couldn't procure seasonal organic produce locally, like I could in the UK. My husband, a landscape architect, and I saw this gap in the market. We

found there were many local farms growing organic foods but few retail channels to reach them to end-consumers," she recalls. "We launched Ripe Markets as an informal market, a place where you can shop for organic produce while supporting local businesses. I wanted to create a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere."

The market is one component of Ripe Organic, the company Balderstone set up, which also has a physical store, Ripe Farm, from where it retails fresh seasonal produce grown on farms following strict organic practices and selected for taste and quality. Orders can also be placed online for delivery across Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

"We currently run four weekly markets and also participate in several other pop-up markets and events to widen our vendor and

customer base. When I started out in 2011, we had only a small handful of vendors selling delicacies. Today we work with over 500 vendors, with 80-to-160 at each market each week. We represent a wide range of local businesses selling everything from food to fashion, jewellery, art, homeware and skincare. We also host live musicians, fitness workshops and a variety of children's activities," shares Balderstone.

That's during winter. In summer, the market moves indoors. "But we try to keep the alfresco vibe in a cool retreat. The difference between the summer and winter markets is that the indoor setting attracts visitors who shop and dine whereas the outdoor market attracts families who come to spend the whole day, enjoying the outdoor ambience and entertainment," she explains.



MOTB: adding vibrancy to outdoor retail

Another outdoor, pop-up market that has created a niche for itself is MOTB, launched in 2014 by the Dubai Festivals and Retail Establishment - an agency of the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing and the DSF organiser.

Located in Burj Park in downtown Dubai, this outdoor market celebrated its third edition this year, running from January 21-30, with local vendors operating out of funky

containers, offering home-made lifestyle products, many of them online.

A vibrant retail platform to showcase the talents of young professionals in fashion, art and more, the market is enlivened by food trucks offering gastronomic delights, music, yoga and fitness events, drama, dance and poetry sessions to create an environment for a family outing. It also features a chill-out zone - Park Central

- where visitors can read the latest novels, and an open-air cinema overlooking the iconic Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

More than 80 vendors participated this year, among them the home-grown sustainable furniture and furnishing concept The Urban Yogi, e-commerce concepts Little Majlis and Vikki Shop and handmade products concept StashA, to name a few.

Street Nights: encouraging people to get out of malls

It started three years ago as an experiment to see if people in Dubai can be enticed to step out of the malls, the underlying theme being to spread the street culture. "In Montreal, where I come from, every big festival happens on the streets and is attended by millions of people from different cultures and walks of life. Dubai, too, has festivals but most take place in a controlled environment. We wanted to break this pattern," says Street Nights co-founder Alexandre Teodoresco.

"We managed to close off an industrial street inside Al Quoz during DSF, bringing in some highly talented street artists – something new for Dubai – to kick off Street Nights. It was a huge success, with over 7,000 people venturing out on the first night," he reveals.

"Most events that take place in Dubai have sameness –



the same stage and similar offerings. We wanted to do something fresh and real. So we went around to every warehouse in Al Quoz looking for spare palettes, requesting Arabtec, a construction company, to lend us their equipment. We put together different things, like a huge flatbed truck used to transport containers to serve as a stage, and a refrigeration truck used

to transport perishables as a projection screen. It clicked with the audience who were pleasantly surprised," Teodoresco continues.

Street Nights now happens twice a year and has evolved from a street art festival to include local underground music, street food served from food trucks and the Night Bazaar, which takes place every two weeks on JBR during >



Alexandre Teodoresco

Vikki Shop: bringing art into homes

It all started with two friends getting together over a cup of tea to start something out-of-the-ordinary. They came up with the idea of using the e-commerce platform to introduce unique Indian products to the UAE market. That's how Vikki Shop came into being a year-and-a-half ago.

"We first thought of setting up a brick-and-mortar store. We also thought of selling to retailers like S*uce, but eventually launched our own e-commerce platform," recount founders Vijita Moray and Kiran Soni.

"The idea was to introduce art into everyday life, adding colour and excitement to the home décor scene. We were just so bored with seeing the same artefacts and accessories in every home, the same furniture and furnishings that made them look like something off an assembly line. Even the cushion cover was the same colour," Soni continues.

"So we started bringing in brands like India Circus, Item Number, Shor Sharaba, Krazy Mug, Alicia Souza, Rachna Raghuram's Doodle Doo, Accidental Art, Good Earth and the like," Moray adds.

Gradually, alongside homeware, Vikki Shop started dealing in fashion, personal and fashion accessories, kitchenware, stationary and many more categories.

Starting a business in Dubai is a piece of cake but the challenge is to sustain it, they say. "Reaching out to customers and generating virtual footfall is a tough job for an e-commerce start-up that doesn't have a lot of money to spend on marketing initiatives," says Soni.

"That's when we saw the emergence of pop-up outdoor markets as a viable marketing avenue. We began participating in a few select ones like MOTB, Ripe Markets, Urban Market and Grazia Fest. Each market brings its specific target audience, which helped us reach out to a wide demographic. We saw more visits to our site after every outing. The pop-up model, along with social media, has helped us popularise our brand," she points out.

"Pop-up is a great platform for us. Many people were curious

and wanted to see, touch and feel our products when we started our e-commerce site. We could reach out to them by showcasing our products at pop-ups. Once they saw our goods, they were more open to buying online. That's the huge benefit. We now have our loyal customers who make it a point to visit our stall to check out apparel and accessories, as well as a few other products that we don't sell online," Soni explains.



› the winter season. It's where indigenous talents and small entrepreneurs showcase their wares and interact with people, telling them stories about their creations. Examples include Nifty Little Things that creates vintage signs with lights and other materials, Howling Roosting that makes upcycled guitars using discarded boxes and Addicted to Soap, the hand and home-made soap concept, among others.

"People travel the world to see street art. We introduced and popularised the art form in the UAE, to the appreciation of many. We signed up with Dubai Holding for prime locations like JBR and Bay Square, and the company readily came on board, knowing the value the event would add to its properties. We also collaborated with the Dubai Food Festival, a specialist city-wide event, for the street food component," Teodoresco explains.

"Street Nights fits in perfectly with Dubai's multicultural ambience. We see more and more people coming out on the streets, indicating that the emirate is definitely ready to experiment with outdoor retail formats," he comments.

Addicted to Soap: curating all-natural, hand-made soaps

"Our bestselling soaps are oatmeal, milk and honey, lemongrass, papaya and Spanish lavender and Turkish rose," says Magdoline Hammad who started making high-quality, all-natural hand-made soaps at home for her children.

She continues to make great smelling soaps at home, free from parabens, phthalates and petrochemicals and not tested on animals. She has also turned her endeavour into a brand, introducing Addicted to Soap to the world through pop-up markets. "Street Nights and other pop-up markets are great for the community," she says. "They get people together and channel local talent into the market in an affordable way. That's sometimes hard to do in Dubai," she observes.

"It's a big reason why I love coming to these markets. You meet new people who appreciate local artisans who handcraft products and like to buy the kind of unique things you don't find in malls. Being part of these markets also builds brand awareness in the UAE and beyond," Hammad continues.



Magdoline Hammad

"Pop-up markets are great for the community. They get people together and channel local talent into the market in an affordable way."

"Some people may feel these outdoor markets aren't sustainable in this part of the world. But they are. We have our winter months when the weather is lovely and people venture out into the streets. And in the hot summer, we can always explore cool, indoor locations," she comments.

Urban Market: sustainability at its core

Urban Market is a two-day pop-up market that takes place at Alserkal Avenue during winter, showcasing local artisans and focusing on sustainability with a surprising range of products. There are upcycled tyres strewn around for people to sit on, small plants placed on every table in the F&B area, recycled plastic bottles and a host of other such concepts. The sustainability focus extends to the organisers even encouraging people to come to the market by public transport.

Urban Market attracts like-minded vendors and buyers and the atmosphere is exciting and bustling. In December 2015, 50 entrepreneurs participated, the names including Baambu, UAE's first apparel concept fashioned from bamboo (70%) and organic cotton (30%); Chari Cycles, which creates upcycled cycles; and A Boutique Society, a multi-brand fashion pop-up concept, among others.

Factor in F&B offerings, art workshops, live music and children's activities and you come up with a very lively and happening market.

Hoodielistic: leveraging pop-ups to popularise the brand

Hoodies are the core of this UAE-based start-up. But what makes the brand so special, considering that many vendors offer hoodies? "It's the design of our hoodies," answers Fouad Yassin Al Hashimi, founder of Hoodielistic.

"We have many start-ups focusing on fashion, accessories and headgear with a local favour, but we're the first to attempt something unique with hoodies. You don't really require wearing a hoodie in Dubai, given its sweltering summers. But, still, when the weather cools during winter it's the attire of choice of many. We wanted to add a unique flavour to the hoodie culture in the UAE by linking it to the many events that take place when the cool winds blow, offering designs to residents and tourists they can cherish," he explains.

Al Hashimi got together with some of his designer friends to take the idea forward and start this cool and funky concept,



citing Superman as an example. "One of our trending designs was inspired by the comic strip hero. We added an Emirati flavour by replacing the S with an E to create Super Emirati, with the UAE flag as the backdrop and a military camouflage background to represent our strength and unity. 'Jumeirah' is another popular design inspired by Jumeirah Road," he avers.

"We introduced our brand last November at Street Nights. It was scary at first because we didn't know what to expect – would people like the idea, what kind of people would the brand attract? We heaved a sigh of relief when it clicked – across the board with different age groups and demographics. People not only bought from us but explored investment opportunities. The

exposure was great and it made sense commercially," Al Hashimi enthuses.

Someday, he would like to set up a physical store. "That's what I thought of doing first when I launched Hoodielistic – set up a store at The Dubai Mall. But I later decided to participate in pop-up markets first to gauge people's reactions before launching something big," he shares.

GObai: the food truck is a culture

Take the Go from Goa, a state in India, add it to the 'bai' from Dubai and you get a heady mix. GObai is, perhaps, the 13th or 14th food truck concept in the Middle East but it's the one and only Goan street food concept in the UAE – with a local twist. Consider its popular Xacuti Shawarma, which infuses the local fast-food wrap – shawarma – with Goa's spice-laden Xacuti masala. Or the best-selling steak burger, known as the Goan cutlet pao, back home. There's also chilli zo parantha, beef chilli pao and much more.

"We have a passion for good food and were keen to start a business. That led to the idea of operating a food truck. We launched GObai Food Truck last September at the Dubai Music Week," says Cara Davies, FEO (food executive officer), GObai Food Truck.

"We have taken our food truck to several public and private events across the UAE since then,



including the Dubai Motor Show, Urban Market at Alserkal Avenue, Street Nights, Ripe Markets, Emaar Boulevard and even to one of the Al Nahyan palaces. We're now scouting for a permanent location after our first quarter of being in operation," she adds.

"The UAE is open to experimenting with cuisines and cultures from across the world. What's different about GObai is the fusion of cuisines.

It's a new offering in an exciting environment, which is also what pop-up markets are all about. So what better place can we get to launch our brand? It's a meshing of interests. The markets bring people out on the streets and fast food is, essentially a street food culture. We love being part of pop-ups, which offer a great way to connect with people and introduce them to our concept," Davies explains.

ARTE: promoting all things hand-made

"Our platform allows local artisans to collaborate with each other and showcase their work to a like-minded audience without having to compete with commercial businesses. At the same time, we ensure the platform is well marketed so the artisans get the exposure they deserve. We began with 30 vendors at Crowne Plaza on Sheikh Zayed Road and the show was a huge success," Walsh recollects.

"We then moved to Al Ghazal Mall in Satwa and finally to Times Square Centre. We also operate from Oasis Mall and Al Hamra Mall in Ras Al Khaimah," she adds.

Today, ARTE has 200-plus participating vendors in its market, depending on the time of the year, of which around 10 have been with it since 2005. Some names among its diverse mix of artisans and crafts-persons include Australian potter Roberta Jack, Tunisian jewellery maker Hayet Zerelli, Lebanese artist



Spill the Bean: satiating coffee addicts

It's a specialty coffee shop offering single-origin coffee from different parts of the world, made from organic, fair trade, locally roasted beans. "My husband and I like spending time at coffee shops, leisurely reading a book on a Friday afternoon. We looked for the perfect café after coming to Dubai, hopping from place to place, but something was always missing. That's when we decided to set up a place of our own, and that's what Spill the Bean is all

about," says founder Ola Sinno.

Located in a cosy corner of Sunset Mall on Jumeirah Road, the café caters to the neighbourhood community as well as the stream of visitors to Jumeirah who walk in to sip a cup of their favourite coffee while they relax or work. A second shop will soon open at the Dubai International Financial Centre but the founders just love taking Spill the Bean to pop-up markets.

"The pop-up format creates brand awareness and has worked

well for us. Going out to different locations to participate in these markets was part of our marketing strategy and very much in sync with our brand ethos. It gave us the chance to talk to people and find out which coffees they like. Some of the markets we've been part of include Urban Market, MOTB, Ripe Markets and Beach Canteen," she elaborates.

"Today, these pop-ups generate the most business for us. Compare your set location with these



Ola Sinno

events and you'll appreciate the difference. Our café stays open for almost 14 hours, while an event spans half that time yet is more intense in terms of customer engagement and interaction," Sinno opines.

"It's a shame to stay indoors when the weather is good. That's when most pop-ups happen and we're working on several such long-term options situated in different communities during winter," she adds.

Marlene Metni who loves to paint roses, ceramic glass painter Bachar from Syria, Arabic-influenced artist Fahema Fattah and British Jo Thursfield of Desert Patch runs decoupage activity. Our database has grown to 6,000 people who have enquired about participating in the ARTE events.

“It’s the passion to create that drives our artisans, not commerce. ARTE brings commercial sense into the equation. The products we display cover the range from fashion and accessories to furniture and tableware and everything in between. There are some food options as well, mostly cakes and cookies, jams and pickles. Overall, we focus on great products that are well crafted, packaged and displayed,” Walsh states.

“Another important function we perform is networking. We encourage our exhibitors to connect and collaborate with the creative community and like-minded people. We also leverage social media for the purpose.



Miriam Walsh

As a result, some vendors have been able to collaborate with mainstream retailers and e-commerce platforms – both regional and international. Some have even opened their own retail touchpoints, such as the Camel Soap Factory, but they keep returning to ARTE to grow their network and create brand awareness,” she points out.



Favourite Things – Handmade by Roberta

Roberta Jack, potter and founder of Favourite Things – Handmade by Roberta, started working with clay about four years ago. Handcrafting products gave her a lot of joy, which she wanted to share with others through her wares. That’s when she decided to be part of ARTE.

“I don’t operate Favourite Things as a business. It’s more about being happy and creating things – and, of course, making some money in the process. ARTE is a perfect platform for me,” Jack avers. “Around three years ago in 2013, my friend and I rented a table at ARTE. She was a painter-cum-potter working with clay, while I’m a mosaic artist-cum-potter. Back then, ARTE was the only market for us to display our handcrafted products,” she recalls.

“It’s a great platform for local talent, supporting creative artisans and helping them communicate directly with the community. No doubt, it’s competitive, but it’s encouraging, too, its synergy giving them the opportunity to collaborate with each other. For example, I started making containers for Pure Candles Dubai, a collaboration that I



Roberta Jack

built at ARTE towards the end of last year,” Jack elaborates.

“I create unique, decorative pieces that are useful as well, each different from the other, not 100 similar pieces like an assembly line. So concepts like us see pop-ups like ARTE as a great option to reach our target art-appreciating audience. Of course, there are some production-oriented potters who are doing a fabulous job, but each one of us has our own USP and priority,” she observes.

But ARTE also offers artisans the opportunity to reach out to mainstream retailers, with even Jack being approached by retailers at The Dubai Mall and Times Square Centre.



It's a pertinent question! There are so many outdoor, pop-up markets happening every weekend – and also over week days – that people are in a tizzy about which to attend and which to give a miss.

"Around 700,000 people lived in Dubai 25 years ago. Today, it's closer to three million. That's a lot of people with different needs and wishes. So you have many pop-ups happening these days along with ARTE, like Wafi Market in Wafi Mall, the Dubai Marina Market near the sailing club and Ripe Markets in the parks," says Walsh.

"One gets the feeling the format is being over-used and over-exposed. People are losing interest or are confused in selecting which market of their choice to visit. Of course, we'll still need pop-ups because the cost of a commercial property for an entrepreneur is exorbitant, automatically creating a demand for these markets," she adds.

"The pop-up format is being overused for sure," complements Teodoresco. "When someone does something cool, everyone wants to jump on to the bandwagon. But only a few with a strong core survive, the rest fade away. For example, Ripe Markets is going strong because it has created a space for a morning family market in parks. We, too, offer an edgy, funky night market. Eventually, every pop-up market must specialise, drawing its niche crowd. But the format will keep growing, taking the battle to the malls because of their human touch."

Davies feels every market already has its own flavour. "Urban Market is all about sustainability, while Ripe Markets popularises everything organic. Again, Street Nights offers a vibrant and youthful environment, encouraging people to step out of the malls. So the entrepreneurs they draw are aligned to its character and ethos. There's a space for every market," she avers.

"Yes, every stakeholder benefits from the pop-up markets," agree Moray and Soni. "However, one must be careful in selecting the right outdoor location and the right time. Weekends, particularly evenings, are busier than week days and, hence, better. Also, pop-ups organised before big festivals like Eid or Christmas tend to fare well. But the market is getting saturated, with too many pop-ups happening, which isn't necessarily a good thing because it leaves people confused and many of these concepts fail. Not every



Are pop-ups being overused?



format works for everyone. So you have to choose carefully between pop-up markets."

Jack sees pop-up markets becoming stronger – whether outdoors or indoor – after having lived in the UAE for over a decade, but wonders about overkill. "A lot of players have come into the market since ARTE a decade ago. Ripe Markets popularised the concept of outdoor retail. Others came along, each building their own proposition. My own buyers have increased in number. Social media also helps individuals like us to promote our concepts and expand our audience. But towards the end of last year, it really became a flood. So much novelty must, eventually, have a downside," she opines.

Al Hashimi thinks otherwise. "The pop-up culture is growing in popularity. People seem to love engaging with retailers at these markets, which are attracting more and more vendors. As long

as a pop-up has something valid to offer, the format won't get overheated," he asserts.

Sinno feels Dubai is finally ready to go out of the malls. "People are really excited to step out of the big boxes and enjoy the fresh air. We have a regular audience at Ripe Markets. They come every weekend. This outdoor retail format is sustainable because it helps you to directly engage with the consumer, introduce them to your product and increase the chances of repeat footfall. Your background can add a distinctive flavour," she comments.

However, Sinno has a word of caution: "The pop-up format has been around for many years. It's the oldest business model, cost-effective and sustainable. People are now reviving it but are not paying attention to content sometimes. So, many pop-ups end up being redundant, becoming boring, used and abused carbon copies."

"We set up Ripe Markets to

bring the community together and support local SMEs. Today, it's a lot easier for entrepreneurs to set up their own ventures, but that won't diminish the charm of outdoor, pop-up markets. They will serve as informal retail spaces and cost-effective platforms that start-ups and those looking to grow their businesses can leverage to drive brand awareness by communicating directly with customers," asserts Balderstone.

Essa feels the improving environment of outdoor markets renders them more attractive today. "A smartly landscaped outdoor market can remain open for up to eight months in a year. Outdoor markets are also environment friendly, using fewer resources. They definitely have growth potential, but a lot depends on how they are packaged. Retail by itself may not be attractive enough so there should be more novel elements added," he suggests.

A new flavour: outdoor shopping malls

Pop-up markets are doing well, but there are some unique outdoor shopping malls that are also catching people's fancy. They sport the high street look and feel, offering alfresco dining and housing some unique retail concepts not readily found indoors.



Meraas: creating unique outdoor spaces

"Outdoor destinations with a mix of retail, leisure and F&B are a rapidly growing trend across the globe. But they do need some customisation to make their offering relevant – and appealing – to the region," says Saleh Al Geziry, vice president retail marketing, promotions and recreation at Meraas.

"Our focus at Meraas is to develop spaces with an impactful design and an interesting tenant mix that can draw people to them. Open spaces like our City Walk, The Beach and Boxpark developments give them new ways to enjoy the outdoors in an urban setting. They beautifully complement mega and community malls, providing an accessible, hybrid destination that blends unique experiences and upscale brands," he avers.

Meraas has broken the rules of regional retail since 2013 to create these three innovative, outdoor concepts. City Walk was launched in 2013 on Al Safa Road, housing over 50 premium global and home-grown brands; The Beach, located on the shoreline opposite JBR, followed in 2014, offering a contemporary shopping and dining experience. The latest project is Boxpark on Al Wasl Road, launched last year. It houses a number of debutant retail, F&B and entertainment concepts, both local and international. Inspired by urban renewal projects, it combines the finest in contemporary architecture with the aesthetics of warehouse containers to create an industrial character.

"Our developments are



Saleh Al Geziry

designed to serve the needs of the community and reflect its unique personality. We are seeing a growing acceptance of outdoor concepts in Dubai's cosmopolitan environment that tourists find especially attractive. Given its retail culture, the emirate is working to establish itself as a global tourist destination and best-in-class shopping capital," Al Geziry concludes.

The Pearl-Qatar: a first-of-its-kind retail experience

The Pearl-Qatar, a man-made island developed by the United Development Company, is one of Doha's unique and innovative landmarks, offering a tailored range of residential solutions and housing globally known retail and hospitality brands.

The 1.8 million sqft of retail offerings is spread across three precincts – Porto Arabia, Medina Centrale and Qanat Quartier. Porto Arabia caters to fashion and F&B, offering upscale retail stores and dining outlets. The bustling district of Medina Centrale offers a unique blend of residential, shopping and leisure experiences through 160 retail stores and 40 restaurants.

Qanat Quartier, to be launched this year, will be the new retail destination hosting a selection of retail outlets, artisan cafés and sought-after F&B concepts.

This unique island development has catalysed the year-on-year growth of outdoor retail in Qatar. Even during summer, retailers, particularly F&B operators, continue to attract high footfall. The tenant

mix helps. So does the recently implemented decision to turn Medina Centrale into a pedestrian-friendly district during weekends to allow residents and visitors to enjoy the outdoor ambience.

Of course, there are challenges, the biggest being factoring in the weather, especially the sweltering summer. But the retailers have been gearing up to prepare the island to face nature's challenge. Cooling systems, mist fans, parasol shading and other smart technologies are being effectively deployed and a host of family oriented events and activities are being hosted to sustain footfall.

The premise is that outdoor retail thrives when it goes hand-in-hand with enticing surroundings. The charisma of the marina at Porto Arabia, the lively entertainment of Medina Centrale and the stylish retail offerings in a colourful ambience at Qanat Quartier add up to make The Pearl-Qatar a thriving outdoor destination. ■