

Belt & Road Fashion Gala Proposal

Shared Futures: The Sheikh Zayed Line and The Irrigated Desert

Canadian University Dubai: **School of Architecture and Interior Design**

In collaboration with Artist: **Charlie Koolhaas** (UAE / Netherlands)

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In this work, the Canadian University Dubai, School of Architecture and Interior Design, invited artist Charlie Koolhaas to collaborate with her ongoing Foto-Couture project. The project examines the intersection of photography, architecture, and fashion, transforming the city's built environment into wearable archives that reflect both personal and national identities.

Design 1 — Reflected Futures: The Sheikh Zayed Line

The abaya, the national dress of Emirati women, is a long, flowing black cloak that embodies modesty, respect, and cultural belonging. Traditionally worn across the Arabian Peninsula, it evolved from a practical garment suited to desert life into a symbol of continuity and pride. During the UAE's nation-building years, the abaya became a visible assertion of heritage — a way for women to participate in the expression of national identity amid the rapid transformations of modernity.

In Emirati culture, the abaya functions as the feminine counterpart to the male kandura — together forming a visual and philosophical duality: black and white, concealment and exposure, softness and structure. These two garments are not opposites but complements: the kandura, with its sculptural whiteness, represents purity, simplicity, and formal presence; the abaya, with its fluid black folds, conveys depth, elegance, and emotional strength.

An abaya's movement is part of its meaning. It flows and shifts with the body, expressing both modesty and confidence. The drape of its fabric transforms every gesture into form — revealing nothing yet articulating everything. In contemporary Emirati life, the abaya has also become cosmopolitan: it can be layered over jeans or couture, worn in both private and public worlds, and styled in infinite ways. Its adaptability — its capacity to cover, reveal, and reinvent — mirrors Dubai itself: a city that dresses for the world while remaining deeply rooted in tradition.

In this sense, the abaya is both architectural and emotional — a frame that allows individuality within collective identity, a surface that carries history while inviting transformation.

As part of this collaboration, Charlie Koolhaas creates an abaya printed with her photograph of Al Attar Tower, one of Dubai's most emblematic postmodern skyscrapers on Sheikh Zayed Road — the city's primary urban artery. Built in the early 2000s by a South African contracting firm, [Murray & Roberts](#), the owner of this business tower is Al Attar Properties, who were known only for their unrealised projects

as they did not deliver any of their promised developments in 10 years of operations, and they have been the subject of extensive lawsuits by investors. Nevertheless, Al Attar Tower captures a pivotal moment in Dubai's architectural evolution: when global modernism began to merge with regional form.

Sheikh Zayed Road began in the 1970s as a modest desert highway linking Dubai and Abu Dhabi. By the 1990s, it had transformed into a monumental corridor of glass and light — a spine of ambition along which Dubai declared its future. Each tower along the road became both a landmark and a mirror, reflecting sunlight, speed, and aspiration.

Al Attar Tower stands within this skyline as a hybrid monument. Its mirrored façade is punctuated by golden cylindrical forms, softening the hard geometry of the skyscraper and infusing it with a distinctly Arab sensuality. The building represents the moment when Dubai began to localize modernism — translating imported forms into its own visual language.

Koolhaas's photograph isolates the tower within this dense environment, transforming an ordinary building into an icon. When printed onto the abaya, the image turns architectural reflection into texture — allowing the city's skyline to be worn, carried, and embodied. The garment becomes a wearable archive, collapsing the distance between monument and body, infrastructure and intimacy.

It also gestures toward the fragility of Dubai's recent architectural past — much of which is already disappearing in the city's relentless cycle of demolition and renewal. The work thus functions as both preservation and provocation: a reminder that the architecture of Dubai's early modernism deserves to be valued as heritage, not just as progress.

Design 2 — The Irrigated Desert

To complement the abaya, which reflects Emirati ideals of femininity and continuity, the second garment adopts the form of the Chinese qipao — another traditional dress associated with modesty, refinement, and womanhood.

The qipao (or cheongsam) originated in the early 20th century as an evolution of the long robes worn by Manchu women during the Qing dynasty. Initially loose and modest, it was transformed in cosmopolitan 1920s Shanghai into a slim-fitting, high-collared silhouette that fused Chinese motifs — embroidery, silk, and mandarin collars — with Western tailoring. This fusion made it a symbol of modern femininity: simultaneously national and cosmopolitan, traditional and progressive. Over time, it became a cultural emblem of China's negotiation with modernity, embodying both pride and transformation.

In Koolhaas's interpretation, the contemporary qipao is printed with her photograph of irrigated desert plants in Dubai — geometric rows of green life sustained by individual drip-feed hoses. Water, the most precious element in the Arabian Peninsula, has always defined life in the UAE. The ancient aflaj irrigation systems once channelled water communally through the desert, shaping both settlement and social cooperation. Today, that same ingenuity survives in the infrastructure of modern Dubai, where each plant's survival depends on invisible networks of technology and design.

This image of cultivation and persistence embodies the UAE's deeper story: a civilization built on adaptation and knowledge, transforming scarcity into abundance. When printed onto the qipao, the

image becomes a metaphor for hybridity — linking the meticulous cultivation of desert life with the qipao's own symbolism of cultural reinvention. Just as each plant is sustained individually yet forms part of a collective field, Dubai's diverse communities coexist within a shared, carefully sustained ecosystem.

In this design, traditional Chinese elements are reimagined: the fabric is silk satin, referencing China's ancient silk-making heritage, while photographic details of scorpions sold in Guangzhou markets recall their role in Chinese medicine — pointing to the deep legacies of biological knowledge that shaped early global science.

In place of embroidered motifs, the photograph of cultivated plants functions as a "physical embroidery", mimicking woven threads while symbolizing the intelligence of Emiratis, descendants of nomadic peoples who learned to thrive in arid landscapes. By merging these visual languages, the qipao becomes a hybrid archive: a dialogue between two civilizations' traditions — China's science and silk, and the UAE's survival and cultivation — showing how innovation and heritage intertwine through cross-cultural exchange.

The design can be complemented by an umbrella (伞 sǎn), finished with a scorpion printed fabric. The umbrella carries deep cultural weight: historically a status object and ceremonial parasol from at least the Zhou era, and later a refined accessory in dress and ritual, it also embodies shelter and auspicious protection in weddings. In parallel, the scorpion belongs to the traditional "Five Poisons" iconography used on amulets during Duanwu to repel harm, and in Chinese medicine (Quan Xie), it exemplifies the idea of countering poison with poison. A scorpion-printed umbrella becomes a layered Chinese emblem: a protective canopy + apotropaic motif + medicinal intelligence—at once elegant fashion object and cultural talisman.

Conclusion — Reflection and Root

Presented together, The Sheikh Zayed Line and The Irrigated Desert form a dialogue of opposites: reflection and root, sky and soil, modernity and endurance. They mirror the Belt & Road initiative's spirit of cultural exchange, connecting two civilizations that have long looked toward each other across the trade routes of history.

In these garments, architecture becomes textile, and geography becomes pattern. The reflective surfaces of Sheikh Zayed Road resonate in the mirrored calm of Chinese ink landscapes; the geometric precision of irrigation parallels the disciplined order of Chinese design.

At a deeper level, this collaboration reflects the growing awareness in both China and the UAE of the importance of embedding tangible and intangible heritage within the contemporary design discourse. After decades of unprecedented economic and urban acceleration, both nations have entered a more introspective and mature phase — one that reconsiders origins as a catalyst for future creativity. This shift has opened fertile ground for design innovation: ancestral practices and materials are no longer seen as static relics but as dynamic frameworks to be studied, disassembled, reassembled, and reinterpreted through new technologies.

In this process, traditional craftsmanship dialogues with artificial intelligence, embroidery meets

algorithm, and the spatial logics of ancient cities inform digital fabrication and parametric design. The result is a new kind of modernity — one that is not imposed but emerges from within, balancing global ambitions with cultural depth.

Urban and natural contexts play a central role in this evolution, acting as repositories of memory, symbols, and lived practices. The city preserves its stories through its skyline, while the desert retains the ancestral intelligence of survival, adaptation, and care for resources. Together they form an ecological and cultural continuum — a landscape of memory in which design operates as both translator and bridge.

The Belt & Road Fashion Gala captures this duality: through architecture and landscape, body and garment, it transforms cultural geography into a sensorial experience, reaffirming that the future of design lies not in forgetting our roots but in reimagining them through new lenses of empathy, technology, and shared imagination.

Through Reflected Futures, Charlie Koolhaas and the Canadian University Dubai envision a new form of cross-cultural fashion — one that wears architecture as memory and landscape as skin, revealing how the modern world's most ambitious cities remain bound by shared acts of imagination, survival, and design.

Charlie Koolhaas

CUD Design Team