

COMMERCIAL

# Interior design

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## SHARJAH SPECIAL

ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN IN THE EMIRATE

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**M**ore than a quarter of a century ago, Umesh Punia travelled to the UAE. That year, 1995, has since been spoken about by regional financial experts as the year the government acted with determination to secure the country's economic future, laying down the building blocks of a sophisticated new economy with the private sector at the forefront.

Umesh was to be among these private companies setting up business in the relatively new country and, in his own words, describing himself as "like a dog with a bone," found his hard work and loyalty to the UAE repaid with success and a thriving business. Here he talks us through his work and tell us why GLAZE is the number one choice for sourcing granite and marble.

**Commercial Interior Design:** What is your main role and responsibility at GLAZE and has that changed over the years?

**Umesh Punia:** My main role has always been the same, sourcing the top-quality marble, at the best prices, from all around the world. Natural stones can be quite deceptive for an end user, and our job is to source and stock the best options. Even today, my role is to supervise, monitor imports, and uncover the best value for investment on behalf of our clients using all of our expertise, network, and resources. After which, we have an amazing team overseeing operations, sales and finance, so I don't need to worry about those details. After more than two decades in the industry, we can really guarantee that we are sourcing the best selections for our clients from every corner of the world.

**CID:** What excites you the most about your work?

**UP:** Marble is my passion. Discovering new and quality marble has always been more of an obsession than a livelihood. When I started traveling to Italy in the late '90s, visiting the world's most important stone galleries, I was fascinated and excited every time I stumbled upon a new exotic stone. I would jump at the chance to learn its origin, its source, its chemical composition, and would eagerly study its



grain size, texture, hardness, polishing degree, so that I could add it to my own growing collection. In my work, the only thing I do effortlessly, with earnest passion and joy is adding more and more better-quality marble to our stone gallery. I believe this is why today we not only have the largest collection of stones in the Middle East, but probably in the world.

**CID:** What's your most significant accomplishment?

**UP:** I feel incredibly proud of the ways we have changed, and I believe elevated, the way marble and other natural stones are sold in the UAE. When I started out in 1995, marble was kept in open dusty yards, like any ordinary construction or masonry stones. GLAZE conceptualised marble from a totally

I'm highly grateful to the visionary leadership of the UAE

different perspective. When I saw the way marble was displayed and showcased in the top galleries in Europe, I was mesmerised and inspired. I realised that marble is no less of an investment than a gemstone stone from a reputable jewellery store.

You must understand, people don't buy marble as a basic necessity; people invest in marble for their home or office for future generations to marvel upon. Like a Hermes bag or a Rolex watch – it is a statement, a declaration of success, an arrival. Whatever profession or business one has made their fortune in, when they picture their dream home or office, do you think they would settle for a cheap

ceramic floor? Of course not! So, what I am trying to say is that we gave the respect to marble that it deserves. Moreover, this attitude translated into all aspects of the business, not only hand picking the best

stones from every corner of the world, but also the way we showcased and displayed these materials in our stockyard, and the way we trained our sales team.

We feel proud that today the quality of natural stone in the UAE, not only in our stockyard but in that of some of our competitors as well, is far ahead of other GCC countries and the Middle East as a whole. Initially, people were surprised that we were trying to sell stone as a luxury product, and my answer has always been the same – why not? You spend millions to buy quality cars, furnishings, or artwork for your home, why not on the floor which you use much more than your Ferrari? Understanding the value of these stones radically changed the way the marble business and its trade takes place in the UAE. I consider this as my biggest accomplishment and contribution to the industry.

**CID:** How have you contributed to the UAE's countertop business?

**UP:** Apart from sourcing only the top-quality marble from every corner of the world, we have introduced many new types

of materials, like reconstituted quartz, for flooring and counters, such as the world's number one quartz brand, Caesarstone, to the UAE, or Coante, another BRETONSTONE technology quartz for kitchen tops. Both of these products provide a 20-year warranty for your kitchen countertop.

Last year, we introduced the most revolutionary product, a sintered stone, called Neolith. This next generation product is not porcelain; it's a nearly indestructible slab which can be used for exterior cladding, countertops, floors, and no other product can match its quality and character. These slabs are completely scratch, heat, water, chemical, and fire resistant, they offer complete peace of mind. In the second quarter of this year, we also introduced GEOLUXE, another next generation product, which is applicable for all surfaces and is produced with 3D printing technology using melted minerals as ink.

We have also introduced some other state-of-the-art products, such as ARIOSTEA, the most impressive porcelain slab brand from Italy, which belongs to the oldest and largest Italian porcelain group, Iris Ceramic Group. Above all, we are constantly evolving the brand with engineered and natural stones. For instance, we were the first to bring in Brazilian natural quartzite as a flooring and countertop product. Quartz or

quartzite is the hardest material besides diamonds, so their performance as flooring or counter material is incredible. The most popular quartzite is from Brazil and is extremely popular in the USA. The trend of quartzite emerged in the USA in the 2010s, and it took us no time at all to introduce these products to the UAE market. Quartzite such as Mont Blanc, Super White, Quartz Cremo, Fusion, and

Corteccia was once very new in the UAE, and they were a risky investment because they are expensive, but they are now some of the most popular products in the gallery. At this current moment, there are over 400 natural stones in our collection. The introduction of these exotic and rare stones was our brainchild – many of them are extremely popular today, and found exclusively at GLAZE.

## More about Umesh

After completing his civil engineering at MIT, Pune, he got the chance to work with a granite company in India and in 1995 was required to travel to the UAE for the sale of some granite slabs. During that first visit, he realised that most customers preferred buying locally over importing, and basically ready stock was lacking in the market. From there it didn't take him very long to realise the potential of setting up his own shop. He started at the micro level, importing just one or two containers a month at a very low operating cost.

different, as is often the case with natural stones especially. In fact, you should never buy a natural stone from a sample, because no two pieces of natural stones can ever be the same, nature never repeats its designs, and so each block or lot is completely different from the others, in terms of quality, colour, texture, tone and veining. Even in the case of porcelain slabs, you never get a real feel of the final finished floor from a sample in a showroom display. At GLAZE, our clients walk through the real stock, which would finally end up as the floor in their home or office. In this case, there is no chance of an error and selecting a material that would deviate from the concept and theme of the homeowner and the designer's vision.

Our gallery is like a fresh fruit store, you get to feel, touch, and smell before putting anything in your cart. Our store not only allows our clients to touch, feel and see how the final floor or wall would look like but ensure there is no chance of misjudgment or error in selecting the most suitable surface solution. It's a totally different experience.

**CID:** What are your goals in 2021?

**UP:** We are currently working on establishing our newest stone gallery in Abu Dhabi, in ICAD Mussafah, which is under construction at the moment. Completing this gallery by the end of this year, and as always adding new natural stones, as well as engineered stones to our collection from different parts of the world is an ongoing process.  
[www.glaze.ae](http://www.glaze.ae)



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Our  
showroom  
is a totally  
different  
experience

**CID:** What is your business niche?

**UP:** We not only have the top brands in our bag, like Neolith, Caesarstone, Coante, ARIOSTEA, KoZo, and GEOLUXE, but our real strength comes from the exclusive agreements we hold with top quarries in Italy, Spain, Turkey, Greece and Brazil. This allows us a continuous flow of material and exclusive access to the very best collections. And of course, our huge inventory, the greatest in the Middle East, which means we are able to deliver immediately for projects of any scale.

**CID:** What do you think makes GLAZE special when it comes to flooring solutions, when there is so much competition in the local market, especially around showrooms?

**UP:** We have created a totally different experience for our clients in our state-of-the-art gallery. In all of these showrooms, you can only see a sample of the materials you are interested in, even though the final material that would be delivered to you is stored somewhere far away in Umm Al Quwain or Ajman, in a dusty open stockyard. The final product you would receive may look and feel completely