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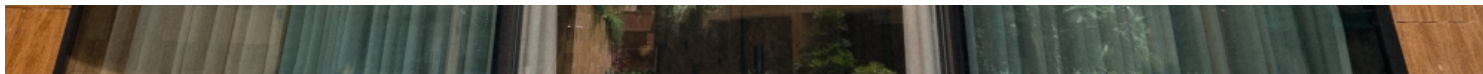
The First Café Elle Opens in Saudi Arabia

Former Elle Décor editor-in-chief turned brand developer Whitney Robinson aims for a space where design stories come alive.

By **RITU UPADHYAY**

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Cafe Elle Saudi Arabia COURTESY OF CAFE ELLE

For years as an editor, Whitney Robinson has been at the intersection of design, fashion, travel and architecture. He is bringing those worlds to life with a new hospitality concept from **Elle** Magazine, Café **Elle**, which just opened its first location in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. “Think of an elevated café, the places that we love to eat as fashion people, like Hotel Coste....Bergdorf’s,” explains Robinson, describing the idea behind his latest creation.



Food at Café Elle Saudi Arabia. COURTESY OF CAFE ELLE

“There are a lot of parallels I take from my magazine career,” says the former editor, who stepped down from the top post at Elle Décor in 2020 to focus on brand and real

estate development projects.

“To think about hospitality as a platform is a new concept, but we are serving an audience in the same way we are serving a reader,” says Robinson. “I love to create environments that spark joy and inspiration.”

Café Elle’s interiors are straight out of a magazine spread — swathed in rich velvets, blush pinks with black-and-white marble with brass accents. The café boasts tabletop settings by Milanese brand La Double J, the first Assouline library in the kingdom and uniforms inspired by Saudi Arabia’s heritage designed by Project Runway finalist Kristina Kharlashkina.

“This project has a great energy of collaboration,” Robinson said, explaining one of the café’s objectives is to provide women and local artists opportunities in hospitality, from the design of the space to the art on its walls and the uniforms and table settings.



Inside Café Elle Saudi Arabia. COURTESY OF CAFE ELLE

Robinson cherry-picked the location for the concept, the luxurious Via Riyadh development.

“[Saudi Arabia] has exploded in the last couple years, and we are seeing this meteoric interest in Western brands,” Robinson said.

Café Elle’s neighbors in Via Riyadh include other famous hospitality names, including the first Raoul’s outside of New York and outposts of Parisian favorites Ferdi and Les Deux Magots as well as London’s swanky Gymkhana. “My friend **Brandon Maxwell** is also going in here, so the development is really representative of this *mélange* which

we see Café Elle very much a part of,” says Robinson, who envisions the café as a place for brands to host events and tell stories, just like in the pages of the magazine.

Robinson is already scouting locations for the next Café Elle in Doha, Qatar. “I hope to bring them everywhere from London to Lahore,” says Robinson, who holds the license for the Café Elle globally through his company, Whitney Robinson International.

Robinson previously partnered with Ralph Lauren to bring Ralph’s Coffee trucks to the Middle East for the first time with locations in Qatar. “My company’s goals are amusement, education and inspiration. I hope people keep coming back because they want to discover more, whether it’s new tablewear or a fashion brand.”



Inside Café Elle Saudi Arabia. COURTESY OF CAFE ELLE

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