Keswa

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The public installation Keswa toured the United Arab Emirates in the spring of 2015 as the winner of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude Award for public art. The student team was given a \$10,000 prize and \$5,000 to produce their winning design with the support of the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation and NYU Abu Dhabi. The resulting piece falls between the typology of the pavilionfavored vehicle for architectural experimentation-and a piece of public art, intended to elicit changed viewpoints and altered awareness. Developed by two Saudi architecture students at the American University of Sharjah (Salwa al Khudairi and Nada al Mulla, mentored by Emily Baker and Daniel Chavez), the piece recasts the abaya, or traditional black robe worn by Arab Gulf women in public space, as a self-structuring habitable space fashioned in laser-cut steel. The stretch and flow of fabric are captured in the bisected form. An iterative process of development through direct access to the means of fabrication allowed the team to develop a detailing language that is not only performative, but allusive, evoking the embellished stitching of the abaya, and creating patterns of light in the shaded interior of the piece. Two distinct perforation patterns were used—one along the folded structural ribs, and the other at midpanel folds. The fold pattern along the ribs pushes out from the surface creating shadows on the steel face and voids that allow light into the interior, each recalling raised embroidery found both on abayas and on the keswa (or

kiswah), black fabric covering over the Ka'aba, or Muslim holy site at Mecca. The fold pattern at mid-panel recalls a simpler stitch pattern of offset parallel lines, functioning to ease stress on the steel during assembly, when pieces may be folded multiple times before set in final position. The piece was made to break down into twelve self-structuring panels, giving it rhythm and allowing easy break down and transport. Keswa's structural capacity and detailing grow from an iterative design process with direct access to digital fabrication tools, enriching the capacity of advanced fabrication to engage both cultural content and performance simultaneously.



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keswa - Arabic: clothing or vesture, covering













