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The Lebanese designers now gaining global recognition

Despite being scarred by instability, the country has a flourishing design community that is attracting widespread acclaim

Dominic Lutyens MARCH 13, 2015

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Lebanon is a country with a history of instability that might have inhibited or indeed stifled creativity, yet it has a thriving design and architecture community, which is at last attracting international plaudits.

Designers in Lebanon are mainly reliant on not-for-profit organisations for support and funding. One such example is House of Today (HoT), which — funded by donors — seeks to give Lebanese designers an international profile and holds exhibitions of their work. Galleries, such as Beirut's prestigious Carwan Gallery, which participates in such fairs as Design Days Dubai, New York's Armory Show and Design Miami, also play a role in showcasing designers.

Beirut's Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA), which has a well-regarded product design department, also fosters talent. Several members of HoT have studied there, including Claude Missir, design duo David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem of the David/Nicolas studio, and Vrouyr Joubanian.

"I think the design scene in Lebanon is fabulous and the country is culturally stimulating," says Beirut-based architect and designer Annabel Karim Kassar,



who has just launched a line of furniture and lighting, including teardrop-shaped steel wall sconces that cast light through their perforated surfaces.

One important showcase for designers is Beirut Design Week (BDW), an annual event founded in 2012, to be held this year from June 1 to 7.

“Designers have not had a unified national platform and voice in this country for a long time, and most had to go to Milan Furniture Fair to draw attention to their work,” says co-founder Doreen Toutikian. “BDW provides them with the necessary exposure to make them important contributors to the Lebanese design scene. We also aim to put Beirut on the global design map. Last year, we promoted seven areas of Beirut with a high concentration of designers, studios and design shops.”

Yet some designers, such as Carlo Massoud, a young ALBA graduate who designs lighting, furniture and tableware, and has just shown his work with the Carwan Gallery at the Armory Show, point out that designers producing contemporary work are hampered by the lack of modern materials and technology available to them.

“Lebanon benefits from having lots of artisans and they are relatively inexpensive compared with other countries. But they don’t always have modern techniques at their disposal. We have wood and metals but limited access to materials such as carbon fibre, electronics and mechanical parts.”

According to HoT’s founder, Beirut-based entrepreneur Cherine Magrabi Tayeb: “We’ve always had a strong tradition of local crafts and fine materials, such as copper and marble.”

Massoud created a light, called “Aladdin I”, which is made of traditional copper, stainless steel and walnut, but is clean-lined and contemporary. And Claude Missir has a double-sided, freestanding mirror that melds traditional and modern materials in the form of a marble base that incorporates a horizontal sliver of Plexiglas in electric blue or yellow. The latter was displayed



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at HoT's exhibition *Naked: Beyond the Social Mask*, which can soon be seen at Design Days Dubai (March 16 to 20).



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Nicolas Moussallem (left) and David Raffoul of the David/Nicolas studio

The design studio David/Nicolas nods to tradition with its Dualita chairs. Commissioned by Milan gallery Nilufar, these chairs reference mid-century furniture, with copper-tipped metal frames and jewel-bright upholstery. The duo's comparatively pared-down cuckoo clock is made of Lebanese cedar, and so riffs on their native country's national emblem, despite looking resolutely modern.

Beirut has a tight-knit design network. "Over the past 15 years, there has been a sense of unity and collaboration in the design community," says Kassar.

"The environment here can be difficult due to lack of government support but, as a result, our design community is supportive and open to new ideas," say Huda Baroudi and Maria Hibri, co-founders of funky furniture and homeware company and shop Bokja, which is based in Beirut's Quartier des Arts. Formerly populated by carpenters, the area is now a hip quarter, brimming with galleries, antique shops and restaurants.

"The current situation impacts on our manufacturing methods but it also makes us more creative and resourceful." Bokja's one-off furniture — upholstered with an apparently random yet harmonious patchwork of vintage fabrics, and made in collaboration with local artisans and furniture makers — is a good example of this.





Dualita chairs, price on request, nilufar.com

Another hindrance for the Lebanese design scene is that few people outside the country know what designers are producing there.

Magrabi Tayeb's decision to set up HoT in 2012 was largely with this in mind. "I became increasingly aware of the amount of design talent in Beirut, and it seemed obvious that there was a need to bring it to people's attention internationally," she says.

"Our aim is to change the perception of Lebanon, to show that our design scene has its place in the international one." Magrabi Tayeb notes that Beirut's design community — whose work is now showcased annually by BDW — is thriving today partly because many successful Lebanese designers are based in the city, rather than abroad.

"Apart from HoT, lighting designers .PSLAB, Carwan and another influential Beirut gallery, Art Factum, are all changing the way Lebanese design is perceived," she adds.

"At .PSLAB we have the attitude of most Lebanese — we live here but are always looking outside. The instability keeps you on edge, makes you think of how to compete in new markets and where we'd go if something kicks off here. It ensures we're competent enough to survive," says Dimitri Saddi, founder and managing director of .PSLAB, which has a strong international presence.

In London, its mainly metal and glass bespoke lighting, handmade in its factory just outside Beirut, graces the Stephen St Kitchen at the British Film Institute and the Barbican Centre restaurants, Foodhall and Lounge.



Nada Debs

Some successful Beirut-based designers who've led peripatetic lives for years have since settled in Lebanon, creating work that is decidedly cosmopolitan. Lebanese-born furniture and homeware designer Nada Debs was brought up in Japan, studied interior architecture at Rhode Island School of Design in the US, set up a design company in the UK and, after a 40-year absence, returned to Lebanon.

“My Japanese upbringing has helped me to take the decorative and handcrafted aesthetic of the Middle East and streamline it to create contemporary furniture, my name for my work being ‘contemporary craft’.”

Her pieces include her Pebble table, which has an articulated base that allows its circular tops to be reconfigured to suit different needs.

She has also designed the “Floating Vintage” stool, which fuses tradition and modernity: an image of an odalisque in the 19th century, Orientalist tradition is printed on its plush, rose-pink upholstery, which in turn is encased in clean-lined Plexiglas.

Another designer, Karen Chekerdjian, who worked for years in Milan, returned to Beirut in 2001, where she founded her eponymous studio. In 2010, she opened Karen Chekerdjian Store, a showroom selling her work in Beirut's port area, and today exhibits at Milan Furniture Fair and ICFE in New York.

Her work is also stocked by London design shop 19 Greek Street. Her handmade, limited-edition pieces include the curvilinear “Papillon” chair;



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“Living Space III”, a foldable seat-cum-coffee-table-cum-magazine-rack; and the Hiroshima light. Nevertheless she sums up her work as “industrial handicrafts” — a reference to its industrial aesthetic.

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The instability keeps you on edge and makes you think of how to compete in new markets

Given the multicultural backgrounds of some of Lebanon’s key designers, is it possible to talk about a specific Lebanese aesthetic or approach to design? Certainly designers seem to favour natural materials as well as the more slick, artificial look of Plexiglas.

Some, like Debs and Kassar, like decorative Islamic, geometric patterns. Yet some are sceptical about pinpointing a Lebanese style: “If it were possible to talk about a Lebanese aesthetic, it would focus on crafts,” says Massoud.

“But because of such diversity within the design community, I’d struggle to describe an overall style.”

Debs, who will be showing a retrospective of her work at Design Days Dubai, says: “I’ve tried to define ‘Lebanese style’, but it’s not easy as we’re a mix of cultures, religions and lifestyles.

“We Lebanese are emotional people and this is reflected in our designs, which evoke a feeling of nostalgia but also of modernity — a mixture of everything.”

Dominic Lutyens was a guest of the Phoenicia Hotel in Beirut (phoeniciabeirut.com)

Photographs: Mark C. O’Flaherty; Sherine Raffoul



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