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Lebanese designers tap into local crafts

Beirut is gaining international recognition as a centre of cutting-edge products

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Adorno Beirut, collection, including 'Lizard King' chair by cocoexotico, €6,000; 'Unborn Creatures of Light' circular light by Youmna Geday, €4,300; 'Crystal Table' in brown and copper finish by Rita Kettaneh, €399; 'Core 3' table lamps by Christian Zahr, €1,800, adorno.design © Sameer Noun

Dominic Lutyens SEPTEMBER 28, 2018

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Lebanon's designers have long faced adversity. They receive no government funding, there have been few platforms to showcase contemporary design, and the Lebanese population has shown little interest in it. One resource for designers has been the country's strong crafts tradition, particularly in Tripoli, where handcrafted copper is a speciality. These skills were once passed from parents to offspring but, with a decline in local demand for traditional crafts,

parents to offspring but, with a decline in local demand for traditional crafts, they are in danger of disappearing. It doesn't help that many Lebanese designers work alongside Italian artisans who are more efficient, although more costly.

Joy Mardini, who has a design gallery in Gemmayzeh, a hip neighbourhood in Beirut, identifies some of the common obstacles: "Lebanon has been known for years for its crafts, but applying these to detailed design pieces has been challenging in terms of production pricing. Another difficulty they face is making a name for themselves as the number of designers on the market is increasing."

Beirut's Académie Libanaise Des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) recently introduced a product-design course; before that, many Lebanese designers studied abroad. "Previously you could only study product design in the last year of ALBA's interior design course," says Lebanese designer Thomas Trad, who studied at Central Saint Martins, then worked for London-based Fredrikson Stallard and Michael Anastassiades before setting up a Beirut studio in 2016. Even so, Beirut is gaining international recognition as a centre of cutting-edge design. Trad showed his M table made of green, black and white marble in an exhibition presented by Danish digital design store Adorno during Beirut Design Week last June. Now in its seventh year, BDW is organised by Beirut-based non-profit organisation MENA Design Research Center.



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Low marble table by Thomas Trad, €8,000, adorno.design



'Stratagems' table in Perlino Rosato Marble with Orange resin by Carla Baz, from \$2,200 jmdesigngallery.com



'Totem' side tables by Karen Chekerdjian, €2,400, dilmos.it

This year's show was held at Beit Beirut, a cultural centre also known as the Barakat building. A former apartment block built in the 1920s, it straddled the Green Line separating Christians from Muslims during the civil war of 1975-1990. Beirut's municipality shows little interest in preserving old buildings, and it took heritage activists, in particular architect Mona El Hallak, to rescue it. Retaining traces of wartime damage, including bullet-pocked walls, its restoration was led by Lebanese architect Youssef Haidar in 2009.

"Beirut's design scene is young but evolving," says Mardini. "There is also the Beirut Design Fair, which takes place in September, and House of Today's Design Biennale." The latter, held this year from December 12 to 28, will showcase work by 22 designers, including David/Nicolas, whose new Supernova collection was recently shown at Carpenters Workshop Gallery in Paris. Founded by Beirut-based entrepreneur Cherine Magrabi Tayeb in 2012, House of Today is a non-profit organisation; in 2015 it launched a scholarship for product design students to study at "a highly rated product design university in Lebanon or abroad".

"Students must deal with high costs, weak networks and lack of professional

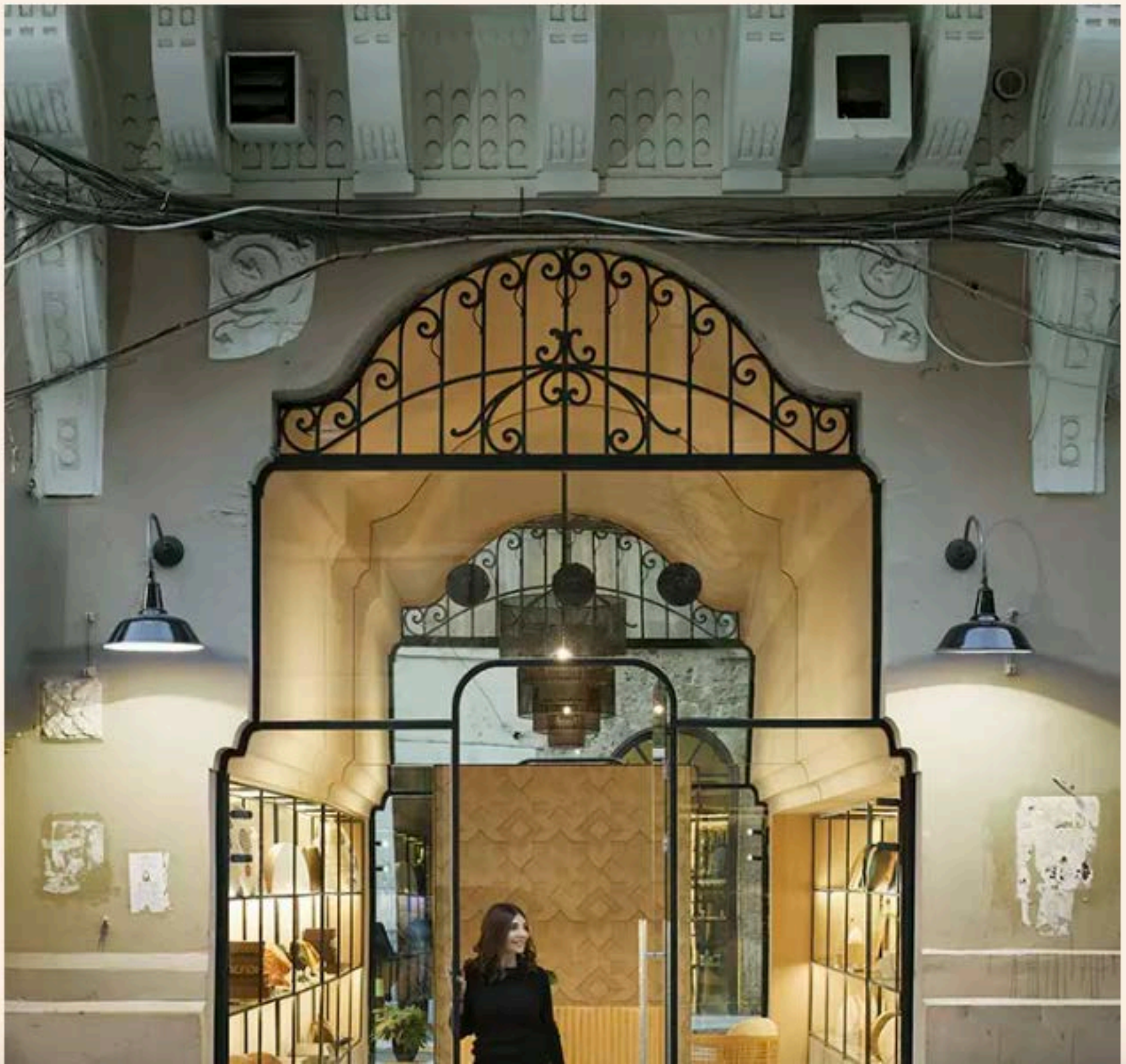
guidance, making it an unfavourable career choice,” says Magrabi Tayeb of the impetus behind the scholarship. Compounding the hardships faced by designers is Beirut’s deteriorating environment: the municipality is cavalier about its green spaces, which are gradually being stripped away. But academics and creatives are rebelling against this neglect of communal resources. This year BDW invited designers, activists, writers and students to consider how design could transform city life, which resulted in interventions designed to render the urban environment more pleasant. “This year saw a distinctive growth in participation of local public and private institutions,” says Doreen Toutikian, BDW’s founding director. “The main exhibitions in Beit Beirut welcomed more than 10,000 visitors.”



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One uplifting installation was Beirut-based Nathalie Harb's modular structure, "Urban Hives", made of scaffolding that provided both a carport and an allotment above it. In Jeanne d'Arc Street, in the city's Hamra and Verdun districts, students at the American University of Beirut created a rotating, communal bench incorporating plants.

Magrabi Tayeb points out another change in Lebanon: "We're seeing the revival of many ancient crafts because our nation's artisans, once threatened by foreign competition, are upping their game, delivering on price and quality. For our first exhibitions, we gave designers the freedom to create products with an artisan. Back then, 60 per cent of pieces shown were produced abroad and only 40 per cent in Lebanon. Today, those numbers have reversed."



'Showdown' table by Michèle and Georges Maria, \$30,000, houseoftoday.com

Nada Debs is an established Beirut-based designer who relishes local crafts: “There’s been a recent boom in workshops opening here in response to a renewed interest in crafts,” she says. “My new collection Funquetry revives marquetry used on backgammon boards. I also use mother-of-pearl, leather and tin inlay, wood perforation and straw-weaving. I mostly make use of local craftsmanship apart from my carpets made in Afghanistan.” Yet, she adds, digital technology, including computer-controlled machinery and 3D-printing, is also helping to boost the fortunes of Lebanon’s designers.

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Our nation’s artisans, once threatened by foreign competition, are upping their game

Another high-profile designer, Karen Chekerdjian, who produced the colourful “Totem” table, says: “I strongly believe in local craftsmanship.” Meanwhile, the French cane used in Trad’s screens, stocked by Joy Mardini Design Gallery, is locally made. Nayef Francis’s “Weave”

pendant lamps have a similar aesthetic. French-Lebanese, Dubai-based designer Carla Baz also champions Lebanese crafts; her collection, “Stratagems”, which includes marble tables filled with pools of colourful resin, and marble and brass lamps, is also sold by Mardini. At the Adorno show, Youmna Geday exhibited “Unborn Creatures of Light”, an idiosyncratic lamp ringed by hollowed-out, illuminated eggshells.

At BDW, designs from other countries also tapped into regional craftsmanship. In the ABC Verdun shopping mall, a pop-up exhibition displayed Kissweh’s cushions inspired by Palestinian needlework, and Casablanca-based Soukeina Hachem showed a shaggy wall-hanging created using traditional Moroccan weaving technique.



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Yet some Middle Eastern designers who took part in BDW are reluctant to identify with the countries they hail from. Bethlehem-based brothers Elias and Yousef Anastas, co-founders of Local Industries, describe their brilliantly colourful steel furniture as “anti-Orientalist” and “anti-folkloric”. Even so, the duo’s mission is to give new life to dying local industries, and their chairs are made in a steel-furniture factory in Bethlehem.

Yet, according to Mardini, “Lebanese design doesn’t bear the stamp of ‘Arabism’. It differentiates itself from design from the rest of the Arab world by not including motifs such as *moucharabieh*, the carved wooden latticework typically seen on windows.”

Perhaps this is a result of the rich cultural diversity found in Lebanon. “The country has been occupied by over 18 civilisations from the Canaanites to the French Mandate,” says Nayef Francis. “Eventually this mix became part of our roots, creating a unique talent whose essence is regional but whose language is universal.”

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