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INTERIORS

'DESIGNED IN CHINA' STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS

Shenzhen's pavilion at a top London design exhibition showed progress, but also how far modern Chinese design has to go

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The well-worn phrase "Made in China" is becoming "Designed in China". And this time it was used for the Shenzhen pavilion at London's recent 100% Design show in the hope of rebranding as an important design destination the city once known as the "national factory of China".

100% Design, Britain's largest interior trade exhibition, attracted 30,000 visitors over four days last month. In the international hall accommodating the Shenzhen pavilion (organised by the Shenzhen Industrial Design Association, or SIDA), countries jostled for attention with interactive lighting and sophisticated displays of the latest designs.

The Shenzhen pavilion, however, was a subdued affair. Furniture was presented on white boxes and accompanied by descriptive labels that would have benefited from professional translation. Visitors were told of Shenzhen's manufacturing importance but not where design fits into this narrative.

If you looked past the presentation, some of the furniture pieces on display were interesting: The Riding Stool, by Jianmo Furniture Design, was a nostalgic nod at childhood games, and the Hair Pin chair, by Xiao Hedong, stood out for its elegant simplicity. But elsewhere you would have needed detective skills to discover the names behind the



Jingchu Design chairs (left), a table by YQ Design (above), The Riding Stool (right) and Hair Pin chair (below) at 100% Design.

Photos: Zoey Goto

I can see that we need to improve the quality of Chinese products

DESIGNER ZHONG WEIGUO

creations. For example, no one was credited for a beautifully crafted meditation chair, which referenced Chinese and Nordic aesthetics.

That said, the director of 100% Design, William Knight, believes there has been an improvement in the Shenzhen pavilion in the three years it has been part of the London Design Festival. "Attitudes towards Chinese design are changing; quality is shining through," he says.

Across town at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, Zhang

Hongxing, senior curator of 20th century and contemporary Chinese art, offered a contrasting view of Chinese design. In 2008 he co-curated China Design Now, an exhibition held at the museum that marked the pivotal moment at which modern Chinese art entered the international stage. Zhang's team made several trips to Shenzhen to meet designers, including many of the first generation of Chinese graphic designers who had migrated to Shenzhen for work.

Zhang feels that Chinese design "is not there yet, in terms of details and concept". He says that while initiatives like the Shenzhen pavilion can help in creating a dialogue between China and the international design world, more support for young creatives is crucial for Chinese design to establish itself. That, he believes, could take the form of education through design muse-

ums and policies to aid the establishment of independent studios.

His sentiment was echoed back at the Shenzhen stand, where Jingchu Design's Zhong Weiguo, who migrated to Shenzhen from Hunan, said more thorough Chinese design training was required. "I had not had any design training before starting at university, so I was like a child learning everything from scratch."

Zhong is no stranger to international design fairs, having shown previously in Milan, Cologne and London. His hope for the near future is that he can help educate European audiences about contemporary Chinese design.

Better understanding and cross-fertilisation can also take place the other way around, says executive vice-president for SIDA Shirley Feng. She is organising a 2014 Shen-

zhen conference at which international designers will be invited to the city, so young Chinese designers "can learn from the masters". This could bridge what Feng says is the difference in thinking between Chinese and European designers.

Narrowing this divide by inviting international architects to work in Chinese cities has also had a positive effect on Chinese design, according to Zhang. Comparing it to the traditional apprenticeship model, he says that being able to work with some of the leading Western designers has had a noticeable impact on the current crop of young Chinese architects.

"Many of the young architects who have set up offices in Beijing or Shenzhen have had experience working for international practices. Through that experience, there is a process of being trained," Zhang says.

Looking across the room at the competing international pavilions, Zhong Weiguo reflects on his vision for the future of Chinese design. "I can see that we need to improve the quality of Chinese products." The first step is for Chinese designers to focus on improving the raw materials.

While acknowledging that Chinese designers face hurdles in the international market, Zhong says the Shenzhen pavilion offered something unique this year. "We are bringing something different with our modern interpretation of Chinese design."

STYLE DAVID RODEN



What: Butler pitcher
Why: Designed by German brand Philippi using polished stainless steel in the shape of a classic milk carton
How much: HK\$1,160
Where: Exclusivites, 1/F, Ruttonjee Centre, 11 Duddell Street, Central, tel: 2521 8626



What: Wall clock
Why: Be right on time with Roman numerals and an antique robin egg blue patina.
How much: Both HK\$1,150
Where: Bowerbird, 2/F, The Oceanic Industrial Centre, 2 Lee Lok Street, Ap Lei Chau, tel: 2552 2727



What: Belle de Nuit chandelier
Why: 40 opaque porcelain shades make up this glamorous light fixture
How much: HK\$266,810
Where: Lladro, Pacific Place, Admiralty, tel: 2321 8039



What: Side chair
Why: Replica of a Saarinen chair from the 1950s
How much: HK\$3,950
Where: Indigo Living, 6/F, Horizon Plaza, 2 Lee Wing Street, Ap Lei Chau, tel: 2555 0540



What: Divine footstool
Why: Put your feet up on this hand-knitted outdoor pouf, which comes with a removable cover
How much: HK\$3,243
Where: Everything Under The Sun, 9/F, Horizon Plaza, 2 Lee Wing Street, Ap Lei Chau, tel: 2554 9088

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ON THE MARKET



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Asking price: HK\$22 million
Agent: Jay Yan (6014 7518) of Colliers International



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Asking price: HK\$28 million (the unit is also offered for leasing with a rent of HK\$45,000 a month)
Agent: Antony Man (6288 2995) of Centaline Property Agency

