

surface

asia

DESIGN / FASHION / ARCHITECTURE / ART / CULTURE

13

FREE WHEELING

PORSCHE'S PINKY LAI
ON THE EMOTIONAL SIDE
OF CAR DESIGN

NEW DIRECTIONS

MOVING FORWARD IN
FASHION AND BEYOND

DESTINATION BEIJING

FOREIGN DESIGNERS
TAKE A FRESH APPROACH
IN CHINA'S CAPITAL

SENSE OF ADVENTURE

MENSWEAR OPENS
UP TO A WORLD OF
EXPLORATION

WATER CITIES

YOUNG ARCHITECTS FACE
THAILAND'S FLOODING
HEAD ON



NEW BEIJINGERS

FOREIGN DESIGNERS ARE FLOCKING TO CHINA'S CAPITAL WITH AN APPETITE FOR INNOVATION AND AN OUTSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE.

WORDS **ANDREA FENN**

For Stefano Avesani, moving from Venice to Beijing in 2005 led to a creative epiphany. “The amount of things that can inspire designers from abroad simply by crossing a Chinese road is stunning,” he says. Dipping into the bustle and variety of China can provide international designers like him with a savage boost of artistry. “China is a continuous art installation.”

Beijing Design Week 2012 was a paramount occasion for local designers to canvass their work to an international audience increasingly interested in creative work from China. Yet strolling around the dismissed state-owned factories and bustling grey-bricked lanes that hosted the exhibition, visitors might have been taken aback by the sight of foreign designers using typically Chinese design media like lanterns, screens and porcelain.

Foreign designers are increasingly moving to China to work, attracted by the country's thriving design scene and growing opportunities for creation. To these expatriate creative talents, being in China also means incorporating indigenous cultural elements in a new wave of design syncretism.

One of these designers is 33-year-old Sara Bernardi. Her first encounter with Chinese design was in 2008, when she worked as an architect with the Italian Studio Fuksas to design a new terminal for the Shenzhen airport. Fascinated by the strength and speed of creation in China, she moved to Beijing and in 2011 founded MICROMacro, an architecture, industrial and interior design practice that aims at fusing traditional local archetypes with Western minimalism.

At BJDW, Bernardi presented *Con-Tradition*, a series of furniture that uses local construction materials. Traditional Chinese screens are stripped to the marrow and left as an intricate knot of reinforced concrete steel bars, while the crystal top of tea tasting tables contrasts with the brutality of bare concrete legs.

Henny van Nistelrooy had also been surveying Chinese aesthetics long before settling in Asia. Dutch by birth but a longtime resident of London, where he studied and opened his practice Studio HVN, Van Nistelrooy focuses on textile experimentation. His research brought him to China in 2009. After visiting Suzhou and Hangzhou, he started to assimilate Chinese influences and produced Shelter, a series of space-dividers inspired by folding screens.



(PREVIOUS PAGE) Van Nistelrooy's Fabricate, a 3D-woven cloth pocket wrapping a metal frame.

(THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT) Stefano Avesani holding one of his Blinking City holographic panels; A 1940s refurbished commode from De Kergommeaux's Coquille d'œuf collection.

(OPPOSITE, FROM TOP) De Kergommeaux's passion for elaborate furniture-making techniques pinnacles on the Galuchat collection, which features artificial rayskin covers produced in France; In MICROMacro's pieces, the lightness of crystal and the brutality of raw building material coexist harmoniously through the lens of extreme minimalism.

Subtly referencing the doors and windows of noble palaces of Chinese water towns, the panels feature geometrical watermarks obtained by unthreading the wool by hand.

In 2012, van Nistelrooy moved to Beijing, where he participated in the Design Week with the pendant light Fabricate. With a wire frame garbed in a 3D-woven cloth, Fabricate combines pioneering weaving technology with reminiscences of China's festive paper lanterns.

The blend of East and West, new and old is also at the core of GCDK Design's manifesto. GCDK is an acronym for Gwenaëlle Chassin de Kergommeaux, a 39-year-old ex-television documentarist turned furniture maker in 2005. De Kergommeaux refurbishes original fittings from the 1920s to the



1960s, uplifting them with a glaze of modern flair. And since moving to Beijing in 2008, she has been adopting traditional Chinese cabinetry techniques and materials in her creations.

Representative of her cross-culturalism is *Galuchat*, a collection of vintage Chinese screens and cabinets mantled in galuchat, a type of rayskin she reproduces synthetically in France through a self-developed technique. At the latest Design Week she also exhibited *Coquille d'œuf*, a line centred around eggshell inlays, a decoration style that uses duck eggshells coated in lacquer that originated during the Tang dynasty.

As expatriate designers combine their creative thinking with local cultural elements, experts believe their work in China can have a positive effect on the local creative industry. According to Beijing Design Week creative director Aric Chen, Westerners bring a different methodology that enriches the possibilities for reinterpretation of Chinese design, as long as they do not resort to trite cultural clichés.

"If we're going to focus on some notion of 'Chinese design' or 'Chineseness' in design, it's more important to focus on what China can contribute to our understanding of and relationship with objects, rather than just Chinese elements," he says.

With a fresh eye towards local culture, foreign designers have been unearthing forgotten symbols and craftsmanship, adapting them to contemporary taste. De Kergommeaux's *Tissus* is a table featuring



fabric garnishings inspired by the traditional fashion of Guizhou, in China's south. In recent times, van Nistelrooy has been researching bygone fabric dyes made of flowers and mud, which he intends to utilise for future collections.

But adapting to the local culture can also be an obstacle to creativity. Bernardi recounts how her work at the Shenzhen airport terminal was changed several times while in progress, as the client objected to the details of the approved project in a way that would seem uncommon in the West. More recently, while designing a high-rise tower in Dalian, she had to remove the green areas inside the structure, which was a key element in her concept, on the grounds of being against a basic principle of feng shui: the clear separation of inside and outside spaces to protect the building from evil spirits.

Similarly, independent designers from abroad can struggle to adjust to the sheer scale of industrial production in China. According to van Nistelrooy, it is a grueling task to find workshops willing to downsize the big volumes they are accustomed to in order to produce bespoke pieces.

And as many China-bound designers strive to incorporate elements of "Chineseness" into their work, others are instead attempting to impact social change by virtue of their international experience. Such is the case of Instant Hutong, a Beijing-based urbanism, interior and product design agency whose work revolves around the restoration and



(THIS PAGE) One of Instant Hutong's Urban Carpets, hung casually in one of the hutong lanes its fabric map depicts.

representation of the hutong, the fast-disappearing lanes that comprise much of Beijing's inner core.

For founders Marcella Campa, 38, and Stefano Avesani, 35, fascination with the Chinese capital and its urban fabric goes back to their university days, when their thesis supervisor was Yung Ho Chang, venerated founder of architecture studio Atelier FCJZ and an advocate of urban conservation. After a few field trips to study the hutong, Campa and Avesani moved permanently to Beijing in 2005, where they have been studying hutong maps and using them as a visual rendition of urban change.

In 2007, they launched Urban Carpet, a 1:1000-scale square kilometre of eight hutong areas, embroidered by hand on cloth, using a similar technique to the propaganda tapestries produced for the Chinese Communist Party at the height of the Cultural Revolution. These eight urban carpets were then exhibited around the hutong to stimulate discussion among residents about the development of their neighbourhoods.

In 2012, the same maps were used to create Blinking City, a series of decorative panels exhibited at the Beijing Design Week. The panels revisit the urban planning custom of colouring plots on maps according to land use, and the ever-changing physiognomy of Beijing's urban mien is conveyed through lenticular print, which produces a holographic effect depending on the viewer's movement.

Avesani believes international designers can leverage their alternative perspective to bring about positive change in China, in product design as in urban planning. According to him, Westerners have experienced the drawbacks of destroying old neighbourhoods and building suburban satellites, so urbanists can share this lesson to avoid repeating similar mistakes.

"China wants to go through all stages of modernity of the West," he argues. "In fact, they could skip some instead, and we can help them understand how."

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