



"City of Towers" by Zaha Hadid

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Designing the Lion Rock Spirit: The International Design Furniture Fair Hong Kong

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PREFACE

IDFFHK is back for a second edition, showcasing high-end furniture alongside exhibitions and talks that explore the more philosophical side of design.

TAGS

What is Hong Kong design? It's a question that runs through the second edition of the International Design Furniture Fair Hong Kong (IDFFHK), which takes place from August 25 to 27. Though the fair started in 2015 as a showcase for designer furniture, its second edition expands its focus beyond high-end brands like Knoll and Baccarat, thanks to 19 talks and five conceptual exhibitions.

The talks and exhibitions are an attempt to make the fair a space for critical exchange about design. "Many designers go for trends," says IDFFHK founder Winnie Yue. "But every good designer and architect should look at the context first before they have any ideas of what their designs should be. Hong Kong design is very fast paced. Designers have to meet tight schedules, so in the end, everything looks the same."

Yue wants to demonstrate that doesn't have to be the case. Trained as an architect, she became smitten with furniture design and ended up opening one of the first design shops in Horizon Plaza, an Ap Lei Chau industrial building that is now filled with furniture showrooms. She eventually went back to architecture, but she never lost the urge to encourage the spread of good design through all aspects of life.

When she first hatched the idea for IDFFHK, she wanted to do something different to the industry-focused design fairs that already existed. "It's not just about connecting brands with designers," she says. "I want to empower people to appreciate the process of design. Design is a way of thinking. It's not just about looking good."



Rendering of Das Haus Asia by William Lim

Renowned German designer Dieter Rams once said that “good design is as little design as possible.” It’s about finding an elegantly simple solution to a problem. But the problem is sets out to solve — and the way it does it — leaves plenty of room for interpretation. In one of IDFFHK’s exhibition, *10cc*, a group of 10 Hong Kong designers have created new furniture pieces that are rooted in or inspired by their hometown. “It’s the idea of taking the Hong Kong spirit and reflecting it in products,” says Yue.

More specifically, it’s the “Lion Rock spirit” – a kind of ingenuity in the face of adversity. The expression originates from the renowned TV drama *Below the Lion Rock*, which focused on the lives of grassroots Hongkongers, and *10cc* curator Patrick Leung, founder of PAL Design Group, says it’s the perfect vehicle for exploring a local design sensibility.

In this case, the adversity is Hong Kong’s tiny living spaces. “We limited the designers to a 600 by 600 centimetre area,” he says – about the size of a typical Hong Kong bedroom. Leung says the chair he designed for the exhibition taps into the city’s historic role as a bridge between China and the rest of the world. “We have very strong wood that comes from Thailand, and I used an interesting fabric that came from France. It has some faces on it – they are smiling, talking, things like that. Hong Kong is special in China because we have the freedom to talk and express yourself.”

Some of the other exhibitions explore Hong Kong from different angles. In *Das Haus Asia*, CL3 architect William Lim has designed an 18-square-metre “nano-flat” — the real estate market’s latest answer to Hong Kong’s soaring property prices — that is fully self-contained despite its tiny floor area, with two closed bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen.

Anderson Lee, founder of Index Architecture, focuses on a very different kind of living environment in his exhibition *On Reading Single Family House 1.5*, which is an update to an exhibition he staged last year on single-family houses in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China. Lee says single-family houses offer architects an “opportunity to investigate and experiment,” but Hong Kong’s land values make such projects rare. Even when a single-family house is built, architects are usually forced to maximise floor area, resulting in an ill-proportioned box.



Atelier Global's 2011 Vice Versa Houses

And yet Lee has found examples of designers overcoming the odds. In Yuen Long, Atelier Global architect Frankie Lui managed to work within the strict regulations for designing village houses — they must be no more than three storeys, with 700 square feet per floor — to create an aesthetically striking family compound that encourages a sense of community. In a talk on August 25, architect David Hoggard, partner at PDP London Architects, casts a critical eye on the globalisation of design, which has left spaces, objects and furniture looking the same whether they are in New York, London or Hong Kong. “Context is a big thing in our London office,” says Hoggard. “But then you get to Hong Kong and it seems to be one of the last things on the agenda.”

Hoggard says that in the seven years he has run PDP's Hong Kong office, not a single client has insisted that a project be rooted in its local context. That has created a situation where Hong Kong is defined less by the design of its buildings than by what fills the space between them: air conditioners, shop awnings, signs.

"It's the kind of layering you get when the basic building has no merit aesthetically and there are no controls, so people do what they want with it," he says. Designers should find a way to respond to that, he says, but he acknowledges that is easier said than done.

"That's quite often beyond our power."

Yue says that she hopes IDFFHK will encourage people to think about how those kinds of factors underpin design. "The appreciation of design has to come from fundamental nurturing," she says. Anyone can come to admire furniture and architecture, but she hopes they will leave with a greater sense of how they came to be.

*IDFFHK runs from August 25 to 27 at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. **Click here** for more information.*