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Magazine (/magazine)

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Contact (/contact) 



12 / 14



DESIGN (/ARTICLES/DESIGN) | REPORT

An International Standing

OTC Editions was founded to provide local and affordable design in Lebanon. All the items in the collection are priced below \$200.

Beirut

IMAGE courtesy Over the Counter
19 December 2016

Beirut in December is unlike any other month in the city.

An estimated 1.9 million people reside in the Lebanese capital, but in December the city’s population swells with the return of 700,000 expats. Public transport is scarce and the car prevails over bicycle or foot. What would be a 15-minute car journey in November can take upwards of an hour in December. Yet, amid standstill traffic and garish Christmas displays, December presents a unique opportunity for the city’s design scene: the presence of an international audience.

House of Today is one such initiative to benefit from this temporary audience. Founded in 2012 by businesswomen Cherine Magrabi Tayeb, House of Today is a non-profit organisation that manifests as a biennial exhibition of design objects, providing a platform to support and promote emerging

Lebanon-based designers. The third iteration of its showcase is currently on display at Le Yacht Club, a private members club in downtown Beirut.

The objects that feature in House of Today – typically small pieces of furniture and decorative items – are selected via an open call and, following a process of refinement and production, are exhibited and sold. If designers self-produce, they receive 70 per cent of the sold-for price, with House of Today receiving the remaining 30. This split reverses if designers opt for House of Today to manage production. The proceeds raised are used to fund design scholarships at universities across the world and provide financial support to designers exhibiting their work in Lebanon and overseas. The collection is priced accordingly: these are limited edition, luxury pieces rather than everyday decorative objects. The current exhibition features, for instance, a marble and polished brass table designed by Stephanie Sayar and Charbel Garibeh, priced at \$14,350.

While 80 per cent of House of Today's sales are made to Lebanese customers, many of these are expats. Magrabi Tayeb cites Dubai, Jordan and the American cities Los Angeles, Miami and New York as some of the initiative's largest consumer bases. International recognition of Lebanon's design scene was one of Magrabi Tayeb's primary motivations in founding House of Today. "It is our mission to give Lebanese design an international standing," she says. "When I first moved to Beirut, there wasn't a design scene. Design journalists would never come to Beirut to cover Lebanese design. Now that there is a design community, it deserves international visibility." The influx of expats returning to Beirut in December plays a key role in House of Today's burgeoning international presence.

Beirut's design community however remains small, described as "a village" by House of Today designer Najla El Zein. "If you are going to talk about Lebanese design today, it is relatively new," says Carla Baz, a design professor at the city's Académie Libanaise Des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) university and a participant of House of Today 2016. "I would say that it started after the (1975-1990) Civil War. The War gave rise to the first generation of architects, designers and urban planners that wanted to reconstruct the country and create infrastructure and projects, trigger the economy and so on. That said, if we go back historically and think of design, then the Lebanese have always been designers. Trade was our main thing. It has always been within our culture, it's just that we didn't call it design."

House of Today deviates from the traditional industry-based definition of design that Baz speaks of; one that relies on Lebanon's metalwork and woodwork industries, as well as the use of raw industrial materials such as concrete. Instead, House of Today offers a glossier, more polished vision. The 17 objects that feature in the 2016 iteration of the exhibition include an elongated chair inspired by the influential Thonet No. 14 bistro chair, a marble and polished brass table comprising 15 interchangeable bowls, and a sunshade positioned on a bent beech wood frame. Smaller pieces include Murano glass, brass and walnut flasks; silver-plated miniature bins; and coloured resin hammers.

Despite House of Today's focus on contemporary design, all the pieces in the collection have been made in response to a theme that is rooted in Lebanese history and culture: *Jungle Protocol: Tradition and Etiquette*. "There is a bit of a play on words with the *Jungle Protocol*," says Magrabi Tayeb. "We have been without a President in Lebanon for the last two years and it is a bit of a

jungle out there. The jungle also represents different species that somehow all live together in harmony. That is what Lebanon is about.” The theme also makes reference to the 1.5 million Syrian refugees that have arrived in Lebanon since December last year. “Lebanon has a refugee issue right now but we have opened our doors more than any other neighbouring country. I wanted to tap into that,” says Magrabi Tayeb. “During the War a lot of people moved elsewhere in the world. They then came back to Lebanon having been influenced by a mixture of different cultures. Today Lebanon is beautiful cocktail of cultures and influences.”

Now in its third iteration, House of Today has garnered the experience to refine the programme into a successful business model that is able to raise the funds to match its founding aspirations. “We try to be self-sustaining because our cause is lovely, but it’s not life saving,” says Magrabi Tayeb. For the inaugural House of Today in 2012, all of the objects were produced in Lebanon. Upon reflection, House of Today deemed this to be at the detriment of the collection’s diversity. “By having to produce in Lebanon the designs were limited to the constraints of Lebanese production,” says Magrabi Tayeb. “Once we told the designers that they could produce wherever they wanted, all of a sudden there was a better mix of materials. Resin was introduced, as was marble and different types of wood.”

The commercial potential of design objects produced in Lebanon is being explored by Rania Abillama Karam as part of Over the Counter, the Beirut-based shop that she founded in 2007. Over the Counter has all the trappings of a luxury design shop: imported pieces by famed designers and brands including Michael Anastassiades, Carl Hansen, Bocci and Established & Sons, balanced artfully on delicate shelving. This December however, the shop launched a new venture. OTC Editions is a collection of small objects made by Lebanon-based designers (many of which also feature in House of Today) and produced in Lebanon.

OTC Editions was founded to provide local and affordable design and create a point of difference to the “expensive and exclusive” design that Abillama Karam says currently predominates in Lebanon. Items in the Editions collection vary in price, but everything costs less than \$200. Over the Counter oversees all production in an effort to manage costs. As a result of being produced in Lebanon, the objects differ significantly from those on display at House of Today. The materials used are raw and simple, predominantly comprising unpolished metals, concrete and wood.

“Producing in Lebanon is a big challenge, that is why we are going for very simple manufacturing techniques,” says Abillama Karam. “We are not a country that has extensive industries. We have a few people that can do crafts and a few that can do some simple manufacturing, and this is where we are trying to look. We would never be able to have a super polished object that is printed in 3D. Instead we are adapting the products to Lebanon’s production capabilities.” Abillama Karam’s ultimate goal with OTC Editions, much like Magrabi Tayeb with House of Today, is to give Lebanese design an international presence. “The idea is to launch Editions locally and then refine it,” says Abillama Karam, “before maybe placing the brand outside of Lebanon. We want to show what Lebanon can do as an editor of design and design processes.”

Whereas House of Today and Over the Counter respond to a demand for somewhat frivolous design – luxury objects that function as decorative pieces to embellish the home – Lebanon’s complex political history creates an opportunity for social design within the country. Between 1975 and

1990, the Civil War displaced over 1 million Lebanese, many of which have never permanently returned to the country. Beirut's infrastructure was shattered and many of its buildings were gutted or destroyed. "Because of our political system and environment, there is a huge potential for social design in Lebanon," says Baz, speaking about the future of design in Lebanon. "If you find the right collaborators, you can really make a tangible difference. I am not just talking about the refugee crisis or international affairs, but also internal problems such as roads and urbanism. There are lots of projects that can truly make a difference and improve the public's quality of life."

Rana Haddad, co-founder of Beirut-based design practice 200 Grms and assistant professor at the American University of Beirut's architecture and design department, is one designer using design to make a difference within Beirut. "I do installation work on the streets in Beirut," says Haddad "It is challenging but I believe that we need to be there, we need to get our rights back." In 2016, with collaborator Joanne Hayeck and students at the American University of Beirut, Haddad created Radio Silence, a public installation in Horsh Beirut, the city's largest green space open to the public. In 1982 during the Civil War, the public park was subject to a bombardment that caused its pine trees to burn. The park subsequently closed to allow for replanting, re-opening only five years ago.

"Everyone was very excited about the re-opening," says Haddad, "but they chose to only open the park on a Saturday to certain types of people. For a while, the only people that could use the park was people aged 40 and above because they considered that demographic to be most responsible. You had to go to the Municipality of Beirut to get a permit to enter the park. I had the privilege to go in because I am over 40 years old but I didn't want to play the game. I was very frustrated: why should I be allowed to enter when most of the public cannot? It is not fair and I didn't want to do it."

Following this, the park became gated. "They created a specific area where they let the people from a specific area of Beirut to enter everyday," says Haddad. "But this area is never cleaned so it is always filled with rubbish. The other side of the gate remains open to the elite on a Saturday and is always very clean." The two segregated areas are separated by a wire gate. You can look through to the other side, but you cannot cross. Radio Silence was made in response to this enforced segregation and comprises a metal seesaw attached to the fence that separates the two areas of the park. "Children don't have a problem speaking to each other, so when children want to play they are going to call a child from the other side. Once the children started playing, they started jumping the fences too. Because they wanted to be together. Parents could not stop them. Class, race and religion was forgotten."

As the necessity for Haddad's public installation demonstrates, heated political discourse, and attendant tensions, continue in Lebanon. This no doubt has an effect on Lebanon's design community, be it through directly promoting responsive public installations and projects, or the creation of design that consciously or subconsciously responds to the environment that surrounds its designers. Aided by established initiatives such as House of Today, and the ambitions of commercial ventures like OTC Editions, the design scene in Lebanon is growing and Lebanese design is slowly positioning itself an international presence.

“There is a lot of talent and creativity in Beirut,” says architect and House of Today participant Rabih Geha. “The city itself is an inspiration and because of the problems in Beirut, people have become fighters. Fighters for creativity, for business, for restoration, and fighters for our individual projects.”

Words Anya Lawrence.

House of Today is on display until 29 December.

Le Yacht Club, Beirut.

House of Today paid for Disegno's trip to Beirut.

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