

Beirut Design Fair showcases homegrown talent, potential

The event also brings opportunities for networking and collaboration

By Maria Rada-Soto
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BEIRUT: Upon entering the Beirut Design Fair, one encounters an infectious atmosphere of excitement as visitors and designers alike circulated among 44 exhibitors showcasing the work of some 100 Lebanese designers gathered together in Lebanon for the first time.

This first edition of BDF, launched last Wednesday at BIEL, runs through Sunday simultaneously with the adjacent, and already well-established, Beirut Art Fair (BAF). The origin of BDF is, in fact, linked to BAF, according to its founder Guillaume Tasle d'Heliand.

When BAF became a pure art fair, some of the designers didn't have a place to go, d'Heliand told The Daily Star. This created both a vacuum and an opportunity. "This event will unveil the size of the design scene in Lebanon, which is huge. Even for us ... preparing this has been a revelation after revelation."

In fact, the sense of fluidity one gets while navigating the fair is a product of careful consideration – the result of a set up conceived by the internationally celebrated Studio Adrien Gardere to generate a spatial language unique to the fair. To work with such a scenographer makes all the difference: "The space tells a story, tells stories," the founder of BDF said, emphasizing the plural because plurality is a common element at the fair.

"Eclecticism is the word that describes Lebanese design," co-founder and head of exhibitor relations, Hala Mourabak said.

This eclecticism didn't go unnoticed among the visitors to and designers of the fair. "When you walk around, you see that everything is unique, different from each other," said Judy Asfour, who works for Hawini. "Each designer has its own signature and style, trying to challenge design in general."

A concept close to this eclecticism was the freedom to create, which Moubarak insisted upon. "Designers already have a lot of challenges and constraints working in Lebanon, such as production, funding and so on. You don't want to burden them with yet another one."

In relation to this, she pointed out that the current lack of industry makes them research and find solutions to problems, which is the very core of design. "We are hoping Lebanese design turns into industry, though. This will be the next challenge: craftsmanship and industry. People are starting to understand the potential."

For now, she said, they wanted to provide a gathering place and the

best showcase for the designers, all Lebanese – both well-known and rising stars, living in Lebanon and abroad – who were selected by a committee of renowned designers, consultants and architects with links to the country.

"We needed a platform that represented quality from the beginning, that is why vetting was so crucial," Mourabak said, adding that they received plenty of submissions.

Judging from the impressions of the visitors and designers, quality was certainly on hand, something that came as a bit of a surprise to many. "Is this really made in Lebanon?" people ask us. 'Do you do this kind of finishing in Beirut?'" Jean-Marc Rif, from Boisseliers du Rif, told The Daily Star.

For Rif, the idea of the fair is brilliant. Every year, around the time of the Dubai design fair, they pack everything and fly there to show their work. "Why take all the Lebanese to Dubai if the Lebanese are here?" he asked.

This promotion of Lebanese talent is also at the heart of the BDF. "To be part of the BDF means a lot to me as a Lebanese artist and designer – to promote Lebanon's craftsmanship, Lebanon's work, Lebanon's excellency," said Karina Sukar, architect and designer. She added that it was a great opportunity to gain visibility, not only internationally but also within Lebanon. "It is time for Lebanese to like what Lebanese do," she said.

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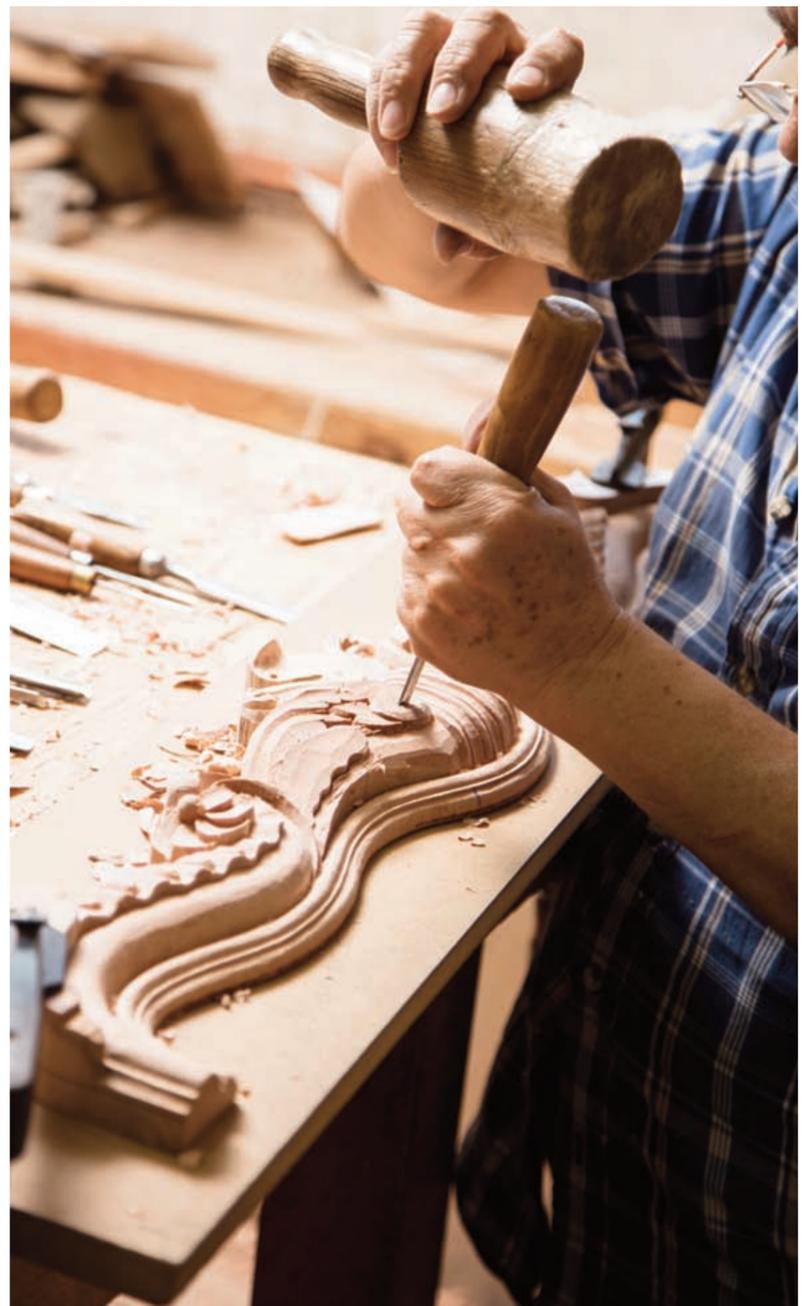
One of the best opportunities BDF offers is the potential for networking and collaboration, something that, according to d'Heliand, is not only the way forward, but is already happening. "I love discovering other designers and collaborating," designer and wallpaper specialist Azza Mahmassani said, insisting also on the importance of the "Made in Lebanon" label – a brand which refers not only to the actual production, but to bringing Lebanese values and traditions to the design table.

Something embodied by projects like the Stouff, which gives a contemporary take to the Lebanese stove and is the product of MAD architecture and design, formed by the Lebanese couple Anthony and Marie-Lyne Daher. "It is made in Lebanon by Lebanese artisans, smiths from the mountains of Anthony's village," Marie-Lyne said. The important issue for her is to preserve Lebanon's heritage: "This lives in the memory of each one of us. We saw it in our grandparent's house."

"This fair proves to the world that we have a lot of excellent designers in this country," Daher concludes, echoing an emotion that can be heard and felt throughout the BDF: a sense of wonder and pride.



MAD architecture and design's Stouff is made by Lebanese smiths.



Boisseliers du Rif is one of the companies participating in BDF.