



Left: Hala Moubarak and Guillaume Taslé d'Héliand
Photography by Anwar Azzi
Below: Visual Beirut Design Fair 2017

SOLUTIONS THROUGH DESIGN



On first analysis, you'd have thought there is no room here in Lebanon," says fair director Taslé d'Héliand of why Beirut lacks a design fair. "But things have changed." Recognising the time has come to showcase the hundreds of designers spread throughout Lebanon, despite lacking the governmental aid that has allowed design scenes to take off elsewhere in the region, there remains a dose of realism. Both Taslé d'Héliand and Moubarak, co-founder and head of exhibitor relations, acknowledge they need four or five years to build up international presence — Lebanon is the ideal location to build the foundation for the Middle Eastern design given its history, geographical positioning, capacity and perpetual reconstruction. "In Beirut alone, we met with over 50 designers," explains Taslé d'Héliand. While Lebanese designers substantiate much of the talent throughout the region, "There is a huge design community here," Taslé d'Héliand clarifies. "It's the most living creative platform in

Guillaume Taslé d'Héliand and Hala Moubarak, co-founders of the new Beirut Design Fair (BDF), discuss with Katrina Kufer the importance of design, what Lebanon has to offer, and why 2017 is the fair's inaugural year



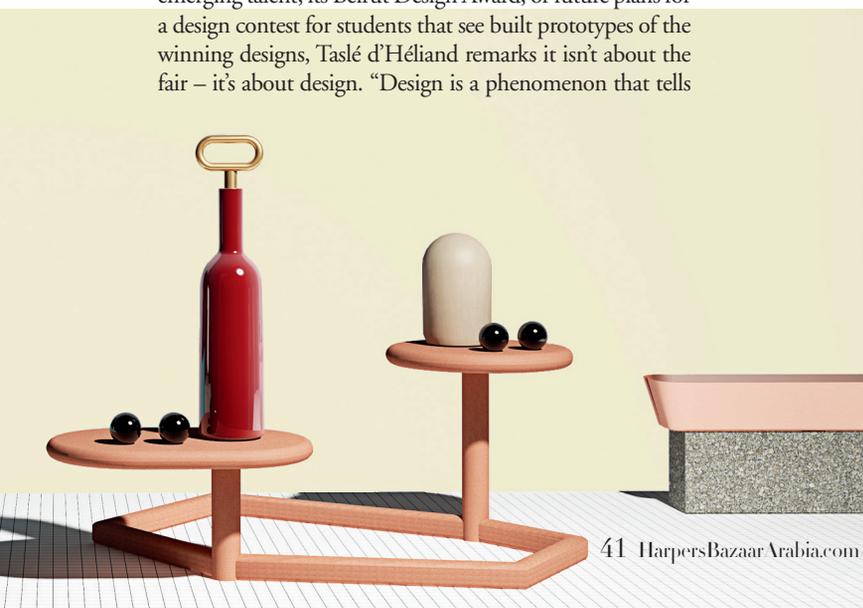


Left: David/ Nicolas, Loulou Hoda Collection Below: Visual Beirut Design Fair 2017. Images courtesy Beirut Design Fair

the region.”

Given the blend of cultures demonstrated in Lebanon today, the fair strives to define and affirm Lebanon’s creative identity and production. Moubarak notes that many designers begin in Beirut, and due to educational programme limitations, often go to Europe or the USA to broaden their design horizons before returning to implement fresh techniques and ideas. “It isn’t negative in the sense of leaving, they come back to make an impact here,” Moubarak says. “You can’t imagine how eclectic it is. In French we say, *pluriel*, and [the fair] would love to stay that way. Lebanese designers are free spirited, they love to play with aesthetics, but freedom is essential to them and it creates a rich palette of tastes.” Lebanon, with a rich heritage and mix of ancient techniques enlivened with contemporary innovation, produces stories to be told. “Every object has a story,” says Taslé d’Héliand, “and designers are often very good storytellers.”

But design is also rooted in solutions. Taslé d’Héliand uses Starck’s visually pleasing but essentially useless lemon juicer as an example of design gone awry. “Design is a solution,” he says, and Moubarak is confident that a testament to the strength of Lebanese design is that the designers are always answering *something*. The fair itself is an answer – to gaps in the design scene, market, and support system, even fair structuring. Hinting at a unique take on the fair’s layout that will manifest its ethos, a section entitled SPOT ON! for emerging talent, its Beirut Design Award, or future plans for a design contest for students that see built prototypes of the winning designs, Taslé d’Héliand remarks it isn’t about the fair – it’s about design. “Design is a phenomenon that tells



you the story of the society in which it exists,” he explains. Whether contemporary or older models, “When it is really design, it becomes a part of your life.”

Offering an example of the subtle but powerful impact of design, he highlights The Banquet, a communal space at BDF for exchange based around a dining table sculpted from a 50,000-year-old tree courtesy of YEW Studio, complemented by a tasting provided by chef Maroun Chedid. The 8x2.2 metre table, made from a New Zealand Kauri tree, dates to the last Ice Age. Moved by its enormity, it invoked consideration of the way Lebanese people live, the social dynamics and constructs associated with sitting at a table and the force of objects surrounding a narrative. “Every government should have such a table!” Taslé d’Héliand



remarks. “To think about time, the weight of their decisions, humankind, before doing anything. When you work at such a table, you think about what you are doing, and how 50,000 years ago there were but a few hundred thousand Homo sapiens. No war, no religion, no agriculture, no civilisation... just beliefs.”

If design reveals civilisation’s standing, then what will the fair have to show and say? Taslé d’Héliand illustrates the impossibility of selecting only a few highlights with, “It is like asking your preferred song. I can tell you *Summertime* is the best ever composed song, but I have 257 different versions of it. What’s the best? Impossible to say.”

Moubarak agrees. “I am in love with so many things. You fall in love with the designer when you fall in love with a piece.” But as the minds behind the event, alongside a selection committee comprising Aline Asmar d’Amman, India Mahdavi, Marc Baroud, Marianne Brabant and Mathias Orhel, there are hints at the upcoming diversity, dialogue and innovation. By asking which design objects they would put in a time capsule to indicate where we’re at today, Taslé d’Héliand responds, “3D printing is one of the next most important revolutions in human history. It obliges you to go through colonisation, growth, to really think as an engineer – which is not always the case with other artists. It changes a lot of things. So I would leave a very complex 3D printed object.” Moubarak, meanwhile, selects Marcel Breuer’s Wassily Chair (“one of the most exquisite designs – it was a revolution”), an iPhone (“which in part is ruining our civilisation”) and the Lebanese *Bri* carafe. “I would add something,” Taslé d’Héliand suddenly chimes in. “A table. A carbon table, very thin... 10 people could stand on it and it wouldn’t move. The creator is secondary, what’s important is the symbol of the table—so many things and stories happen around a table – so then I need a chair!” Moubarak laughs: “You can use mine!”

Beirut Design Fair runs 20-24 September at BIEL, Beirut, Lebanon. beirut-design-fair.com