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Designers explore relationship between local and international



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👤 Finbar Anderson | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: For a number of architects working in Lebanon, the smaller scale of furniture design is offering them the opportunity to experiment with balancing local craftsmanship and international influences.

1% Architecture, a small firm based in Beirut's Mar Mikhael neighborhood, is exhibiting its new range of furniture at Beirut Design Fair this week at the Seaside Arena.

The pieces on show – a Bauhaus-inspired step chair and an armchair fashioned out of a leather seat laced around a frame of powder-coated steel – do not obviously speak to their Lebanese origins. However, their construction was made possible thanks to the proliferation of artisans and local craftsmen around the country.

"In Lebanon, you still have this low scale and artisan scale that has not yet become heavy industry," said Waldemar Faddoul, the practice's founder. He explained that his products are designed with this in mind: "We have a reverse approach to the [design] of the furniture, which means that I don't create designs that I go and impose on my artisans or factories. I go and take the best things they know how to do ... We use their technique in which they excel and accordingly we readapt our designs to them."

This willingness to work against the grain is reflected in the company's name. "It's a culture of anti-conformism. It's against the other, the rest, the 99 percent," said Hala Habr, an architect and designer, and one of two full-time employees at the firm.

While many of the company's products, and indeed many of the buildings it has designed, have a more recognizably Lebanese form, the use of international design cues is deliberate. "Our studies [and] our travels made us open our eyes to other cultures and other inspirations. We are very fond of Bauhaus, progressive design, early '30s design. This is something we have affection for because it's something that

brings people together. It gives an international reference to the thing; it's less identity orientated," Faddoul said.

His international ambitions are due to take a more concrete form next month when the firm opens a branch in Paris.

Studio-A is another Beirut-based practice with an international perspective. Its founder, Ahmad Bazazo, told The Daily Star that after graduating in architecture he was driven to explore his hobby of furniture design after several trips abroad. The constant access to exhibitions in London inspired him, while during a trip to New York he found himself drawn to the Art Deco towers and elevators.

Like many at Beirut Design Fair, he believes in the importance of learning from previous generations. "There's so much to learn from the past," he said. "Just trying to reinvent the wheel every time is a bit counterproductive, so why not look at something from the past ... and learn how it can be valid again."

Having explored more international themes with his first two collections, Bazazo's third is likely to have a more Lebanese form. "If you want to look locally there's so much history here," he said. "There's so much going on here and there's so much we can learn from, so why not apply that into the design process?"