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Coming of age

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COMING OF

AGE

This year Hong Kong's Business of Design Week celebrated its tenth anniversary with its eleventh and biggest show yet creating an exciting roster of international design masters, including many from Denmark, the partner country for 2012. As DANIEL JEFFREYS reports, the event has grown in authority and scope over the last decade and now represents one of the most important dates on the creative industry's global calendar.



OPPOSITE PAGE THE CROWD GATHERS FOR BODW 2011

DIETER RAMS, FRANK GEHRY, Marcel Wanders, Rem Koolhaas, Raman Hui, Zaha Hadid, Tom Dixon, Jimmy Choo, Sir John Sorrell, Karim Rashid, Marc Newson, Vivienne Tam, Winy Maas, and Thomas Heatherwick. These names sound like a celestial roll call, for they are all stars of the design world. And they have all been speakers at Hong Kong's Business of Design Week (BoDW).

It is a mark of the event's maturity and influence that BoDW has become an essential destination for the top talent from the world's creative industries. And from the beginning the structure of the event, created by the Hong Kong Design Centre (HKDC) has been deceptively simple.

"The goal has always been to promote awareness of the value of design and to link the business and design worlds together," says William To, the HKDC project director who is in charge of the BoDW programme. "We want business to understand how important design is as a business tool and we want designers to have a better understanding of how they can build their brands."

To says the over-arching goal is that "business and design should speak the same language" and to that end BoDW is structured as a series of forums

"for great creative and business minds" with an exhibition by the partner country and opportunities for exchange programmes between the partners involving the two main participating educational institutions, the HKDI and Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Since the HK Ambassadors of Design took over the Detour programme 4 years ago, they turned it into an important element of BoDW, engaging the general public and young designers in design appreciation and interaction. And although the partner country feature of the BoDW programme is now one of the event's trademarks, it was not initiated until 2004.

"The first year we had a country partnership HKDC worked with Sweden and in the second year it was Sweden, Finland and Denmark," says To. "The UK came next and after that the event really started to grow."

In the last four years the country partners have been the Netherlands, France, Japan and Germany. Each year the HKDC receives several proposals from countries that wish to be the BoDW partner and HKDC staff also selects countries they would like to see as partners.

"The vetting process is very thorough," says To. "There are clear guidelines that the partner countries must follow but we always initiate creative tracks that emphasise each country's strengths. With Germany it was cars, with the Netherlands architecture and objects."

Denmark, this year's partner, came with a much-anticipated focus on sustainability and social design, two topics that are at the heart of the HKDI's mission.

"Denmark has a very rich culture in design," says To. "The influence of their design masters can be seen all over the world. And they are the leading country in social design."

HKDC



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DIETER RAMS (2011), ANTONIO CITTERIO (2011), NAOTO FUKASAWA (2010), ZAHA HADID (2007); OPPOSITE PAGE: THE BODW GALA DINNER 2011

world, when you get to pension age, what you do is that you develop a secondary occupation, and this happens because if you are not 'in engagement' you simply die," says Hvid. "We are proposing changes to the welfare services that will promote and facilitate the development of the engagement potential of this sector of the population and in its daily working life. We will live longer and work longer, because it will be what we want to do."

To and others at BodW were inspired by the kind of work that INDEX has been doing, and also gratified that the ideas brought to this year's event by Denmark are so different to the focus of previous years.

"Every country approaches BodW in a different way," he says, picking on an element of the event that he believes is a vital asset. "This makes sure that each year is unique, but there is a common goal for every BodW, to make sure everybody who attends is inspired and amazed." And as the programme grows, it became obvious that the event has also turned into an international platform for connection and collaboration.

In 2010 Japan was the BodW country partner and outside the conference centre there were some mutterings of discontent because of ongoing friction between the governments in Beijing and Tokyo. To and others at BodW say these external issues did not find their way inside the event in any meaningful way, highlighting again the importance of cultural exchanges like BodW in improving international relations at the micro-level.

"Design is never involved in politics and the collaboration with Japan was very successful," says To. "We had the biggest public attendance so far in 2010. Creativity opens up minds and neutralises conflicts because the purpose of design is to improve life and society. In the design world there are no geographic boundaries."

Although BodW has brought many international designers and their work to the city, it has not been a one-way street. Designers and business people who visit Hong Kong for the first time are often impacted in profound ways and those who are returning for a second visit are often stunned by the speed of the city's progress and development.

"Hong Kong's status as an international city has made the BodW a core draw, combined with the fact we are a gateway to Mainland

This year's BodW forum was led off by Kigge Hvid, who has spearheaded the development and growth of INDEX: Design to Improve Life since her appointment as its founding CEO in 2002. The non-profit organisation stages the INDEX: Award and numerous other programmes to inspire, educate and engage people worldwide to use design to create sustainable solutions to global and local challenges.

"The original intention behind INDEX was to create a global event, like the Oscars," says Hvid. "We then spent six months travelling around the world asking people, if we were to organise such an event, what should its main focus be? Without this approach, our view would have been limited. What emerged was that, if we wanted to have this big event for design, we would have to focus on human values, on what design can do for people, on new design thinking and design innovation."

As a result INDEX has created some important initiatives, especially in regard to design for the aged, a key topic for the HKDI's own design faculty.


"At the moment we are working with a foundation in Denmark, providing welfare services, and we are observing old people's homes, and talking to the elderly, and realising that, wherever you are in the

China," says To. "Every foreign designer who comes here for the first time with open eyes gets inspired and invigorated."

With many visitors struck by the city's efficiency and the successful way it has combined modernity with traditional Chinese culture. To believes that many BodW visitors over the last decade have returned home determined to make changes in their own countries. But To says the BodW's most important achievement in the last decade may be the way it has changed perceptions about the value of a career in design, making it easier for talented and creative young people to enter the creative industries.

"I think BodW has helped parents to understand that design is an important career and to not freak out if one of their children decides he or she wants to be a designer rather than a doctor or a lawyer," he says. "This has actually been the result of a combined effort between educational establishments, BodW events and the incredible support from the Hong Kong government, without which there would not be a BodW."

To emphasise the importance of government support, To points to the new government-funded renovation of the old Police married quarters on Hollywood Road, where 100-130 units are being created for young designers to work and showcase their creativity. It's a prime central city space in a very expensive neighbourhood that could so easily have been sold to a property developer to demolish and build flats. And yet it will soon emerge as a hub of creative entrepreneurs.

"I think visitors to the 2012 BodW will be amazed when they hear about the Hollywood Road project," says To. "Like BodW itself, the project will strengthen the city's reputation as an Asia design hub. I think many of the designers who come here and see these developments will go back and ask their governments why they are not doing the same thing." 

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WILLIAM TO'S BODW TOP TEN

- 1 **FRANK GEHRY** signing on to be one of our earliest keynote speakers when BodW was at its infant stage.
- 2 The first year of full-scale collaboration with a partner (UK).
- 3 In 2007, Italy sent two major exhibitions - History of Italian Seating and 50 Italian Masters which were both very successful.
- 4 In 2008 when The Netherlands was our partner, the Dutch broke all records by bringing in the biggest design delegation (over 300+) and the entire city buzzed with creative energy and everywhere in Central you could see people kissing each other on the cheek 3 times (a Dutch tradition).
- 5 Inviting **REM KOOLHAUS** to be our keynote speaker and him agreeing to curate our first Culture & the City track by hand picking creative participants from all over the world.
- 6 Successfully convincing **DIETER RAMS** to come, with the help of our good friends, **FRITZ FRENKLER** and **RALPH WIEGMANN**.
- 7 Signing on **PHILIPPE STARCK** as our keynote one year and getting a sold out full house.
- 8 Being informed by **PHILIPPE STARCK** he couldn't come so we had to arrange live-telecast to satisfy our audience.
- 9 Despite the political tension between China and Japan in 2010, Japan staged the most successful exhibition that drew the highest number of visitors.
- 10 Receiving **ZAHA HADID**.

