

DESIGN IN THE TIME OF CHAOS

Festival for the new bells and whistles blows off the glitz and extravagance

BY ELLEN HIMELFARB
in London

Perhaps it was that bugbear, the economy. Or maybe London Fashion Week — oddly scheduled to coincide — got in the way. But London's annual Design Festival (Sept. 13 to 23) this year seemed, well, not at the forefront of everyone's minds. Certainly, it's difficult to muster enthusiasm for a \$5,000 desk (like Nest Design's Writing Desk) or a \$5,500 chair made from turquoise neon tubing (Lee Broom's Bright on Bistro chair) when thousands are being escorted from theirs. So those who were on the scent were sniffing around quietly. Even furniture designer Suzanne Trocmé — a veteran of the 14-year festival, who happened to be covering the events for *Wallpaper** — lamented on her blog that she had been struck from the guest list of various parties after organizers conspired to pare down their typical excesses.

I did, however, spot a schmoozing Trocmé at *Wallpaper**'s Tuesday night bash to celebrate a roster of recent guest editors — architect Zaha Hadid and artist Louise Bourgeois

among them — at a penthouse club in Soho. Ah, so this is where everyone was letting loose. Artist Tracey Emin was there well into Wednesday, rubbing shoulders with designer Tom Dixon (more on him later) and Canada's own Alannah Weston, illustrious creative director of Selfridges department store.

Nonetheless, the week began quietly. Exhibits that claimed to kick off Monday were, as of Tuesday, still looking like home renos gone bad. More than once I found myself staring at an installation of "ladder, nail gun, light bulb," only to realize that the electricians were still working on the "installation" of the building's infrastructure. Various "pop-up" shops set up around town to exhibit and sell limited-edition pieces from the city's finest designers were unable to do a proper business on their opening day. And those exhibits that were up and running — the huge Bisazza tile showroom, the "Craft Central" ceramics gallery and the fashion-meets-design exhibit at the boutique of Canadian footwear designer Tracey Neuls — left salespeople twiddling their thumbs into midweek.



The exception was Vessel, a swish Notting Hill china boutique where Spanish eccentric Jaime Hayon was exhibiting his new, surreal Fantasy collection of figurines designed exclusively for Lladró, that longtime manufacturer of senseless tchotchkes. Here one could pick up a porcelain boy riding a rocking green chicken for \$870, or a one-eyed harlequin bust-candlestick for \$390. No? Well, suit yourself. But if it happens that a Hayon figurine turns up on the gift table at your wedding or bar mitzvah, think before you march it up to Goodwill — apparently, they're already being snapped up by serious art collectors.

Which brings us to the anchor of Design Week: 100% Design, held, as usual, at the enormous Earls Court convention centre, host to Madonna & Co. by night. The so-called "bad boy of British design," Tom Dixon curated this year's show and opened it with a press conference at which he scowled at photographers like a pencil-wielding Sean Penn. But while he fielded questions at the makeshift podium, more exciting things were happening at his booth — not because of the designer's industrial furniture or stage lighting (called, appropriately, A Bit of Rough) but owing to the fact that his boothettes were giving away gold lamé tote bags to a growing queue of visitors. In the current retail atmosphere, it seems we are all starved for something — something shiny and new. Even the (straight) men!

This made for a happy start to a show that can sometimes leave a more memorable impression on your poor overworked feet than on your design imagination. Special mention this year must go to the 10 designers making up the Canadian contingent, sponsored by the Design Exchange; particularly the Loyal Loot Collective from Edmonton, who showed their Log Bowls, made from previously felled trees finished with a glossy saturated acrylic, and their Monsieur Dressup coat hangers, in the shape of a starched shirt collar. And to Mat Cult, by Jonathan Sabine of Toronto, who showed his finely tooled totem-

like Bead pendant lamps. Thank you, also, Canadians, for reminding me that the Canadian-flag lapel pins you were giving away still command respect and a smile from even the crustiest Brits.

The pure exhaustion of scouting (I'm seven months' pregnant) was mitigated by the special friendships I made along the way. At bathroom designer William Garvey I was shown to a giant wooden salad bowl doubling as a tub, in which, I was told, I could comfortably give birth (provided I wanted to pay \$30,000 for it). Ditto a luxury bath outfitter from Italy dubiously called Mill-Due, which exhibited a sunken polished-steel bathtub faced with onyx marble sitting on mirrored Louis XIV legs. But I worry about the child born in a tub manufactured by a company that aligns itself with fungal matter, however European. I took a ride on a high-concept hobby horse (the Rocky, by British duo Pearson Lloyd for Spanish manufacturer Mozoo).

I was invited to take a siesta in my personal favourite of the day, the state-of-the-art LOMME bed made in sleepy Liechtenstein. The acronym stands for Light Over Matter Mind Evolution — which tells you nothing about it, really. The king-sized cocoon — injection-moulded in the shape of an egg and hollowed out to allow for a memory-foam mattress and pillows — features a light-therapy "alarm" clock; colour-therapy filters on the lights; built-in iPhone; built-in massage system; and a device that blocks electromagnetic waves and radiation, if that's your thing. All this can be yours for just \$21,500.

Unwilling to become the exhibit myself, I escaped to Aram in Covent Garden, the contemporary design shop where the design collective OKAY Studio was experimenting with alternative materials in a show that smelled overwhelmingly of burning cake. In a program that featured a Mould Chair and something resembling Chinese fish in soya sauce, it could have been anything. But the offending piece ended up being rather enlightening: a

chandelier made from large bars of cooking chocolate in various stages of meltdown. The bars are heated by the light source — chicken-roasting bulbs, as it were — and gradually drip into a mixing bowl beneath the fixture. The artist, Spain's Jordi Canudas, provided viewers with breadsticks for dipping. Good design, decent art or simply an ingenious way of bringing patrons up three flights of stairs to the exhibition space?

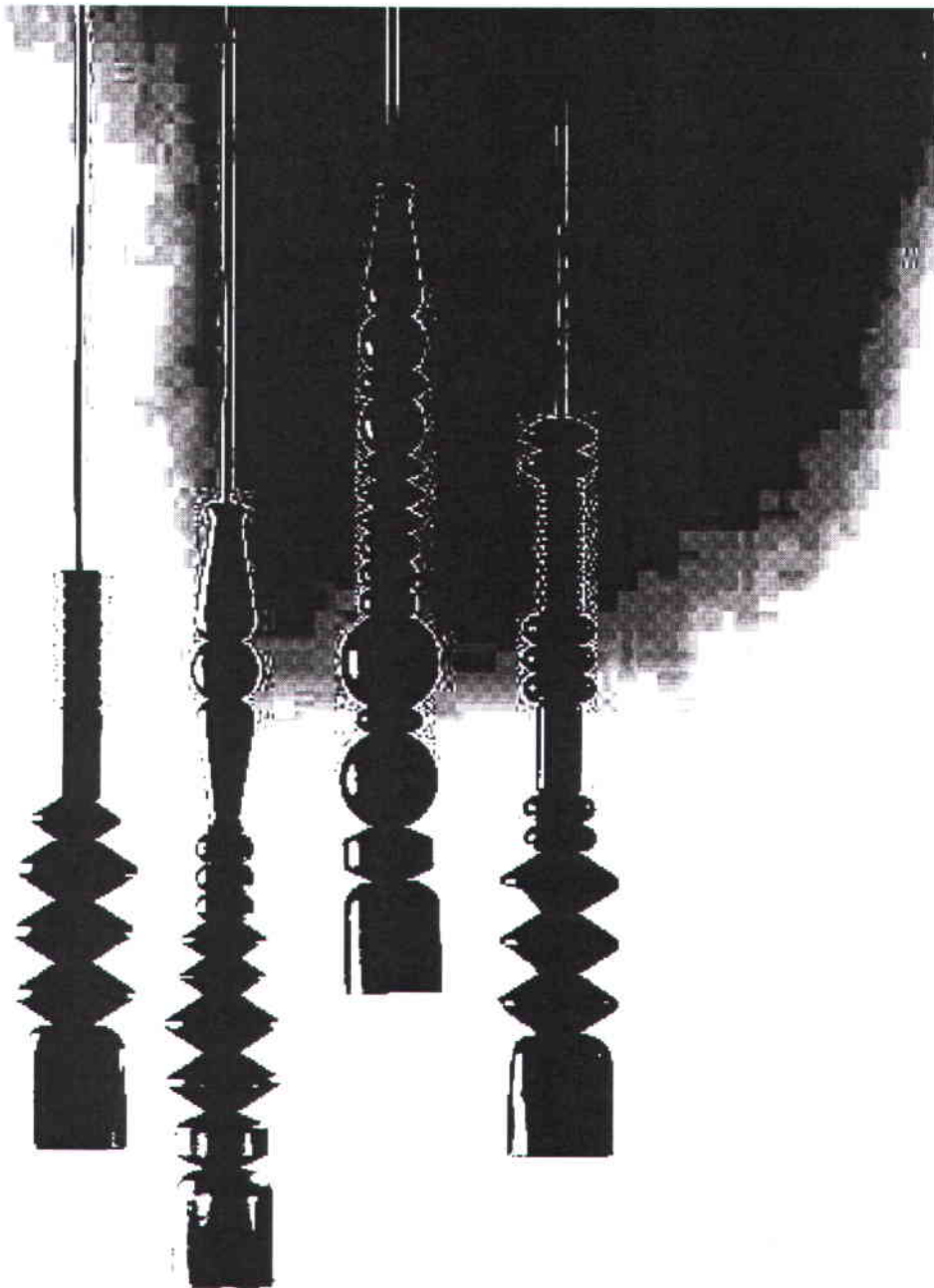
Thus refuelled, I ticked the next box: the London Transport Museum, just down the road in the Covent Garden Piazza, where a team of local designers had upholstered new wooden furniture designs in fabrics from old subway cars. At last: design that was accessible, affordable and — I was told — clean. But, alas, not for sale.

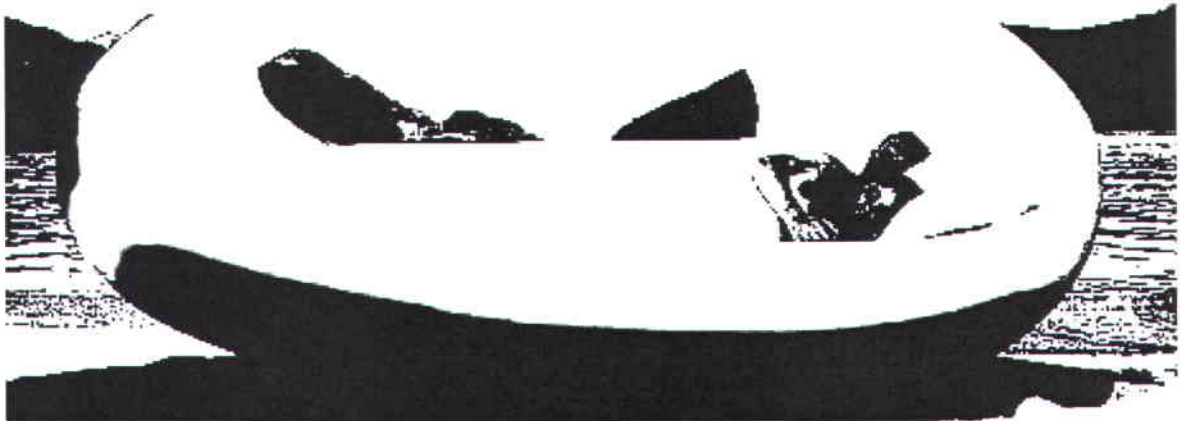
You could hardly move during the festival without bumping into something that wasn't there last week. In the East End, there was a "pop-up" gallery for every pleasure: plastic design, enviro design, surreal design — the latter represented by the Heroes of the Invisible vase by architecture collective FAT (for "Fashion, Architecture, Taste"). From afar, the black lacquer urn seemed standard issue; but stare a little longer and the profiles of two heroes of innovation, Mies van der Rohe and Marconi, took shape.

Down on the Southbank (near Royal Festival Hall), the surprise of the week was a temporary shelter made from American tulipwood by the young "starchitect" David Adjaye. Outside, it looked like nothing but an oversized garden shed; inside, however, a barrage of tulipwood stalagmites (called sclera, in this case) assaulted you from the ceiling. Adjaye is hoping to raise awareness of tulipwood as an indoor material, and also hoping to sell the shed for big bucks at auction in October.

Indeed, given the number of bankers bailing out of their overvalued homes this autumn, a simple wood shed could be just what the doctor ordered.

Weekend Post





Jonathan Sabine of Toronto showed finely tooled totem-like Bead pendant lamps, top. The king-size cocoon bed by LOMME, above, has a light-therapy alarm clock and a device that blocks electromagnetic waves.