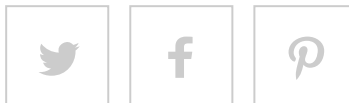


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Utopian visions: a review of London Design Biennale

The inaugural London Biennale explores the theme of utopia – via a Beirut street scene, a wish machine and a giant weather vane. There is much to see, but the show is frustratingly hit and miss

By **Rachael Steven** 8th September 2016



Annabel Karim Kassar's Mezzing in Lebanon at London Design Biennale. Image: Ed Reeve

In a guide to the inaugural London Design Biennale, president Sir John Sorrell describes the event as an outstanding exhibition of ideas and ingenuity – one that demonstrates designers' ambitions to create “universal solutions to problems which concern us all”.

The Biennale features work by designers from 35 countries spread out over various wings of Somerset House. This year's theme is utopia, inspired by Thomas More's text of the same name and a year-long programme of events marking the 500th anniversary of its publication.

The theme brings to mind the early days of World Fairs and expos, when these events presented an exciting vision of the future to millions of visitors. Charles and Ray Eames' Think! Pavilion for IBM offered a glimpse of how computers

could change the world with dazzling multi screen displays while GM's 1939 Futurama exhibit introduced the concept of motorways linking states and cities.



Norway's installation highlights the country's inclusive design initiative – making buildings and transport suitable for all and not just the average user. Image: Ed Reeve

At London Design Biennale, several installations offer up designs that aim to improve public spaces or tackle environmental issues. The UAE considers how historic irrigation systems could be revived to tackle water shortages in desert areas while Norway highlights the country's inclusive design programme – an initiative to design buildings and transport with everyone and not just the average user's needs in mind. China's Den City project proposes self-sufficient high-rises that function as mini-cities as a solution to Shenzhen's land shortage.

But those hoping for a show focused on designs that are changing the world will be disappointed. The Biennale introduces some interesting prototypes and proposals – from public Wi-Fi pods in Cuba to furniture made from waste plastic found in the ocean – but these are interspersed among more conceptual responses to the idea of utopia. Austria's Level, for example, is an interactive light sculpture made up of lightweight metal rods that are thrown off balance when visitors enter the room, presenting utopia as an impossible ideal and a precarious state. The show is not a glimpse of the designs that are shaping tomorrow – for that, you'd be better off visiting the Design Museum's Designs of the Year.



Austria's Level installation – created by micscher'traxler, it is made up of lights suspended from lightweight rods. When the installation is still, the lights shine brightly, but dim in response to movement as rods are thrown off balance, reflecting the precariousness of a utopian state. Image: Ed Reeve

Some projects demonstrate a more tenuous link with the exhibition's theme. The US contribution is an interactive display from the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum that allows visitors to scroll through digitised wallpapers from its archive, selecting patterns to be displayed on a large screen. An accompanying caption describes the freedom of being able to change the backdrop to your living environment as a form of utopia reachable by design – but you get the sense this installation would have been put forward whatever the exhibition's theme. In the Cooper Hewitt, among other objects from the museum's collection, it offers an engaging way to explore a vast archive of designs. In the basement of Somerset House, however, it feels oddly out of place.

Some of the most engaging installations are those that show design's power to inspire and delight. Yasuhiro Suzuki's installation for Japan introduces the concept of *mitate* – the idea of looking at things differently and adding new layers of meaning to objects, often to humorous effect – via a cabinet of curiosities packed with inventive designs that encourage visitors to look at the world around them in a new light.



Yasuhiro Suzuki's collection of curiosities offer an unusual take on everyday objects, with spoons that measure time and an eye drop dispenser in the shape of a gun. Image: Ed Reeve

There are glass spoons that measure time, metal spoons shaped like faces, an eye drop dispenser shaped like a gun and compasses in the shape of the British isles and the Japanese archipelago. Silhouettes are etched from a metal plate, magnetised and placed in a glass filled with water, revealing the orientation of both islands without the use of markers pointing north, east, south or west. Porky Hefer offers a similarly imaginative take on an everyday object with his series of chairs resembling animals. Both designers use creativity to turn a mundane object into something wonderful.

Benjamin Louyate's *Le Bruit Des Bonbons – The Astounding Eyes of Syria* is a poignant take on the refugee crisis. The designer has created a vending machine which disperses pink candy sweets with proceeds from each pack going to help

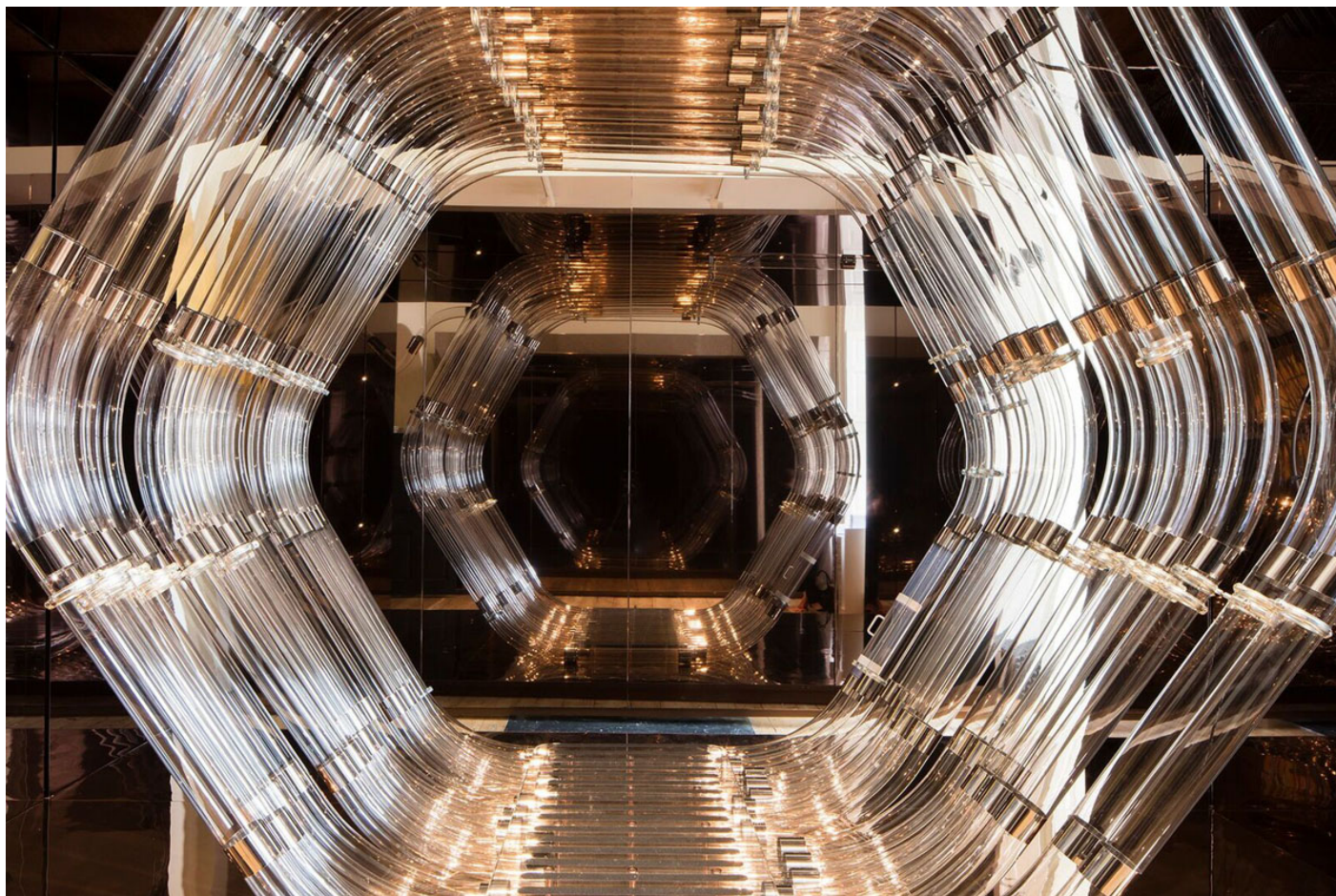
displaced Syrian families. The sweets – designed in the shape of an ancient Syrian eye idol – evoke thoughts of happier times, exploring the role of objects in preserving and provoking memories. In an accompanying film, shot at a refugee camp in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, Syrians reflect on their past and their desire to one day return home.



Benjamin Loyaute's pink candy shapes – bags cost £5 and proceeds go towards helping displaced Syrian families. The sweets act as a reminder of happier times, reflecting on how objects can provoke memories

Turkey's Wish Machine (created by Autobhan) also references the refugee crisis in a modern twist on ancient wishing trees. The hexagonal structure whisks wishes written by visitors through a series of perspex tubes and out of sight, never to be seen again. It's a thoughtful reflection on Turkey's position between Europe and the Middle East – a home for millions of refugees fleeing their home countries in search of a better future – and is one of several interactive pieces on show. (Poland brings us a Yes/No game while Germany invites visitors to contemplate the idea of utopia in front of a crackling digital fire).

The most evocative installation is architect Annabel Karim Kassar's Mezzing in Lebanon (pictured top), which resembles a street scene in Lebanon complete with shisha smokers, backgammon players and a barber. Here, utopia is presented as a relaxed, shared space which promotes a sense of community. Taiwan's Eatopia, meanwhile, celebrates cultural diversity through a five-course menu created by Rain Wu and designer Shikai Tseng with chef Chung Ho-Tsai. Food is served in a forest-themed room to a soundtrack of birdsong.



The Wish Machine, Turkey's installation at London Design Biennale. Wishes are whisked through a series of perspex tubes in a modern take on ancient wishing trees. Image: Ed Reeve

Chile and Russia explore historical visions of utopia. Russia presents hundreds of photographs of pioneering prototypes developed by Soviet designers – many of which were too advanced to be put into production – while Chile has reconstructed the operations room of the Cybersyn project, an early version of a smart city, developed in the 1970s, which allowed ministers to view real time economic information. Both present fascinating examples of utopian visions from the past and ideas that were way ahead of their time.

There is much to see – some of it great – but the exhibition is frustratingly hit and miss, particularly given the £15 price tag. The quality of installations varies – some fail to reflect the diversity and brilliance of their respective countries' design scene and there is little to connect the displays that inhabit the various

wings of Somerset House. Some objects present a considered take on this year's theme and others show how designers can contribute to making the world a better place – but some fail to do either.

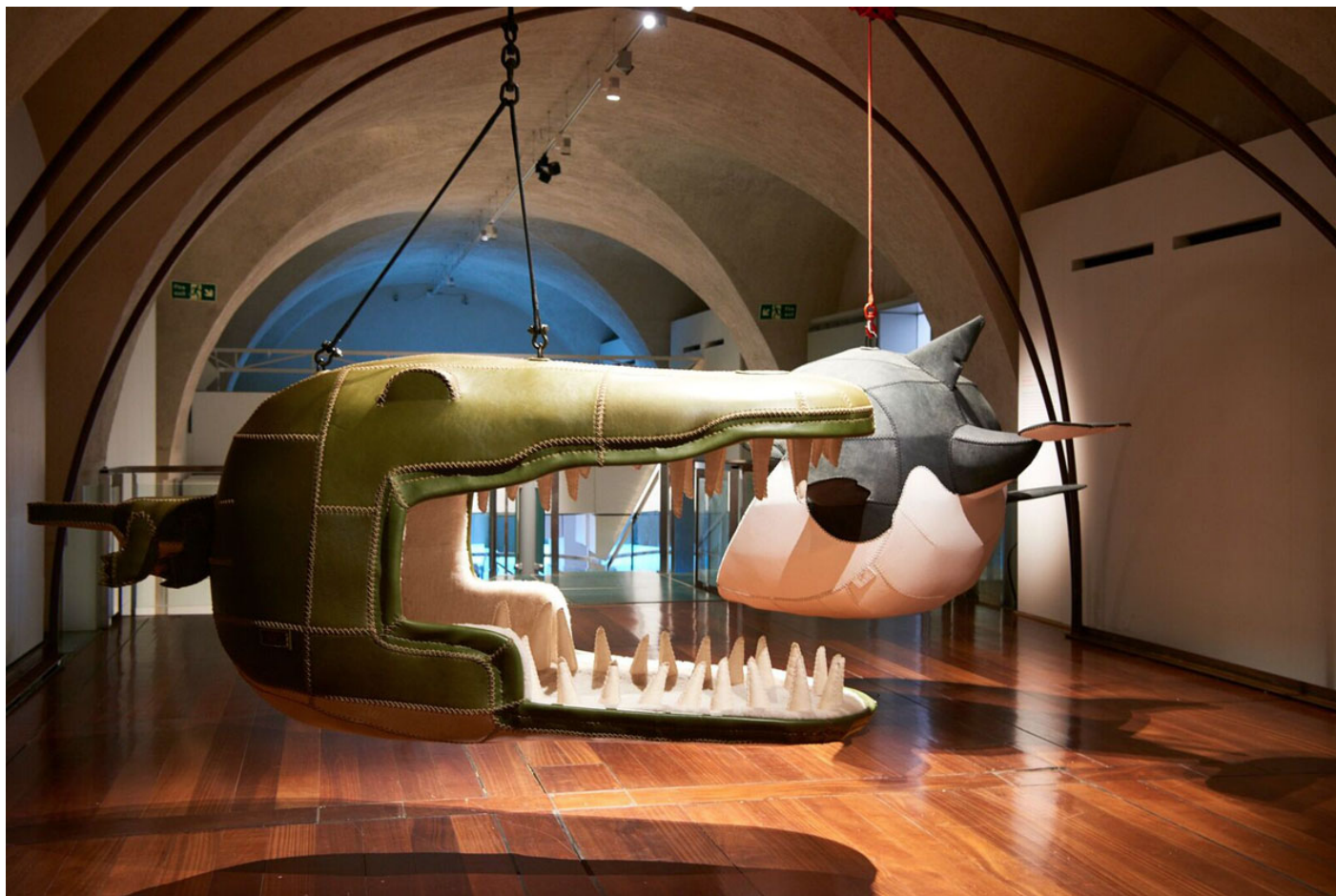


Discovering Utopia: Lost Archives of Soviet Design at London Design Biennale.

Design team: Alexandra Sankova, Stepan Lukyanov. Image: Ed Reeve

As often at major design events, graphic design is woefully underrepresented. There are some digital projects but the only VR installation (Spain's) is underwhelming, presenting a vision of Santander in 2100 which fails to harness the potential of VR to create immersive and realistic virtual environments. It's also confusing to use and left several visitors scratching their heads.

Walking around the event, it's difficult to discern exactly what the point of it all is – and whether the Biennale wants to be seen as an exhibition about designers solving real-world problems or an art show. In the basement of Somerset House, among an Italian installation which reimagined 20 white flags next to Porky Hefer's animal chairs, I found myself wondering what a biennale should do. Should it present a vision of the future, like the expos and world fairs of the past? Should it showcase the best in contemporary design from various countries – reflecting diverse creative industries and outstanding craft? Or should it simply aim to present an unexpected collection of objects that highlight design's potential to inspire and delight, made by designers from all over the world?



Porky Hefer's animal chairs celebrate playfulness and optimism

The London Biennale has been touted as all three but it works best as the latter. Not all of the projects work – and it could certainly do with a greater curatorial focus – but there are some moments of delight to be had among the chaos.

London Design Biennale is open at Somerset House until September 27. For tickets and visitor info see londondesignbiennale.com

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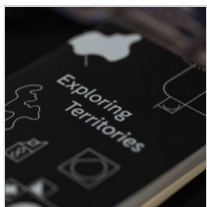
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