

MODERN REGRESSION

Lebanon-based, Japan-raised, US-educated designer Nada Debs is using her cultural eclecticism to visual effect by incorporating more than one country's traditions into her oeuvre

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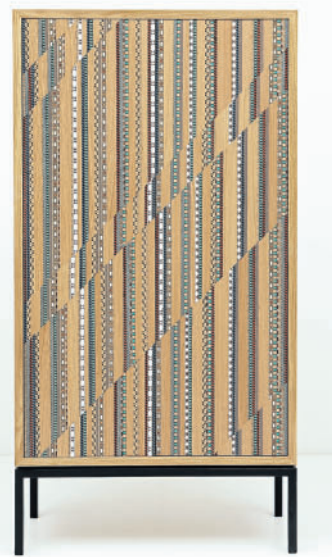
Many designers work with craft concepts for a season or a collection, but you've dedicated almost 20 years to it. Why is that? It's the DNA of what we do. When I moved back to Beirut in 2000, craft in this part of the world was completely unexplored. Coming from abroad, I had no emotional attachment to it so it was easy for me to view it as a design element, investigating whether we could change patterns and materials.

So you returned to work in Beirut after the civil war?

Yes, at the time when there was a lot of reconstruction, and people returning from abroad, giving Lebanon new hope. We needed something that related to our identity — something we could be proud of that was contemporary and not always traditional. I created that modern Arab look.

You made a name for yourself by placing machrabiya patterns in your homeware design. Last year you started experimenting with marquetry, launching your Funquetry range at Rossana Orlandi in Milan. This year you followed it up with the Marquetry Mania collection. What drew you to marquetry in the first place?

I started looking more closely at the traditional backgammon board, which I knew involved a lot of work. I found out about the marquetry strips that are applied to this, discovered craftsmen who make them and asked if we couldn't add colour, rather than neutral tones, and use unexpected patterns. So Funquetry came about because of the fun elements added to marquetry, which



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we inlaid into shelves, side tables and cabinets. But those furniture forms were very linear and these marquetry strips can go around a 180-degree curve, so we designed more curvaceous products with softer forms and placed the straight graphic strips on these in a chaotic way to produce Marquetry Mania. The pieces are in colours inspired by the bright kimonos of Japan, where I grew up and where I return annually.

Last year you combined your cultural influences in pared-back tables that were made with Japanese tatami mats bordered by marquetry strips. You seem to maintain a Japanese sense of minimalism, even in your very experimental items.

My work is neither Japanese nor Arabic. It's a balance between opposing cultures, philosophies, ideas and materials. My pieces need to be just modern enough and just traditional enough. Just Japanese enough and just Arab enough. It's like me as a person, juggling between more than one identity.

One common thing that you seem to insist on is that your work is handmade and heartmade. What does heartmade mean?

Craft is a spiritual act filled with repetition. It requires a lot of attention and total focus. You can't fit a piece of mother of pearl into a hole you've carved if you're looking away and talking. So heartmade is about the passion of the craftsman. It's not enough to be handmade. People always feel the human effort and soul that's been put into a piece.

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Just opened

THE NEW OLD

Rand Steam, one of Joburg's greatest heritage losses, is reborn victorious, writes Mila Crewe-Brown

The story of Rand Steam Laundries is a contentious one. This heritage site in Richmond came into being around 1896, when a group of Zulu men made a business of washing clothes along the Gas Works Spruit for the mining industry. The AmaWashes, as they were called, were displaced when two formal laundry businesses, which later became Rand Steam, opened up there.

Rand Steam Laundries became so popular that hotels from all over SA sent their laundry to be cleaned and dyed there. After it closed in the early '60s, the industrial buildings were inhabited by craftsmen and informal traders. Next came Imperial Holdings in the 2000s, who illegally flattened the buildings to make way for a car dealership. Their plans were intercepted as the community and heritage association took umbrage, leaving the property derelict until now.

The Moolman Group, with Jonker Evolution, Genesis Property Three and Group44, have now created a centre to serve the community with a retail offering, at the same time reviving the site's historic soul and injecting character into the development. Anchor tenants like Woolworths, Pick n Pay and Clicks sit alongside buzzy cafés and small retailers.

The property's most prominent feature and the only part of the structure to survive the demolition is its water filtration tower, which is now inhabited by shoe brand Six Kings, whose winding staircase was built using repurposed timber from the original site. Across the parking lot, Tapenade & Friends has a beautifully curated shop that combines the brand's olive products with lifestyle brands such as Goet furniture, Babylonstoren and children's brand Land of Lark.



The piazza fountain, built from reclaimed bricks, above, the water filtration tower survived the demolition, below.



Customers will catch sight of reminders of the past, like the bricks that stand proud on the walls with the inscription AmaWasha imprinted across the front; and the fence that borders Barry Hertzog Avenue which features the same words. The original red roof tops have been recreated and replicas of the characteristic red steam vents once again sit on top of the roofs.

In the courtyard, where shade is thrown from olive trees, cafés and restaurants look onto a wall carved out with scenes of a mule and the original washermen bent over the stream. At the rear of the parking area is a majestic pepper tree — planted to keep flies off the mules — that was moved from where the stables originally stood.

What they've nailed is an urban regeneration project that serves major retail needs as well as a lifestyle destination with soul and history. The companies behind the development have restored faith in protecting heritage, carefully walking the line between present and past ... and with style.

randsteamcentre.co.za