London Design Festival

September 16 - 24, across London
Review by Francesca Perry

Blueprint scoured LDF from top to toe, from immersive installations in Brixton to participatory pavilions in Shoreditch. What we found was a festival where design tries to save the world — and make life more enjoyable.

Under largely sunny, early-autumn skies, the London Design Festival — now in its 15th year — activated nine ‘districts’ and plenty more ‘destinations’ across the capital with an array of work from emerging and established designers, from immersive one-off installations to extensive trade shows.

As the official hub for the festival for the ninth year in a row, the newly extended Victoria and Albert Museum welcomed a record number of visitors. Annual design show designjunction — where the winning images of the Blueprint iGuzzini Architecture Photography Awards were exhibited (see page 147) — also attracted a record-breaking 26,000 visitors to the site in King’s Cross over four days.

The nine dedicated design districts spanned the capital: Mayfair, Brixton, Brompton, Clerkenwell, Shoreditch, Bankside, Chelsea, Islington and Pimlico Road. The two major landmark projects of the festival came from Camille Walala, who installed an inflatable play-castle of colourful forms in Broadgate’s Exchange Square, and MINI Living with Sam Jacob, who created an ‘urban cabin’ micro home at the Oxo Tower Wharf.

The most striking elements of the festival fell broadly into two categories: design which is propositional — creating a vision of a more sustainable, efficient and socially conscious world — and design that is participatory, focusing on the value of play, experience and engagement.

PROPOSITIONAL
There was a big focus — as you might expect in a world suffering the impacts of a hyperconsumer and throwaway culture — on creating design products out of waste materials. The idea is so satisfying and exciting — guilt-free consumerism, if you will — that it distracts from the reality that we simply shouldn’t be generating that much waste in the first place; that the whole system needs to be redesigned, not just the after-effects. In the meantime, what new brands such as Pentatonic are doing is worth celebrating.

Founded by Jamie Hall and Johann Baedeker, with support from waste-upcycling company Miniziw, Pentatonic turns post-consumer waste — such as the 1,000 used plastic bottles it collected from Fabric nightclub in the space of 90 minutes, smashed smartphone screens, or the masses of coffee-cup lids from collaboration partner Starbucks — into furniture, homeware and tiling.

Launched in September, the brand’s
mission is to ‘lead the world into the circular economy’. Its opening furniture collection — called the Pentatonic AirTool system — is a modular kit of parts that can be configured in a variety of ways to form tables and chairs.

At LDF, Pentatonic opened its first pop-up store in Shoreditch, and installed its Trashpresso machine in the Somerset House courtyard, the ‘world’s first mobile, off-grid recycling plant, conceived to bring industrial grade recycling to isolated communities’. The solar-powered mobile recycler creates tiles out of waste materials that can be used for construction and building purposes. At Somerset House, it was inviting visitors to bring their own waste and see the process take place before their eyes.

Upcycling waste materials is not a new concept, but it does seem that Pentatonic is dedicating itself to upscaling the approach. But why is it that products made from recycled waste don’t tend to be very attractive? Though seemingly

1. The Urban Cabin, by Mini Living with Sam Jacobs, proposes a vision of shared micro housing for cities
2. Australian lighting designer Flynn Talbot’s Immersive Reflection Room Installation at the V&A Museum
3. Pentatonic’s first collection is a modular kit of parts constructed entirely from consumer waste
4. Brodie Neill’s ‘ocean terrazzo’ material is made from fragments of plastic waste from the oceans

styled on a simple Eames chair-like form, the chairs — and their table counterparts — appear as overly bulky, industrial, unforgiving versions of the style.

There were plenty others upcycling waste too: designers Soft Baroque, James Shaw and Michael Marriott, as part of the Ready Made Go 3 group show at the Ace Hotel in Shoreditch, used recycled plastic and glass to create tables, stools, stands and plant pots for the hotel.

Australian-born furniture designer Brodie Neill presented his Flotsam bench, constructed using his self-created ‘ocean terrazzo’ material, made of collected fragments of plastic waste washed up on shores around the world. Neill collaborated with an international network of scientists, researchers, environmental experts, beachcombers, engineers, artisans and manufacturers to create the material, hoping to draw attention to the global issue of ocean pollution. What’s more — and it could just be because terrazzo is very ‘in’ right now — Neill’s work has the benefit of being visually satisfying, as well as environmentally so.

New Swedish brand Livsidal, meanwhile, is using design to address one of the other biggest environmental problems: air pollution. The brand, founded by Andreas and Tobias Murray, is making trendy scandi furniture work harder. Its cabinet-like side tables have
an attractive mid-century modern meets Swedish Empire style, coming in a range of exterior wooden finishes — and they are also discreet air purifiers for the home. As city inhabitants, many of us can forget that poor air quality is inside our homes as well as on the streets. The Livelad air purifiers capture toxic gases, viruses, bacteria and other harmful particles — while looking and functioning as a piece of design-conscious furniture.

5 The new Livelad air purifiers are designed as furniture items in their own right.
6 Inoke Hans's installation drew attention to what needs to change in the world of design.
7 PriestmanGoode's new Horizon seat design would increase capacity on commuter trains by 30-30%.

At Design Frontiers, a group show at Somerset House exploring the intersection of future thinking and commerce, a range of emerging and established creatives working across the fields of automotive, fashion, product and graphic design presented their responses to the future needs of the marketplace.

Transport and aviation design practice PriestmanGoode presented two seat designs — Horizon and Island Bay (not, as it would seem, the names of Floridian retirement homes) — that aim to tackle public transport overcrowding by increasing capacity. Horizon enables 20-30% more seats per carriage (based on a typical commuter train) by essentially providing semi-standing, slim-seat designs to fit more people into the same amount of space. Island Bay is a flexible seating solution that provides regular seats (as in, seats which allow you to fully sit down) during off-peak, and a higher-density configuration during peak hours, resulting in 15-20% more seats and increased standing capacity.

Both are neat solutions to the task of fitting more people into a space, but surely endlessly increasing capacity is not the way forward? We shouldn't be aiming to find new ways to pack people in: we should support neighbourhoods and affordable housing that mean people can live close to where they work, and embrace the culture of working remotely, thus reducing pressure on commuter trains that will quickly reach capacity even with these new seating designs.

Urban Cabin, a project from Sam Jacob and MINI Living, was also a response to ever-more congested, overpopulated cities, where space is at a premium. The cabin is a propositional prototype of a new form of shared micro housing for young, mobile, city dwellers. There is a fold-out, modular kitchen, a hammock (yes, really) and a micro sharing library. Shared resources and smaller-scale housing may be the future of city life, but with the urban cabin taking up less space than a (budget) hotel room, it’s hard to see how it wouldn’t be a claustrophobic future.

Again, while these projects respond admirably to many of the world’s environmental and practical problems, the focus should surely be on using design to prevent, reduce or ameliorate those problems in the first place. One installation that seemed to acknowledge this was Explore & Act by Dutch industrial designer Inoke Hans in Brompton, a manifestation of her 12 London salons that aimed to interrogate how design can take up an active role in social change.

The conclusions of the salons were translated into protest-like signs that shook the viewer out of their endless-rooms-of-design-products torpor.

The propositions may sound obvious to some, but someone at the festival had to sound the bell. “Design solutions not stuff”; “Design for social context”; “Sense global & local impacts”; “Meaning instead of more”. Each sign had further text elaborating on the manifesto-like statements: “Designers can apply their problem-solving abilities to move away from creating more tangible objects towards intangible strategies and solutions”; “Our technology-driven society needs a human, more psychological approach for design embedded in social context where it interacts with users.” All were written up in a public pamphlet designed by Irma Boom. All are inspiring calls to action, but how can we upscale these relatively small-scale salons and publications into wider, more meaningful change across the design industry?

PARTICIPATORY
Two of the darlings of LDF — both instantly recognisable by their bold and vibrant use of colour — were French-born, London-based print designer Camille Walala and Nigerian-British furniture designer Yinka Ilori. While the ever-popular Walala created the inflatable Villa Walala landmark project in Broadgate, Ilori’s work was seen four times across the festival: the Estate Playground installation in Shoreditch, the Africa Centre show A Large Chair Does Not Make A King, the NOW Gallery installation Not All That Glitters Is Gold, and the collaboration with social enterprise Restoration Station (see Meet on page 30).

Play is a key part of both designers’ work, but in different ways. While both use hyped-up colour and pattern, and explicitly enable play in Estate Playground and Villa Walala, the French designer is interested in the fun, the materiality, and the aesthetics (notably her Tribal POP style), while Ilori uses play as a device to dig into notions of identity, culture and memory, weaving elements such as African fabrics and literature, as well as the recreation of a playground from his youth, into his work.
Estate Playground, Ilori’s work situated outside the citizenM Hotel in Shoreditch, comprised a slide, seesaw, and swing in a range of bright colours, but the invitation to play was received hesitantly by passers-by when I visited. WAlala’s (much larger-scale) Exchange Square installation, created using colourful inflated vinyl forms, much like a bouncy castle without the bouncy floor, made clear it was publically accessible, but the hawk-eyed security guard, corporate surroundings and roped-off corners dampened any sense of free abandon.

Playful experiences, perhaps more successful, could also be found at Adam Nathaniel Furman’s glorious Gateways in Granary Square, Lee Broom’s Illusionary On Reflection installation in Shoreditch and Flynn Talbot’s Reflection Room at the V&A.

Furman’s installation, in collaboration with Turkish Ceramics, created four 4m x 4m gateway structures lined up amidst the fountains of Granary Square, clad in colourful and boldly patterned arrangements of ceramic tiles. It instantly became London’s favourite selfie hotspot.

Lee Broom’s installation — a cozy, dimly lit room with a toasty fireplace and an array of sleek Broom-designed furniture — took the viewer by surprise when it transpired that what seemed like a mirrored wall was a painstaking recreation of the room in reverse on the other side of a screen designed to look like a mirror, constructing an illusion that both confused and delighted.

Reflection Room, an immersive colourful light installation from Flynn Talbot at the V&A, was wondrous and a little bit addictive — I wanted to stay in there for ages. Taking over the museum’s Prince Consort Gallery, the work highlighted the design of the vaulted space while simultaneously transforming it and transporting the viewer. The Australian lighting designer used 56 custom-made Barrisol panels in gloss
black, visually expanding the width of the space. Woven within the panels were Tryka LED profiles emitting Talbot's signature red-orange and blue hues in glowing verticals. 'With all of my work, I want to create new experiences using light that build a connection between people and place,' he explained.

The nature of experience and immersion was also used in thought-provoking works that, while relying on interaction, didn't explicitly invite play. Hubb, an installation from new design studio AWMA, was conceived as a 'shimmering reinterpretation of a minaret in public space,' situated in Brixton's Windrush Square. Established by four creatives from diverse backgrounds yet united by their Muslim faith and hometown of London, AWMA describes itself as 'creating powerful stories around communities'. Hubb, the name of which derives from the Arabic word for love, was intended as a place for reflection and togetherness.

In the Islamic community, the mosque plays the role of a hub and traditionally the minaret is an architectural device that facilitates a person at the top calling the local community for individual reflection and congregational gatherings for good,' explains AWMA. People were invited inside Hubb for individual reflection, with the experience further enhanced by the spatial geometry of the structure alongside scriptural engravings and audio composed by Yusuf Islam (aka Cat Stevens). As a sensory environment, the experience transcended faith, prompting the visitor to take a moment to pause and reflect in the busy city, and be transported by the sounds and words offered to them.

Another reflective experience was created by While We Wait, a similarly encountered installation from Bethlehem-based architects Elias and Yousef Anastas, which responded to the recent construction of a wall in Palestine's Cremisan Valley. The work was a small, stone, tower-like structure, much like a wall wrapped round into a cylinder, which the viewer could step into and walk through. Unlike the wall it referenced, however, this structure was a permeable one: not only could people move through it, but the material itself was given a lace-like dentelle pattern, suggesting the evaporation of solid one. The structure is now due to move to the site of its original inspiration

within the Cremisan Valley, with an ambition to become a part of the local and religious lives of the community there, cut off from its local monastery by the wall.

Participation, play and experience all came together in On Repeat, a pop-up pavilion in Shoreditch created by Universal Design Studio and The Office Group. This wooden 'pavilion of repetition' was designed to host participatory events and workshops based around the meditative value of repetitive, manual activities — such as paper crafts and sushi making — with a 10m-long wooden table for co-working.

On Repeat is part of a wider collaborative project between UDS and TOG in which they are envisioning workplaces that enable people to be more creative and feel more inspired. Responding to our tech-saturated world, the pavilion was a space in which to escape the 'cognitive cul-de-sac' of staring at a laptop, as Paul Guleit of UDS described, and harness the power of repetitive activities to allow our minds to daydream. 'It's difficult to find this quiet time to reflect in our lives,' Paul added.

But what of the benefits of participation beyond simply enjoyment or reflection? Yinka Ilori collaborated with The Restoration Station — a social enterprise run by addiction recovery charity Spitalfields Crypt Trust, which engages recovering addicts in restoring antique furniture. The enterprise supports these 'trainees' through their recovery, giving opportunities to learn new skills, and prepare to move on into paid work. Ilori worked with the trainees over a month, collaboratively upcycling pieces of second-hand furniture into new designs, which were then auctioned off in support of The Restoration Station. 'All of the participants were following the auction live online,' Ilori explained, 'so excited and proud that their chairs were being bid on. It was great.'

So, design might just save the world, bring us together, improve our lives and solve our problems, but it certainly won't do it alone. What I took away from the festival is that we should be taking down the barriers between designers and participants, users and innovators, and all work together to imagine and implement design that really does have magical powers.