

DESIGN

Focus on China's evolution as a creative powerhouse

New Shenzhen institution curates exhibition with V&A, drawing on collection of 2.5 million pieces

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Design Society is a new cultural landmark and a symbol of the Shenzhen's evolution from sweatshop to creative economy. Designed by star Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, it houses the first overseas outpost of the Victoria and Albert Museum. That is a lot to live up to.

Gleaming white, with 71,000 square metres of floor space, and sitting on the waterfront at Shekou, it is a sight to behold.

Its interior is airy, featuring a three-storey atrium, and flooded with natural light. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows show Deep Bay (also called Shenzhen Bay), with Hong Kong's northern New Territories in the distance.

Its exhibition galleries are high-ceilinged and have very few columns, which allow for dramatic architectural interventions.

Maki, 89, attended the December 1 opening of the 1.3 billion yuan (HK\$1.53 billion) building, officially called Sea World Culture and Arts Centre. As Maki told the attending VIPs, the centre is a tribute to the power of design and the power of China, at a time when the United States and Europe are ceding their influence to the East.

A certain amount of self-congratulatory propaganda is inevitable; the Shekou Museum of Reform and Opening, which occupies one of the centre's four galleries, will be operated by China Merchants Group (CMG) – a Chinese state-owned conglomerate, and the founder of Design Society – and opens next year. That's also when a branch of the Guangfu Museum – a private museum of Chinese antiques owned by dealer/collector Ma Weidu – will open.

Its two core components are ready, though: an in-house exhibition curated by a local team led by Design Society director Ole Bouman, and a V&A Gallery, operated by the London institu-

tion under a five-year contract until 2019. Together, they promise a programme that will extol the value of design, provoke intelligent debate about design in the digital age, and consider how China might do things differently.

The V&A's exhibition is conscious of the parallel between the museum's founding mission and what China wants to accomplish now – namely, to get manufacturers and the general public to appreciate design in the everyday. Its curators have picked 250 pieces from the museum's 2.5 million-piece permanent collection, backed by ample research and interesting stories, for a show called "Values of Design".

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There is a display of Penguin paperbacks and the Isokon Penguin Donkey bookcase; a Barbican Estate ceramic basin from the 1960s (designed for small flats and closely resembling those used today in Hong Kong City Hall) and glasses issued by Britain's National Health Service. There are niches dedicated to manufacturing materials: plywood, tubular steel, Bakelite and so on.

This is largely a historical exhibition; don't go expecting it to have the "wow" factor or to offer a particularly exciting museum experience. There is a wealth of information in the captions and plenty of nostalgic moments (remember Teddy Ruxpin, the talking toy bear?), but some visitors will find it as tedious as a World Expo pavilion.

There are two particular disap-

pointments. Numerous pairings of the old and the new don't quite offer the pithy comment intended. For example, a 19th-century Turkish cup with an ancient Egyptian water filter is placed next to a made-in-China e-cigarette in a display about design and health. The result is visually underwhelming and the tenuous connection eccentric at best.

The V&A team under Luisa Mengoni has undertaken research in Shenzhen for the past three years, but there is little to show for it in this exhibition, bar a couple of locally made smartphones and a display about the WeChat mobile phone app.

In comparison, the main gallery's show, called "Minding the Digital", is immersive and fun. Perhaps not having its own collection gives it more flexibility. While the V&A's exhibits are mostly behind glass, here you have large walk-through installations that make a real impact.

To be fair to the V&A, the team's main contribution in Shenzhen is intangible and long-lasting. Its contract involves the training and mentoring of the local team so Design Society can mount world-class shows on its own.

According to Joseph Strzempka, an American employed by Shenzhen's Nanshan Bureau of Education, the V&A has also been admirably proactive about serving as a bridge between schools, manufacturers and cultural institutions. It has two more exhibitions coming to Shenzhen in the next few years.

The biggest questions regarding Design Society are about its sustainability as an institution and the CMG's commitment to its mission. Still, whatever the future brings, the opening of Design Society unequivocally informs the world of Shenzhen's ambitions, and that is something to which Hong Kong should pay heed.

To get there, take the MTR East Rail Line to Lok Ma Chau, and cross the border at Futian checkpoint. Take Subway Line 4 three stops to Civic Centre, then Shekou line (Chiwan direction) 19 stops to Sea World.



Entrance of the Design Society on the waterfront at Shekou in Shenzhen. Photo: Enid Tsui