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Monocolumn: Egypt's Design Revolution



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"We see Egypt like an African China," says Maurizio Ribotti, CEO of the

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"We see Egypt like an African China," says Maurizio Ribotti, CEO of the Italian-based Design Partners and mastermind of the annual Zona Tortona satellite design event in Milan. Ribotti was invited this week by the Egyptian Furniture Export Council (EFEC) to inaugurate +20 Egypt Design, a new government-funded annual initiative that aims to turn Egypt into a design hub by exposing its locally made products to manufacturers and designers around the world.

To jumpstart the initiative, +20 took over an empty, century-old Cairene house in the heart of the city's main market, Khan et Khalili, and asked Italian designer, Paola Navone, to fill its rooms with a curated mix of contemporary Egyptian furniture alongside Italian products from staple brands such as Molteni and Kartell.

"The goal is to show how Italian products can stand side by side with the Egyptian ones," says Ribotti. "We are trying to tell the world the quality is already here in Egypt, but it needs more of an identity. By bringing the expertise we have got from creating Zona Tortona we can help make this Egyptian scene global."

Ribotti along with the EFEC decided to inaugurate +20 during Egypt's international furniture fair, Furnex, in the hope that the thousands of foreign exhibitors attending the fair would make their way over from the convention centre to see first-hand "just how impressive Egyptian-made products could be", says Ribotti. "We want people to consider not just selling items here, but also making their products here. There is just so much potential."

"We have all the resources in Egypt – a handful of top notch manufacturing plants and thousands of people already working in the industry," says Ahmed Helmy, chairman of EFEC. "+20 is just the start of an initiative that aims to add Egypt to the world's list of design capitals and hopefully start a design revolution."

While the ambition for a revolution may be there, thus far the sector, like many other industries in this country, has been mired in politics and bureaucracy, which have inhibited its growth. Design-sector revenue, although increasing from \$45m in 2004 to \$310m in 2009, represents just a fraction of the nation's economy.

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"The only way Egypt can compete on a global scale is to reinvest in our human and intellectual capacity and we haven't done this until now," agrees Amr Abdel Kawi, one of +20's organisers, who arranged a +20 collateral event that featured design projects by local students.

"We have over 35 design schools and 10,000 students in the design field graduating each year. And add that to the fact that 50 per cent of our population is below the age of 25. It's a tremendous resource that is totally not utilised," says Kawi.



And while the design sector can only alleviate a tiny part of Egypt's problems (soaring unemployment and low standards of living permeate the entire country), the hope is that nascent initiatives like +20 can, as EFEC chairman Amr Helmy says, "shine a light on so many other Egyptian sectors associated with design – like textiles – that also greatly need attention".





For Kawi, though, time is of the essence. "The status quo is no longer possible to maintain," he says. "Now we need to show the world our design relevance. And hopefully then we can put Egypt on the map."

Marisa Mazria Katz is a Monocle contributor based in New York

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image by Ahmed Ramadan

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