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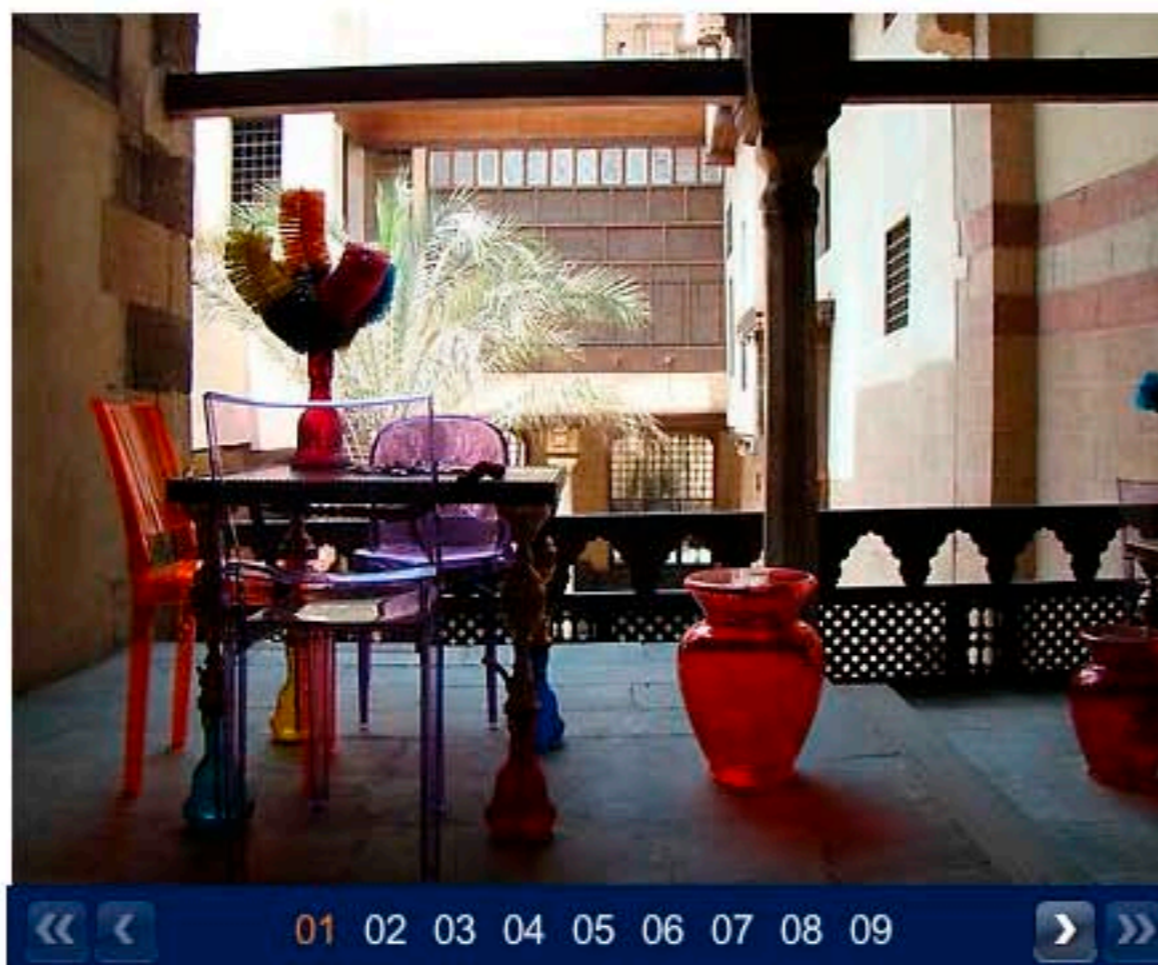
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The Nile gets a dash of style

Sandra Lane

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When the great and good of Cairo mingled with members of the international design community at a chic party in Cairo's Old Town last week, it was more than just a social occasion: its organisers had hoped that it would be nothing less than a breakthrough for design in Egypt.

It may just have been that: in a country that has been long on artisanship and big on furniture manufacturing capacity (cue curly-whirly baroque-style European repro for the most part), the handful of talented, locally based furniture designers and interior architects (notably Karim Mekhtigian and Cherif Morsi) were little more than voices in the wilderness.

But last week's event, +20 Egypt Design, a government-backed initiative

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But last week's event, +20 Egypt Design, a government-backed initiative organised by Design Partners – the company that transformed Milan's Zona Tortona into a major design hub – was quite a revelation.

It placed the work of Egyptian designers alongside that of several hand-picked European companies in an exhibition that spanned three exquisite side-by-side historic houses just off El Muiz Street. There were talks, too, by such luminaries as Gabriele Pezzini, the design director of Hermès, and Mario Trimarchi, a leading designer for Alessi.

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The choice of Paola Navone as the exhibition's curator and art director was a stroke of genius, as she harnessed her long-standing fascination with the mix of old and new, west and east with her talent for creating evocative spaces.

She mixed products from Mekhtigian, Morsi, Shahira Fahmy, Dina Shoukry and other local talents with the work of Philippe Starck and Patrick Jouin (for

Kartell), Ray Power (for LZP lighting) and pieces from Moroso, Alessi and others – and then added spice to the mix by trawling the local bazaars for traditional furnishings, metalwork and glassware. The result was captivating – and demonstrated the enormous difference that context can make in showing products to their best advantage.

"This is something we have been dreaming of doing for five years," said a happy Mekhtigian the day after the opening party. "Egypt needs a story to tell [in design]; we need to stop being proud only of the pyramids and mix all of the layers we have, old and new."

Like him, Maurizio Ribotti, the principal of Design Partners, he emphasised that the event was only a start.

"We must remember that business is a process, not an action," said Ribotti. "It will take time to develop this on both a local and international scale. But everybody who has been involved is very, very happy with how it has gone."

With the protagonists committed to staging a bigger and better event next year, and government backing guaranteed, the prospect of well-designed Egyptian-made contemporary furniture looks brighter than it ever has.

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