

Intelligent design

By Daniel Hilton



Beirut Design Week grows bigger and better

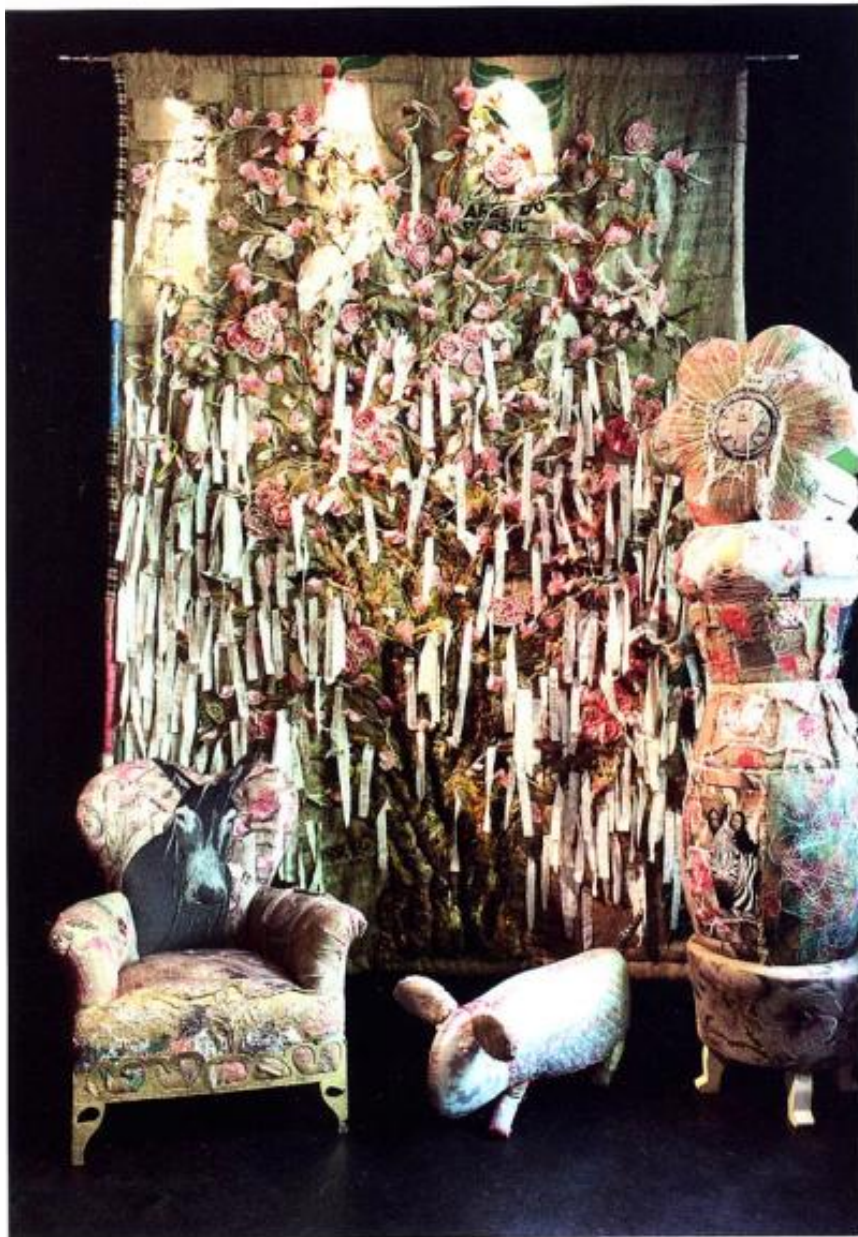
When asked what she's learned over the past few years, Doreen Toutikian, director of MENA Design Reach Center and founder of Beirut Design Week, pauses before answering somewhat cryptically. "How can I say this diplomatically? Sometimes you're really trying to please the wrong people." It's been three years since she and Maya Karanouh launched what is arguably Beirut's most innovative and far-reaching

artistic event and there has been a lot of growth along the way, the complexion of the event changing considerably.

In terms of scale, this year's Design Week eclipses the previous years by a distance. There are around 100 locations sprawled across Beirut, from the boutique-lined boulevards of Downtown to the bustling streets of Bourj Hammoud, which will be showcasing nearly 100 designers, both local and international. This, though, is only part of its progression. "At the beginning we were much more into the social impact of design and focused on the whole non-profit side," Toutikian reveals. "In the past year the economy has suffered so much because of all the political turmoil that we



This page Visuals by Beirut Design Week participants Wondereight (right) and furniture by Bokja Design Studio (below) Opposite page Designer Ghassan Salameh will take part in the week-long event

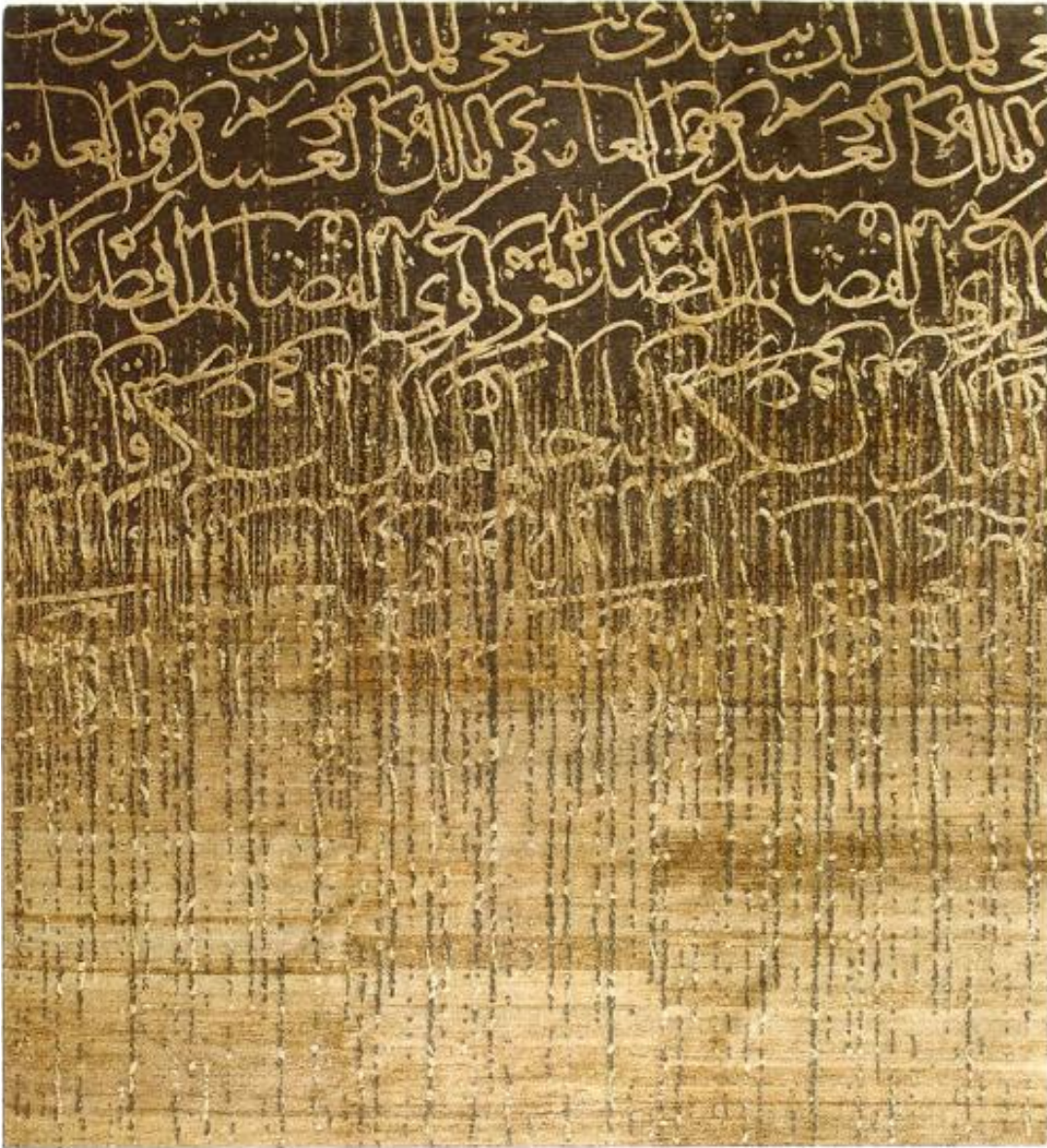


decided to focus more on the value of design – the creative economy.” It’s no secret that Beirut is erupting with creative output and Toutikian, speaking with a warm and energetic focus, clearly believes that this is an untapped mine of potential for the city.

The scope of Design Week has always been expansive and educational. From the beginning it has explored the role of design in entrepreneurship, education and in social impact and public interest projects. Now, better known and with a strong reputation, it has attracted larger foreign designers and investors to help kick-start Lebanon’s creative economy. This year, a far greater focus has been given to providing Lebanese designers more opportunity for investment and to developing their business skills. Says Toutikian, “Once you show them the right tools and get them to think of themselves as entrepreneurs and not just as designers, you actually help them for much longer.”

Lack of local government backing and greater potential for funding has meant that support often comes from abroad, and the event has impressed some big names already. A collaboration with the Dutch

Carpet brand Iwan Maktabi (top) and design studio Atelier Khaled el Mays (bottom) are involved in Beirut Design Week



embassy reaped especially fine benefits this year, resulting in a partnership with Dutch Design Week. Toutikian attributes this to the Dutch ambassador, Hester Somsen. “She’s young, she’s a woman and she’s very progressive in the way that she thinks. They are doing such a great job providing positive feedback about Lebanon that all of these designers from Holland are very excited to come.”

Hopefully, the continuing success of Design Week and the sight of foreign interest in local design will encourage investment from a governmental level so that Toutikian’s vision of a creative economy will come to fruition. “We have so much talent and so many human resources. We want to prove that Beirut can be the heart of the whole MENA region,” she enthuses, and its difficult to disagree with her.

Beirut Design Week runs from June 9-15 across Beirut, beirutdesignweek.org