

## „promisedesign“- new design from Israel

DESIGNMAI FORUM, Edison Höfe  
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*“Man is the mold of his  
 country's landscape.”  
 (Saul Tchernichowsky, 1875–1943)*

The first exhibition abroad of the work of young Israeli designers was held four years ago at the trade fair „Abitare il Tempo“ in Verona. This year, a new exhibition of bigger dimensions with works of more than 60 Israeli product designers. „promisedesign“ is being presented in Berlin as part of the international design festival, „designmai 3“. „promisedesign“ is also an adjunct to the events marking forty years of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany. The „promisedesign“ exhibition comes to Berlin directly from Milan, where it was presented at the „Triennale di Milano“, concurrent with the 2005 Salone del Mobile. After Berlin, the exhibition will be shown in other European cities.

Thanks to the exhibition of 2001, design historian Mel Byars, author of The Museum of Modern Art Design Encyclopedia, was confronted with Israeli design for the first time and declared in short, “Israeli design is the world's best-kept secret.” Since then, those of us associated with the country's design family have endeavoured to export and exhibit work that will continue to draw the contours of the phenomenon which can be circumscribed as Israeli design.

The initial venue four years ago provoked questions which seem to have lost none of their validity, but the passage of time has contributed more intelligible answers.

The first question was and remains: What is the purpose of an exhibition based on national characteristics and one occurring at a time when international borders are being economically and artistically lifted and blurred by globalisation?

The next question: Is there room for local identity in such a modern discipline as the field of design?

The third question is specifically addressed to the subject of Israeli design: Does it really exist, and, if so, where is its place in an international context?

Concerning the marketplace for mass-produced goods, such as those for households, globalisation has brought little in the way of a local culture to the public at large. However, the situation is quite different with small-scale experimental design—an area that has been a source of inspiration for international designers in their personal enquiry into subject matter and trends. In this domain, a cultural, social and even religious regional reference can be found in Israel, where designers have developed their own language. For instance, despite the proximity of Holland to Italy, Dutch design, like that of the Droog group, is distinct from Italian design, like that of Memphis was. But both reflect aspects such as the geography, culture and economics of their respective countries. Likewise, Israeli design has developed a design language that relates to its own particular geography, culture and economics. And their distinct language is much like the unique approach adopted by the Dutch design consortium Droog. Yet it is very different industrially, geographically and culturally from the Italians'. Israeli work reflects the industrial, geographic and cultural circumstances of the nation state itself.

Beneath a thin crust of globalisation in the country, subterranean rivers of local culture continue to flow. The cultural DNA of the place and the people living there defines these rivers. In order to decode the genetic formula of Israeli design, some factors have to be considered.

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### The Second Commandment

The biblical ban on figurative representation mandated by the Second of the Ten Commandments in the Bible—in portraits or sculpture—did not encourage the development of an aesthetic approach to the secular material culture, such as domestic artefacts and furniture. Even though the aesthetic traditions of Europe have at times burdened imagination, the absence of a similar tradition in Israel has liberated its designers from any kind of fixation and obligation and established a free space in which they have experimented and developed.

### The corruptive force of beauty

Hellenism, which circumscribed the idea of “the beautiful”, has become one of the foundations of Western civilisation. But the concept is absent in Jewish culture, in which the ancient Greek empire was regarded as an enemy of Judaism.

Thus, the two cultures were antithetical. The Greeks pursued the physical and emphatic, and the Jews, the iconoclastic, abstract and introverted. But, no matter their distinct differences, both have appreciably contributed to present-day form of Western culture. Yet, two thousand five hundred years ago, the ancient Greeks did their utmost to destroy the Jewish culture even though many Jews at the time adapted to Greek “globalisation”. Those who continued to adhere fanatically to their identity, in contrast, regarded Hellenism as the archenemy of Jewish spiritual and ethical values.

In the course of time, Jews developed the notion that the Hellenic concept of beauty would corrupt the soul, and this negative association persists even now.

Even though most Israeli designers are far from religious zealots, a reflex seems to prevail in many of them (frequently subconsciously) which dissuades them from the pursuit of beauty. As revealed in much of the work included in “promisedesign”, the solutions express surprise—rather beauty per se. An example is Zev Perlmutter’s refrigerator, padded with polystyrene pellets, that is a low-tech variation of thermal protection. His solution eschews refined aesthetics and is rather an ironic statement about our consumer-orientated world.

### “Post-industrial crafts”

Israel’s cutting-edge plastics industry and its refined high-tech sector offer first-class production facilities. Nevertheless, a designer-oriented furniture industry does not exist. But the void has fostered a high level of creativity, which might have been thwarted by the demands of the marketplace or the mandates of unsophisticated manufacturers.

The technologically advanced industrial conditions have encouraged a considerable number of designers in Israel to work in a sector, which could be called “post-industrial crafts”.

The designers have no real access to industry, so they create industrial products in the manner of traditional craftspeople. The saw, hammer and lathe of crafts workers have given way to injection and rotational moulding, metal pressing, photochemistry and other advanced methods of production.

As early as 1996, Tal Gur started to experiment with a special rotational-moulding technique for making chairs in various series. His solution stemmed from his own discovery that air pressure—comparable to that for customary injection techniques—was not required in the rotational process. He thus developed, with the aid of manual intervention, a new method for changing the form of rotation between one chair and the other.

Even though a rotational-molding factory initially rejected Gur's project, he persisted, developed the technique through his own effort and proved to the factory technicians that his idea was indeed possible.

A relationship of this nature—between factory and designer when the designer must by necessity be inventive to prove his point, to dispel doubt and to invest a great deal of energy in convincing doubters—is quite typical in Israel.

The story of Alon Razgour and an aluminium factory is similar in many ways to Gur's. Yaron Elyasi, on the other hand, reconstructed his own injection machine for recycling plastics for the manufacture of lamps and chairs. The result is far from industrial and reflective of the glassmaking in Murano.

Liat Poysner produces lamps by means of photochemical machinery (PCM). The technique is normally employed to cauterise thin sheets of metal with acids that eat out complex shapes. She became acquainted with the technique while working in the quality-control unit of a factory in her kibbutz.

Talila Abraham, who also uses photochemistry, computer scans crocheted material that is then transferred onto thin metal plates and cut out. Hence, she marries crafts skills to modern technology.

Ezri Tarazi's "Baghdad Table" offers a different view of the post-industrial society. The table is composed of hundreds of different extruded aluminium profiles to become an example of what the "demon machine" can realize. The geometry of the profiles emerges as an aerial view of the city of Baghdad. Like a military model, the political and local realities of the Middle East are revealed.

### Wunderkind

As opposed to other countries of a Western stamp, the birth rate in Israel is somewhat like developing nations. Even though there has been a reduction in the birth rate in some European countries, the average family in Israel has three children. And Orthodox Jews and minorities, such as the Bedouins, Arabs and Druse, have appreciably contributed to the Israeli population.

All in all, a strong desire to survive appears to have permeated the psyche of the Israelis. They strive to compensate for both the decimation caused by the Holocaust and the Palestinian demographic factor.

The number of children and their status are inimitable to Israelis. Children never feel badly treated or unwanted. Every restaurant has children's seats, and the wheeling a pram into a bank is never discouraged.

The attention paid to the young is further reflected in the production of children's products. Examples from this domain in "promisedesign" are the toy chair furniture by FAZA Design Atelier, design44 and IntoDe-

sign. In the Diaspora, the aspirations of Jewish parents for their children were directed in particular to their education and the achievement of excellence. And they wished the success to be, if possible, in science or music through which their offspring would have a better chance in life. In Israel, parents are relieved of this pressure and liberated from such compulsions, because they are, after all, at “home” and can relax.

Monkey Business’s wall-hanging pacifier holder, Odem Plast’s potty and Boogaloo’s eating set are all in serial production and symbolise the “worries” of Israeli parents.

### A humorous vein

Even when circumstances might have not been worse, Jews have been characterised by their sense of humour, which they hoped to call on to turn unhappiness and adversity into an occasion for jest and self-mockery.

The same motives, which have permeated Jewish literature, film and the theatre, are found in its design; although, nowadays the desire to surprise is uppermost. And this desire is not only to entertain the neighbours, the group, the friends or the general public in the same manner as the archetype of the classic Israeli who, by means of irony or wit, loves to attract attention to himself and is also cheeky (chutzpah).

To those unfamiliar with the culture, the craving by Israeli designers to surprise or amuse the public may almost be an obsession or a somewhat childish foible.

The work of the couple Tami Pampanel and Michal Pickel-Sagi—like Maya Shapira/ Sahar Batsry, Yaara Nir Kachlon and Maya Vinitsky—is filled with a subtle sense of humour. And the interactive coffee table and chair in the “Golem” category by Ezri Tarazi is a parody on the intelligent household, recalling Charlie Chaplin’s machines in *Modern Times*.

### The place

An echo of the sense of place emanates from objects influenced by tradition, climate or lifestyle. This is the field in which Ami Drach and Dov Ganchrow excel, particularly through the tradition of decorating festive tableware with golden script. In their contemporary interpretation, decoration functions as a thermal element to keep food warm on the plate.

Calling on the theme of custom, Talila Abraham covers unleavened bread with “cloth”. But Abraham’s “cloth” is a metal sheet into which embroidery has been chemically etched.

Cold chocolate or “shoko” is a typical Israeli drink; this is due to the hot climate. Iris Zohar, who also designed the set for hot chocolate, interprets the “shoko” ritual with a special ceramic cup, manufactured by the Max Brenner chain.

The project that well assimilates the sense of place is expressed through the prototypes by industrial-design students in their second year at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. The theme of the assignment was a beach-tennis game. People who have visited Tel Aviv probably remember the activities on the beach. Regardless of the season, couples or groups of all ages play beach tennis. The school assignment intended to examine the forms and functions of the game’s racket, ball and container.

### The themes

“promisedesign” has been organised according to a number of themes, such as “Shulhan Aruh” (the set table) to illustrate the realm of ceramic cutlery and includes many examples selected from the ceramics biennial in Israel, held in 2005 at the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv. “Golem” presents interactive objects—or those that simulate human behaviour. “Wunderkind” addresses design for children.

The fourth theme is “Post-Industrial Crafts”, which in particular reflects the specific situation of Israel where there is virtually no activity in mass-produced furniture, even though, as stated above, the high-tech industry is highly developed. The combination of these two phenomena has resulted in a wide spectrum of varying forms of articulation in Israeli design. There is not only very sophisticated technological design—in medicine and electronics, as examples—but also design outside the industrial sector, which avails itself of modern technology, while applying crafts principles.

Need, a five-metre-high shopping trolley by Ido Bruno, is the emblem of the exhibition. It holds the quantity and diversity of food consumed by the average Israeli in one year and represents, among other ideas, a conceptual, non-industrial type of design which uses a symbol of industrial consumption.

The lighting fixture “Viviana”, produced by Luxid and designed by Yaakov Kaufman, was chosen to illuminate part of the exhibition area of “promisedesign”. And the exhibition platforms were been selected from the product line of the Israeli company Polymer Logistics, which manufactures storage containers and exhibition platforms made of recycled plastics.

“promisedesign” endeavours to unveil “the best kept secret in the world of design”, at least to a certain extent, and also emphasises “promise”, which Israeli designers, producers and institutions have still yet to fulfil completely.

#### *The curators*

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