

Moving to Hong Kong from Toronto has opened up new perspectives for the industrial designer

'It's interesting, East and West working together'

BY ALEX BOZIKOVIC

Designer Scot Laughton has never been predictable. When he was fresh out of school in the mid-1980s, his self-produced Strata lamp (a collaboration with Tom Deacon) drew international attention. From there, the Ottawa native went on to create a range of furniture and lighting for manufacturers from Nienkamper to Umbra. In 2002, his line for the company Lolah won a major award at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York, but the firm ultimately fizzled.

Recently, Laughton has been pursuing a quieter path. In September of 2006, he moved to Hong Kong from Toronto with his wife and their young son. Today, he's teaching at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and getting ready to re-enter the scene with a new line of outdoor furniture for Toronto-based Avenue Road. Laughton will also be showing limited-edition works at Design Basel this spring.

What are your current projects?

I'm doing the line of furniture for Avenue Road and then I'm doing some work for a gallery in Shanghai called Contrasts Gallery. They're using some Westerners and local people; their idea is to use traditional techniques, or factory techniques that are indigenous to China, with some narrative of Chinese culture mixed in.

The work for Contrasts Gallery is art-slash-design. I've done a bookshelf that's not dissimilar from what Ettore Sottsass had been doing with his bookshelf explorations – limited-production explorative works. It stacks in a very primitive manner, the way an inukshuk would stand. And it definitely has an Asian quality to it, because the shelves have turned-up ends – the way a roof on a traditional Chinese building might turn up at the end. They curve up to hold a book.



Scot Laughton poses with the Prototype Lounge Chair he designed for Toronto furniture store Avenue Road. RYAN CARTER FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

All by design

BORN

In Ottawa in 1962.

EDUCATION

Graduated from the Ontario College of Art in 1986 with a degree in industrial design.

HIGHLIGHTS

Co-founded and for five years helped run Portico, a design company producing lighting, chairs and tables.

Named Designer of the Year in 2003 by the Interior Design Show in Toronto.

Moved to Hong Kong in September, 2006.

CURRENT GIG

Designing a line of furniture for Toronto's Avenue Road.

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What is it like working with Chinese manufacturers and craftsmen?

It's interesting, East and West working together. I have a way that I'll propose something can be made, which they'll understand. And then they'll propose something back.

In North America, it would be very common for a fabricator to use different materials – say wood and metal – together.

For the bookshelf, my construction, which was basically a box, used metal to reinforce the interior.

And they said, 'Well, we don't do metal, and if we were to work with someone who did metal, and it was to fail, who would be responsible?'

How do you see new technology like 3-D modelling and rapid prototyping changing the design world?

It's a tool. It's allowed us to visualize things we wouldn't have been able to visualize before. But because we can get something pretty quickly in 3-D modelling, we may not get to know the form as intimately as we would by modelling it the old-fashioned way. You know, I see my students design objects that are standing up somehow in 3-D but defying the laws of gravity.

I just saw an incredible new building design by Zaha Hadid and was thinking that you can do these fantastic buildings on computers. But in product design, it's tempered a bit, isn't it? You have to

consider that most production techniques are still pretty limited – moulds and so on – and these are the things that limit forms and define how mad we can make them.

So how mad does your current work look?

For Avenue Road, it's an outdoor collection – an aluminum and stainless-steel combination with a mesh fabric. We're trying to make it light and airy – not overly rectilinear, but not overly curvaceous either. I think all the details are quite disciplined, but there's a relaxed nature to the pieces as well.

What designers are inspiring you these days?

I've taken a hiatus from everything Canadian. In general, I've seen great products by [Milan-based Spaniard] Patricia Urquiola; [Japan's] Naoto Fukasawa has done a couple of sweet, sweet pieces. But in general, what's interesting is that manufacturers produce these nicely edited collections of objects. [Italy's] Moroso, for instance, worked with a handful of designers who were different last year than they are this year. The ideas are nice and they're fresh.

So one thing to look out for isn't necessarily a consistent body of work from a designer, but from one well-run manufacturer.

Absolutely. And I think you start to realize quickly that the original idea is only part of the final design. I think that's something we often forget.

Now, I want the names of the people working on these pieces in China. Who are these people? What have they done? I think you start to realize that craftspeople and manufacturers bring far more to the table than we're led to believe.

And all that is overshadowed by a designer who has a consistent look.