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DESIGN *takes seat*

Gaining global recognition, new labels springing up: Local design is on the rise

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ONE look and you know Apple's iPod isn't just any old portable music player.

And Motorola's new RAZR mobile phone didn't help Motorola clinch the No 2 market position on functionality alone.

These days, more Singaporeans are willing to pay a premium for products that look as good as they work – if not better – be it that streamlined hi-fi from Bang & Olufsen or furniture designed by Philippe Starck.

While it may appear that the most innovative designs are imported, homegrown designers are starting to get noticed as they grow in stature.

Recently, it was announced that this year's Red Dot Design Awards – among the world's most prestigious design prizes, previously held solely in Germany – will be held in Singapore. Five local firms are past award recipients.

Last month, as part of the *Singapore Season* artistic showcase in London, an event called *Singapore Evening* was held at the fashionable Old Truman Brewery to offer insight into Singapore's design and creative community.

An exhibition at the recently-concluded Jendela Visual Arts Space at the Esplanade featured finalists from this year's Furniture Design Award.

Australian designers are also coming to town next month for *Design For Passion*, a design showcase at The Arts House as part of this year's Arts Festival. More information is available on their website at www.theartshouse.com.sg.

At the end of the year, a design festival is slated to take place right here in Singapore. Visit www.designsingapore.org for details.

The first Singapore International Design Festival in November will be themed "Testing the Edge".

It appears that design has never had a higher profile here.

The badge of chic

"Design sells lifestyles," said Teal Triggs, a design-historian, critic and educator at the School of Graphic Design at the University of Arts in London.

In an interview with TODAY, she said: "Take the U2 limited edition iPod, for exam-

ple, where the original white music player (was remodelled) into a more sophisticated and sleek-looking black version.

"So, while colour for the iPod minis projects the playfulness of younger music, the U2 black iPod – with its affiliation with the Irish rock band – suggests 'hipness' can be bought and displayed to your peer group.

"It's association by product: Design sells community and a sense of belonging."

There is even a resurgence of design-related television programmes in Britain, from *How Things Look* to *Changing Rooms*.

The designer's eye

While many may think it impossible to define good design, most local designers have clearly-defined ideas about what makes a product desirable.

Song and Kelly's Wykidd Song, who took part in the *Singapore Evening*, said: "Good design brings with it a desire and need. It'll always win in a market where one is inundated with choice."

Product designer Voon Wong, a London-based Singaporean, agreed: "A non-essential product is never about its function – it is sold by creating the desire for the product."

Hans Tan, gold award winner of the young designer category in the Furniture Design Award 2005, had a more pragmatic view of design.

"Good design could include plastic cutlery that decomposes in weeks, or it may involve successfully increasing the livelihood of third-world country artisans by collaborating with them in creating new products for export markets," he said.

"There is simply so much more (than just how a product looks)."

Slicing the market

Today's consumer are a lot more savvy when it comes to design.

"In our mature market, consumers are

more discerning. You can't pull the wool over their eyes," said Song.

Furniture Design Award merit winner Edwin Cheong said that better design adds value to a product in terms of aesthetics, but also noted that, in every market and society, there are different segments to cater to.

"Why, for example, would more Europeans want to buy a Philippe Starck Fly Swatter, when most people in Asia would rather use that money to buy 100 made-in-China fly-swatters?" he asked.

"Basically, what do people value? Economy or design?"

But, contrary to popular belief, well-designed products do not necessarily cost a bomb, said designers we spoke to.

Said Voon: "Good design does not necessarily mean higher price tags. In the same vein, an item that has a hefty price tag does not necessarily mean it's well-designed."

Tan added that Ikea furniture, designed primarily with lower costs in mind, still manages to look good.

It's time to grow

Local designers said recent developments had encouraged them and that they hope to see more done to help this nascent industry reach Red Dot heights.

"There's a handful of talented young designers in different fields of design, such as graphics, film and fashion," said Song.

"But there has to be a more obvious platform by which we can encourage them to excel."

Echoing this view was Tan: "I think it is important for Singapore to focus on discovering our design identity instead of merely emulating success stories."

And when will we know that the industry has "arrived"?

Said Cheong: "The day when even *ah mas* and *ah kongs* (aunties and uncles in Hokkien) in the wet markets talk about design – *that's* when we'll know that we have a 'design-conscious' culture."



Furniture Design Award-winning chair "Qi Pao", by Tan Bee Hock.