

mabuhay

November 2017

48 HOURS IN BROOKLYN

Find out why New York's
buzziest borough deserves
more than just a walk
across the bridge

All eyes are on Davao's
first female skimboarder

Bike-sharing in Beijing
is now in fashion

Bohol comes together
to rebuild its iconic landmark

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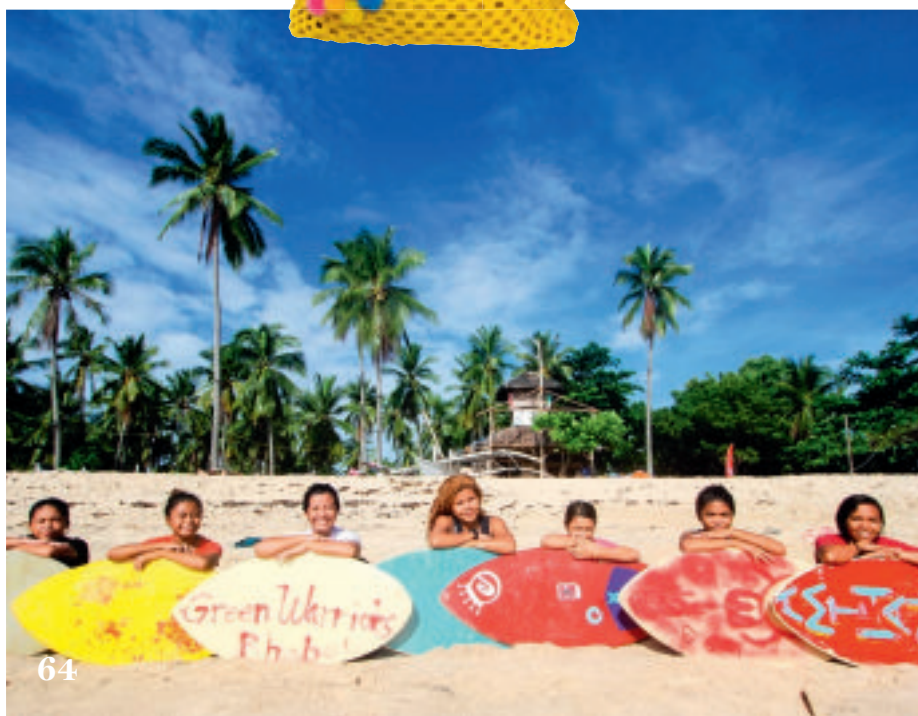
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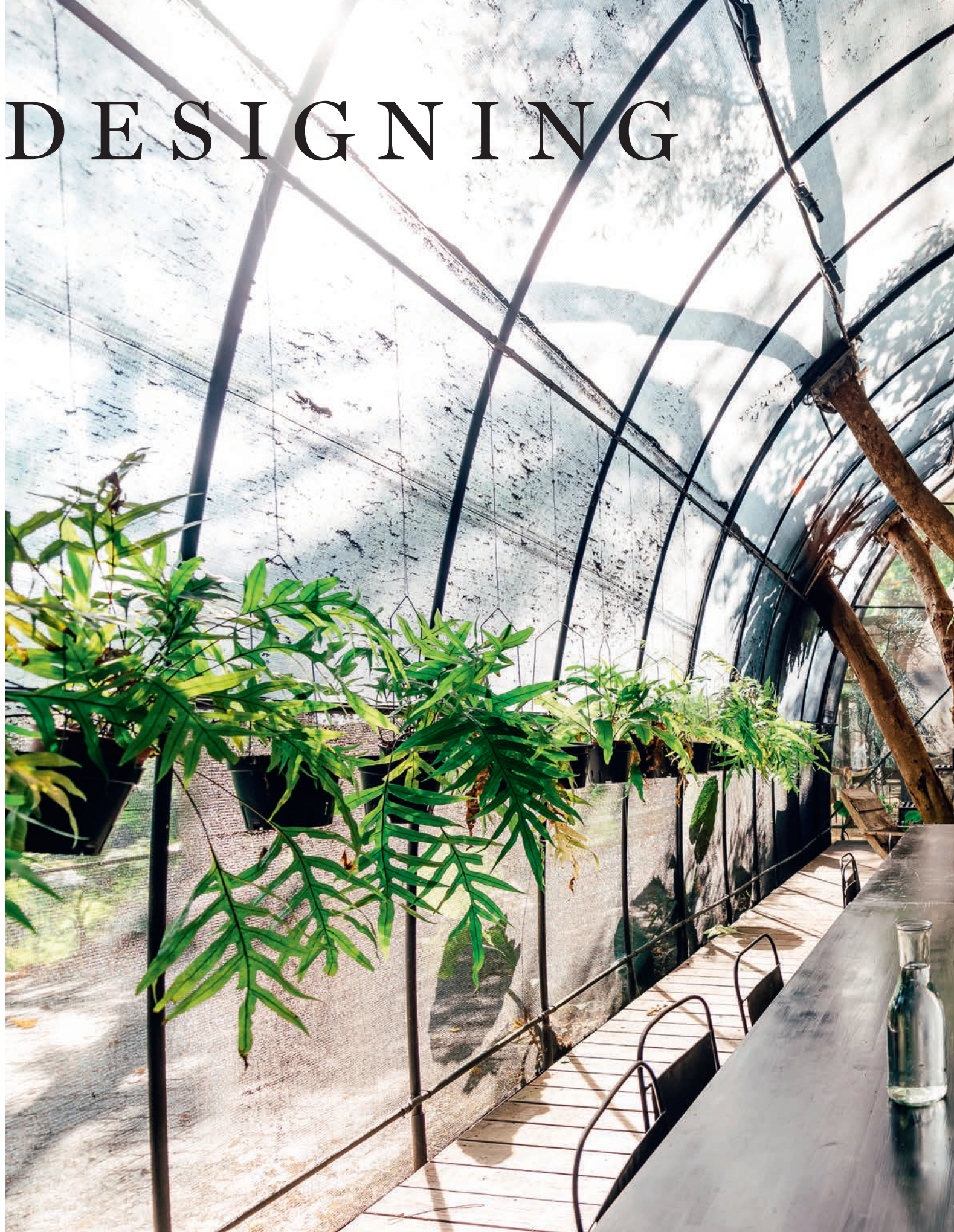


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DESIGNING





Taipei will have a new skyline by the beginning of next year, but creative change is also brimming in the city's quiet alleys and hidden spaces – where hotels, galleries and craft stores are leading a grassroots revolution to shape the city

By Dana Ter
Photography Joe Russo

THE CITY

FOR A MAJOR METROPOLIS WITH NEARLY THREE MILLION RESIDENTS,

Taipei's skyline – much, one could argue, like its general vibe – is somewhat understated. Over the past decade or so, it has sat on the sidelines as other Asian cities engaged in an architectural arms race to construct a seemingly endless number of high-rise towers. Unlike neighboring Hong Kong or Singapore, Taipei lacks any easily recognizable landmarks, save for one: Taipei 101, the city's sole skyscraper that sticks out like a sore – albeit attractive – thumb.

But this is set to change, starting with Xinyi District, a business and shopping hub, welcoming two new additions to the neighborhood. The 48-story Nan Shan Plaza, designed by Japanese architect Yasuhiro Sube, is scheduled to open at the end of 2018. Financial institutions and IT companies will occupy most of the office spaces, with a shopping mall on the ground floor and restaurants dotting the upper levels. Meanwhile, the 40-unit Tao Zhu Yin Yuan luxury condominium, designed to resemble a double-helix with 23,000 trees and rooftop solar panels, will open early next year. Designed by Paris-based architect Vincent Callebaut, it will feature an art installation by Taiwanese designer Chih-Kang Chu that incorporates various natural elements as its centerpiece on the ground floor. Both skyscrapers will, in time, become architectural icons. They will be joined in the near future by the Taipei Sky Tower



and Fubon Group Xinyi Headquarters, both of which are slated for completion some time in 2020.

The rest of the world is beginning to take notice of Taipei's grand design ambitions. In 2016, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design named Taipei the World Design Capital, a title which recognizes thoughtfulness and innovation in design and urban planning. And the 2017 Golden Pin Design Award, an annual event honoring design ingenuity in Chinese-speaking countries, took place in Taipei in September. An exhibition of the award winners will open to the public on November 21 at the Taiwan Design Museum, while a bilingual English and Chinese forum is scheduled for December 7 at the Eslite Spectrum Performance Hall. Organized by the Taiwan Design Center, the forum will feature speakers such as Rossana Hu of Shanghai-based design practice Neri&Hu and Hong Kong-based design and architecture firm LEAD's Kristof Crolla.

THIS SPREAD,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
The interior of Siu Lab, designed by Divoze Zein Architects; architect Fanyu Lin; a working desk at Green Room; texts on display at Pon Ding



ON THE STREET, THOUGH, ASK ANY

Taiwanese what they think of Taipei's new mega-structures and its design boom, and they'll simply shrug. "World Design Capital, design hub – these are just labels," says architect Fanyu Lin of local firm Divoee Zein Architects. "Taipei may not be a visually appealing city, but there's something charming about it – its energy is something that you feel, rather than see. And as architects and designers, it's our job to preserve that feeling rather than work against it."

While the huge strides in Taipei's commercial design and large-scale architectural scene will culminate in the coming months and years, in the meantime, a fascinating design evolution is happening in the city's repurposed industrial districts. Here, quiet areas and warrens of backstreets are home to a range of independent designers tirelessly working to define the visual identity of the city at the grassroots level – a lofty goal which often goes unnoticed.

Many Taiwanese factories shifted their production to China over the past two decades – due to reasons such as cheaper resources, lower labor costs and the projected potential of China's large market – taking along with them the support staff that once populated many of the city's office buildings. This exodus has freed up these spaces, allowing small-scale design studios and firms, as well as exhibition and retail spaces that combine art and design, to take over the vacated spots. Each of these outfits operates with the ethos that constructing a city doesn't necessarily mean making major changes to its skyline.

ONE SUCH COMPANY IS DIVOOE ZEIN

Architects, founded in 2002 by Divoee Zein, a Taiwanese architect who grew up in Palau. The firm is known for using natural materials and organic contours rather than rigid lines, and their projects range from private homes to art galleries and tea factories across Taiwan and China. Some of their more notable local projects include a renovation of the Daxi Tea Factory near Taoyuan International Airport and Bear Mountain Tea Plantation in Sanxia, on the outskirts of Taipei.

To find out more about the company's creations, I visit Fanyu Lin at Siu Siu Lab





THIS PAGE
Play Design
Hotel, a boutique
establishment
where each of
the five rooms is
uniquely curated
by a different
design studio

of the Primitive Senses, an exhibition and event venue Divooze Zein Architects designed back in 2014. Located a quick taxi ride uphill from their design studio near the National Palace Museum, Siu Siu Lab resembles a makeshift shelter in a forest, with the façade constructed out of a durable waterproof net.

Stepping into the space, I notice little distinction between the indoors and outdoors. Wooden floors and furniture bring natural elements inside, while interior contours are designed to accommodate three acacia trees and a tallow tree that jut through the netting. There are no windows in this section of the venue, as the porous black netting is transparent enough for sunlight to enter.

Lin arrives on her motorcycle, casually dressed in ripped jeans rolled up to her

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”

calves and a white shirt, with her hair tied back in a loose ponytail. She jokes that every day is “casual Friday” at the less-than-conventional firm, which she joined in 2012. “We found this place and kind of built around it,” Lin tells me of the site on which Siu Siu Lab sits. “We wanted to show that nature is the host and we are the guests.”

She reveals that, compared to some of the other projects the firm has pursued, the architects had more creative leeway with Siu Siu Lab since they run the space themselves. “We're not just architects, we're also curators,” she says. The types of events held throughout the year at Siu Siu Lab include floral-making workshops, musical performances and art exhibitions. “Most of the people we invite here also consider nature to be sacred,” she adds.

Lin stresses that younger Taiwanese designers and architects often prefer to work independently on small projects rather than as part of a large-scale operation or paired up with multinational firms. “It's not just because there are fewer opportunities these days to work on something as big as Taipei 101,” she says, alluding to the economic boom that ended when the dot-com bubble burst. “There's also a generational schism. Young people didn't grow up with the pressure to conform, so we're just doing our own thing.”

DIVOOZE ZEIN ARCHITECTS IS FAR FROM being the lone challenger to the limits of design in Taipei. A quick drive from Siu Siu Lab brings me back to the city, right at the doorstep of Play Design Hotel. Despite its location at a busy intersection, the hotel, like Siu Siu Lab, requires some sleuthing to locate. Hidden on the top floor of a five-story residential

building, only a small sign on the ground floor announces its presence.

Built in 2015, Play Design Hotel is far from your typical boutique establishment. For one, founder Daniel Chen personally greets guests at the tiny fifth-floor reception. Furthermore, each of the establishment's five rooms is curated by different design studios and features a rotating selection of locally made furniture and decorative items. "We're more of an interactive museum than a hotel," says Chen, who used to be an exhibition designer. "Guests can pick things up and play with them. The goal is to teach people about Taiwanese culture through design."

The five guest rooms have changed themes a total of 14 different times since the hotel was founded. Current themes include Play Tea Room – which recreates the atmosphere of a traditional Taiwanese tea ceremony, complete with delicate blue-and-white porcelain tea sets – and Future Lab, curated by a biologist-turned-designer and decorated with vases that resemble beakers. Meanwhile, the Maker Room is furnished with items made from recycled electronics and gadgets, while the Guest Selection room allows guests to choose their own furniture and decorative items from a list on the hotel's website before checking in.

Room 503 – known as Made in Taiwan 3.0 – is furnished with items that blend traditional materials and craftsmanship with modern aesthetics to achieve an earthy yet sleek urban feel. The curator, A.M Ideas, is a two-person consultancy



focused on products made with natural and environmentally friendly materials. They also manufacture their own line of products, including lamps lined with rush grass made in collaboration with grass weavers who have been engaged in the trade for generations.

"When Daniel asked us to curate this room, we thought, 'Why not?'" says Wanshan Lin of A.M Ideas. Co-founder Helen Chen was initially more hesitant. "We were worried that we wouldn't have enough products!" she laughs. However, they were able to discover items made by under-the-radar local designers to fill out the space. "There's a small niche [of these who are] becoming more patriotic and realizing that we have a lot of good stuff here," she says.

THIS PAGE
Daniel Chen, the
founder of Play
Design Hotel



ART AND APPETITES

Dine at one of these spots where the ambiance is as snazzy as the food



MARU
This Japanese restaurant's renovation won it a Golden Pin Design Award in 2016. The simple geometric shapes on the walls complement the dark-wood flooring.
fb.com/marutaipei

Akuma Caca
The furnishings of this café located in the basement of Eslite Spectrum Songyan are cute, sophisticated and picture-perfect.
fb.com/akumacaca3

Lin Mao Sen Tea Co.
This refurbished tea house blends modern aesthetics with traditional motifs. The woven bamboo ceiling alludes to the bamboo nets used to sieve tea leaves.
linmaosen.com

Baffi
Designed by Taipei Base Design Center, the contrasting textures of this Italian trattoria's brick walls and metal ceiling conjure a rustic, low-key atmosphere.
baffi.com.tw

Their favorite items in the space include a table lamp designed by product design company Localware. Made from recycled Yakult and beer bottles, the design alludes to the cheap consumer products Taiwan was once famous for. Other items are a terrazzo vase and accent table designed by local brand Cofusion. Brought over to Taiwan by the Japanese, terrazzo was used for flooring during the colonial era, and Cofusion learned the art from terrazzo craftsmen. "Terrazzo evokes feelings of familiarity and nostalgia for older Taiwanese," Helen says. "There are subtle hints of tradition in all the items we curate."

IN FACT, AS THE NEIGHBORHOOD

guidebooks in the hotel reception point out, craft stores, antique shops and galleries populate the alleys next to Play Design Hotel, nestled between street-side food carts and more upscale cafés. This juxtaposition of old and new says much about the evolution of Taiwan's design scene over the years. Amid a row of cafés, noodle shops and old residential buildings, Pon Ding stands out.

Pon Ding's logo, an understated neon puddle, greets customers at the establishment's narrow entrance in a quiet alley. Inside are long rows of neatly

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”

stacked magazines ranging from Hong Kong-based title *Design Anthology* to back issues of food magazine *Lucky Peach*. Communal wooden tables and stools line the walls while a barista brews coffee at the back, which opens out to a small garden. The original terrazzo floor remains, giving Pon Ding a traditional feel despite its uber-modern ethos.

Pon Ding serves as a coffee shop and bookstore on the first floor, with exhibition spaces on the second and third floors for designers and artists to sell their works. Co-founder and former magazine editor Yichiu Chen opened the venue with Indonesian product designer Kenyon Yeh and Japanese curator Yoichi Nakamuta in 2016. Their vision was a fun, interactive and constantly changing space to help nurture the design scene.

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Pon Ding's first floor, which houses a coffee shop and bookstore; Yichiu Chen, the co-founder of Pon Ding





I chat with Yichiu over a cup of mint tea as she shows me a pocket-sized letterpress book on sale. Despite her quiet demeanor, she wears her hair in a bouncy bob and she's not afraid to criticize Taipei's design scene, especially its commercial aspects. "A few years ago, if you asked Taiwanese what they thought of design products, they would say that they're foreign, expensive and found in department stores," she says. Pon Ding is none of the above. When I visit, an artist had painted the exterior glass walls with doodles, while a fashion designer converted the third floor into an interactive "market" with virtual reality installations criticizing fast fashion.

The establishment is also a platform for young Taiwanese talents to feature their work. "It's a space for illustrators, product designers, graphic designers, fashion designers and other creative types to meet and share ideas," Yichiu explains. "We're saying that design isn't high-brow – it's relatable and tangible." On the whole, Yichiu believes that Taipei would benefit from more spaces like Pon Ding. "It's the type of shop that I would love to stumble upon if I'm out exploring with friends," she says.

A 10-MINUTE METRO RIDE ACROSS town, GreenRoom Ideas Cooperation is another such establishment. Occupying the second and third floors of a shophouse off popular Yongkang Street,



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this handmade leather goods store and workshop sells products like bespoke bags, watch straps and luxurious passport holders made by the on-site seamstresses and leathersmiths.

The interior consists of simple white-wall décor, with products displayed neatly on streamlined shelves. A seamstress stitches a leather tote in a small work nook near a big window overlooking the tree-lined street below. Upstairs, five leathersmiths are measuring and cutting slabs of leather.

"A lot of people have trouble finding us, or they get a little creeped out by the

THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT
 The brightly lit interior of Pon Ding; Ethan Yang of GreenRoom Ideas Cooperation

narrow, dark staircase," jokes co-founder Nagaaki Shaw. He and his business partner Ethan Yang started GreenRoom in 2011, but they remain under-the-radar and clients learn about them either through word-of-mouth or from design magazines they've been profiled in, such as *Monocle* and Japanese title *Anan*.

"We're not very prominent for a reason," Yang says as he straps on a blue apron and gets to work assisting the leathersmiths. "Of course, we have to run a business, but we also want to attract a certain clientele, one that appreciates the beauty and craftsmanship that goes into making these items."

Yang and Shaw both come from industrial design backgrounds, but decided to call it quits after a decade of designing mass-produced goods. "There's no warmth," Yang says. "But with handmade goods, each maker has his or her own style and that gives each item its own character." Shaw adds that he's glad young people attend GreenRoom's

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Scenes from GreenRoom Ideas Cooperation, a leather goods store and workshop

leather-making workshops, which take place once every two months, to learn how to create leather totes and clutch bags. "It's simply a matter of time before this subculture of design becomes part of the mainstream," he says.

It might be easy to agree with Shaw that it's best for GreenRoom to remain under the radar for now, along with Siu Siu, Pon Ding and Play Design Hotel. Despite working in the shadow of the larger corporations that are changing the shape of the city's skyline, there's something to be said for the intimate, sincere and immediate nature of their work. They may differ in their approaches, but one central belief unites them all: that in order to gain international recognition for the city's design, it's best to first focus on local talent and resources.

HANDMADE GIFTS

These shops, which specialize in handmade products, are perfect for souvenir shopping



22 Design Studio

Diamonds are not a girl's best friend for the craftspeople at 22 Design Studio, where their impressive range of handmade concrete and steel jewelry includes rings and earrings inspired by urban life. 22designstudio.net

HEE Porcelain

Tableware at HEE Porcelain re-interprets Taiwanese motifs using simple lines and cool, pastel colors. Turtle-shaped chopstick holders allude to the association of turtles with long life and wealth. heeporcelain.org

ACID Lab

Standing for "artists, craftsmen, innovators and designers", ACID Lab is a workshop and retail space selling handmade shoes, clothes and other items. The founder is EJ So, who also makes customized men's shoes. fb.com/acidlab2015

The W Space

This is the flagship store of Taiwanese leather accessories brand, Wotancraft. All products are handmade. The store is designed by One Work Design, a new firm founded by three young designers. fb.com/wspace215



TAIPEI

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