



## Past present, future perfect

Take a trip down memory lane at this year's DesignInspire with these innovative and quintessentially Hong Kong creations

Every December, as the city brims with end-of-year celebrations and happenings, festivities are further enriched by a series of design events, where local and overseas talents take part in programmes that celebrate the diversity of the city's creative industries.

One such event, making a strong comeback this year, is Hong Kong Trade Development Council's (HKTDC) DesignInspire, a three-day immersive design fair packed with the latest products, trends, installations, exhibits and more, set in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre from December 5 to 7.

Young creatives will be among the standout exhibitors this year, as the event will once again play host to RetroInnovations, a section dedicated to local traditions and crafts that features a curated selection of emerging local designers, each bringing their own contemporary reinterpretation of what is uniquely Hong Kong – ranging from re-imagined red, white and blue 'amah' bags in new forms, to a mahjong-inspired coffee table.

As a sneak peek into the December event, *Perspective* spoke to six up-and-coming young designers in the RetroInnovations pavilion, to give us an exclusive first look at their creations.

### Red-White-Blue

Ming Ho, architect, LAAB

**What is the inspiration for *Red-White-Blue*?**

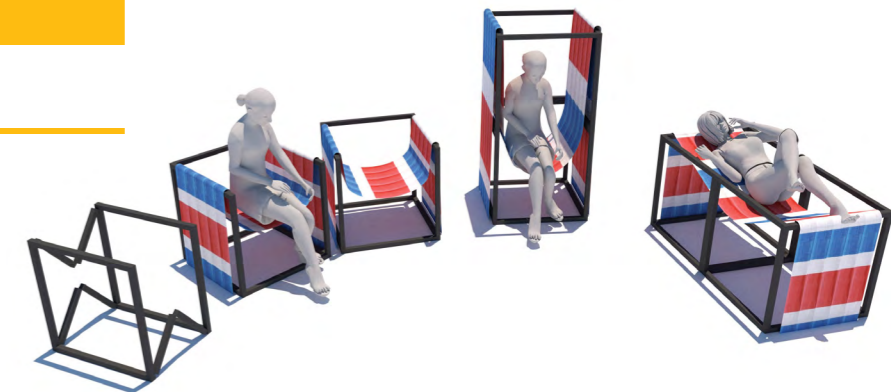
I was inspired when I walked passed a 50-year-old traditional canvas shop one day and saw an old craftsman sewing up a red-white-blue bag. At that time, I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to try to preserve this craft and material in a new setting.

I believe most Hong Kong people know what a red-white-blue (RWB) bag is, and nearly every household has used it at some point as it's so durable and cheap and can be used in various ways. It is tough and flexible, which in a way is also a reflection of Hong Kong's grassroots spirit.

The concept of the *Red-White-Blue* is to celebrate the toughness of RWB bags. Together with flexible steel modules, it could generate various combinations of flexible furniture. RWB has a very good tensile capability, and the installation will utilise the character of RWB.

**Why did you decide to take part in this year's RetroInnovations?**

I believe this year's RetroInnovations will again attract Hong Kong designers to share their views on how we should counter the paradox of striking a balance between the old and the new. This event gives us a platform to express how we could face the past and benefit our contemporary way of living.



**How do you demonstrate the connection between the past and present in your creation?**

*Red-White-Blue* represents our past, our traditions. The tri-coloured canvas is a great material that was used in daily lives in the past. And by combining it with a transformable designed structure, I wish to give this material a new meaning and function. I took the characteristics of the high-tensile strength of the red-white-blue and created a piece of furniture that could transform between a hammock, seat and a swing. It could be folded and stored away, like our red-white-blue bag.

**How do you think DesignInspire plays a part in raising the profile of Hong Kong's design scene?**

DesignInspire gathers young designers from various disciplines. It is an event for bright minds to share what they hope future society will be. It promotes the re-interpretation of the past through cross-disciplinary collaborations. Showcasing this synthesis to the general public would definitely help the public to pay more attention and expect more good designs from local designers.

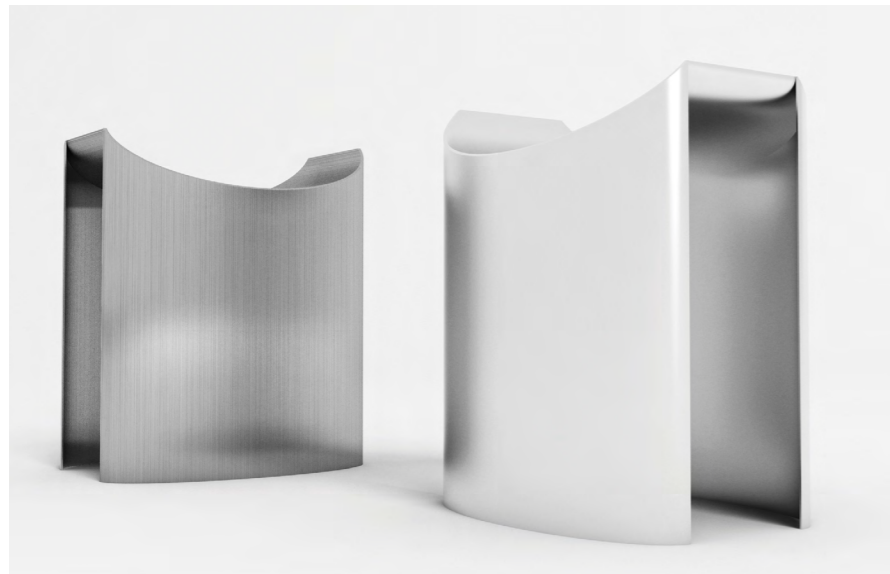
**What is your view on traditional culture and how it affects design?**

Traditional design and craftsmanship often comes with a story: there was less theory to drive the design, and their methodology was trial and error. This contributed to numerous failed attempts. They hid the design intelligence through experiences. It was a long ongoing procedure of experimenting, evaluating and improving. I believe in our era, with the use of new technologies and software, we could simulate designs under different conditions, tested in the digital realm.

Old and new, or tradition and modernity, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they can co-exist. It is our mission to exact their characteristics, learn from the past, re-energise and re-interpret the past in a contemporary way.



Photo: Model: LAAB Studio



These metal stools are a funky twist on the commonly found plastic stools around Hong Kong

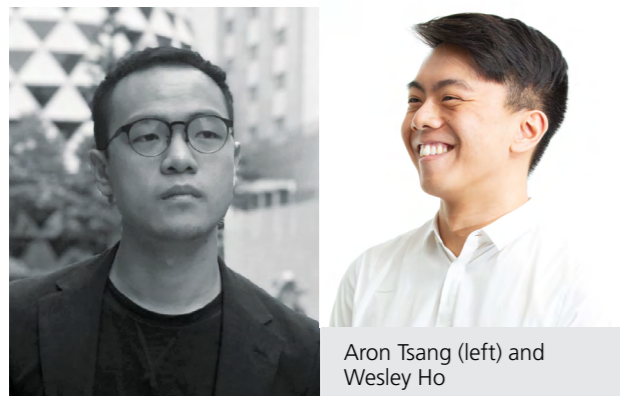


## A Sheet of Stool

Aron Tsang and Wesley Ho,  
co-founders of NAPP Studio & Architects

### Can you walk us through the concept behind your exhibits?

In the old days, colourful plastic stools were widely used in Hong Kong because they are functional, cheap and easy to store. As we become more conscious about design and the environment, we were inspired to make stools that are aesthetically more pleasing and more durable. Hence, the use of stainless steel. To ensure there is no wastage of material in the production process, the stool is designed to be folded out of a flat rectangular sheet of stainless steel, which also gives it a very simple yet sculptural form.



Aron Tsang (left) and Wesley Ho

You worked with local metalsmith Li Chun-yi on this. What was the experience like?

Hong Kong was once famous for its secondary industry. In fact, there are still so many passionate masterful *si fu* (craftsmen) of various trades in the city with exquisite craftsmanship and attention to detail. We have been very fortunate to work with *si fu* Li for one of our other projects, the *Vitrine Shelf* for the arts library at Tai Kwun. His expertise in metal work is truly inspiring.

### What is your take on traditional culture and craftsmanship, and how they impact design?

We think it is important to realise that craftsmanship is not limited to traditional crafts. Traditional culture and craftsmanship have their irreplaceable value when combined with technology and informing the development of art and design. With the advancement of technology, it is extremely critical for us to constantly reflect on our design in relation to what already exists so as to better understand the meaning of design at our time and throughout history.

### What do you expect from participating in this year's DesignInspire?

We have been engaging with DesignInspire for a couple of years already (showcasing our works in 2017 and designing the Hong Kong Design Centre's Pavilion in 2018). As a local young practice, it is very important for us to have such opportunities to showcase our works. We hope that they can speak to people across and outside of Hong Kong, and help to promote the city's design industry of Hong Kong to a wider audience.



The idea for the modular play set came from wooden moulds used to make traditional almond biscuits

## Almond Biscuit Play Set

Benny Lee, design director of BREAD Studio

### What inspired the making of the *Almond Biscuit Play Set*?

The installation will be a miniature version of a play set, which was inspired by the wooden moulds that are used to make traditional almond biscuits. Visitors are invited to design their own play set, while at the same time experience the unusual texture and scent of almond biscuits. Not only are almond biscuits delicious traditional treats, the wooden mould used to stamp and shape the cookies is one of the pioneers of mass-food production.

Inspired by their modularity, our team designed a modular play system that allows kids to configure their own playground. In the limited space we have today, public playgrounds offer less freedom and creativity



Lee (centre) and his design team of Almond Biscuit Play Set

compared to when we were kids. The proposed modular play set engages the public to design their desired play configuration.

### How would you describe your personal design style?

We intentionally distance our design from a certain style. Seeing no project as identical, we want to keep our mind open and fresh for different brief and conditions of each of our assignments. Having said that, some people might be able to connect the dots from some of our projects and depict a certain style. We are the same designer after all.

### Why did you decide to exhibit at this year's RetroInnovations?

While global focus usually lands on the financial success of Hong Kong, we want to showcase the creative side of the city.

### What are your expectations from your participation in RetroInnovations?

We wish our design can inspire people to re-think the value of our culture in today's world.

### What is your take on traditional culture and craftsmanship, and how they impact design?

Every piece of tradition is an accumulation of wisdom and experience. We always try to find inspiration from local tradition for our projects to help connect our design to a wider audience.

**Moonlight Capsule**

Dylan Kwok, designer

**Can you tell us about your exhibit?**

It's a box set that involves three old games: dice in bowls, a vintage set of Chinese chequers, and a deck of hand-drawn playing cards written in Chinese. These games will whisk you away from current affairs to enjoy a sense of nostalgia. Like a movie, this *Moonlight Capsule* (月光寶盒) shall bring you back to the past.

**How would you describe your personal design style?**

Human-centric design that is witty and sometimes humorous.

**Why did you decide to take part in this year's RetroInnovations?**

I like to shed light on Hong Kong's surviving traditional crafts, and let the public learn more about the city's declining sunset industries, a vital part of our culture.

**What traditional crafts or elements do you play with? And where/from whom did you get the idea?**

I worked with a metalsmith who works with tin, and fabric vendors in Sham Shui Po; a brass manufacturer in Sheung Wan who makes cabinet parts; a pottery seller in Tai Po Market that sells tofu dessert bowls; a young calligrapher who practises Chinese poetry; and a vintage tin lid of Chinese chequers made in the 1950s that I got from Amazon. It's a collaborative experience that could only happen in Hong Kong.



Kwok's *Moonlight Capsule* is a time machine filled with vintage pastimes

**What is your view on traditional culture and how it affects design?**

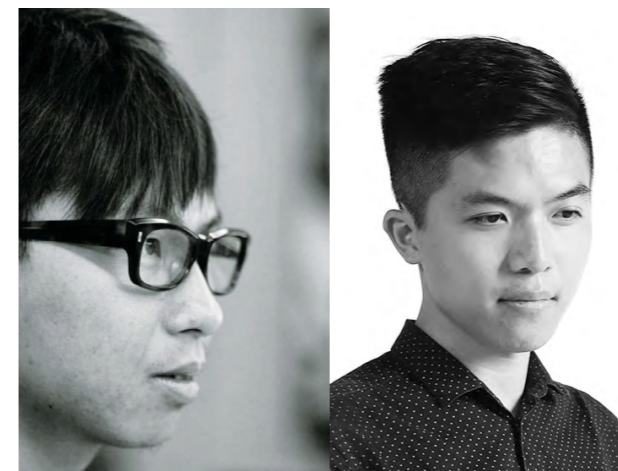
The craft of a nation has a huge impact on our identity. The quality of goods that one nation creates reflects the quality and style of the people. Good craftsmanship shall be mingled with smart design, may it be elegant, whimsical, or simply practical, the outcome will cast an impact on our culture, hence our identity.



Kwok (right) with a local metalsmith



PEGSaPLAY, a multi-purpose seating system designed by Kwok, consists of a bench and various customisable add-ons



**OO Blocks**

Kenrick Wong and Magic Kwan, co-founders and principals of Orient Occident Atelier

**What are OO Blocks? Can you explain the concept behind them?**

Our installation is a collection of *OO BLOCKS* – *Orient Occident Blocks* – literally “East and West blocks”. An *OO BLOCK* is an alphabet block that you can touch as well as see, shaped by shadow and light. It began with the question: how do we represent letters and words in the simplest way possible?

The letters and alphabets are shaped by simple cuts and carve-outs precisely milled, leaving a smooth, gentle texture on the blocks. Premium-grade wood is carefully chosen to evoke the best colour contrast in daylight. The abstract shapes of *OO BLOCKS* capture imagination and become versatile, timeless pieces of art. It can be a tactile learning toy for children, a decorative piece at home or the perfect gift for special occasions.

**How do you demonstrate the connection between the past and future in your installation?**

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the last Chinese type-casting company was shut down. In the past, metal type pieces produced in Hong Kong were common. Nowadays, only a handful of type-casting craftsmen remain and the craft of metal-type casting faces extinction.

We want to use this project to adopt computer-controlled milling technology, which allows for better efficiency and accuracy, and reinvent the carving of Chinese and English word- and alphabet-type pieces as a way to bring this industry to the present.

**Why did you decide to take part in this year's RetroInnovations?**

We are delighted to be invited to create an art piece that demonstrates the idea of connecting the past with the future. It coincides nicely with OOA's design interests of the conjunction of oriental and Western values, and of contemporary interpretations of traditional aesthetic values.

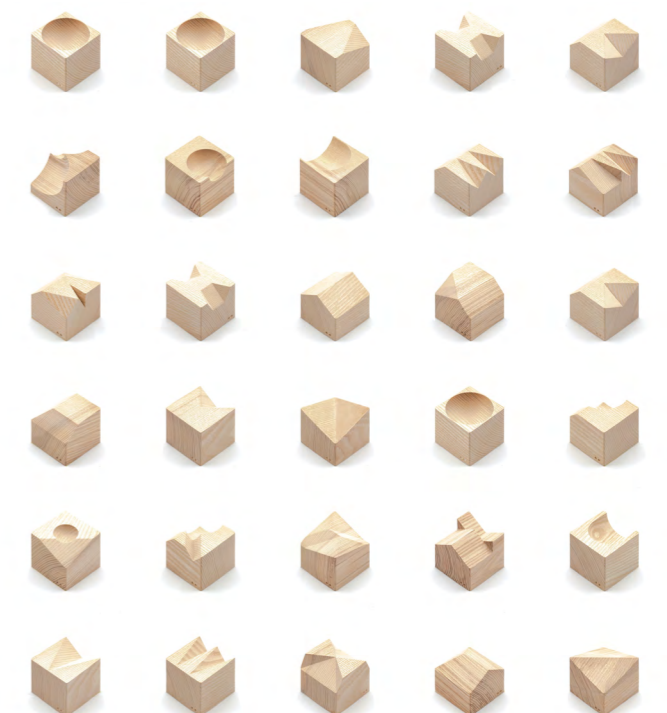
**What is at stake for Hong Kong's culture? How can young designers help to preserve and inject it with new vitality?**

Narratives. The disappearance of old stories of the city's culture, and the lack of proper filing and systematic analysis of long-lasting stories of the past.

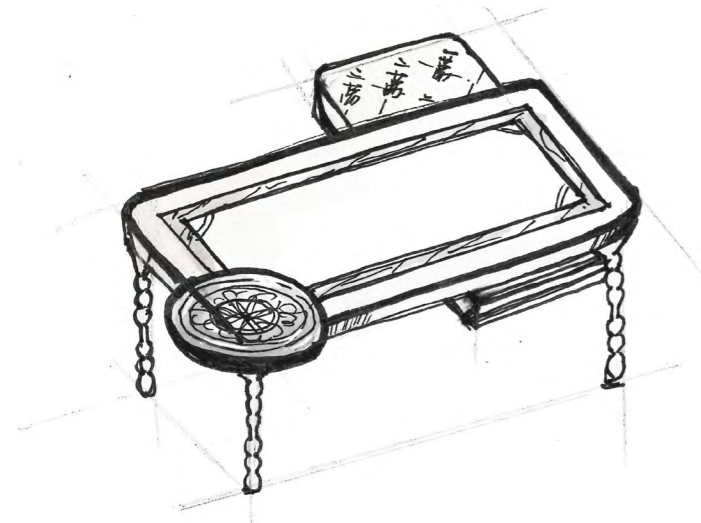
As young spatial designers, we hope to get involved in preserving the good moments of our culture and reflect them creatively in upcoming building projects. Thus, new narratives can be created and passed along.

**How does DesignInspire play a part in raising the profile of Hong Kong's design scene?**

Design flair hinges on creativity, and freedom to express and a rich context for cultural exchange is always the linchpin for design creation. DesignInspire is therefore beneficial for that reason.



*OO Blocks* pay tribute to the ancient technology of moveable type-printing



Anya's coffee table introduces a modern way of enjoying this century-old game

## Mahjong Table

Anya Wu, director and co-founder of Root Design HK

### Can you tell us about your exhibit?

I play mahjong whenever I got together with my family and friends. But I know a lot of people don't play the game, or are left out from the game, which only allows four players at a time. So I wanted to create a furniture piece that had a similar bonding effect, but is more universal, accommodates more people, while still paying homage to the craft and tradition of mahjong.

### Where did you get the idea from?

Mahjong carving is one of the most iconic traditional Hong Kong crafts; the game itself is so well-loved through generations of Hongkongers. The table on which mahjong is played not only connects friends and family but also



brings about great memories of joy. I hope my modernised version of a mahjong table will be able to evoke a sense of connection among Hongkongers likewise.

### How would you describe your design style?

People- and site-oriented.

### Why did you decide to take part in this year's RetroInnovations? What is your expectation?

After visiting DesignInspire last year, I was really impressed with the public interest it was able to garner. I hope my *Mahjong Table* will intrigue and engage visitors of all ages.

### How did you demonstrate the connection between the past and future in your design?

Infusing mahjong elements into the furniture piece is a modernised expression of the traditional craft. From a distance, it is a coffee table – a piece of stylish furniture. Yet if you look closely, you will discover elements of the game etched into the design of the table, such as carved characters on the surface, reinterpretation of mahjong tiles – to give a new purpose to a traditional mahjong table.

### What is at stake for Hong Kong's culture? How can designers like yourself help to preserve and inject it with new vitality?

The pace of life in Hong Kong is very fast, allowing little time to stop and appreciate the finer things around us, including Hong Kong's traditional art and culture. As designers, we can look to innovating and reinterpreting tradition, so that they can be incorporated in our daily lives. ■