

A simple twist: Taipei street life inspires Swiss designer

A Swiss designer who found inspiration in everyday life in Taipei is selling his fusion creations to the world

■ INTERIORS

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His early morning strolls through the bustling streets of Taipei ended up proving the unlikely inspiration for one of Andreas Saxer's most iconic pieces. The Swiss furniture and industrial designer, on a teaching assignment at Taipei's Chang Gung University, would watch as boxes of fresh tofu were delivered to local restaurants early in the morning. Those simple white containers, stacked together, provided the impetus for his Tofu stackable sideboard, which is part of his "Made in Asia 2009" limited-edition series. Each shelf, in three greyish-white shades, can be positioned in many ways, enabling the user to personalise the piece.

"Sometimes you recognise a small detail that changes your surroundings," says Saxer of what led to the idea for his Tofu modular system, which is available through private order. "It's about looking around and finding objects that don't seem important to anyone."

Saxer has made a career, and a name for himself, by using ordinary objects and creating instantly recognisable pieces that have become darlings of the design blogosphere. In addition to Tofu, there is Chop Stick, a minimalist wardrobe inspired by those ancient Asian eating utensils; four wooden sticks are connected with an aluminium pole in what is essentially an ultra-modern modified coat rack. His Snow Blossom vase is a set of two, in glossy white ceramic, inspired by the simplicity of ikebana floral arrangements. And his Shining lamps, he said, are an homage to Chinese paper lanterns.

Saxer says his fusion approach to design - finding simple and minimalist forms in both Western and Eastern references - has been a gradually evolving process. A one-time apprentice to a dressmaker, and a former student of fashion design, he moved into furniture in the late nineties. After studying industrial design at Zurich University, he was offered a part-time junior lecturer position at the same institution, which he took on while founding his company, Andreas Saxer Designwork.

When his fiancée was offered a job in Taipei last year, he followed her, choosing to resume his interest in teaching. But being in Taipei offered him another, unexpected opportunity: makers of inexpensive and mass-produced furniture sought out Saxer's skills and hired him to come up with export-quality pieces that reflect his streamlined design aesthetic. Some of the firms he designs for make furniture for the likes of Habitat and Ikea.

"It's worked out very well for me," he said. "I've developed quite a big workload working for different Taiwanese and Japanese design companies under their own brands. Europe is a very dry market at the

moment, so here I have a chance to experience the mass production sector, something I would not be able to do in Switzerland."

The opportunity to make furniture in volume stimulates his creativity, he says. "It helps me bring ideas down to a very simple solution. If I need to make a table, I'm forced to think about the construction and shape in a way that will be easy to produce. It means I don't need to add a lot of decoration."

That's not to say that he is neglecting his high-end pieces. Saxer held an exhibition in Switzerland this year of his "Made in Asia" series, and sold out. His Chop Stick wardrobe is making its Asia debut this spring through Studio Domo, a high-end furniture store in Taipei with distributors in Japan, Hong Kong, Australia and throughout Europe.

"I found his Chop Stick wardrobe to be quite original, something nice and simple that would fit into our collection," says Gary Lin, owner and founder of Studio Domo. "We like to focus on simple, original, functional and timeless pieces and we are confident that this is something that can fit into our line and can go on for many years."

Lin describes the piece as "iconic" and says, as a result, that it is not something he could sell in volume. "It's a very distinctive item with a strong design. It's the kind of thing I could see would work in an office or home in cold countries, where someone can come in and hang their coat up." Although this is Lin's first collaboration with Saxer, he says it will most likely not be the last. "We like to invite diversity from different cultures and countries to put into the brand, to make the brand more international," he says.

Saxer says he has immersed himself as much as possible in the culture of the place, thriving on finding great craftspeople to work with and studying Mandarin for two hours a day. He finds it enormously valuable teaching design to young people. Although he will be teaching for a month at a university in Lucerne this spring, his time in Taipei is otherwise open-ended.

"The most important thing I can teach them is to have patience in their own work," he said. "Often, the pressure in education is high and universities are competitive. But I tell them to focus on the story, on the working process, to have time to think about what they are doing and not to rush in a way that misses the creative part."

Saxer also hopes to impart some of his own design ideas to his students. "I would describe my philosophy as honest and direct. The combination of materials is very important to me. I'm really trying to tell stories in my products - on one side that can be a story about other cultures, artifacts and objects, and on the other a story about the materials itself. For me, design is a little more than about just looking good."