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On design



Korea's design biennial: an extreme body of work that pushes no products

With plastic surgery for fighters and designs for bombs, the Gwangju Design Biennale – curated by Ai Weiwei – is challenging the norms of commercially motivated design weeks



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Folly good show ... one of the 10 follies built around the city for the Gwangju Design Biennale – this one is designed by Francisco Sanin

September is "design week" season, when cities from London to Brussels to Beijing flaunt their design talent, if they have it, or fly it in if they don't. Either way, the idea that design is crucial to a lively urban economy has become so prevalent in the last decade that there are now more than 60 design weeks around the globe – some of them in cities you may never have heard of. This weekend I was in Gwangju, the sixth biggest city in Korea. The Gwangju Design Biennale may sound obscure, but it is rumoured to have a bigger budget than the Venice Art Biennale, which tells you how seriously the Koreans take their design.

Without the biennial – and its sister art event, which runs in alternate years – Gwangju might be just another middle-sized far eastern city with cheap towers draped in neon signage. Worse than that, it is best known for the massacre of hundreds of students during pro-democracy protests in 1980. The biennials – the art edition has been running since 1995 – have been crucial in forging a new identity for this city. And to Gwangju's credit, a design biennial provides something that very few "design weeks" (including London's) ever do, which is an ambitious programme of independent, thought-provoking curating, rather than a slew of new products pushing a primarily commercial agenda.

This year's theme – "design is design is not design" – might sound like an existential tongue-twister, but it reflects the kind of dualism that is more common of Taoist thought than European. Chief curators [Ai Weiwei](#) and Seung H-Sang derived it from [Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching](#). The dissident Ai couldn't make it to the opening as he is not being allowed out of China, but his willingness to challenge assumptions runs right through the exhibition.

One exhibit is a pamphlet handed out in [Tahrir Square](#) during the [Egyptian uprising](#) that advised protesters on the most effective tactics for civil disobedience, including how to improvise a helmet and how to breach police lines. Then there are designs for IEDs (improvised explosive devices) of the kind that kill troops daily in Afghanistan. There's also a video of the plastic surgery that [Ultimate Fighting Championship](#) competitors can undergo in order to bleed less from the nose or above the eyes. (Korea, it should be pointed out, is one of the global hotspots of plastic surgery).

Is all of this design? It would be difficult to argue the case against: collective behaviour, bombs and extreme bodies all require designing. This tests the bland "designing a better world" rhetoric implicit in so much production. The most brazenly provocative exhibit illustrates different forms of public execution, from lethal injection to stoning, as blueprints – methods that someone had to devise in meticulous detail.

All of the above belong to a section of the biennial on anonymous, or "un-named", design. Curated by Brendan McGetrick, it is intended as the antidote to the market's fixation with recognised designers and their value-added authorship. There is also a section on design by communities, curated by Beatrice Galilee, which includes the [WikiHouse](#), an open-source house design kit. Everyone is free to contribute or modify a design (as long as they like plywood), which they can then print out and take to any computerised cutting service – hey presto, a flatpack house. Such open platforms, using the creative commons, are one of the major forces that will change our conception of design in the near future.

The definition of "design" is much more expansive, more fluid, than it used to be when it was still primarily a process that resulted in products. One of the most gratifying aspects of this biennial is how few objects there are – not a chair in sight. If this were a standard "design week", you might expect the Korean hosts to use it as a showcase for new electronics by Samsung and LG, or cars by Hyundai and Daewoo. How else could one approach such a display except as a consumer in critic's clothing, painfully aware of one's complicity in cheap labour? One of the displays here reveals that of the \$600 that an iPhone 4 sells for, only six dollars is spent on the (Chinese) labour that manufactured it, whereas Apple's profit is \$360. You wouldn't get that piece of information in a design trade fair.

In contrast to the anonymous, questioning tone of the biennial, the directors have taken the precaution of parachuting in a troop of prestigious architects to build follies around the city. There are 10 of these by the likes of [Peter Eisenman](#), [Alejandro Zaera-Polo](#) and [Dominique Perrault](#). The better ones, such as [Atelier Bow-Wow's](#) pergola with a six-storey periscope, bring some delight to the sidewalk, whereas the worst, such as Eisenman's steel gate, merely get in the way. The cynical would view these as urban branding, a pinch of architectural stardust sprinkled on the property market. But they also demonstrate a city's willingness to invest in moments of urban whimsy and character.

At least they're not corporate branding events, like our own latest folly, the [ArcelorMittal Orbit](#). But then it's almost impossible to imagine this biennial happening in Britain. In Gwangju, the biennial is almost entirely paid for with municipal money, which means no corporate sponsors pushing their marketing agendas, and none of the

commercial tie-ins that can compromise exhibitions during design weeks.

The biennial (a format borrowed from the art world) is a rare space in design since it allows for questioning what the discipline is and what social purposes it serves – crucial at a moment when design is moving beyond its traditionally commercial concerns. And Korea is an interesting context in which to see those questions asked – a wealthy country with considerable industrial prestige hosting an event so discursive and open-ended, with no commercial imperatives being pushed. It's smart. Perhaps it's no coincidence that some of the most talented students at the Royal College of Art in the last couple of years have been Korean.

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