London Design Festival 2019
by JWT Intelligence - Thursday, September 19, 2019


The London Design Festival takes place throughout the city of London at venues including the Victoria & Albert Museum, Coal Drops Yard and Finsbury Avenue Square. Running from September 14th to the 22nd and free to the public, a series of events accompanies the installations. This year key themes include urban interventionism, immersive sensory experiences and the emotional impact of climate change.
As our cities and urban spaces become more crowded, brands and designers are looking to deliver some respite. At this year’s festival, designers unveil solutions which act as urban interventions to bring a sense of calm to hectic city lives. Please Be Seated, by Paul Cocksedge, is tailored to the busy pedestrianised area of Finsbury Avenue Square. The installation’s ribbons of wood allow people to walk through, under or around it or even take a breath while sitting in its curves. As Cocksedge says, “It walks the line between a craft object and a design solution. It occupies the square without blocking it.”
Camille Walala’s Walala Lounge also invites visitors to take a seat in what she has deemed an open-air urban living room. The sculptural benches have striking colors and patterns, bringing a sense of whimsical joy to South Molton Street.
Choosing to utilize the ancient labyrinth pattern, PATTERNITY’s Life Labyrinth not only serves as a place to rest in front of Westminster Cathedral but also encourages people to experience the meditative practice of walking the labyrinth. Companies and brands should look to the design world to understand the needs of city dwellers and create spaces which foster wellbeing.
This year’s London Design Festival also aims to transport visitors to new worlds, harnessing the five senses to create immersive experiences. Taking over the Tom Dixon store in Coal Drops Yard, TouchySmellyFeelyNoisyTasty taps into all five human senses to bring Tom Dixon’s products to life. Each area focuses on a different sense: Touchy highlights the tactility of pillows, rugs and other soft furnishings; while Smelly explores the perfume making process, allowing visitors to smell the scent components that go into perfumes or candles.
Volume Creative and Virgin Voyage’s Take the Plunge experience also invites sensory exploration, immersing visitors into a world of color, sound and touch. The experience involves entering a mirrored hallway filled with white tubes.

By pushing through the tubes, visitors are immersed in an underwater sunset filled with the sounds of the sea. Choosing a different realm to explore, Dan Tobin Smith and The Experience Machine worked with Gemfields to uncover the world inside gemstones. Using magnified photos of Mozambican rubies and Zambian emeralds from Gemfields’ mines as well as a soundscape from female electronic drone choir NYX, the installation brings the inside of gemstones to life for guests.
Sony Design’s Affinity in Autonomy interactive experience explores the visual. Visitors enter a dark room where they can communicate with an illuminated robotic pendulum through gestures. When a person enters the space, the colourful pendulum rises to meet them and starts to follow their motions. Bot and human move together in unison as if they are performing together. The work is part of Sony’s exploration into how humans and technology can evolve together through AI’s ability to understand human feelings. By utilizing multisensory elements, companies can take people on a journey, delivering more engaging and stimulating experiences.
Sustainability efforts in the past have focused primarily on increasing awareness and laboring to convince people why they should care about environmental impact. But now that awareness and consumer buy-in is well established, projects’ objectives are more nuanced. This year, brands and designers are focusing on how to encourage action by deeping our emotional connection with the world around us.
Sea Things by Sam Jacob Studio forces visitors to confront the painful truth of the global plastic system. The installation, which hangs above the Victoria & Albert Museum’s Cromwell Road entrance, is a large cube structure made with mirrored panes. An animated motion graphic plays on a screen inside the box resembling a colourful tiled mosaic, however on closer inspection most of the fragment pieces are pollutants. As visitors look up, they see plastics and aquatic life floating together in a cosmic-like stream as well as a reflection of themselves. They visually become part of the piece and thus the problem; but the installation encourages visitors to also become part of the solution.
Avalanche by Matthew McCormick Studio underscores the idea that tackling climate change starts at the level of the individual. Also situated in the V&A, the experiential exhibit places visitors in a situation which mimics the moments leading up to an avalanche, an increasingly common consequence of climate change. Visitors enter a dark room where large pillars are illuminated by a wall-length white screen. An initially delicate soundtrack fills the room gradually increasing in volume and ultimately erupts into loud, frantic crashing sounds bringing a real sense of fear to the space. By placing visitors at the forefront of the avalanche, the work attempts to make them confront the frightful effects of climate change.
Brompton Biotopia’s ‘Nature Scenes’ found in the festival’s Brompton district attempts to re-establish visitors’ emotional connection to nature by creating animal habitats which are designed to support urban biodiversity. The habitats are integrated with My Naturewatch cameras which are motion-sensitive wildlife cameras made in collaboration with Goldsmith’s Interaction Research Studio and the Royal College of Art. Festival visitors can click into a link online and watch live recordings of animals using the habitats. Allowing visitors to tune in, the project aims to develop stronger empathy between individuals and wildlife.

The London Design Festival is a chance for designers, brands and institutions to show visitors how great design can tap into their emotions, solve modern social issues and transport them into new worlds.

*Main image courtesy of Avalanche by Matthew McCormick Studio*

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