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## Full stretch

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# FULL STRETCH

Hong Kong's Business of Design Week had Belgium as its partner country this year, which gave Asia insights into the creative culture of a diminutive nation that has a huge reputation for innovation. SUMMER CAO reports.



**W** The Belgians are very understated," says William To, the project director at the Hong Kong Design Centre who organises the BoDW programme. "But their contributions to the design world are substantial, and they deserve more attention." From December 2nd to 7th, the 2014 BoDW featured Belgian Spirit, an initiative to promote Belgium's creative industries in Asia, and provided the Belgian design community with a platform to share their insights, giving Asia a unique opportunity to have intimate contact with one of the most innovative and prolific countries in the design world. What To calls the understated nature of Belgian designers might just be the key value that has endowed the country with a diversified range of sources for innovation, and provided an ideal condition for them to bear fruit. Unlike BoDW's previous partner countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Japan and Germany, whose strengths and character in terms of design are easily

recognised, Belgian design cannot be represented by any one collection of work or confined to a single combination of styles. The reason for such a special trait can be partly explained by the country's history. The land that is now known as Belgium has been frequently occupied by foreign powers over the past 2,000 years including the Romans, Spanish, Austrians, French, Dutch and Germans. As a result, the Belgians are generally critical of any form of authority, and the individualistic and anti-authoritarian mindset has percolated into the design world, generating unconventional creations in almost all streams of design. "They have an innate sense of design style in their culture," To observes. "Belgian spirit is about proactively seeking out new ideas, being flexible and truly creative. I think there's a lot for us to learn from them." Belgium's history also bestows the country a "peaceful anarchistic" element, which characterises the modern architecture of Brussels,

the nation's capital city. Besides multilingual, multicultural Brussels, the country and its design community draw upon two distinct areas – Dutch speaking Flanders in the north, and French speaking Wallonia in the south, and each of these three was represented in Belgian Spirit, which was set up in 2011 to promote Belgian architecture, design and fashion in Asia through events like BoDW. The variety of demographics that contribute to Belgium's design culture helped bring more than 230 designers and design students to BoDW. The attendees did much to teach Asia about Belgian design but the encounter between the two cultures was a two way street. "One of the missions of Belgian Spirit was to create awareness within the Belgian design world of the importance of Asia as an up-and-coming region for design, with Hong Kong as its hub and gateway to other countries," says Siegfried Verheijke, leader of Belgian Spirit. This year's BoDW is the event's 11th edition, and to start its second

decade, its influence has risen to new heights. To explains, "We have received a huge amount of support from the Belgian government. We have seen a shift in the kind of support from BoDW. In the past we often got support from design associations and groups. These days, especially since last year's co-operation with Denmark, we have been getting governmental support." To mark that change Belgium's Queen Mathilde showed her support to BoDW by attending this year's opening ceremony. "This signals a coming of age, as

governments are finally realising the importance of design to an economy and society as a whole," To says. "Also, it is proof that BoDW has become so successful that governments are taking us seriously now. They know the benefits that such an event will reap." To says the increased quality of support for BoDW is a factor that over time will raise design standards on a global scale. "BoDW in HK wishes to be a bridge that ties Asian designers with their Western counterparts; also linking the design world with the

business community. Hong Kong and China, along with the rest of Asia will greatly benefit from this exchange of ideas; foreign designers and businesspeople will get a fantastic insight into Asia through design from BoDW, too. Everybody is a winner." ©

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