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So cool so hot

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SO COOL SO HOT

Hong Kong's SoHo, the area south of Hollywood Road, between Aberdeen Street and Queen's Road, has become a desirable destination for aspiring creative entrepreneurs and their clientele. With the new PMQ in the mix, and HKDI alumni becoming involved, the city may finally have a design district that's worth the name. DANIEL JEFFREYS takes a look.



PICTURES PMQ, Konzepp and squares.ted

Four years ago I wrote that Hong Kong's SoHo neighbourhood had become "the Montmartre of Asia", and people laughed. They are not laughing now. With the opening of PMQ's Great White Whale on Aberdeen Street, the area is now awash in new design talent, designer boutiques and a mix of locals and expatriates shopping for everything from jewellery to couture and home furnishings. With Vivienne Tam, Agnes B and a Jason Atherton restaurant in the mix, SoHo has become the hot place to shop and a cool place to hang out.

The HK\$400 million renovation of PMQ (the former police married quarters) has been the area's premiere event, but the true nativity of SoHo's design quarter may have been last December. That's when Droog opened a store on Square Street, between Hollywood Road and Tai Ping Shan Street in Sheung Wan, close to Blake Garden, where the world's last bubonic plague outbreak began in 1894.

As a result of its 19th century epidemic, the Tai Ping Shan Street area of SoHo has long been home to coffin makers, funeral homes, paper offering workshops and tailors who specialise in clothes for the dead. Square Street, a quiet backwater behind the Man Mo temple, once had all four merchants of the afterlife, although sadly its paper offering store is now gone.

For Droog to choose what might be truly called a dead-end street for its second store worldwide is miraculous. Co-founded and directed by curator and author Renny Ramakers, Droog is an internationally renowned design company with its base in the heart of Amsterdam. The Dutch HQ includes its own

revolutionary hospitality concept Hôtel Droog, which has only one room.

Ramakers has been designated by *Newsweek* magazine as one of the "150 women who shake the world" and she has been pioneering new directions for design since the early nineties, with an emphasis upon "finding new ways of weaving precepts of luxury" into everyday objects like chairs and kitchen equipment.

The entire building on Square Street is dedicated to Droog, from ground floor to the rooftop terrace. Next to the store, Droog Hong Kong offers a gallery, dining room, outdoor kitchen, rooftop terrace and The one and only bedroom number #2, an extension of Amsterdam's Hôtel Droog concept.

Before Droog's arrival, Square Street and its surrounding environs had already seen signs of SoHo's design revolution. In 2010 Konzepp set up on Tung Street, dedicated to hatching new ideas and providing a space where the artistic and creative community could come together. In the same year, David Ericsson and Alexis Holm from Sweden decided to share an office at 15 Square Street, with David working on his VOID Watches brand and Alexis on gram footwear. They took the name "squares.ted" and their space has evolved into an open environment mixing showroom, office and workshop.

All squares.ted products are designed and developed by the Swedish founders, thus granting the store a natural integrity and a touch of Scandinavian aesthetic. Apart from watches and footwear, the duo offers high quality leather goods, eyewear and jewellery.

"We firmly believe that simplicity, functionality,



OPPOSITE PAGE
THE OPENING OF
PMQ'S 1600 PANDAS
WORLD TOUR IN HONG
KONG: CREATIVITY
MEETS CONSERVATION
EXHIBITION IN JULY 2014
THIS PAGE
A DESIGN AND CAFE
ALLEY OFF TAI PING
SHAN STREET

quality and pricing are all vital components,” says Holm. “They are the pivotal point around which squarestreet spins.”

Design spaces like squarestreet have effectively cut out wholesale and retail middlemen, shortening the supply chain. “This generates closeness to the brand and ensures good service,” says Ericsson. “The shop in office environment creates a link for the customers between the end product and its origin, inviting them to take part in the creative process.”

The squarestreet philosophy is one that has been adopted by many other new design stores and art galleries in SoHo, an area that allows for intimate strolling. The district’s many coffee shops with outdoor seating offer the closest thing Hong Kong has to European café society, something which plays a key important role in inspiring creativity in countries like France, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands.

“There is a design atmosphere here,” says Manuel C.S. the Founder and Creative Director of Lines Lab, a design and fashion company based in Macau. “Any ‘design capital’ must have a place where creative entrepreneurs can introduce their work to the public in a relaxed atmosphere, without paying ridiculous rents.”

Manuel was at PMQ on August 24, when the facility held its second Design Market of the 2014 summer. The event was for designers who have no permanent space elsewhere in Hong Kong and have not yet taken space in PMQ. Two dozen designers participated in the open-air bazaar and sales were brisk.

“There is great traffic here,” says Manuel, who had just sold a dress for HK\$5,000. “PMQ provides the city with a destination where people know they will see design work that’s out of the ordinary. For design

companies like ours, who don’t want to be pigeonholed, it’s a valuable point of contact with our market.”

Like others, Manuel observed that the clientele at PMQ seemed young, sophisticated and curious, willing to explore all the spaces in the seven-storey structure and meander around the stores in the nearby streets.

“We have seen a lot of customers who have a very good awareness of design,” says Zoe Li, the designer for Chew the Cud. “We sell unisex clothes that appeal to people who are cool and fashion forward. This is great place for that group. It’s a fashion magnet.”

The Design Market will return for two Sundays in October and two in November. The markets were created to make PMQ more attractive. Foot traffic has already been strong, not least because of the major names that have become part of PMQ, including Joyce, Vivienne Tam and kapok.

Joyce’s project is Joyce|Cares, “...a unique sustainability platform that aims at nurturing upcoming artists and designers... for the betterment of the community.” The latest Joyce|Cares initiative has been a collaboration with HKDI. Members of HKDI’s faculty shortlisted four existing ready-to-wear labels, designed by the institute’s most promising and talented alumni including A Tentative Atelier, MODEMENT, The World Is Your Oyster, and Wan & Wong Fashion.

The works were collectively called “Talent Shop” and each of the designers has been given HK\$10,000 worth of financial sponsorship and an opportunity to retail their collections at Joyce Cares PMQ unit from August to October 2014. Joyce will further extend its support in all areas of retail, including visual merchandising and marketing.

“All major cities that are renowned for their design



OPPOSITE PAGE
POUND LANE IN
SOHO
RIGHT VISITORS AT
THE KAPOK DESIGN
STORE IN PMQ

《 ANY DESIGN CAPITAL MUST HAVE A PLACE WHERE CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURS CAN INTRODUCE THEIR WORK. 》

creativity have design laboratories that nurture fresh talent,” says Liz McLafferty, the Head of the Department of Fashion and Image Design. “The PMQ initiative gives students something to aim for, a place where they have a realistic chance of seeing their work on sale. If designers feel they have no chance of an audience it makes it very difficult for them to be sufficiently motivated. PMQ helps solve that problem.”

The Musketeers Education and Culture Charitable Foundation executed the conservation and transformation of the PMQ site, with support from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HKDI and the Hong Kong Design Centre. When PMQ opened its Chairman, Stanley Chu, said that it is “...a place where creative talents cluster and grow through networking and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and concepts.”

Chu’s description could serve as a good motif for the entire Soho district. The neighbourhood has become a fertile field for new designers, and a magnet for those who cherish and appreciate good design.

It’s inevitable that many of the new boutiques, galleries and workshops that open in SoHo will fail, but many will not, and the area now has the true atmosphere of a design community, drawing established Hong Kong designers like Tina Liu, who opened her Tina’s Choice Pop Up Shop at PMQ on September 1. “SoHo is important because ‘togetherness is strength!’,” she says. To have a

lively, big space at a prime location with convenient transportation designated for creativity and design is rare and precious. It will be a platform for exchange, exposure, experience and growth.”

Although it’s unlikely that Parisians will start calling Montmartre, “Paris’s Sheung Wan”, many French residents of Hong Kong and their visitors will be relieved to find the city now has a district that has all the important aspects of a “design quartier” where creativity and innovation feel at home.

SoHo’s future as a design hub has been given a significant boost by the arrival of PMQ, and that’s precisely what it hoped to achieve. The next step is to make the process more interactive.

“PMQ is not an incubation platform but an accelerator – all tenants are ready for retail,” says William To, PMQ’s Creative & Programme Director. “Offering support is important, but we will also ask them to take part in our development. At the end of the day PMQ aims to establish a platform for co-creation to enable community involvement.”

And that’s the principle on which SoHo will stand or fall. If the community is fully involved, finds inspiration and value, then SoHo will take its place along New York’s Soho and Milan’s Brera as a neighbourhood that the whole world wants to visit in search of the newest, hottest and coolest examples of design-based creativity. ☺

PICTURES PMQ, Konzepp and squarestreet