

Design

In Finn Form: The Art of the Practical

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A new design exhibition at the Finnish Embassy leaps into the thoughtful chasm between fantasy and reality. That's where the practical solutions to everyday problems will be found.

Lacy paper wedding dresses hang in the atrium, ready to be worn once, ripped off and tossed into the trash, with no insult to the permanence of vows.

Dangling globes filled with scents invite visitors to enter, breathe deeply and be transported to distant cities, in this case, Paris (Gauloises and perfume), Budapest (paprika and exhaust fumes) and Helsinki (woods and sea). Washington's olfactory profile is left to the imagination.

Blocks of concrete are overprinted with graphic images that transform industrial surfaces into murals of ice crystals and ferns. In theory, portraits of presidents would be entirely possible.

The exhibition, which opened Thursday night, is called "Sauma [Design as Cultural Interface]." It's the most intriguing collection of contemporary design shown in Washington since the

2001 run of "Young Nordic Design: Generation X."

Finns will understand the title word (pronounced sah-u-ma), which in colloquial usage means getting a chance to try something new. Fifteen design teams have given mundane furniture, clothing and the streetscape unorthodox twists. For instance, Klaus Aalto's chests are neatly fitted with plastic suitcases instead of drawers, so busy people can grab and go.

The concept of chance applies to exhibition visitors, too. Velcro-stripped "Jackets for Lonely People" await those with the courage to encounter strangers — and stick to them.

The Finnish Cultural Institute in New York produced "Sauma" as part of Finland's year-long celebration of design. That the show debuts in Washington, rather than New York (it goes there next) is a feat of design diplomacy from Ambassador Jukka Valtasaari. Since taking up his post in 2001, Valtasaari has put local museums on notice with an impressive series of exhibitions featuring such legendary designers as Tapio Wirkkala, Nanny Still, Oiva Toikka and Eero Aarnio. The country's contribution to 20th-century architecture is honored daily by the spectacular contemporary embassy building. For this display of 21st-century design, the ensemble of glass, copper and gleaming wood provides a perfect backdrop.

The "Sauma" project began two years ago. Curators Hannu Kahonen and Marko Tandefelt issued a call for innovative personal work, as opposed to commercial designs commissioned by major clients.

The array of chosen projects includes an electro-acoustic sitar guitar by Kari Nieminen, who has made instruments for the Rolling Stones and the Who. Humanism and technology are combined in imaginative proposals for emergency gear. One is a Braille-enhanced pack with phone and Global Positioning System device to help the visually impaired, the other a solar-cell shoulder strap capable of powering up a mobile phone or laptop in the wild.

For his conceptual kitchen, Esa

Hilda Kozari's dangling globes at the "Sauma" show evoke memories of cities by capturing their smells.



From the Finnish Cultural Institute exhibition at the embassy, a paper wedding gown by Tuija Asta Jarvenpaa. Samuli Naamanka's graphic concrete turns gray blocks into grand murals.

Vesmanen drew inspiration from the essential elements of fire, water, air and fertile earth. Stove and sink are supplanted by a brushed-steel "campfire" four inches off the ground, and a water-filled basin that serves as a "well." The ensemble, which comes with a wind machine instead of an industrial hood, and a handcrafted herb garden, is about as Zen as a Finnish designer can get.

A professional-quality portable audio system by the well-known industrial designer Harri Koskinen is making its worldwide debut here. It resembles a fat aluminum laptop. A lamp by Ilkka Suppanen, a regular on the international furniture fair circuit, would emit diffused light from an LCD screen. It's still a work in progress. But the paper wedding dresses by Tuija Asta Jarvenpaa were modeled in May at the Kunsthalle Helsinki, by nine brides who wed en masse at the museum.

Dress, created for a singer and an audience of 238 to be seated literally in her pockets. The skirt required 1,640 feet of fabric and was spread into a circle 66 feet in diameter at its premiere at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark in August. Images are online at com-pa-ny.com/reddress/reddress1.html.

One of the most down-to-earth designs is Sirpa Fourastie's futon cube, which can be folded and zipped into 11 different forms, including an armchair, a baby crib and a storage unit. A Finnish company has agreed to put the design into production.

"In Finland, there is wide respect for design on a broad level," says Juulia Kauste, director of the cultural institute. She credits Finland's highly competitive but low-cost education system for supporting creativity.

In an age of globalism, nationalities have become a blur. Song moved to Helsinki from South Korea in 1998. Visual artist Hilda Kozari, creator of the scented bubbles, was born in Hungary. She collaborated with the Parisian perfumer Bertrand Duchaufour. Architect Pasi Kolhonen, who is investigating the visual effects of advertising on city space, uses photos from St. Petersburg, Tokyo and Washington's Wisconsin Avenue to make his case. An electronic game is being developed by Tuomo Tammenpaa with British game designer Daniel Blackburn.

Still, it would be hard to mistake "Sauma" for anything but a model of Finnish design. The installation is airy and spare, with display tables and racks designed by Koskinen. Objects respect function, use natural and modern materials efficiently and employ technology with subtlety. And, of course, there's a sophisticated New Age sauna, with a magnificent artificial daylight wall.

Valtasaari acknowledged that issues of light and dark often inspire Finnish designers. But he sees another force behind the unbridled creativity.

"Survival," he said at the opening, as toy designer Tammenpaa nodded in agreement. "In the north country, you face more problems. You have to solve the problems, otherwise you are cold."

Sauma [Design as Cultural Interface], at the Embassy of Finland, 3301 Massachusetts Ave. NW, through Nov. 13. Open daily 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Free. Call 202-298-5800. For more information, go to www.saumadesign.net.



The sticky Velcro jackets caused unexpected togetherness among guests who tried them on Thursday night. They were designed by Aamu Song and John Olin of Com-pa-ny. There was not room at the embassy for Song's astonishing Red



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FINNISH CULTURAL INSTITUTE