
TheNational

The spark that fires the extraordinary

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“When I talk about design and drawing, seeing this little light sparking in my students is the most satisfactory element of my design existence. It goes above and beyond creating things yourself,” enthuses Alan Hughes, a once-reluctant professor who is now the vice principal of Inhbald School of Design in London.

As one of the judges of the design competition held in conjunction with this week’s Interiors UAE and Gulf Landscaping exhibitions, Hughes will be searching for that same special light among the student entrants, whose brief was to create four zones based on how we use interior space – living, playing, washing and eating – and to connect these activities within a circular building.

Challenging students to produce something exceptional is part of Hughes’s daily regimen. It’s all about the spark that fires the extraordinary student to create great spaces – whether indoor or outdoor. And that, he says, is why seeing former star pupils such as Stephen Dick and Philip Nixon gaining recognition for their work is truly rewarding.

Last year Dick designed a small, two-bedroom London apartment with stunning views across the River Thames to Westminster. His challenge was to “find a way to open up this dark, small space to take advantage of the view day and night, extend the perspective and borrow the view as part of the environment,” explains Hughes. “Stephen did this using broken walls, moving walls back, cutting slits and spaces to allow constant background knowledge in terms of how the light was spilling in from the large windows.” Dick’s ability to balance openness with numerous practicalities impressed his client, while light was another concern that the designer tackled beautifully.

Returning to London after living in the Gulf, Dick’s client was worried about the lack of light and part of the brief was to echo the light qualities that he was used to – a tall order in Britain’s climate. “Stephen used reflective materials, so even in the darker elements, the materials were shiny and sharp. There’s a wonderful kitchen wall – a combination of textured stones – which causes tiny shadows but also picks up very strong highlights from the Corian work surfaces. And the bathroom and private areas are beautifully lit – with very shiny wall finishes to bounce the light around and reflect. Stephen really understands that human beings are phototropic and head towards the light. That was a key element that had to be expressed,” says Hughes.

Nixon’s garden designs are equally profound. “Philip’s work really fits in to that category of an emotionally changing space. It’s not just about the relationship of the space; it’s how he considers shadows, light and materials and actually how the materials encourage you to follow a certain path or consider a certain view. Philip is one of those people who takes a route through to a space, and the framing of views is particularly relevant.”

In one of Nixon’s garden designs in London’s Primrose Hill – executed in timber, metal and slate – the framing of the kitchen-dining window is matched by a very large, sun-catching frame at the far end of the garden, extending the perspective. Nixon also conceals steps behind grey slate walls, “all very beautiful, calm and uplifting for a city space”, says Hughes. “The old philosophy about a small garden would be, ‘let’s see the openness without clutter,’ but actually, creating these levels, barriers and semi-obsured areas and sometimes emphasising width rather than length, adds a little bit more mystery.” To address the long and narrow garden, the designer stretched the eye lengthways and width-wise with lateral grey bands of material and high timber panels that offer privacy. “He’s skilled at detailing, and the combination of materials somehow makes you focus down on the space itself, making you forget almost that it’s a garden in a series of London terraces.”

Nixon’s positioning of the garden as entertainment space, and the interior-exterior continuity it provides, are also relevant to the UAE competition, says Hughes: “We’ve extended the balcony on the given site to provide a transition between the inside and outside spaces. Most people make that transition these days much more than they used to.”

Similarly, Stephen Dick’s clever manipulation of light offers another guideline. “One of the most exciting things about interiors is how shadows run across the floor as the sun moves. In that totally circular space, with six-metre-high windows, there are pillars and mullions that will cause an amazing shadow pattern on the floor. I find the shadows and the progress of the sunlight across a space very calming to look at.”

Competitors cannot simply focus on enjoying the light show, however, but also on how to limit it. “In Britain, it’s all about maximising the light; in the UAE, it’s about controlling it – and by degrees,” Hughes explains.

The winning entry, as with the work of Dick and Nixon, will boil down to excellent design. So what does that mean in Hughes’s book? “Good design has to be a balance of function and aesthetics and something that makes you feel different about the space: giving the client 50 per cent more than they expected. It’s rather like a good perfume in a way, with a base note that lasts, which is familiarity; and then there is a top note, which is your ‘wow’ factor, something that the client wasn’t expecting. I think good design moves you in a way that is completely multi-sensory, satisfying your sense of touch, vision, taste, texture, smell – all of it.”



Professor Alan Hughes will be a judge at the design competition held in conjunction with Interiors UAE and Gulf Landscaping.
