

Gap in the market

Why doesn't London have a design district? By Edwin Heathcote

We're in the middle of an explosion of gallery building in London, apparently in defiance of the economic climate. London's booming art market seems more related to its real estate than its real economy, its growth fuelled by the city's position as a stable global hub and a provider of luxury accommodation and the luxury status goods with which to fill it.

But there is a gap, and it is a surprising one – design. The city, which is one of the few world centres of real design innovation and production, doesn't have a proper design district and has only a handful of scattered specialist galleries. Where Antwerp has its burgeoning concept stores that can become launchpads for young designers in eccentrically curated spaces, and Paris has its streets of mid-century modern dealers, London still suffers from a lack of density.

Clerkenwell, which looked like it might become a design district, hasn't quite arrived, although it does come alive during its own design week. There is the redoubtable Zeev Aram's lively upstairs space in an old banana warehouse in Drury Lane. There is also an ever-expanding infrastructure of museums and institutions keen to collect and

display design – the V&A's *Postmodernism* show is the culmination of a wonderful series of blockbuster exhibitions dedicated to design, and the old Commonwealth Institute in Kensington is being converted into a new home for the Design Museum. The Brompton Road is aiming to become a "design quarter" but even here, close to the city's most famous design school, the Royal College of Art, there's not much going on.

Even Tom Dixon's Dock in out-of-the way west London seems slow to build any real mass. In fact it is PAD London, the chic French design and art fair popping up during Frieze week in Berkeley Square, that prompts in me a sense of what is missing for the rest of the year.

Other design galleries include David Gill in south London, Rabih Hage in the west (celebrating 10 years in Sloane Avenue with a retrospective exhibition) and Fumi in Brick Lane in the east, but so far only the Carpenters Workshop has managed to establish a West End presence, in Albermarle Street.

One new gallery, however, gives hope that design might truly be able to stand on its own in the West End: Libby Sellers' new space in the former rag trade district, Berners Street, just north of Philippe Starck's theatrical Sanderson hotel.

Sellers quit a curatorial position at the Design Museum to become a gallerist and her *modus operandi* up to now has been to inhabit pop-up spaces in

recession-emptied premises around the city. The new gallery, as stark and white as you'd expect, opened last month with a show by Formafantasma, a pair of amiable and bright young Italian graduates of the Eindhoven Design Academy. Beautifully crafted works include tapestries, vases and more, and are conceived to make links between Italy and its African colonies – the kind of conceptual, critical show that Sellers specialises in: a blend of the attractively commercial with the compellingly narrative.

Sellers' gallery is part of the ongoing transformation of once-bohemian Fitzrovia into one of London's most interesting gallery districts. Stuart Shave's Modern Art (designed by architect David Kohn) and Pilar Corrias' eponymous gallery (designed, remarkably, by Rem Koolhaas's OMA, surely their tiniest project) were in the vanguard, as was Alison Jacques in her crisply modern and impressively generous space (designed by MRJ Rundell, architect of the White Cube galleries) across the road from Sellers. It may be that momentum is building to establish the city as not just a centre of design production but as a place to browse and buy.



Critical Ceramic and textile work by Formafantasma

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