



T U O I BY DESIGN P

MEXICO CITY DESIGN © FERNANDO ROMERO ENTERPRISE

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With the arrival of the London Design Biennale at Somerset House, Jo Caird gets the low-down from the event's president and director

London Design Biennale (LDB) has been a long time coming. Sir John Sorrell, the event's president, saw the success of the London Design Festival (LDF), which he co-founded in 2003, and began thinking about how the British capital could "stage a great design biennale" along the lines of Venice's offering. This September, then, as venues across London are taken over once again by the eclectic exhibition and events programme of the LDF, another major event will be taking place, with more than 30 countries setting up camp at Somerset House for the inaugural London Design Biennale.

The theme that each country's design team has responded to, 'Utopia by Design', takes its inspiration from the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*, a work of political philosophy depicting a fictional island society. The director of the biennale, Dr Christopher Turner, says: "Designers and architects have long grappled with Utopian ideas and the book remains a potent reminder of how such pursuits are generally destined to fail." The response from participating countries "has proved that Utopia remains an inspirational provocation".

REIMAGINING THE WORLD

The theme has certainly elicited a broad and fascinating range of installations, from a Lebanese street market celebrating the 'Utopia' of Beirut street culture that offers visitors the chance to have a shave and drink pomegranate juice, to huge, woven sea animals from South Africa in which visitors can sit, like Jonah inside the whale. The British entry, meanwhile, from the award-winning design practice Barber & Osgerby (the team behind the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic torch), explores Britain's history of maritime exploration and its leading role in the development of wind energy by means of a towering kinetic sculpture.

This breadth of response and outlook is exactly what its creators hoped would be achieved, with the biennale "giving each country a platform to present their explorations of the issues in design that affect them," Turner notes. That said, various common themes have emerged across the range of countries involved, explains the designer and entrepreneur. "It's unsurprising, perhaps, that the issues of migration, equality, security and the environment appear in a number of projects, given the world we live in and how provocatively the idea of 'Utopia' sits alongside those grappling with these issues first-hand," he says. These issues are also pertinent when it comes to the host city itself, notes Sorrell. "The biennale will present new ideas, which should inspire London and other cities to think about the future," he says.

The event will be a boon for local and visiting culture vultures alike but, beyond that, it also has the potential to be a genuinely useful forum for discussion. And given the turbulent political context of the past few months in the wake of the referendum vote to leave the European Union, it's critical that the UK continues to host such important discussions.

Turner explains: "Our relationship with Europe and the world is under scrutiny as never before. We feel that it is vital that the cultural and creative sectors continue to represent Britain as open, outward-looking, inclusive and welcoming. Hopefully the biennale will be part of ensuring the wider world sees us in this way."

That's not to say that it's just designers and the like who will get a lot out of the event. Turner is "determined" it will appeal to a broad visitor base. "Design is part of everyone's daily life," he says. "And good or bad it can profoundly transform our experiences. I'd challenge anyone not to want to see what the future might look like."