Design isn’t a niche pursuit in this stylish city, rather it’s an integral part of everyday life.

CATTLE CLASS TRANSIT IS ALWAYS an exercise in brutality. Thankfully, it’s only 30 hours of knee-knocking, shin-kicking hell in the air from New Zealand to Denmark.

But then it’s hey, Copenhagen! (Hei, even, given that everyone there has a pretty firm grasp on English, thanks mostly, I’m told, because English movies are subtitled and not overdubbed.)

Copenhagen. Home of the courtly and egalitarian, the tall and the blonde, the handsome and bike-riding fit. Copenhagen might be old, but it’s progressive. They do design as well as anyone and have some big names in the pantheon to pull out in any international brag-off. Poul Henningsen, Hans J. Wegner, Arne Jacobsen, et al.

The Danes do architecture too. A 1000-year-old architectural heritage has left piles for miles. You might even start to get a little sick of the sight of old bricks in Renaissance, Rococo and Baroque iterations. But then you discover the modernist and the very modern: BIG’s mountain housing in Orestad, the just-finished Bella Sky Connell Hotel by JØR, which looks like two people dancing, the Royal Danish Playhouse by Lundgaard & Tranberg, and not forgetting Henning Larsen’s Opera House, which proves the Danes – or at least one of them – do philanthropy too. Arnold Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller, head of shipping company Mærsk, gifted the city this hugely expensive opera house (gifts being tax deductible, however, there was some political consternation about this at the time). As with almost all architecture, some people like it, some don’t. It draws inevitable comparisons with another great house, in Sydney, designed by another great Dane, Jørn Utzon. Yes, the Danes do a lot of things well, but if there’s one thing they do really well, especially when it comes to design, it’s that they remember the people.
Louise Campbell.

Furniture and Lighting Designer, Louis Poulsen

Although slightly reticent when it comes to discussing her own work, it’s quite clear that Louise Campbell’s design knowledge is varied. She credits Ole Jensen, before she knew him, with helping along her career, thanks to a three-year grant when he was working for the State Arts Council. Like Jensen, her products vary in materiality and cut across furniture, lighting, ceramics and interiors, although “not so much furniture at the moment, which is my big thing, but also the hardest thing to make a living from”.

I mention that she’s the only woman on the books in the gentleman’s club of Louis Poulsen lighting designers. She seems cheerily unfazed, although I’m impressed, as other luminaries include Verner Panton, Arne Jacobsen and Poul Henningsen. The eponymous Campbell Pendant, for Louis Poulsen, was an attempt to replicate outdoor light (Campbell is not enamoured of Denmark’s long, dark winters), and other prototypes in her studio exhibit a brilliance of colour. This year she is “taking a year of doing useless things”. That is, I think, a self-deprecating way of describing her process of testing ideas.

“Knowing how to ask the right questions and get into the materials is what is important.”

Campbell is also on a committee to “figure out what design has got to do in ten years’ time in Denmark.”

“It’s very hard to get people to understand that this is exactly what we’ve got to do. I used to say ignore Milan, let’s just do our own thing, but you can’t today because everything happens so quickly.”

louiscampbell.com

Above. Louise Campbell in her sun-filled studio, little experiments and models are scattered around Campbell’s studio.

Clockwise, from top left. An odd collection of materials from plastics to papers allow Campbell to physically play with her design ideas; the ivy-surrounded studio door; the white space is punctuated with colourful experiments and objects; she says she’s spending the year “doing useless things”, with beautiful results.
In an understated building, tucked away down a little cul-de-sac off Nørrebrogade, you’ll find the offices of architects BIG and product designers KiBiSi. The building is so unassuming, the only thing to alert you to its presence is an A4 piece of paper printed with BIG’s pixilated logo.

KiBiSi, the word, is a reduction of the company names of its troika of designers: Lars Holme Larsen (Kilo Design), Bjarke Ingels (BIG) and Jens Martin Skibsted (Skibstead Ideation). Larsen, a D&AD judge last year, has many other strings to his bow. After completing a bachelor’s degree in architecture, he did an internship at Plot – “the mother of BIG and JDS Architects”. He then studied furniture and product design at the Danish Design School. Six years ago he co-founded Kilo Design.

The “happy marriage” that he calls KiBiSi has spawned bikes for Puma, headphones for AiAiAi and one of the most architectural sofas of all time. Brick, says Larsen, combines a couple of actual architectural references, in the brick bond system that the sofa’s construction is derived from and the fibre cement buttons the firm developed to hold it together. “Often buttons are decoration. This is construction. Showing off the detail.”

“We respect and understand our design tradition, but we also know that we need to bring more to the table. Form and function is past; it’s necessary and we need to understand it, but we also need to push it every time and bring other ways into it. You could be inspired by art or architecture, as with the Shang Hay chair, or a more user-driven product like these headphones, which was developed with a team of 30 DJs.”

The firm doesn’t focus on “right here, right now” products. “You start to peel things away and figure out what is at the core of the project.”

kibisi.com
Tina Midtgaard, CURATOR, DANISH DESIGN CENTRE

Tina Midtgaard, curator of Copenhagen Design Week, is based at the Danish Design Centre on Hans Christian Andersen Boulevard, a stone’s throw from City Hall.

Midtgaard is in the enviable and possibly perilous position of defining the shape and form of the city’s premier design event. There’s no shortage of talent, but with just a few people on her team she is a little harried when we meet. At that moment she was compiling the content and architectural features and connections and, happily, had just decided on a focus – “think human”. This seems appropriate, given the human aspects of Scandinavian modernism, which seems to have carried through to the city’s current batch of designers.

“It’s something that goes a little bit beyond sustainability,” she says. “It’s more encompassing of design and other professions. It’s more a way of living, about trying to move a little bit away from consumerism to humanism. Trying to develop this to be something connected to Denmark and a part of our way of creative thinking.”

Midtgaard herself trained as an architect. Does she miss a professional practice? Not really. Designing exhibition satiates her need for design expression.

“The Danish school of architecture has a holistic approach to design, that can work across graphic design and product design. It’s part of our history. The bigger architects, like Arne Jacobsen, always worked like that, from very large scale to smaller products.”

Designing chairs and buildings does seem to be a peculiar trait of Scandinavia, I venture.

“The limit is not so much about what you design, it’s more the approach to designing … Bringing back to human scale. Now we’re beginning to define this characteristic.”

ddc.dk, copenhagendesignweek.com

Facing page, from top.
Tina Midtgaard, curator of Copenhagen Design Week at the Danish Design Centre; a detail of an exhibition on show.

This page.
Though Midtgaard didn’t design the exhibition on show when Urbis visited, the interactive elements reflect her desire for exhibitions that are humanist in nature. Midtgaard’s background in architecture has the Danish design education works to a model that drifts easily between architecture, graphics and furniture.
Jakob Lange.

ARCHITECT, BIG

Jakob Lange sits in front of an artwork of BIG’s mountain housing project that he made on the wall from strips of packing tape.

Clockwise, from right.
Designer Jakob Lange in his apartment; one of BIG’s futuristic architecture proposals; Lange’s apartment is in a converted school designed by BIG; a cluster of lamps; classic windows and brick of Lange’s apartment exterior.

"YOU’RE NOT BUILDING SOMETHING THAT WAS MADE 100 YEARS AGO. YOU’RE DOING A MODERN PIECE AND IT SHOULD REFLECT THE CURRENT TIME."
Vibeke Fonnesberg Schmidt.

DESIGNER, NORMANN COPENHAGEN

THE HOME STUDIO OF VIBEKE Fonnesberg Schmidt is in Hellerup, north of Osterbro, on a long, leafy street that points almost directly east out to the Oresund, the strait that separates Denmark’s island of Zealand from the Swedish province of Scania.

Fonnesberg Schmidt’s studio is in the lowest level of the three-storey building. It is immaculately clean, and organised around a large table that is, she says, an instalment of a project on sustainability. The table is made from recycled materials from a Danish kitchen manufacturer. The patterned top, constructed with hand-painted wood, is the first visual cue at the designer’s strong interest in geometry.

Like some of the other designers I’ve met in Copenhagen, Fonnesberg Schmidt has a background in ceramics, porcelain in particular. The designer says she has had a long-time interest in the harmony and beauty of geometric shapes. Yin for yang, that interest has been countered by a need to rebel against the rigidity of the geometric.

“Geometry is perfect and beautiful but it can also be quite boring … you know what it is, you don’t have to go to the other side of the thing to see what it looks like because you know exactly what it is going to look like.”

Her Bau Pendant, designed for Normann Copenhagen, has just returned from Milan, where it was part of the exhibition Still Light – 100 Danish Pendants. The pendant clearly exhibits the designer’s geometrical sensibility. It’s her first light and her first commercial production piece. It’s composed of intersecting coloured-ply circles, a natural shape for a ceramist or potter to turn to, she says.

“It’s a whole different way of working rather than making one-off pieces. I find it really interesting that you can make something that looks like something in nature, something that’s grown, or something that’s very random from strict shapes.”

vibekefonnesbergschmidt.dk
Ole Jensen.

DESIGNER, NORMANN COPENHAGEN

"I’M AN ANALOGUE DESIGNER," says Ole Jensen, as we stand in one room of his small studio. Looking around, I wonder if “alchemist” might be a better description. There’s his potter’s wheel and the prototypes – “all the pieces with small mistakes” – of his numerous designs for Normann Copenhagen, Royal Copenhagen and Louis Poulsen, for whom he is putting the final touches on a metal lamp that looks more like plastic. His works embrace functionality; he appears to always be looking for ways to improve commonplace items. His hot water bottles have “fingers” and his mugs have arms; he’s designed stacking sofa beds, invented silicon rubber washing-up bowls and reinvented the humble brush and shovel.

I suggest to Jensen that he has a good sense of humour that is visible in his work. The choice of words doesn’t resonate with him, I think because he is very serious about design, and also, to descend into generalisation, because design, to the Danes, is a serious business. “Instead of saying humour … I think the pieces perhaps have a kind of smile,” he says. “Instead of being very self-controlled, instead of having order in everything, I think it could be nice to be described as a musician’s touch, instead of being very stylish and academic. I think my best pieces have a kind of friendliness.”

“I think it’s fun. And for me it’s OK if they look fun, but I’m not trying to be fun, always. For example, a plate like this is not fun in that way. But perhaps the decoration is close to being fun.”

Trying to pigeonhole this designer’s work is an exercise in futility. Jensen protests that his English isn’t great, which is bollocks. He might reach for the odd word, but in doing so he comes across only as thoughtful. Imagine a world where everyone thought before they spoke!

olejensendesign.com

Clockwise, from top right.
Jensen’s potter’s wheel; markers and polaroids; little farm creatures sit alongside ceramics; the studio pup; Normann Copenhagen objects.
EAT AND BE MERRY.  
Home of the best restaurant in the world according to Restaurant magazine, Copenhagen is a foodie’s town as much as it is a design hub. Here are some of the best eats in the city.

Nimb, at Tivoli Gardens, has a supermarket, Michelin-star restaurant, bistro and the best hotdog in town. Superior quality at several price points.

Also at Tivoli, The Paul restaurant. Sketches for Glassalen (Glass Hall) were completed by the Danish architect Poul Henningsen during the mid-40s. He drew as Architect-in-Chief for Tivoli Gardens up until Simon Henningsen, his son, took over the reigns in the early 50s.

Gourmandiet is an ecological butcher with great interior – pendants made from helmets, pig themed ornaments and fantastic small goods.

Paustian got its Michelin star in 2010. It is a real fine experience and they also do lunch at a very fair price.

Opened in 2009, Kødbyens Fiskbar is in the hip and still upcoming area of Kødbyen (meatpacking district).

Also in this district is the stylish Karriere Bar with a fit-out that highlights Danish design pieces.

Ruby is a downtown cocktail bar decorated as an apartment. Pricey but delicious.

The botanic garden is a great place to relax. There is a small café that makes great coffee and snacks.

Scapetta is an Italian restaurant at Nørrebro, which won the “best new restaurant voted by the Copenhagen people”. And the spot that has won best restaurant in the world for the past two years running? That would be Noma, an acronym of the two Danish words “nordisk” (Nordic) and “mad” (food).
PLACES


illumsbolighus.dk

Danish Design Centre.
ddc.dk

Statens Museum for Kunst. Great for art and architecture.

smk.dk

Botanic gardens.

botanik.snm.ku.dk

Tivoli Gardens. Believe it or not, an amusement park with style – 18th-century style.

tivoli.dk

SHOPS

Hay. Designer and manufacturer of contemporary furniture, accessories and rugs.

hay.dk

Le Glace. Unbeatable ‘sports’ cake and hot chocolate with a very old, weathered interior.

laglace.dk

Gourmandiet. Organic butcher.

gourmandiet.dk

Paustian. Michelin-starred restaurant.

paustian.dk

Kodbyens Fiskebaren. Fabulous fish restaurant in the meatpacking district.

fiskebaren.dk

Ruby. Head here for great cocktails.

ruby.dk

Scapetta. This Italian eatery won “best new restaurant voted by the Copenhagen people”.

cofoco.dk/scapetta

With thanks to The Trade Commission of Denmark for making the visit possible. For further information oceanien.um.dk/en

EAT & DRINK

Nimb. Your choice of restaurant, bar’n’grill or bistro.

nimb.dk

The Paul. Stylish dining the old-fashioned way.

thepaul.dk

Illums Bolighus. Purveyor to the Royal Danish Court. A great collection of Danish design under one roof.

illumsbolighus.dk

Magasin du Nord. One of the classic Danish shopping experiences.

magasin.dk

Electric Chair. One of numerous interesting boutiques down Istedgade in Vesterbro. Best T-shirts in town.

normann-copenhagen.com

Normann Copenhagen. The flagship store; an impressive array of products in an old cinema building.

normann-copenhagen.com

Places

Style City.