



Karim Rashid

Karim Rashid's mission has been to bring beautiful, functional, modern design to the masses. And our tastes are changing, he tells Winnie Yeung. So now he's branching out – into science fiction.

IT'S RATHER LIKE a meet-and-greet with a pop star – more than 100 people are waiting anxiously in a brand-new convention hall at the almost deserted Shenzhen Exhibition Centre on a Tuesday morning. Armed with cameras, their eyes are fixed on the door, the same question is on all their lips – “Where is he?”

There is no doubt about the identity of the person they are waiting for. Projected on to two large screens on the stage is the face of Karim Rashid, one of the most famous product designers in the world.

And then there he is: the man himself. A tall, slim figure dressed impeccably in a white suit and a shocking-pink T-shirt and matching spectacles appears on the stage, surveys his “fans” and jokes, “Wow, this is almost like the United Nations – may I have the representative from Poland?” He asks to readjust the lighting, so he is the only person under the spotlight.

The 45-year-old New York-based designer has been invited to give a talk at the Brands & Designers China Initiative, a symposium chaired by fellow designer Philippe Starck that has brought together dozens of big names in the industry. The

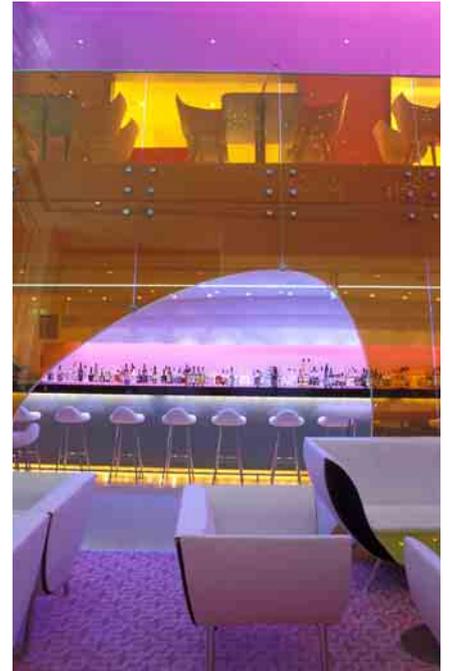
theme of his lecture is “The Business of Beauty.” And who better to talk about beauty than Rashid, one of the most outspoken advocates of the importance of beauty in design products?

Born in Egypt and raised in London and Canada, Rashid set up his studio in 1993 in New York. Among his award-winning creations are the Semiramis Hotel in Athens, the “blobby” Oh Chair and Umbra bowls.

He has his own brand of spectacles, laptop bags, clothing lines, portable hard disks, chess sets ... you name it, he's designed it. His long client list contains virtually all the big names: Sony, Issey Miyake, Prada Beauty, Umbra – even cleaning-product company Method – they all want his designs.

Rashid doesn't stop at product and industrial design – he is designing another hotel in Las Vegas, has published four books, and is on the lecture circuit. He recently appeared on reality TV show *Made in the USA* in which contestants designed a product every week (“Of course, I'm the bitchy judge,” he says).

And then there is the media coverage – Rashid is one of the most recognisable >>>



designers in the world. Sitting in a suite in the 999 Royal Suites & Towers hotel in Shenzhen for our interview, he looks like an advertisement for himself – he is wearing his trademark spectacles (which he designed), on the floor is the laptop bag he designed and beside him, the two large photographs of himself from his speech.

Some might call it attention-seeking, but what Rashid is doing is more than just self-promotion – he wants to teach the world to embrace good design. When Rashid arrived in New York 13 years ago he realised that, apart from companies such as Apple and IBM, US manufacturers were unwilling to hire designers for their products. They had no interest in how they looked. Although it's slowly changing, he experiences much the same thing today. He says that only recently one of his designs for a razor company fell through.

“Someone said to me in the meeting, ‘It doesn’t really matter what our razors look like, [as] we still own 75 per cent of the world’s razor market,’” he says. “You have these subjective people making decisions that are not about evolving us, but about staying with the status quo – you’re a strong company and you stay high at where you are. If people in the brand are so afraid to change, and believe their history is so important, they will die with the company.

“But without the support of bigger corporations, it’s difficult to make a difference because design products play such a small role compared to the mass-produced products in the world. It’s a Catch-22 – I want to design something new and radical, but the only company that listens is a tiny little one near the suburbs of Milan. Then the products obviously would come to the market in little volume and be very expensive,” he

says. “Meanwhile, the number of products Warner Brothers and Disney have made is way beyond what design firms would imagine selling.

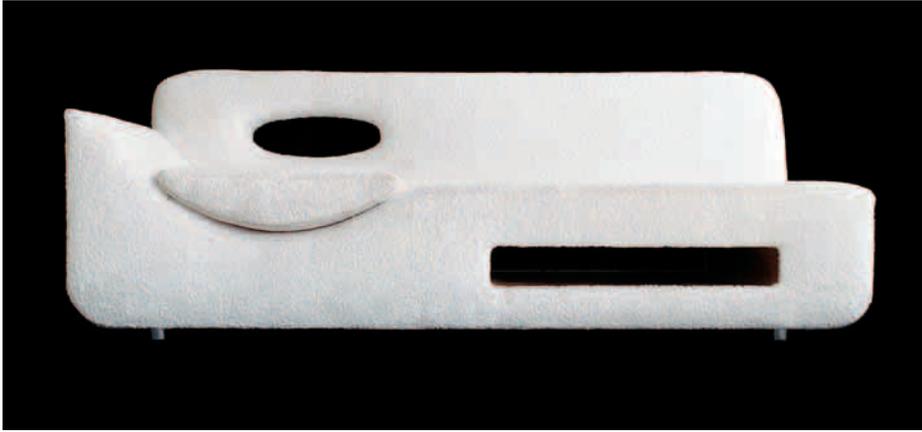
“I have to educate Americans, so I don’t have to hear from my snobbish European clients saying Americans have no taste,” he says, adjusting a pen so it’s parallel to the edge of the coffee table. “It’s not that they have no taste, it’s just that they don’t know any better. If you’re from a small town and the only furniture you have ever seen is what’s sold in Wal-Mart, what furniture are you going to put in your home?”

But Rashid says he is starting to see a difference. “I’m designing a hotel in Las Vegas and the intention is to build a really contemporary environment, but not to replicate an old look like the Bellagio, which is always a kitsch idea. But all of a sudden they want to make something really modern. It’s good news,” he says. “For the first time, Disney is not doing very well; Hard Rock Café is not doing well; Planet Hollywood closed. All of a sudden, we want [something] better in our lives.”

Rashid says his efforts and those of other designers trying to push cutting-edge design into the mainstream such as Philippe Starck, are paying off. “If 2,000 of us are making really cool contemporary bowls, that may change the world of bowls,” he says.

While Rashid works on accomplishing this goal (and he is working non-stop – he



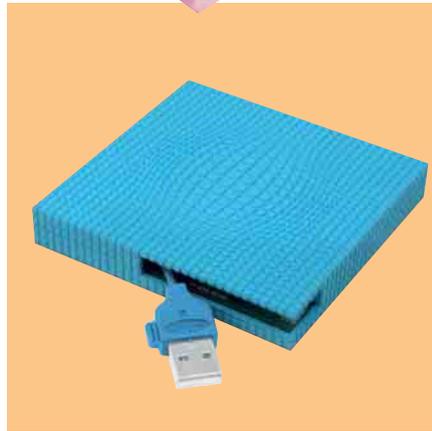


isn't able to check out Shenzhen during his visit because he remains in his hotel room working), he still finds time to get in touch with his Egyptian roots.

"For many years, I didn't even admit to my Arabic side. But recently, I think I've grown and started to appreciate it. It's sad not to know the language and the culture," he says. Rashid held his first exhibition in Cairo this January and is studying the hieroglyphics and art of ancient Egypt, which reinforces his belief that human beings come from another planet. "[The origins of life] didn't just happen. It must have come from somewhere. And there are a lot of implications about outer-space travel [in ancient scripts]," he says.

With that in mind, Rashid says it has a bearing on how he views the world. "We've created a very complex world that has a lot of problems. The essence of our businesses – to create and to be creative on every level – is hindered by issues like fanaticism, cultural and political differences," he says. "I want to find a way to become integrated again, so that we can have a peaceful world to focus on creation."

And the belief of a more simple and peaceful world has also made Rashid do something he has never done before – he is writing a sci-fi screenplay about a Utopian world. "It's a world more beautiful and poetic than ever shown in sci-fi films. For most of the time in those films, you always see the end of world or armageddon like in the *War of the Worlds*," he says. "My movie is the opposite. The problem is, if you make a movie about a beautiful world, you have no story. I'm now trying to come up with a story for this Utopia." 📌



Opposite, from top: the award-winning Semiramis hotel, Athens, Greece; Pure Design DJ Kreemy table. This page, clockwise from above: Prada cosmetics blister-pack; Prada cosmetics bottle; Galerkin Sofa One; Umbra Oh chair; Bozart orange and green chess set; LaCie Skwarim hard drive; Timex X Factor watch.