

JOHANNES TORPE

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AN OUTSIDER'S INSIDE GUIDE TO COPENHAGEN

FOREVER WEAR

DANISH JEWELRY DESIGN
KNOWN AND WORTH KNOWING

A SOFTER SIDE OF SCANDINAVIA

ONE DESTINATION, TWO COUNTRIES

JOHANNES TORPE

DANISH DESIGN TALENT
WHO DEFIES DEFINITION



Johannes Torpe.



A Mega

Design Talent who Defies Definition

Words by Julie Ralphs

One of the hottest names in contemporary design, Johannes Torpe is a pioneer in immersive branding experiences. A multi-disciplinarian designing everything from architecture to entire interiors (including the art on the ceiling), to furniture and tableware. To fashion accessories for global giants like Roberto Cavalli, Tom Ford, Pal Zileri and Dolce & Gabbana. He does lighting design, corporate, graphic and industrial design. Oh he's also a rock musician. A drummer producer and owner of three record labels with his half-brother. In between flights to his offices in Hong Kong, Copenhagen and Padova, Torpe spoke with us from his new HQ in Beijing.

Bohemian upbringing

Not many designers have the honor of the Taiwanese President attending the opening of one of their projects. But then again, Johannes Torpe is not like most designers. He doesn't come from a typical mold. He's a self-taught trailblazer who has created his global claims to fame from scratch. Half-Danish, half-Irish, Torpe is unafraid to explore new territory while others stay stuck in a pre-determined past. In the process, he's extremely serious about having fun. What made his brain wired this way?

"It's all about programming certain patterns in thinking, behaving and perceiving the world," explains Torpe. "Both my parents chose a rebellious path. My father left the restrictive Catholic mindset in Ireland and moved with his guitar to Denmark's alternative society in Christiania. My mom came from an intellectual family of professors, doctors and psychiatrists. But she wanted to be an artist. They both broke their parents' patterns and I'm breaking theirs."





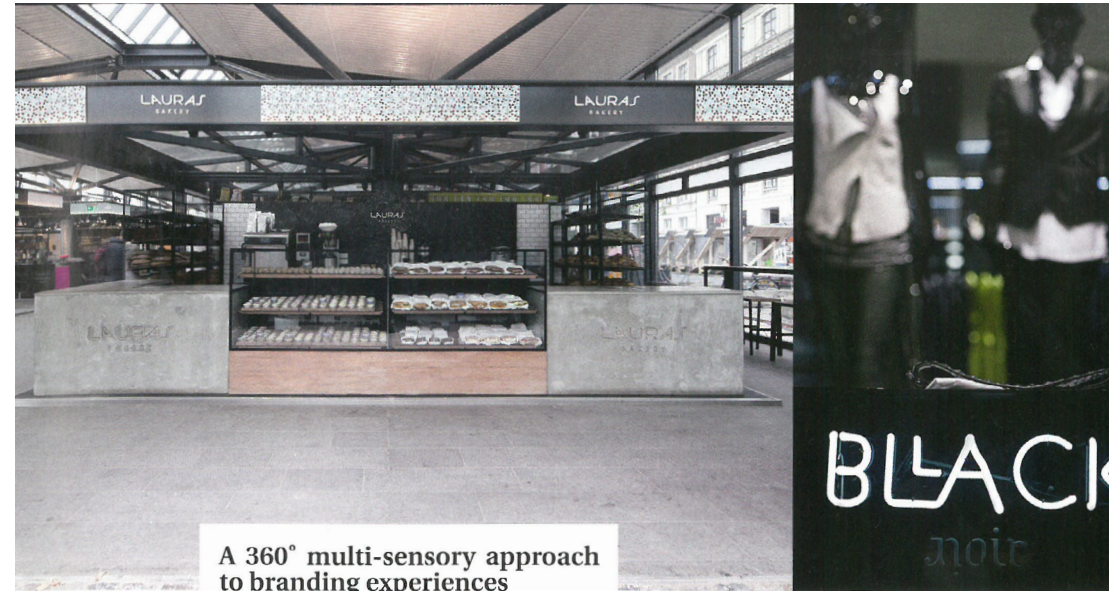
Anything that becomes something was once nothing

Since he was a child, Torpe was fascinated with the idea of creating something from nothing. "My parents were real free thinkers," says Torpe. "I grew up in a hippie collective and attended a free school where there was no homework and classes were only three days a week. If it was nice weather outside, we were encouraged to go out and play. When I was six, I went to the Midtfyns Rock Festival, which had a huge impact on me. I started playing with modeling clay and became absorbed in small details that sort of grew. From creating a guitar and microphone to a complete stage set-up for a small band. Very realistic." Even now, when Torpe has an idea for a product, in the process of designing a chair he automatically thinks of other pieces to go with it. Including the space where they'll be placed.

By the time he was 17, Torpe built up one of the top three lighting design companies in Denmark. Then came NASA. An über cool nightclub he owned and designed, which became the launch pad for his multitude of talents. Whereas lighting was crucial for setting the scene, his focus shifted to the scene itself. "NASA was attracting rich guys with money and girls who wanted to meet rich guys with money to get more Gucci handbags," remembers Torpe. "So I designed the interior to be futuristic chic and at the same time intimidating. You need to get people's attention. And you need to be clear about the purpose. What you want to accomplish with a space."

Making it big across four continents

Fast forward to China, where Torpe recently opened an office in Beijing. Growing up with a father he affectionately calls the "Irish Catholic Buddhist" exposed him to a way of being which helped him connect with the Chinese mentality. "About two thirds of China is Buddhist, to varying degrees," adds Torpe. "Before opening any restaurant in China, my partner naturally arranges for a Feng Shui master to come from Tibet to bless each room. The Princess of Tibet is a dear friend of mine. Her father was the 10th Panchen Lama, a high-ranking Buddhist monk close to the Dalai Lama. You don't get to meet these people without some spiritual connection to Buddhism."



A 360° multi-sensory approach to branding experiences

Close kindred spirits with clients

Torpe felt an instant affinity with his Chinese partner Wang Xiaofei and his mother Mrs. Zwang. When Torpe came over to design the interior of SUBU, an exclusive chain of restaurants from South Beauty Group, he and Xiaofei were stuck in a traffic jam. Xiaofei turned to Torpe and said, "I feel like you are the brother I never had. Like we've known each other forever." As for Torpe, "He's my extra little brother. Very proud with a great soul and energy. It's really important to give to others. In some societies, people tend to limit each other. In China, so many people have so little. And so few people have so much. Here the attitude is more magnanimous. If I have something, let me help you have some, too."

Torpe sees himself as a global citizen in sync with the world versus someone who fits into a specific society, as such. When he works with a new person, sharing something personal is what connects them. "The first time I understood this was in Italy," recalls Torpe, "where you're not in business until you're in their home, eating dinner with their family. Getting drunk and silly together. I was in Verona printing my book and a guy saw my work and immediately invited me to his home for dinner with his wife and kids. He later became my partner in our Padova office. They're so warm and welcoming. In China it's very much the same. In Danish business relationships, you deliver the work, send in your bill and that's the extent of it. You don't really get personal."

Denmark's déjà-vu point of view

Denmark has a heritage of design, most notably from the 50's and 60's with references to Arne Jacobsen, Hans Wegner and a long list of others. Speaking to academicians here, some seem stuck in the past, unconsciously seeking design solutions that resemble or repeat it. An attitude Torpe describes as looking backwards not forwards. "Over 50 years later, Denmark is still resting on the shoulders of giants. They can't step up or down or go anywhere. To be so stuck in the past is the opposite of evolution. Danes need to be more open to innovative ideas. And to implementing them. If car manufacturers kept doing vintage 60's designs, they would die."



Jonathan Torpe.



Anybody can design a chair. It's the entirety of it – the universe and the experience.

Special Effects

Torpe goes to great lengths to orchestrate an extra dimension that adds to the atmosphere and energy of a space. An amazing example is the LED waterfall effect he created in South Beauty Group's high-end restaurant in Taipei. "If people have to sit somewhere for two hours, you have to do something that changes," says Torpe. "Create something they can't get their eyes off of that will make the entire room come alive. A centerpiece." Look up at the ceiling and Torpe has added an extra sense of beauty and serenity, with watercolor images of birds hand-painted by Danish artists. Add to that his talent for curating the right type of music to play depending on the time of day, and you have an experience that's nothing less than awesome.

If it feels like work, then you're doing it wrong

In his world, work should be fun. Complete with the "kick" that comes from seeing his ideas become a reality. As Torpe sees it, "I play music with my half-brother Rune [aka DJ Rune RK]. When you perform live onstage with an audience, you put your arms up in the air and they put their arms up in the air. Hundreds of people are instantly responding right back to you. It's a kick. Once you feel it, you never let it go. In design, there are long lead times in between kicks. I need to multi-task to bring in more kicks more often."

As an ultra intuitive and inventive gigawatt guy, I was wondering if he ever feels none of those things. Apparently not. Torpe's food for the soul is all about energy. He runs every day and practices The Five Tibetan Rites, a series of exercises Tibetan monks have used for 2,500 years to enhance physical endurance and mental vigor. True to form, he challenges conventional thinking – even about unconventional approaches to inner peace. "It's all about finding your own ritual of relaxation. Meditation can be a lot of things. It's not limited to sitting still in a lotus position all day." An apt insight from a guy who refuses to be limited, and can't help but keep moving forward. Breaking new ground and illuminating us all along the way.