

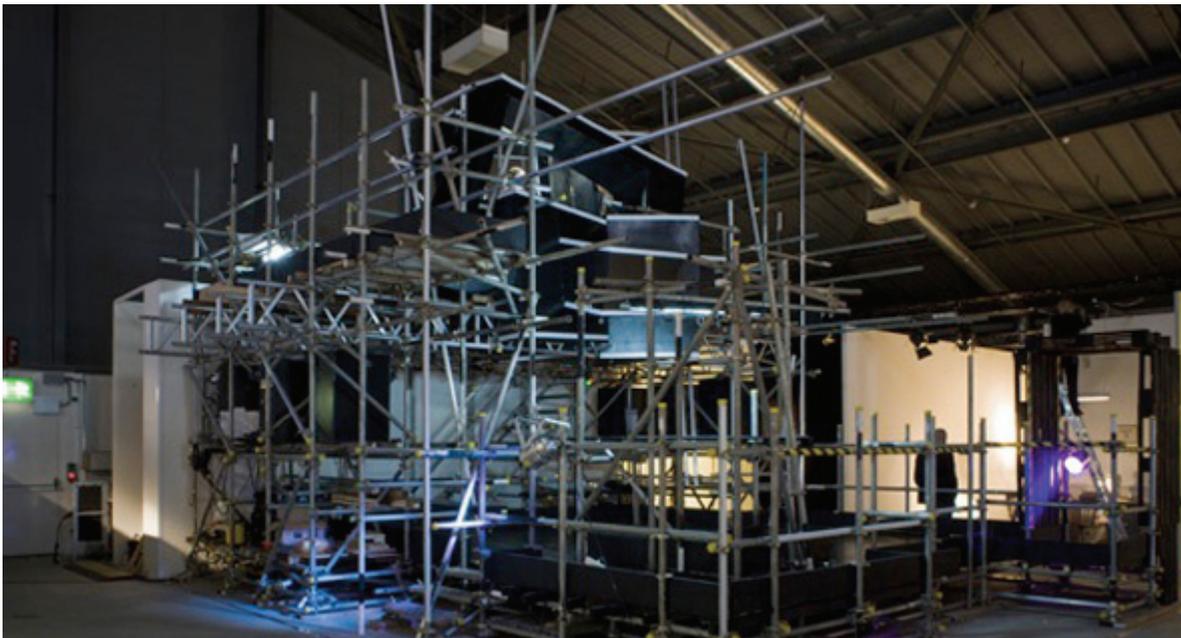
Design Miami/Basel | The Future Perfect

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James Harris for Design Miami Graham Hudson's "Renaissance: The Last Dance at the Cross," is a modular bar/DJ booth that can be installed at W Hotel sites around the world. Hudson, left, in the DJ booth, is with Mike Tiedy, the senior vice president of global brand design and innovation at Starwood Hotels, and Eva Ziegler, the global brand leader of W Hotels.

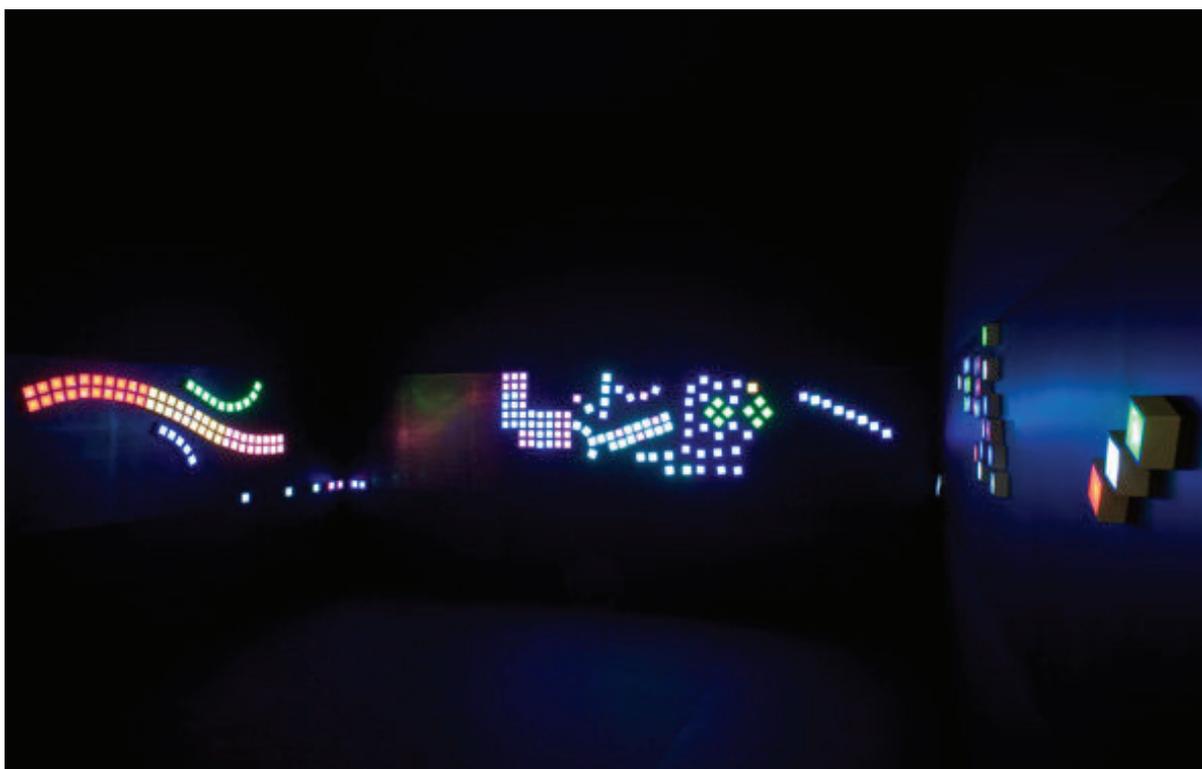
Tomorrow always comes today at Design Miami/Basel, where exhibitors take forward thinking as seriously as beauty in form. Still, any future worth imagining contains its history, and the London sculptor Graham Hudson brought a piece of it to Monday's VIP preview, when W Hotels Worldwide unveiled commissioned projects by the four young winners of the fair's Designers of the Future Award. (The others are Jamie Zigelbaum and Marcelo Coelho of Future Matter, based in Boston; Beta Tank, founded in Berlin and London by Michele Gauler and Eyal Burstein; and Stuart Wood, Flo Ortkrass and Hannes Koch, of Berlin's rAndom International.)

Hudson, 33, was charged with creating a modular D.J. booth that could be set up in any location, like lobbies — or Living Rooms, in W parlance — of selected hotels in the style-conscious chain. The booth has the usual turntables, CD players and a mixer, but its installation at the fair is a bit of a wreck — hardly what one would expect to see at a W, where design is as essential to a hotel's social architecture as it is to the company's public image.

Of course, the dishevelment is actually pretty neat. The D.J. booth is in a black sky box that Hudson positioned high over a black dance floor. A system of steel scaffolding holds the booth in place and serves as its walls. Benches are made out of the metal steps of a catwalk; green laser beams cut across the floor; a fallen mirrored ball has been kicked into a corner. On the whole, the space looks like the skeleton of nightclub where the party is definitely over: it resonates not with dance music but a hollow sense of quiet.

And that is the point of the piece, "Renaissance: The Last Dance at the Cross," which commemorates the recent demise of three underground dance clubs in London — Bagleys, the Key, and Cross. Hudson built his piece with materials salvaged from all three clubs, which were located in Kings Cross, a neighborhood of north London that is undergoing redevelopment.

"The piece is designed to function, not to look great," Hudson said in an interview. "I also wanted to look at the social and political conditions of the clubs' closing and encourage people to think about a situation." He's talking about the body blow to London nightlife that has been delivered by social networking, and sex and music sites on the Web. "Now if you're seeking sex, you go to the Internet," he said. "The music scene that began with House music in the '80s is gone. It's harder to get a license for late-night drinking. But I'm a good Marxist and I'm interested in personal freedom, and it's easier to keep track of people on the Internet. I want to speculate on the future of freedom, where the counterculture comes from, and what it is to live in the modern world. But if people here look at this and think just that I must love clubbing, then the piece really hasn't worked."



Social interaction is also first on the minds of Zigelbaum & Coelho, geeks who are concerned with the way humans connect with computers. Their “Six-Forty by Four-Eighty” is an interactive lighting scheme made of 220 three-inch “pixel tiles” that are installed on the walls of a pitch-black booth. The tiles are actually magnetized light-boxes, illuminated from within, and programmed to glow or blink pink, yellow, green, red or blue. Users can move them around at will to create designs of their own, and they’re terrific fun. Pretty, too.

“They’re each a computer that can display thousands of colors,” said Zigelbaum, 32, who formed what he calls a “postindustrial design studio” with Coelho, 30, in Boston. They have studied neuroscience, film, computer science, electrical engineering and technology, and are inventors as well as designers. Recently they came up with what they call a “3-D food printer,” that looks something like a large microscope but which dispenses chocolate once it’s fed the ingredients by a computer.

“We started with the idea that computers exist outside the space of human interaction, so we’re trying to build technologies around the physical world, so people can deal with computational data as if it were solid material,” Zigelbaum explained.

They have designed other pixel tiles that can be used either in domestic or public spaces, where people can stick them on the wall for a party or collect them to create light strong enough for reading. “I see technology as part of the human organism and not independent of it,” said Zigelbaum, who is also the inventor of Slurp — an eyedropper that can pluck digital information, like how long a life a light bulb has, directly from one’s surroundings. “I’ve always been interested in how we receive the world through materials,” Coelho added. “I’ve done computers made of pulped paper. I’ve worked with materials like curtains that can control lighting or open doors.”

What puts this brainy pair squarely into the world of design is their attention to aesthetics. Their objects don’t just look great; they have attractive insides as well. “So many objects have beautifully designed shells,” Zigelbaum said, using an unprintable word to describe what’s often inside them. “We’re trying to put it all together — harness tools we have today and bring them to a different place.”