


OCTOBER 2017 £4.99

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS



Solar Power

An opportunity to visit Africa on a business course lured Maria Haralambidou away from a career in architecture and inspired her to set up People of the Sun, a social enterprise that empowers basket weavers and other traditional artisans in Malawi, teaming them up with international designers and bringing their work to discerning buyers across the globe. Text: Augusta Pownall >



Cyclists carrying cane chairs to be shipped can balance eight or nine of them at a time. When Maria came across this by chance, she asked the cyclist who made them. He led her to the chairman of the producers' group who, having heard of her work, was expecting her



Maria Haralambidou didn't mean to set up an award-winning social enterprise in one of Africa's most deprived countries. The way she tells it, a series of happy accidents have led her to where she is today. But four years on from its conception, People of the Sun is thriving, with a new collection in collaboration with the Dutch designer Ineke Hans chosen to be part of Brompton Design District's 'Other Stories: Alternative Perspectives on Design' programme during the London Design Festival.

Back in 2013, with a stint at the prestigious Architectural Association School of Architecture in London under her belt and working on slick residential projects, Maria set off for Africa for the first time. The previous year, while studying for an MA in creative economy at Kingston University, she was picked to travel to South Africa and Zimbabwe to visit an NGO that connected 2,000 basket weavers. The first happy accident. Her introduction to Africa was a shock, but also hugely romantic, 'like going back in time'. Meeting small-scale producers encouraged her to act. 'These people are so talented, but their skills aren't seen by a wider audience.'

On earlier trips, Maria had always made sure to visit local markets. Like many of us, she'd snap up handicrafts 'because it was nice to have a souvenir in your suitcase', only to find that what worked in the markets of Mexico didn't sit quite so happily in her London kitchen. But she had a hunch that with the right design steer, business development nous and a better understanding of the markets, their work could translate to European customers. She set off for Malawi, and began at the obvious place, the market. 'Always a good starting point!'

There Maria met the second happy accident, in the form of Mr Bigna. He noticed her browsing the craft stalls, picking out products that were especially well made. Together they set up two weeks of meetings with artisans in the surrounding villages, careering around on- and off-road and trekking through the bush. From an initial handful, there are now roughly 120 people in the city and in village co-operatives working with the enterprise.

A single basket can take ten days to make, in the cool courtyard of a village house or under a tree, and production grinds to a halt during harvest, so testing new prototypes is a slow process. In fact, Maria found that 'the whole concept of time is very different in Europe and Africa'. She had assumed that once an order came in they would work flat >

Clockwise from left: a traditional cane chair of the type made by artisans in the villages around Lake Malawi; Maria can see the hand of every maker in their work, as each is subtly different; the artisans had been producing chairs since the 1980s, but had struggled to diversify into making mirror frames and other products, so Maria set up an Innovation Group to help them develop marketable items



out until it was fulfilled, but the weavers went at their own pace, happy to earn enough for 'a phone, a bicycle, a solar panel, a TV and a motorbike, in that order'. There were adjustments to be made on both sides. In villages without electricity they wake with the sun, so Maria's working day began at 4.30am with a stream of phone calls.

In the early days she did it all: learned how to build a website, designed the first collection and produced a catalogue, working by trial and error. Then she got in touch with design stores she knew from her architecture days. The owner of SCP liked the story and put in their first big order – a serious boost to the fledgling outfit. Slowly she ironed out myriad issues. As little is produced there, Malawi doesn't have a thriving export business, so you can't share a shipping container to Europe as you could in Kenya. Quality control reared its head time and again. Transport is expensive, so they are competing with high-end makers and things have to be perfect.

At the Salone del Mobile in Milan, some woven chairs caught the eye of Ineke Hans. Working remotely via the messaging service WhatsApp, the two women developed a collection of baskets with lids that also function as a tray or small table. 'It's possible [to work like this] as long as you have a trained eye and know what you're looking for,' explains Ineke, adding that homes are getting smaller and more expensive, so furniture must work harder. 'My Dutch grandmother would have a writing table, a breakfast table and a dining table. Now we have just one.'

Initially the plan was to set up a network of enterprises in various countries, but having seen how hard it is, Maria is happy to focus on Malawi and concentrate on building a strong distribution network in Europe. After four years living in the south of the country, she will step away from her role on the ground, safe in the knowledge that she can tweak designs (and stay in touch with the artisans' kids) from anywhere in the world. WhatsApp aside, she insists that the most important element is love. 'Without love you couldn't make it work. Love, dedication and patience.' That and some happy accidents ■

Prices from £33 approx for a tray. To contact People of the Sun, visit peopleofthesun.net. The Ineke Hans collection by People of the Sun will be launched during London Design Festival (Brompton Design District), at 4 Cromwell Place, London SW7, 16-24 Sept. Mon-Sun 10-6. For details, visit londondesignfestival.com

Clockwise from top left: Ineke Hans designed according to the artisans' skills, but sometimes a design that looked good on paper doesn't match their work, so it is tweaked to fit; the artisans' main livelihood is farming, but as well as earning extra money from weaving, they are keeping traditional skills alive; profits are ploughed back into the enterprise and spent on courses and renting production space