

INTERIORS

FURNITURE FOR BABIES THAT'S ALL GROWN UP

Designers turn their hands to helping parents create chic, contemporary nurseries with style and comfort

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You'd think, given the amount of baby stuff already out there, there'd be enough to kit out one small room for a tiny person.

First-time father Jon Lake didn't think so. A US product designer, he grudgingly bought what was on offer, saying it was "functional but not attractive".

Fast-forward a few years and nothing had changed. "My own children were older by then, but friends of mine were becoming parents and they found that the same PVC-covered atrocities were still being passed off as baby's furniture," he said during a routine visit to Hong Kong.

So four men with offended design sensibilities established bloom (www.bloombaby.com), a brand of baby furniture of European design and precision engineering. They tapped a trend: its start-up in Hong Kong in 2006 led to bloom products being sold in 56 countries and notching up US\$20 million in annual sales.

Caroline Ma, of Jason Caroline Design (jasoncarolinedesign.com), also wanted something stylish for her children. Not for Ma the old "blue for boy, pink for girl" convention. She and her husband mixed and matched from various retailers to get the desired effect, buying both in-store and online.

"For our (second) baby, we converted our dressing room ... into a nursery. We chose a Jacadi



A range of baby furniture designed by Sand for TREE includes this cabinet on wheels. Photo: TREE

cot and bedding (www.jacadi.com) and an Ikea dresser and made some Roman blinds from Cetec (www.cetec.com.hk) in Casamance fabric."

Some Australian alphabet wall stickers from Little Chippipi (www.littlechippipi.com.au) were added for character.

Ma says it's not necessary to spend a fortune on a nursery. "As a general rule, I like to mix and match - expensive with inexpensive, brands with no brands - to achieve a unique look." But she did invest in health-related items, such as a high-quality air purifier.

Designer Silvia Marlia's influ-



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JON LAKE, BLOOM

ences go back to the womb. A student of the Rudolf Steiner pedagogy, she believes a newborn's environment should mimic that which it knew before entering the world. Think furnishings calming to the senses and devoid of sharp edges, such as oval-shaped cots from Stokke (www.stokke.com), available from Indigo Living (www.indigo-living.com), fine gauze coverings to shield new eyes from harsh light, and pale, calming colours.

Marlia's Sand brand of children's furniture and accessories (www.sandforkids.com) infuses an educational approach into contemporary design, and is available exclusively at TREE (www.tree.com.hk) at prices ranging from HK\$2,950 for a Books on Wheels box, to HK\$13,450 for the MM wardrobe and rolling cabinet series.

Parents also want natural, non-toxic materials, preferring a more tactile look and feel, and a lighter environment, Marlia says. "Designers are responding by offering products made out of wood, with organic shapes."

Sand uses hardwoods and bent plywood, leaving surfaces natural so that children can appreciate the construction of the shape. Marlia believes that exposing babies to good aesthetics, functionality and refined colours is part of their early development.

In an ideal nursery, Marlia would choose wooden furniture, with a calm range of colours, and products that, as they grow, a child can easily handle by themselves. It would also have storage space so kids can find their favourite things easily.

Websites such as www.fisherprice.com and www.huggies.com offer online decorating tools for planning a nursery layout and colour scheme, but as Australian designer Sara Slim points out, you can include in the décor something that already has meaning for you. For example, a beautiful handkerchief bought by Slim's mother-in-law in Paris in the 1940s, when mounted and framed, became "a wonderful heirloom and piece of art" adorning her daughter's bedroom.

If you want to avoid sex-spe-

cific stereotypes, what colour do you choose as the blank canvas for a nursery? Yellow or white are neutral, but not inspiring. How about grey, then?

Contemporary grey, suggests Ursula Wesselingh, a Dutch interior designer living in Britain, can create "a soothing environment". Accented by other "soothing colours, like blue, green, and lilac", this palette can be calming, yet playful, she says. The owner of Room to Bloom (www.room-to-bloom.com) believes the two most important things to bear in mind when choosing colours are that you should feel good in the room, and that it is a good place for baby to sleep.

"There is evidence that babies sleep better in dark environments. This doesn't mean you have to decorate the nursery in the darker colours that are very much in vogue right now. As long as you can adequately darken the room, a soft and light palette is restful too," she says.

Another problem with items of nursery furniture is their short lifespan. A baby will grow out of a bassinet in a few months, and be too big for a high chair before they turn two. The bloom dads have addressed that with a high chair, fresco chrome (HK\$4,250-HK\$6,000), which reclines to safely cradle a newborn and can hold a child of up to eight years.

Other bloom designs have Hong Kong's small spaces in mind. The alma mini-crib (HK\$2,800) sits by the parents' bed, yet can be used by babies up to 18 months. Its small footprint allows room-to-room mobility between even the narrowest of doorways, and it folds to 25cm wide for storage when not in use.

Expectant parents nearly always say a baby won't change their lives. Ha! Some things will change, but that needn't include the prized interior you've lovingly created over time.