



PRODUCT DESIGN  
Beirut, Lebanon

# True as Steel

A Beirut-based brand with faultless design integrity, .PSLAB is one of the Middle East's leading product designers

The library of Nok Yoga Shala, a yoga centre located in the Saifi Village neighbourhood of central Beirut, is a compact, peaceful and elegant space. A sanctuary-like wing in a recently renovated 18th century stone building, it's the inventive set of structures protruding from the walls that brings soul and a sense of radiance to the yoga centre's heart. The light installation is one of many products, inside and outside of Lebanon, designed by .PSLAB, a multidisciplinary collective of designer-manufacturers that has carved a niche for itself with its earnest approach to design.

Formed in 2004, with over 100 team members working out of Beirut as well as Stuttgart, Helsinki and Singapore, .PSLAB has worked continuously to establish themselves as a strong presence in commercial spaces as well as homes, leading to accolades such as the iF Product Design Award in 2011 and the Good Design Award in 2011 and 2013.

.PSLAB has gained its foothold by offering products that always carry an abstract thematic concept and a high-end finish, not different from the sophistication and specificity that would set a designer garment apart from the general crop. The brand's team too has likened its work to the haute couture approach.

Today, the brand has a strong creative and technical team that works on every stage, from the conception of a product to its packaging and delivery. 'There is no traditional Arab

trade that fits our work. Some of the people we work with are trained as carpenters, some are blacksmiths, some are welders – they vary in skill. Some are engineers, some are pure craftsmen,' says Dimitri Saddi, founder and creative director of .PSLAB

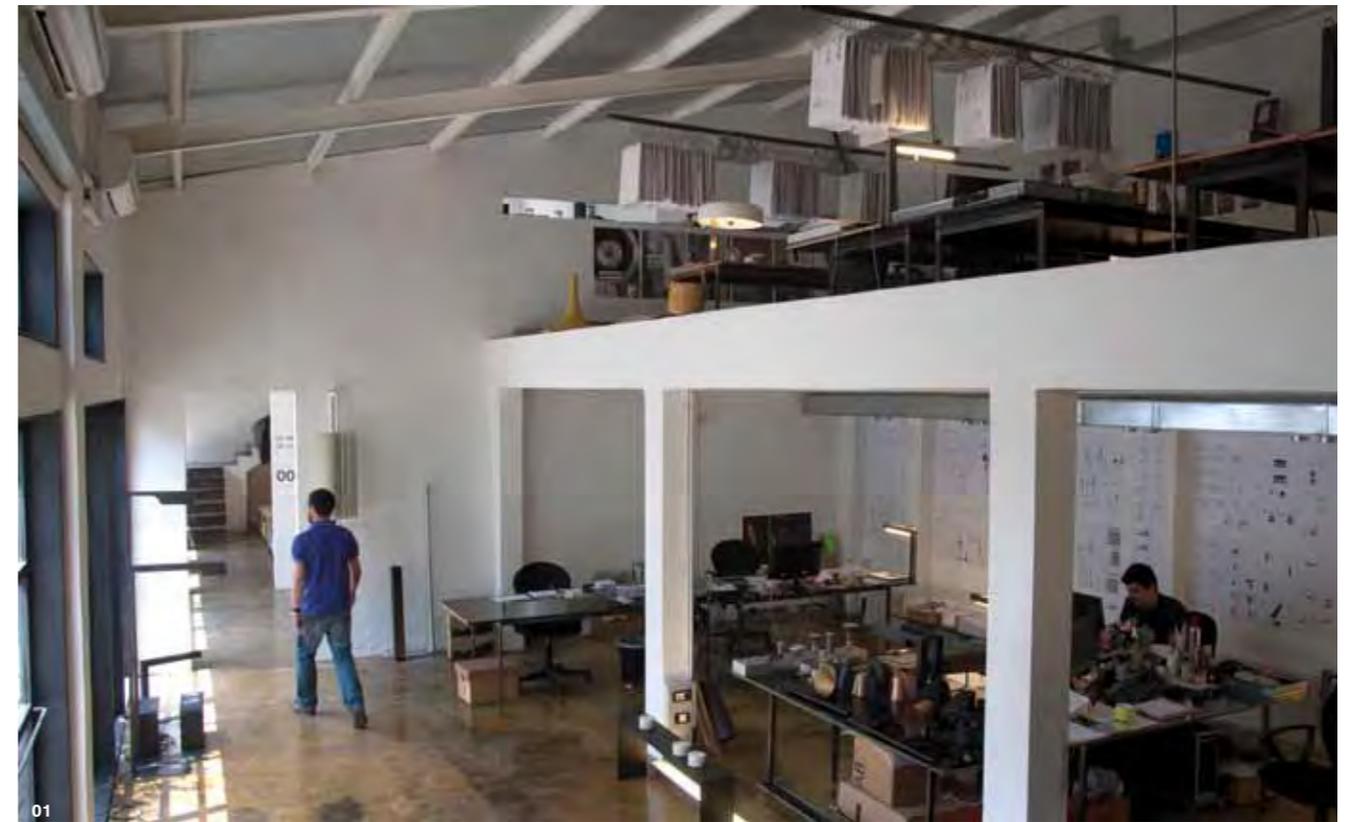
It wasn't an easy start though. Being based in the Middle East brought its own set of logistical challenges. 'Lebanon isn't on the international market. It's not renowned for this stuff. You rarely associate these types of products with the Middle East,' says Saddi. 'This is one barrier we had to overcome by working on our communications strategy and showcasing our work on a regular basis by developing booklets and sending them out.'

Additional problems for the brand included a lack of nearby resources to test products and examine prototypes. Along with suppliers who were unable to supply to Lebanon readily, it was a challenge that prompted the company to become increasingly self-sufficient.

'We used to design products for other brands, but when you design with other people's ingredients you are limited by what they offer you and the fact that you are only allowed to sell these products in a certain market,' Saddi elaborates. 'So if you want to work somewhere else, the supplier would tell you we can't supply you in this country. So we stopped collaborating with other suppliers and went 100 percent with .PSLAB.'



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The creatives behind .PSLAB see their offices, located in the Beirut neighbourhood of Mar Mikhael, as a reflection of their company's identity. Open-plan, drenched in light and furnished by the team, both the indoor and outdoor spaces in each of their locations are organised in a way conducive to work and thoughtful meditation. Each .PSLAB office reflects its particular location but carries an identifiable part of the .PSLAB identity, linking it with its peers. Decorated with lavenders, the courtyards of the Beirut headquarters are perfectly suited to the weather testing of outdoor lights. Large olive trees planted in pots that double as benches mirror the city's Mediterranean identity and offer up a tranquil setting for work and reflection. .PSLAB lighting illuminates the office space, enveloping the team in inspiration as they brainstorm and execute various projects. Indoors, what .PSLAB describes as 'spacious, vaulting workshops' equipped with a library provide ample room for experimentation and exchange.

The question of identity has been one that the company has answered on its own terms. 'Today we are all a bit global. I'm not into this "we are Lebanese designers" thing. We are a company that originates in Lebanon but we've lived abroad most of our lives; we read, we mix,' says Saddi. 'It's not a Middle East tag or a Lebanese tag that makes me proud. What makes me proud is that our core team is Lebanese, that there is lots of great talent on our team and in the

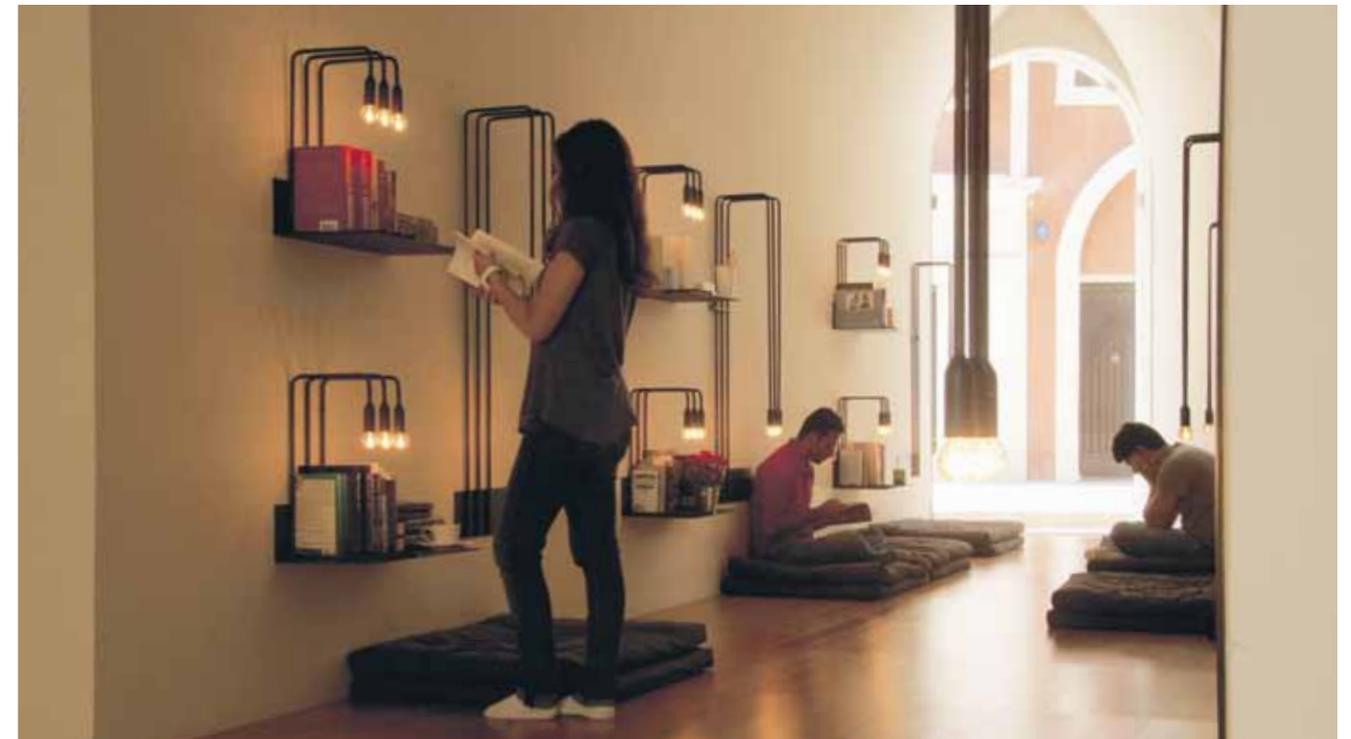


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† .PSLAB offers two kinds of services. The first is a bespoke/from-scratch solution, and the second adapts products from the .PSLAB library to a new context

‡ The core concept for Barbican Foodhall and Lounge was based on Levantine glass olive jars. They were hung on the ceiling, mounted on the walls and stacked on shelving

country, and that we are part of a lovely community.' A part of the design firm's image is its sense of mystique. Always projecting itself as a brand first, .PSLAB has never designated one specific individual, not even Saddi himself, as an official face or spokesperson for the company. This subtle and understated approach to marketing brings attention to the creations themselves, rather than the people behind them. With a versatile skillset that mixes both handcrafted and machine-made products, .PSLAB works very closely with its clients, encouraging open discussion and input to ensure a personalised end-result.† The lights installed in Nok Yoga Shala's library are no exception. Owned by a friend of Saddi's, the not-for-profit space benefited from the close relationship. In Saddi's words, 'We wanted to do something inspiring for people who were trying to meditate.' The small but welcoming library is an integral part of the centre, a place to exercise the brain with some quiet reading after one of the centre's ashtanga, tantric or aerial yoga sessions. Collaborating with architectural design practice CBA Group, .PSLAB intervened in the library space by creating minimalistic wall-mounted light fixtures. Protruding black steel platforms are fixed to the higher part of the wall. From their base, long and appendage-like, extend three powder-coated metal tubes, trailing upwards before curving and moving back down, finishing with a softly-lit exposed lightbulb. The tubes are moulded to complement the arcade-shaped roof of the library, and the steel platforms



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serve as bookshelves, displaying available reading material. Similar fixtures are mounted on the lower level of the wall, providing subtle illumination to the pages being read.

The light is meant to be soft, an indication of harmony and metaphoric enlightenment. Simple as it may appear, the process behind the creation is intricate, Saddi explains. 'We asked why we should have this type of light? What's the advantage? What does a yoga centre symbolise? We wanted to be sensitive to the context. It's important that you know how to read the context. That's what differentiates us.'

This complex analysis of each and every project is what helps .PSLAB create an apt addition to any given space, somehow executing a very different product for each installation yet using recurring themes such as steel and exposed lights. Alongside Nok Yoga Shala's library, .PSLAB has also taken the concept of lighting design to new dimensions for clients such as London's Barbican Foodhall and Design Lounge<sup>+</sup> and Antwerp's Graanmarkt 13 boutique.

Despite not sticking to labels, the brand's sense of motivation and drive does come from a characteristically Lebanese spirit. The trait of perseverance has helped it succeed and thrive in a setting where the odds are stacked against them. 'Our heritage is Middle Eastern in the sense that our philosophy is very much "min dabber 7alna" or "we'll make do,"' says Saddi. 'There is no impossible solution – you can get things done. This is probably the thing that most distinguishes us from a Danish company, for example. They go down one road and read the signs; we have to make our own roads and make up the signs.'