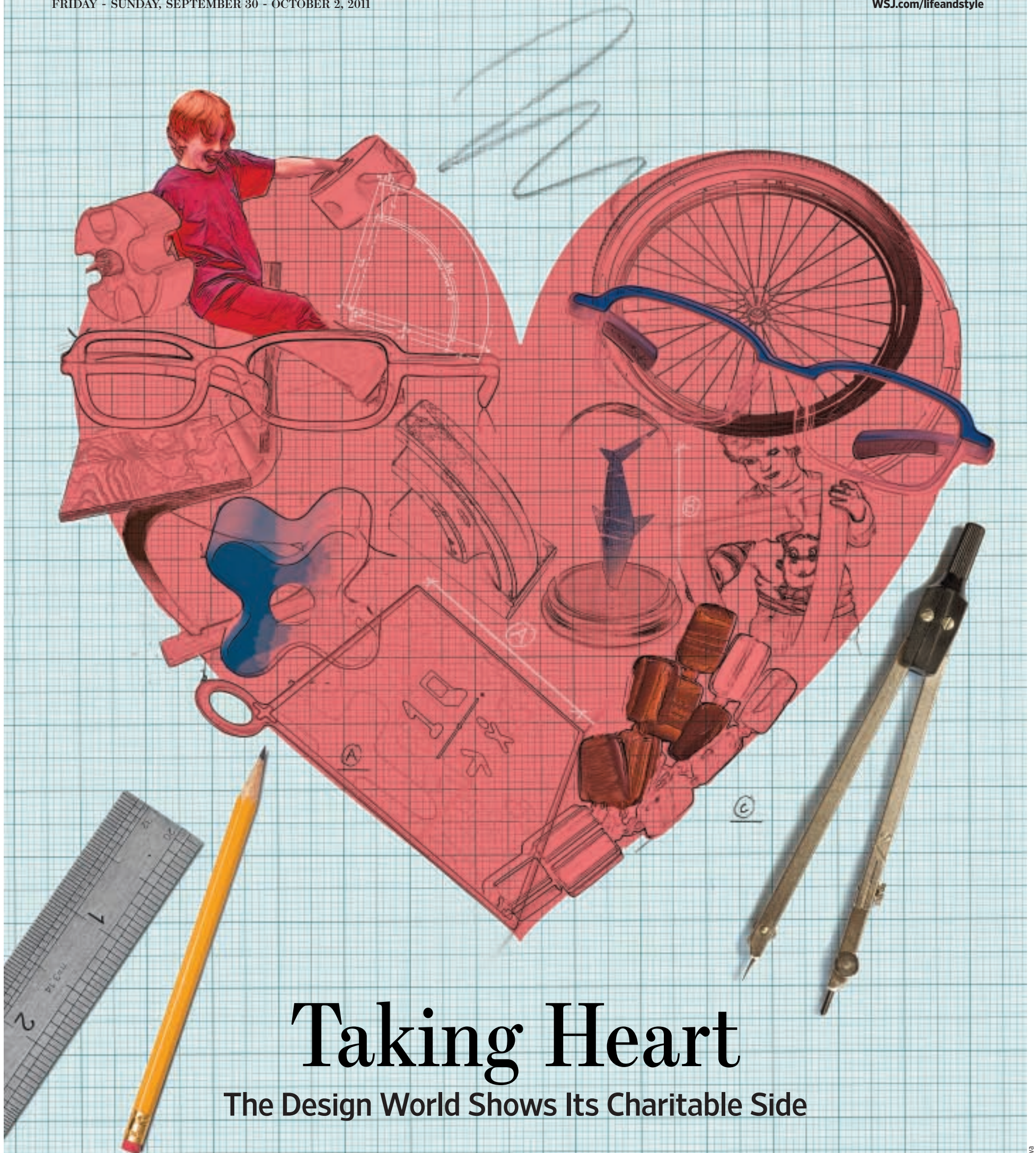


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Taking Heart

The Design World Shows Its Charitable Side

FASHION

Fresh starts, flirty spring styles and oldie revivals in Milan W5

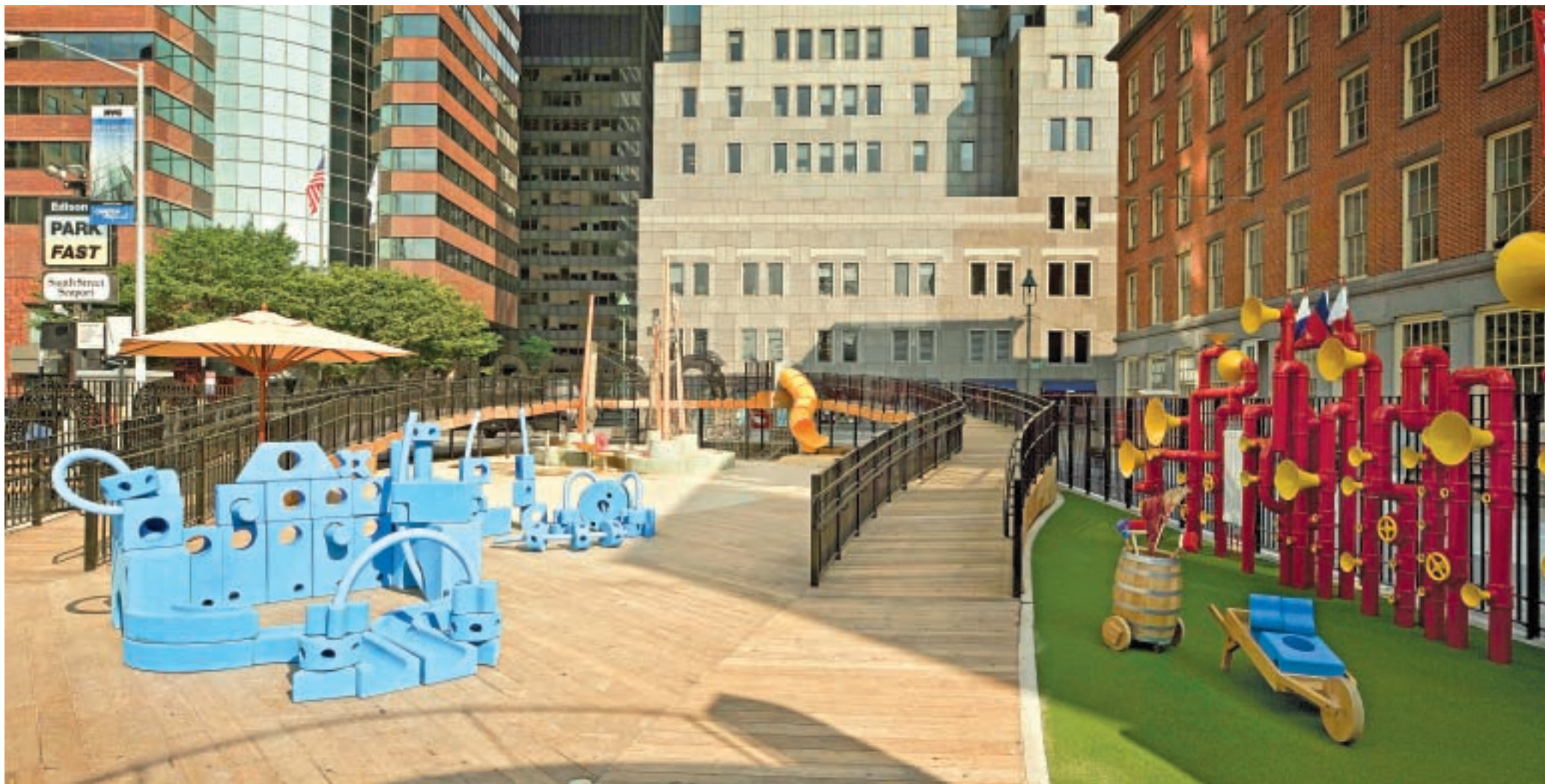
FOOD & WINE

A culinary revelation. Plus, tasting unusual suspects W7

ART

John Baldessari's new works are a modern twist on the familiar W13

COVER STORY



Wearing a Philanthropic Heart on The

For Some Designers, Charity Begins at Work as They Create New Products Meant to Improve Lives and Orga

BY NICOLE SWENGLEY

Big, philanthropic gestures have traditionally flowed more steadily from the heart of the arts world than design. But that is changing as the industry looks outside of its normal sphere of influence to improve lives, as well as architecture and home decor, through projects ranging from cheap eyeglasses and playgrounds to fund-raisers.

"The fundamentals of design are about serving everyone," says Swiss designer Yves Behar. "It's crucial to show that good design can go beyond luxury items. There is a world of need for good design solutions that change people's lives."

This month, Mr. Behar won Copenhagen-based, nonprofit Index's 2011 award for life-improving designs for the fun, fashionable spectacles he created for See Better to Learn Better. The project with San Diego-based lens manufacturer Augen Optics and Mexico's government distributes free eyewear to disadvantaged children in the country. "To me, the need for corrective eyeglasses is such a simple and fundamental problem—if children can't see, they fall behind in school," Mr. Behar says.

The project has so far provided glasses for 358,000 students, with new partnerships spreading the program to San Francisco and Indonesia. Children can customize their own spectacles, with five different frame options in three different sizes (for face and age variations) in seven different colors. A two-part design not only allows schoolchildren to create funky, two-toned glasses, but enables easier assembly of the lenses inside the frames without using traditional, costly heating processes.

Paul Thompson, rector of London's Royal College of Art, says there has been "a dramatic increase in focus on design for social responsibility reflected in the curricula of design schools such as Art Center Pasadena, U.S.A., or the RCA in London, but also in the rise of prominent NGOs working in the field, such as Architecture for Humanity or Cooper-Hewitt's program, Design for the Other 90%, in New York." But, he adds, "straight

'philanthropy' suggests a hierarchy of donor and recipient: These design ventures are much more focused on effecting change on the ground through co-design and venture philanthropy rather than hand-outs, creating deeper and longer-lasting outcomes."

Mr. Behar, the founder of California design firm fuseproject, says he has long had a social conscience, which he attributes to growing up in Switzerland, where so many international organizations are based. One of his first big philanthropic initiatives came when he joined forces with Nicholas Negroponte's One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) in 2006. Mr. Behar's template for the cheap laptop for schoolchildren in developing countries won the Index award in 2007. A Behar-designed follow-up, the smaller, lighter XO-3 tablet, will be launched next year. "We have heard so many times about how the design and iconography we created with OLPC inspired other nonprofits to see design as a critical way forward," he says, adding that See Better to Learn Better was directly inspired by OLPC. It also sparked the designer's interest in further philanthropic endeavors. "My personal motive is simply that design can help others, and design can make a fundamental difference when done to solve specific problems in the developing world where resources are scarce," he says. "This is especially true when designing for children, as kids are so quick to adopt new solutions and adapt to a changing environment."

Some in the industry see the shift toward more charitable work as a reaction to the increasingly blurred lines between design and art that have led to sky-high prices over the past decade. "After the so-called 'DesignArt' period, where inflatable chairs were auctioned off for equally inflated prices, we are witnessing a new push toward sustainability, ethical sourcing and the need to produce products that increasingly serve a social, environmental or philanthropic function," says Martin Raymond, editor-in-chief of LS:N Global, a London-based trend-forecasting and consumer-insight network. "Designers are using design for good."

Design's potentially transformative

power is something that draws designers like David Rockwell to certain projects. Raising two young children in New York's Tribeca neighborhood, the founder of architecture and design firm Rockwell Group became interested in playgrounds. Though his work had largely been on high-profile projects like the W Hotel in Paris and the set for the 2010 Academy Awards, Mr. Rockwell's time on the city's blacktops led to a partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation to develop innovative play spaces in urban environments.

"I have been involved in many pro-bono projects since the beginning of my career. What sets Imagination Playground apart from the others is that it was a self-initiated project," he says. "After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I joined forces with a group of incredible architects to approach the city to build platforms around the World Trade Center site for spectators and mourners to have a quiet, elevated place to grieve. After this, the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan became an enormous focus for me, and I began to think about creating a new and different play space for Financial District locals and visitors." His design for the 1,700 square-meter playground near South Street Seaport, which opened last year, includes traditional playground components such as slides and sandpits, as well as loose, movable parts—burlap bags, buckets, shovels, brooms, carts and fabric—that are meant to encourage unstructured, child-directed play.

Mr. Rockwell has also designed portable versions, called Imagination Playground in a Box and Imagination Playground in a Cart that come with the basic loose parts of the fixed playground. "Not all communities can accommodate a fixed playground because of space or funding issues, but having the smaller, semi-mobile playgrounds helps to fill this void," he says. London was the first city in Europe to receive one, with an Imagination Playground in a Cart installed at Coram's Fields in August. PlayDirectUK.com, which has distribution rights for Imagination Playground in the E.U., expects packs to be sent to Sweden, Germany, Denmark and Spain early next year.

While some designers work toward creating new products that improve lives directly, others use design to raise funds for charitable causes. To coincide with London's Pavilion of Art & Design in October, interior designer Francis Sultana is organizing the A Child's Chair project to raise funds for the U.K. charity National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's Rebuilding Childhoods program. Mr. Sultana, one of the program's volunteer board members, has asked leading designers from Zaha Hadid to Fredrikson Stallard to customize Vitra's child-size edition of the iconic "Panton" chair. Priced from £1,500, the chairs will be for sale at PAD, with proceeds going to Rebuilding Childhoods. Author and curator Max Fraser has also corralled design luminaries for a cause close to his heart. "After a very personal, emotional journey—I supported my mother through her six-year battle with cancer—I vowed to contribute in some way to mankind's fight against this disease," Mr. Fraser says. In March, he organized a show in London to raise money for Maggie's Cancer Caring Centres by auctioning works of more than 100 designers, including Sir Terence Conran and Tom Dixon. The designers illustrated single sheets of A4 graph paper with the show's theme, "Joy of Living." The works were sold anonymously (designers signed the back) for £250 each, raising around £30,000.

Even some stores have gotten in on the act, balancing selling with giving. At Merci in Paris, all profits, after operating costs, from sales of its designer fashions, furniture and homewares are channeled into children's charities. Undertaking one or two new projects a year, the store this year funded the construction of a primary school in Madagascar. Merci was set up in 2009 by Bonpoint founders Bernard and Marie-France Cohen as a way to give something back after the success of their luxury children's label. "We wanted to say 'merci' for the chance we have had in the past," says Ms. Cohen. Though the store has fared well in the current economic climate—they say sales have risen 15% so far this year, compared with a year earlier—Ms. Cohen doesn't think that



COVER STORY



Clockwise from top left, the Imagination Playground in New York; David Rockwell at the London launch of Imagination Playground in a Cart; a man in India rides his Motivation tricycle wheelchair; One Laptop Per Child's XO-3 tablet, designed by fuseproject; Barnaby Barford's 'World Cup Chair 1986-2010,' part of Francis Sultana's A Child's Chair project; 'Shark' by Rodrigo Solorzano, part of Max Fraser's 'Joy of Living' project; a schoolgirl in Mexico wears her See Better to Learn Better glasses.

their Designs

imize Fund-Raising Projects



people shop at Merci specifically because of its charitable aspects. "People shop here because they like the products and the environment," she says. French chain store Nature & Découvertes, meanwhile, gives 10% of its profits to nature-friendly projects, through its eponymous foundation. The store, which sells eco-friendly products such as solar lights and bamboo homewares, says the tithing is part of its *raison d'être*—to get people closer to nature.

While tax-allowance deductions can be part of the attraction of giving, it appears that more often than not it is a passion for using intelligent design for the greater good that underpins philanthropic gestures. Motivation was founded in 1991 by David Constantine, an RCA industrial-design graduate and wheelchair user, and his colleague Simon Gue, with the aim of creating a low-cost wheelchair for disabled people in the developing world. "We were aware when we started that we were trying to do something that had not been done before," says Mr. Constantine. "To us, it seemed natural to base a charitable initiative on good design."



After winning the 1991 Frye Memorial prize, the duo used the prize money to introduce their product in Bangladesh. Though they now provide wheelchairs for countries from Argentina to Kiribati, developing the business has been a slow process. Funding, which comes from an amalgamation of organizations and individuals, was difficult to come by, and production, which was done locally in each country, was laborious. In the first 10 years, they made around 25,000 chairs. So in 2005, Motivation launched a flat-pack wheelchair made to their design in China in an effort to increase production and to get the chairs to more remote locations, such as North Korea and northern Iraq, where it was difficult to set up workshops. Last year, they produced 13,000 flat-pack chairs and plan to increase production to 50,000 a year. "The design industry is turning to more charitable initiatives," Mr. Constantine says. "But designing isn't the difficult bit. The logistics are more challenging—funding, distribution, delivery, training end-users. It's not enough to have a great idea. You have to deliver it."



Clockwise from top left, Frank Oudemans; Susan Smart; David Constantine/Motivation; fuseproject; Armin Weishet/Courtesy of Francis Sultana Ltd.; Rodrigo Solorzano/photo Ed Reeve; fuseproject