

The Museum of Modern Art

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ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE -- May 26 - September 11, 1972

Text by Emilio Ambasz at conclusion of exhibition

(Visitor enters in a space totally defined by mirrors. The mirrors are specially treated and act as screens for a rear-projection of color and sound.) (15 min.)

This exhibition intends to acknowledge the cultural achievements of Italian design in the last decade, to honor the accomplishments of its gifted designers and incisive critics, and to illustrate the diversity of their approaches to design by presenting a collection of the most interesting examples of their work. Moreover, Italian design's importance is due not solely to its remarkable formal production, but also to the high level of critical consciousness with which its protagonists -- designers and critics; individual and communal users -- are today questioning the socio-cultural meanings and implications which the design phenomenon has for Italy.

But, the range of these designers' and critics' concerns is so rich and widespread that, in a sense, they transcend their local circumstances. Thus, Italian design may be seen as a micromodel whose examination and evaluation may help us to better understand the mutual relationships that exist between design and society.

SECTION I

1. Since the end of World War II, Italy has developed an important industrial system, achieved an international balance of payments, and become a sort of workshop, importing raw materials and exporting manufactured goods. Such accomplishments manifest not only technical and organizational abilities, but also the capacity to invent forms derived from age-old practices in craftsmanship; long-standing contact with formal qualities; and ingenious research into the possibilities of new materials and production techniques.

2. Italian design in the last decade has replaced the artisan image of Scandinavian design, if not with totally new cultural meanings, at least with a new set of stylistic references.

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3. Although Italian design has been largely imitative, it has, on the other hand, produced a series of original projects -- inventive, vivacious, and resourceful -- overcoming methodological deficiencies by good luck, entrepreneurship, and brilliant ideas, all converging somehow to form a remarkable cultural edifice. Italian design is the more fascinating for its contradictions: very serious concern for formal constants opposed by improvisation and an anxiety for novelty at all costs; full development of areas of private consumption while little concern is shown about producing for public services; designers who produce paperweights in the morning, and at night make declarations on TV against the society of repressive consumption. Comparisons with the United States suggest that the situation is not so different here.

SECTION II

1. Italian design has not yet influenced the everyday environment at all scales, nor is it yet a commonplace for the Italian household. This situation reveals deep disjunctions between material supply and cultural demands. As the exhibition shows, Italian design has been limited to the production of simple items and small environments, and has rarely extended to the design of large environments or communities of objects.

2. As is the case in most industrialized societies, these beautiful, isolated objects and microenvironments usually exist in the midst of the decaying historical territory, deteriorating towns and urban areas, and the imbalances produced by ecological neglect.

3. The emphasis on consumer products would seem to show a lack of interest in a social design patronized by the community rather than by private individuals only. In reality, it obeys a number of interrelated industrial and cultural factors. Although most of the Italian designers are highly aware of the needs of the community and of industry, the design of single items and small environments is conceived without real connections to a "culture of the dwelling." This is due to an intricate set of market

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conditions. No organic coordination occurs between the furniture industry and what might be called, if it existed, the building industry, since the latter requires long-term investments that can only be assured by a long-term housing policy. At present, such a policy exists mainly as an aspect of the employment program rather than as an integral part of town planning. This has left a very small, and at that, a very rarified, area for architecture. With a few exceptions, opportunities for architecture and town planning are frozen, thus forcing the migration of many architects and planners to the peripheral areas of product design.

4. Once within the provinces of product design, the designer's alienation is furthered by the fact that the Italian furniture industry has not yet fully resolved the switch from artisan to industrial processes. Italian industry, not finding government support for a policy oriented toward the concept of the home for mass consumption, quite understandably turned to a market which does not require basic technological innovation, and which responds chiefly to the traditional values represented by the quality object. This situation has caused a continuing breach between the design of the home and the design of mass-produced single objects. This situation is directly responsible for the pervasive feeling of crisis and the diffuse symptoms of frustration among Italian designers in the last four or five years.

5. If there had been a controversy over industrialization of the building trades, and over urban planning, design might have developed in a social context. Instead, design concern has shifted in the last ten years to an emphasis on the product design sector. Here a relative degree of freedom and range of choices existed, although clearly delimited by the established economic conditions. Thus, it is not purely coincidental that for the last decade it has been the designers and design critics who have been formulating hypotheses for change instead of the architects, planners, and urbanists.

6. However, the roots of crisis are not all grounded solely in socio-economic

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factors. Much of the cultural controversy in Italian design finds its origins in the psyches of its protagonists, their inhibitions and guilt complexes.

The subjective explosion of deep-rooted complexes about the traditions behind the modern movement, and guilt feelings regarding his role as collaborator in reinforcing a consumer society, have given the Italian designer an acute awareness of social questions, responsible for the brilliance, and also for the rhetoric, of Italian design-culture's current self-doubt.

SECTION III

1. The environmental proposals presented in this exhibition represent two opposite attitudes to design currently prevalent in Italy. The first attitude involves a commitment to physical design as a problem-solving activity, capable of formulating solutions to the problems of natural and socio-cultural milieus. The opposite attitude, which we may call one of counter-design, chooses, rather, to emphasize the need for a renewal of philosophical discourse and social and political involvement, as a way to bring about structural changes in our society.

2. The environments proposed by those designers who believe in the efficacy of physical design reveal many facets of the present industrial and ideological controversy. They explore -- as far as possible in the scope of an exhibition -- the possibilities for change which the present Italian situation allows.

Within this group, there exists no clearly defined line separating those designers who seek to change by means of technology-established conditions from those who attempt to use design for symbolically reforming the present. In the latter group, we find, for example, those who reassert the sculptural and representational value of the object and those whose heavily ironic symbolism is protected by an ambiguous layer of allusions to individual and social protest. There are also those who design deliberately unattractive objects endowed with redundant formal detail and gloomy colors as a purposely self-defeating way of declaring the ultimate futility of their protest. Those designers exploring the possibilities technology may offer

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for circumventing present shortcomings seek to develop such domestic service elements as kitchen, bathroom, and storage ensembles which may, for the time being, act as surrogate parts for the absent industrialized housing system. There are those designers who seek to solve the same problem, at least partially, by recycling and adapting structures which belong to a totally different industrial process from that of housing -- such as aluminum freight containers -- in order to make them serve as habitat environments. Still other designers, despairing of ever being able to change the backward building techniques and managerial methods of the present construction industry, propose the concept of the mobile home as a strategic argument to direct the attention of the highly qualified automobile industry towards solving the problems of the mass-produced house.

3. Physical design as the prime task of the designer is brought into question by those designers who believe that only urban and socio-political involvement can provide substantial solutions.

Since we are in battle with the present, it is understandable, although not altogether acceptable, that the future be offered as the occasion for all reconciliations, and that counter-design should be the preferred mode of the Italian avant-garde. Nevertheless, these avant-garde groups are located within the present production structure. As a metaphor for collective action, some of these groups attempt to recover the archetypes of human conduct by proposing individual withdrawal into an image of paradise. Freedom from work and Eros are proposed as man's total experience of self and universe.

But here, Utopia has its traditional signs changed, for the counter-design groups propose negative Utopias. They do not aim at ideal cities, but rather at the eradication of architecture and city planning in order to free man from all formal and moral structures which prevent him from passing free judgment on his condition and on his history.

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The negative Utopia is intended not for the future but for the present. Destroying the notion of the object and the city means opposing the foremost trends of Italian design, which cultivate as status symbol the aesthetic quality of the product. This approach also implies an alternative to the closed cycle of dispersed production and atomized consumption: it purports to recover design for communal ends, since it wishes to stimulate the active participation of every individual by the creation of spaces wherein mental, psychological and sensorial functions regain the quality of rituals, and where transactions between individuals of the community permit the daily renewal of their ceremonial patterns and the configuration of their spaces.

SECTION IV

1. Italian design today illustrates the widest array of conflicting schools of thought and action to be found anywhere. By inviting the exponents of these diverse design philosophies to present their viewpoints, this exhibition has attempted to bring into focus the most representative positions. Thus, in the same show, we have thoughtful and imaginative attempts at giving alternative physical solutions to problems of the present which are, in their turn, contradicted and denied validity by other designers who elaborately explain why no solution is possible at all until the structure of the present is changed.

These design statements make it possible to draw specific conclusions, and also to venture a set of general observations as to the present state of the design endeavor in industrialized societies.

2. The international rebellion against the object came about not only because of the doctrines of cultural vanguards, or the hysteria of "technological desperation," but also because the object lacks a suitable socio-cultural context.

3. In the specific case of Italian design, despite its many contradictions, it is, in fact, possible to sense the circumstances which could lead to a change of scale, method and ideology.

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Italian design could now choose between two alternatives. The first is to remain limited to the production of isolated objects and small environments for only one segment of the social strata. The second alternative requires facing the need to build at least 2,000,000 rooms a year, while not spoiling the urban and rural landscape. This will require an enormous effort in design which cannot be limited to isolated objects or single buildings, but has to embrace as a complex whole the task of building urban environments. Such a development could establish the favorable circumstances for the object to lose its isolation, both in production and use.

The merging of the divided sectors -- construction and design -- will not automatically lead to urban utopias, but it is equally clear that the disentanglement of so backward a sector as the building industry, and the realization of a housing program, could have beneficial effects for understanding design as a social service.

SECTION V

1. Evidentially, the issues raised by this exhibition transcend Italian boundaries. They respond, in great part, to a growing distrust of objects of consumption emerging in all industrialized countries. This trend threatens the traditional notion of design as solely concerned with producing cultural objects. There is a more acute awareness of the ways the individual is manipulated, of the diminishing room for intellectual action, and, in particular, for aesthetic concerns. As a reaction to this situation, the temptation is growing to abandon the specific field of design in order to concentrate on the political front to the exclusion of all others. Thus, political action puts itself forward as the dominant force of any transformation of man and society. However, the task is much more complex than what political action alone can accomplish. What is needed is a discourse of several voices which excludes any one form of hegemony. Political reason alone restricts intellectual freedom and, in its concentration on reacting against the established, it disregards the possibilities for action which aesthetic invention may reveal.

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2. The hypothesis of a rejection or destruction of the object has become a well-known form of aesthetic activity and criticism, in addition to being a political stance. The designer's attention shifts from the object's form alone to encompass the processes it generates. This preference for process over result is an aspect of the conflict between aesthetic intention and concrete work.

An aesthetic of design founded not only on the concrete object but also on the context requires introducing the user as the actor of the aesthetic event. Hence, the concept of environment presupposes for man the role of protagonist, not merely spectator.

3. The attempts at absorbing the object into the whole of the environment, and the conception of this environment as the constantly changing relationship between the man-made milieu and the natural milieu have brought about a redefinition of the task of design.

From this redefinition of the design endeavor, two converging and complementary interpretations emerge. The first sees design as functional and symbolic formalization, capable of effecting changes from within, by the power of the designed entity itself. The second, a political definition, sees design as conflict, capable of effecting changes from without.

The two definitions are really aspects of one system of thought which transcends both object-making and conflict to encompass all the processes whereby man gives meaning and order to his milieu. Without claiming to solve everything, design can move man towards an authentic realization of himself.