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UNDER THE CREATIVE LEADERSHIP OF ALBERTO ALESSI, THE ITALIAN HOMEWARES **COMPANY** ALESSI HAS WORKED WITH MANY DESIGN MAESTROS OVER THE YEARS. NOW IT IS PARTNERING WITH YOUNG AUSTRALIAN DESIGNER ADAM CORNISH, WHOSE TRINITY BOWL WAS INSPIRED BY THE GEOMETRY OF A NAUTILUS SHELL

THE Milan-based homewares **company**, Alessi, is still a 100 per cent family **company**, even though it employs designers from all over the world, including Australia. Late last year managing director Alessio Alessi travelled to Australia with two of his four sons-the eldest, Giovanni Alessi Anghini, an independent designer, and his second son, Luca Alessi, who had recently joined the **company** as international sales and development manager Asia-Pacific based in **Hong Kong**. In Sydney, they launched a distribution agreement with Danish jeweller Georg Jensen and celebrated the release of a new Australian design, the Trinity bowl, by Melbourne-based designer Adam Cornish. WISH conducted a round-table discussion with all four.

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Alessio: We say that Alessi is a laboratory, a continuous activity to find a new language of design and so we need designers from around the world to build our catalogue.

We like to say it is a kind of encyclopedia or bookstore that shows people the interpretation of different typology for the kitchen and table in different languages, and of course we have to continue to work to find new languages of design around the world. That's why we are very interested in collaborations with young designers. We have already seven Australians in the catalogue.

Adam: When I had just freshly graduated, I wanted to show Alessi my work because of its reputation for being able to work with new designers. I knew they'd be happy to have a look. Being inspired by nature, I know that Alessi's work is often playful and has natural elements to it, so I knew my Trinity bowl, which is based on a Nautilus shell, was a good fit from that angle. I was just working out the way to get the actual piece to them. That turned out to be quite funny. I met the head of the Polytechnic of Milan, Arturo Dell'Acqua Bellavitis, and with typical Italian hospitality he offered to put me up in the family home on my first trip to Milan.

So I brought the Trinity bowl with me and tried to tee up an appointment at Alessi. It was a long shot. I went to an address I was given by the family but the office had moved.

Luckily enough, a person in the neighbouring building could speak English and told me to go down the road, turn right and then right. I remember just looking at all these buildings and the only thing I could see from the outside was an Alessi Mediterraneo fruit bowl in the window.

I thought that must be it, so I went in and waited on the steps for the PR representative for Alberto Alessi, who is president and head of marketing strategy, communication and design management.

When she returned from her meeting I showed her the bowl and she said 'This is something we could be very interested in'. I wanted to leave it with her but she said, 'No, not necessary, just send me images'. So

I thought maybe this is a brush-off. I get home and a week later I get an email from Alberto saying 'Can you please send the bowl?' The irony was I had put it in the mail, so I had to wait for it to come back to Australia and send it straight back over. I had just graduated and I thought it might be a joke.

The Nautilus shell is an extremely lightweight yet strong structure because of the way each chamber intersects with the other. My first prototype was just experiments in playing with cues from that structure and it had 60 hand welds, which is not practical for a product.

So we went about streamlining the manufacturing process; now everything curves and, of course, when stainless steel is bent it stays in that position when it hardens.

GIOVANNI, WHICH PRODUCTS HAVE YOU DESIGNED FOR ALESSI?

Giovanni: I've done many. I designed the pop-up bottle opener when I was 18 years old but it was too early to present something, so it took five years of development and it was presented to the market in 2008. It won the 2008 Good Design award and remains in the collection of the Chicago Institute of Architecture and Design. And then I did a salt set for grinding salt and presenting different kinds of salts on the table. And then a bowl that is called MooM - it's a bowl that also holds a glass of wine. That I designed because I was moving out from my family and starting university and I was eating alone in front of the television, so I thought about an object to bring a little bit of poetics into my life. Then I did lighting projects with Electrolux, then I designed a bottle of water [AdiAcqua] for Alessi in 2012.

In the 1970s, Alberto [Alessi] worked with freelance designers mainly. The only person who was designing was my grandfather [Carlo], but in 1945 he had to become general manager, so he had to leave it behind. So I'm a new outsider who is following my own passions and building my knowhow around design on the ground. I'm working with technology companies, furniture and lighting; to explore those areas I have to be outside the organisation because Alessi won't do a sofa or a table, so I need to diversify.

A: Alessi is still 100 per cent a family company, so we say that the fourth generation have to get at least two years' experience outside the company, and the more they do the better it is. They must go and be evaluated by independent people because the evaluation is much stronger than by their own parents. Luca just came in last October and is located in Hong Kong.

Luca: I worked in the US for De'Longhi Group and then after three years they moved me to Hong Kong, managing the Asia-Pacific, North America, South America, South Africa, in product management and trademarks. I've done five years outside the company but I've been knocking on the door for a long time.

WISH: HOW DO YOU TACKLE WHAT ALBERTO ALESSI CALLED THE CHALLENGE OF THE "ANOREXIC MARKET" WHERE PEOPLE ARE RELUCTANT TO SPEND MONEY?

A: There is this situation around the world where the economics guys have brought people to be much more cautious about spending but they want to buy good-quality products. So they are open to spend but they want quality, so this is the challenge for the new designers-to make a good design affordable. That's very important. It's not enough to make an incredible and innovative work with low function.

YOU NO LONGER HAVE THE LUXURY OF MAKING PRODUCTS THAT DON'T WORK VERY WELL?

A: I don't want you to understand that we expressly made products that didn't work; it's just that to work with a designer on the border of what is possible and what is not possible functionally, sometimes the project is so interesting from the cultural point of view that, even if they are not perfect in function, we put it into production anyhow. This was in the past. Now we are much more careful. But with the kettle of Philippe Starck people value it not only for functionality but from the cultural point of view.

Design for us means a project where the component of art and poetry is at the best level because we believe that people need it; and we want that they can find it not only in the traditional way in the museum but in everyday objects that you can use at home.

WHICH HAVE BEEN THE MOST INFLUENTIAL ALESSI DESIGNS?

A: Ettore Sottsass was one of the masters of design working for all the important companies. We began a relationship with him in 1978 and he didn't make only very good work for Alessi but also he made Alessi focus on what is the meaning of design. The question is to make quality of design for the houses of people; if they will be foreign objects, people won't be so happy. I would say this is one of the most important steps of design at Alessi.

The second one I want to mention is Alessandro Mendini because he wrote a book about Alessi and he organised an exhibition about Alessi and he also made the building for the company.

Alessi is a strange **company** - it does not do traditional marketing research. The best marketing people for us are the designers because the good designers are able to bring inside Alessi what is the feeling and the evolution of society. So this is the real marketing that we need and we want to follow.

WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE PIECES?

A: My favourite pieces are by Richard Sapper but it's not only a matter of design aesthetic; it's also a kind of symbolic item for the evolution of the **business** of Alessi.

Before his kettle we didn't produce any kettle and the reason is in Italy we do not use a kettle to boil water, only in north of Europe and the States. So the American distributor asked us to make a kettle and we made a kettle with Sapper and it's been very successful and enabled Alessi to be much more known outside Italy, to open many doors to **business** outside Italy.

DID YOU SAY THAT THE KETTLE WAS NOT VERY FUNCTIONAL?

A: No, it was very functional. The brass whistle calcifies from the build-up of the water in the brass and after many times it stops working, so we have to deliver new ones.

L: We have a couple of new whistles already inside the packaging.

A: So why did Sapper want this? Because the whistle makes a very wonderful sound. It's a small instrument used for professional musician for tuning the instruments.

L: It plays two musical notes-mi and si-so the sound is a mix. It's a beautiful sound.

G: When Sapper was a little boy, in front of his house there was a ferry boat that made that specific sound and he wanted to reproduce that memory that he had when he was a child.

Adam: There are many different ways that Alessi works with designers. Some people only send prototypes but Philippe Starck sent a sketch on a place mat. Alessi is willing to work with a designer the way they work. They don't force you into their way, and creating this open way for you to work you don't feel anything you say is going to be laughed at. That's how amazing projects come about when you know that they're willing to listen to you and take everything seriously and to work with you to get to that end goal. Alessi is willing to experiment with you and offer you all these facilities, so I think that is why they have an amazing catalogue of products.

WHAT WILL THE LINK-UP WITH GEORG JENSEN DO FOR ALESSI?

Alessio: We decided to go with Georg Jensen because I believe they have been able to show us how they can underline the importance of our **brand**. So I think this is an important step for our **business**. Their idea is to have a more select distribution than today and another important step is to focus on shop-in-shops in David Jones where you can shop the line more completely.

L: It's also a direct distribution, and since every Alessi product has a beautiful story behind it, it's much easier to communicate those stories when you have your own support team on the floor.

A: I think also Georg Jensen understands about good design. We just came from **China**. Now **China** is a big market - a lot of very rich people - but there is not the ground for understanding design and they are not prepared for that. Australia is much more like Europe, so we expect a very good **business** here.

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