Italian Design Show Appraised -- Ambiguous but Beautiful
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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A chair will never be a chair again. It is an object whose formal characteristics are derived from, or motivated by, the semantic manipulation of established socio-cultural meanings. And it is just one of 180 objects and 11 specially commissioned environments in the show, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," opening to the public appraisal today at the Museum of Modern Art after a week of glossy preopening fanfare for one of the most ambitious shows ever mounted by that fashionable institution. The exhibition, sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Trade and subsidized by a blue chip list of Italian industries, has been conceived, nurtured, directed and installed by Emilio Ambasz, the museum's curator of design.

It is big, beautiful, costly, didactic and disturbingly ambiguous. There are handsome objects and designers protesting the meaninglessness of handsome objects. (What is a big, beautiful, costly show like you, rife with innuendos of the irrelevance of it all, doing in a place like this?)

Within Limitations

Not least of all, it's cosmic. The basic premise of the show is that design totally structures our life and activities, that it does so within the unavoidable, often tragic limits of our society and system, and affects society irreversibly, succeeding or failing according to that system.

It combines form and content, object and ideology, using the outstanding Italian example. By doing so in an effort of serious analysis, and in a display of numbing expense and impact, this is easily the most important design show in 20 years. It's Supershow.

Basically, the exhibition is divided into two parts and two philosophies. (This oversimplifies, but it helps.) One section is given to objects, and another to environments, with a lot of audio-visual supplements. Both parts deal with the processes of design and "counterdesign."

Counterdesign is the protest of the counterculture, which believes, not without some cause, that everything is generally rotten, in the worst of all possible worlds, and that the design of beautiful things is a pointless act.

This group substitutes artful or political gestures of the absurd. In a society of the absurd — overdesigned consumer society, if you will— this often makes a telling kind of sense.

The show's many definitions and divisions are set up with a fierce intellectual firmness by Mr. Ambasz. There is an indoctrinating film as one enters, and an audio-visual summary as one leaves.

In the museum's garden, a military array of monumental "shipping cases," row on row, contains displays of household objects, suggesting, according to one opening night visitor, "a supermarket at Karnak."

These objects demonstrate all the skill and taste of which the Italians are capable, and that is a lot. There are brilliant creative exercises. One simply cannot avoid the redundant word beauty.

The items chosen have all been designed and produced in Italy within the last 10 years, a period defined as the flowering of the movement. Actually, there was a similar flowering just after the war. Some names here, such as Franco Albini, Alberto Rosselli, Ettore Sotsass Jr. and Marco Zanuso, go back to that time.

What has happened is that technology has caught up with intent, for the sleekest plastics and most elegant systems-designed objects possible.

And there are still the one-of-a-kind gems—oh, to play poker on Joe Colombo's poker table—distinguished by the simple, sure, elegant, easy, inspired manipulation of line for purpose that is the particular Italian genius. No hands; no gimmicks.

Back in the galleries are the environments, commissioned from some of Italy's leading practitioners and produced as display models for the museum show by Italian manufacturers. These, divided into permanent units and mobile units, are meant to rethink living and life styles in this industrial age.

They are billed as a search for the "meanings, rituals and ceremonies" of the 24-hour day, and the "artifacts and spaces" that define them.

These design essays are compact models of elegant ingenuity — the life-supporting box kind of thing, containing devilishly neat cooking, sleeping and storage units, with lessons supposedly both for mass production and the unresolved socio-industrial problems of housing 20th-century man.

You have a choice, among others, of Gae Aulenti's glowing red plastic molded geometries or Zanuso-Sapper's fully outfitted, telescoping unit that invites one to play house.

The question is whether life reduces to such esthetic formalism, or whether this is the application of traditional Italian taste and cleverness to a forced and rigid life style, with or without claustrophobia.

Beautiful Images

Italian design is full of these seductively false and beautiful images of the myths of industrialized society. "Progress" is "styled," suggested through suave visual effects, often unrelated to the facts of production, and increasingly, even romantically disassociated from reality.

It is superbly effective theater, but even the Italians can reject it.

There are designers represented in the show who refused the museum's invitation to create an environment—set out in an eight-page program of stratospheric concept by Mr. Ambasz that begins at the beginning by discarding the "first, heroic period of modern architecture" and its "prototypical solutions." So much for Mies van der Rohe and Corbusier.

These designers believe that no more objects need be added to the cluttered consumer culture. The group called Archizoom offers an empty room with a recorded voice alternating between descriptions of destruction and a perfect world. The team of DeRossi, Ceretti and Rosso has set up three wagons with help-yourself political action pamphlets, red for something called the mediatory city, white for the struggle for housing, green for Utopia. A manifesto by Enzo Mari states that everyone has been co-opted.

In a complete departure from the museum's former "good design" shows, the objects in the garden are not merely enshrined. They, too, have meanings.

There are objects selected for their "formal and technical means" — chairs, lamps, vases, tables, typewriters and telephones.

And there are objects "that permit multiple modes of arrangement and propose more informal patterns of behavior than those currently prevailing"—such as flexible seating made of tubes, polyurethane and air, kitchens on casters, and multiple purpose units like readymade wombs.

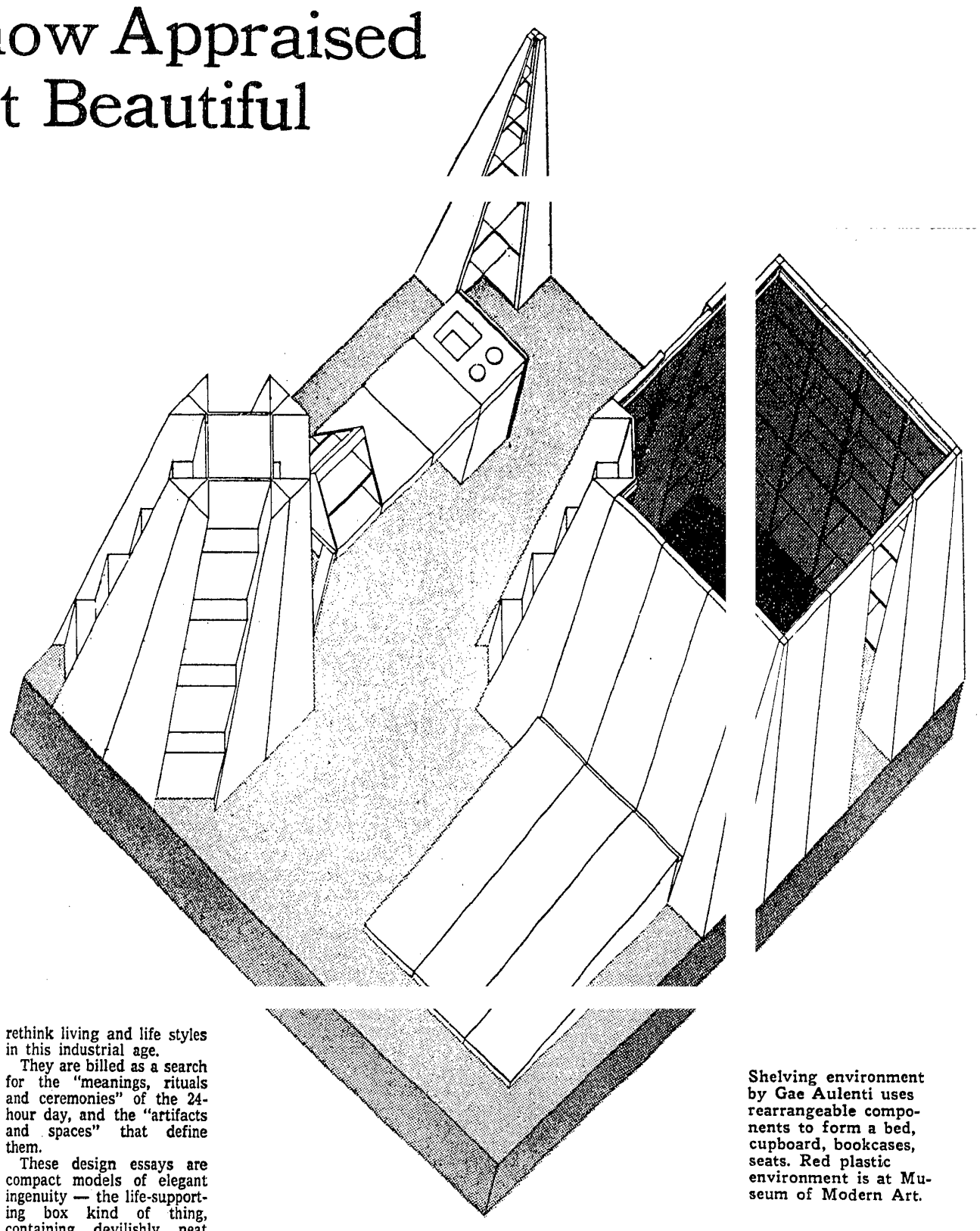
You can't follow any of this very well, or divine the themes of the show without painfully close attention. Even that doesn't always work, when faced with "Design as Postulation" and "Counterdesign as Postulation."

Or when, as Mr. Ambasz tells us in the fine book and catalogue that accompanies the show, an environmental designer "chooses to emphasize the need for a renewal of philosophical discourse and for social and political involvement as a way of bringing about structural change in our society."

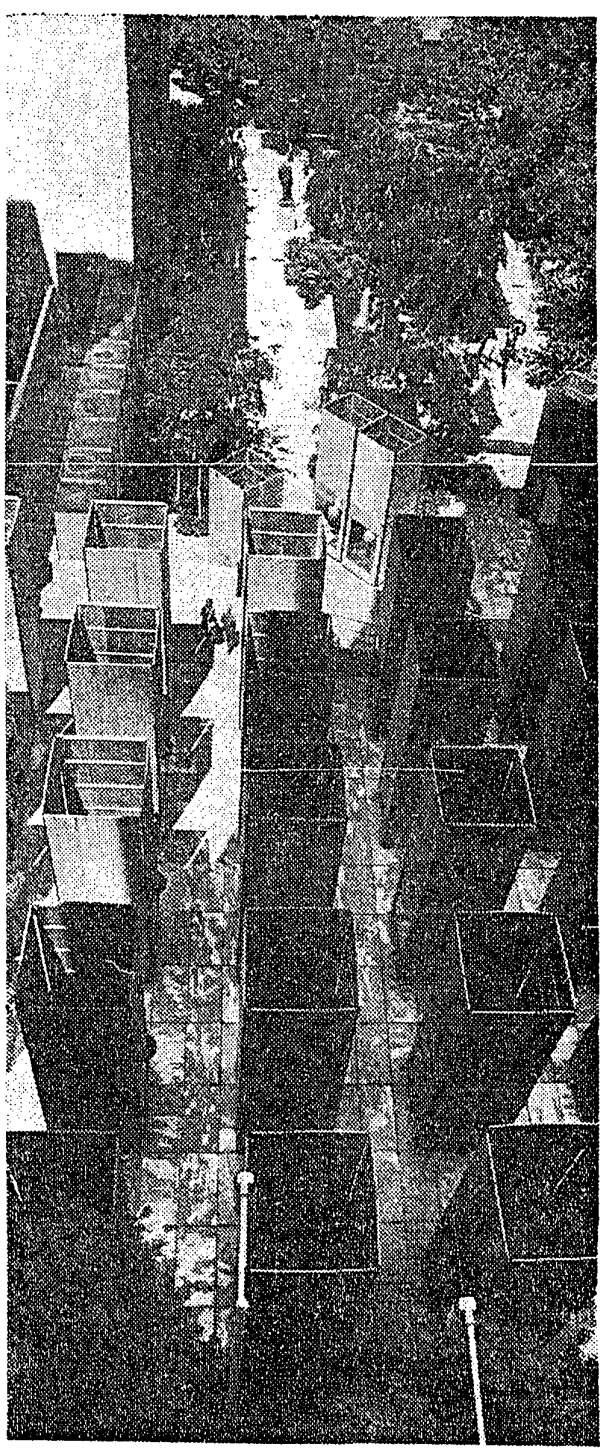
There's not much evidence yet of societal change at the museum. But you can get your discourse red hot through Sept. 11. One suspects that it is that fine old Italian art of publicity called réclame, however, rather than restructuring, that motivates the involvement of the sponsors.

When you come down from the semantic heights it is the Italians doing superbly what they have always done well—designing with consummate elegance and style. From plug-ins to protest, style stamps everything in the show.

What one takes away, primarily, is the impression of that remarkable marriage of mind and eye that has consistently produced some of the most skilful and sophisticated artifacts and most provocative polemics in the history of art.

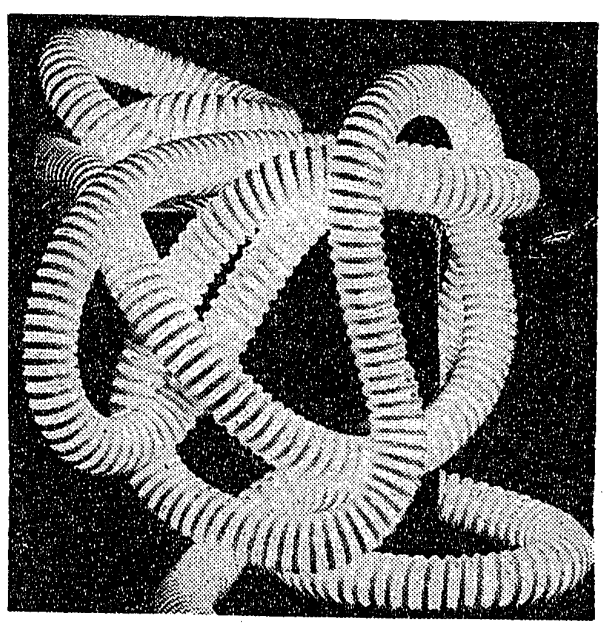


Shelving environment by Gae Aulenti uses rearrangeable components to form a bed, cupboard, bookcases, seats. Red plastic environment is at Museum of Modern Art.



The New York Times Studio/Bill Aller

Wood crates housing 160 Italian furnishings were installed on the museum's two terraces.



Snake-like lamp designed by Gianfranco Frattini and Livio Castiglioni, has 20 bulbs inside.