Designing the Death of Design -- But Stylishly
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Architecture

Designing the Death of Design—But Stylishly

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT'S *déjà vu* time at the Museum of Modern Art—for this observer, anyway. This is where I came in, which gives me a very funny feeling. Twenty-odd years ago, convinced that there was a vigorous and significant rebirth of design activity in Italy, I went there with a Fulbright grant to collect the evidence. There was a good deal of talk about the postwar flowering of an Italian style in those days, and we spoke of a renaissance of Italian design leadership. In 1952, I brought the material home to turn it into a traveling show for the Museum of Modern Art.

Twenty years later the Museum of Modern Art is telling us that Italy has emerged as a dominant force in design. This time it is the subject of a very large, costly, provocative exhibition, one of the most ambitious, the museum says, that it has ever mounted. Called "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," it has been conceived and directed by Emilio Ambasz, curator of design, and will run through September 11.

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The show is supposed to be controversial. It is controversial because the Italian designers represented in it are not in agreement that there is any point in designing beautiful objects at all. What is being shown are elite products for elite consumers and the question is raised within the exhibition and by its participants as to the importance of such design when there is poverty and pollution in the world and design is not contributing to social needs.

The element of self-flagellation gives the show an approved socially conscious theme beyond the object of art for its own sake, and that is a fashionable necessity today. As the Italian critic, Vittorio Gregotti, points out, one can live in quite comfortable elegance as long as one denounces the duplicity of the situation.

There are 180 of these elegant objects — furniture, lamps, vases, typewriters, telephones and sundry household and consumer goods — all created with the consummate sophisticated taste and flair that is the special Italian talent. Since their art is due in no small part to modern technology, the products are considered relevant to modern society. By some. They are totally irrelevant to others. That rejection, in film, manifestos and artful acts of rebellion, is part of the museum show and it is executed with great style. The museum calls it counterdesign. If the Italians are in charge of doomsday, that, too, will be carried out with style.

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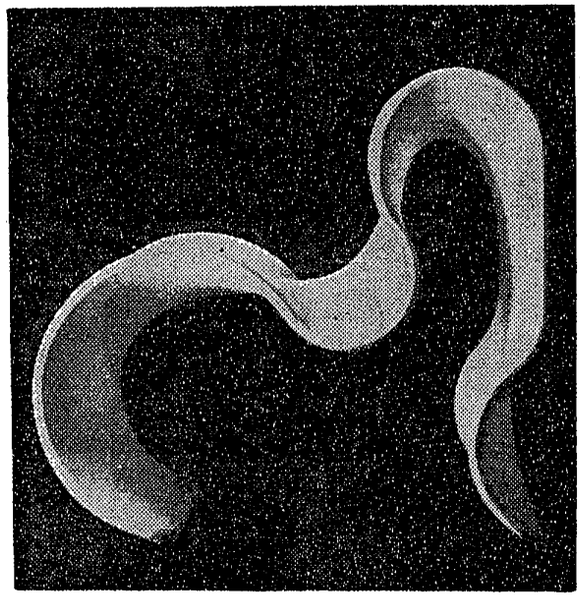
It is, in fact, all style and none of it is quite real. That goes as well for the specially commissioned environments from Italy's leading practitioners, an extremely good game of let's-play-house-as-industrial-technology.

The ultimate irony, of course, is that huge amounts of money have been poured into a show to tell us that there are designers with consciences who won't design for the overdesigned world of the elite who are flocking to see the show and admire the elite and beautiful products in it. It's all there in one absolutely perfect package — protest, social themes, the relevance debate, and ultimately, the object as avant-garde art. It takes on the coloration of parody, a kind of Italian "Catch-22." This is not a time in which one can escape the absurd.

As history, however, the show is fascinating. How much of a style this is, and how much of a flowering, is worth explication. Although the exhibition does not suggest it, this is a continuous, if somewhat disjointed phenomenon within the larger context of the modern movement. It is the full development of something that began 20, not ten years ago, as indicated.

Many of the names at the museum now were also making news then — Albini, Castiglioni, Gardella, Mangiarotti, Magistretti, Sotsass, Zanuso and others. To these have been added new names, catalysts of the present, such as Joe Colombo, who died a most untimely death last year. The movement has spanned two generations.

What the museum is showing is not only a style, it is phase three of a style. The modern movement came late to Italy. After a brief spell, similar to the early Soviet experience in which modernism became identified in its most rationalist and constructivist expression with the political power of a totalitarian regime, it suffered academic repression. World War II suppressed it completely. After the war, Italian creative energy surged forth belatedly in both architecture and design.



Chair of iron tubing and fabric, by Gruppo G 14, in MOMA show, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape"
A kind of Italian "Catch-22"

At that time design was seen not just as the flowering of the modernist esthetic set in motion by the Bauhaus—a process in which the artist worked for the machine which worked for society to replace traditional handcrafts — but as a kind of national salvation through planned production and consumption. It was to be a force for rebuilding Italian society.

It was a paternalistic hope, as we see it now, and it failed. There was no place for the architect in housing, or in industry, and there was no social purpose to either. The architect turned, with considerable bitterness, to the bread and butter business of making elite and beautiful things for the affluent and for export. He set enviable standards. His products were, and are, a smashing commercial success — the handsome staples of Bloomingdale's and good design collections.

In its first stage, these products were taut and lean; they had controlled, intricate, dramatic contrasts of smoothly flowing curves and sharp, straight lines, reduced to ultimate refinements. We admired the swelling folds of Venini glass, the precision of metal and marble, the "prototypes" of plastic housewares with the hard-edged elegance of machine art. In the early 1950's we all brought home Sarfatti lamps, Castiglioni flatware, Albini furniture and Azucena objects that presided like fine-drawn aristocrats over heavy-handed American rooms.

In the late 50's and early 60's the much admired controlled refinement seemed to break down. Historical revivalism in the form of a strange mutation of Stile Liberty appeared, to be denounced abroad. It was more symptomatic than we knew. Memory is used in design, Gregotti tells us, as a defense against what is too new or disturbing. Historicism precedes change.

What appeared in the 1960's was phase three. There was a newly alarming sensuosity. Thin had been in; now fat was back. Overstuffed furniture had been considered bourgeois-vulgar; the Italians inflated their furniture to gross proportions and it came out with class. They blew it up, folded and rolled it. Table legs swelled. Broader elements, open joints, continuous surfaces were molded in plastics and it is hard to know whether the taste or the technology came first. Both worked together. They did it all with immense ingenuity and flair.

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The curious phenomenon of bricolage appeared. Familiar elements were broken away from their associative meanings and given oblique or indirect meanings through insolent assemblage. Chromed tractor seats and neon lamps invaded luxurious living and dining rooms. Snake sofas were photographed in fields. These are the designs that shock and inform most.

Although this is clearly, and importantly, fashion, it is much more. It is more because the changes in thinking behind the changes in form indicate the profound cultural change that creates style.

Phase one had relied heavily on the modernist doctrine of beauty plus utility: the object as an ethical and esthetic product of manufacture, and an absolute thing. Phase two carried the uncomfortable realization that the sum of good objects is not, alas, a good environment. Phase three now recognizes the totality of the environment. It is recording the death of the simple idea of esthetic virtue as a social tool. It sees the breakdown between the product and society. It considers the well-designed object an anachronism, and suspect.

The museum, dealing with this phenomenon, is also trapped in it. That, too, is the style of our time.