

Mediating Synthetic Fibres and Colour at the Centro Design Montefibre in the 1970s, between Fashion Forecasting and Design Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the activities carried out in the 1970s by the Centro Design Montefibre (1973-1998), a unit within the textile division of the Italian chemical group Montedison established to support the application of synthetic fibres in the fashion and design sectors in Italy and Europe. By contextualising this experience within the broader transformations of market and consumer patterns, and through the analysis of company records, first-hand accounts from former collaborators, and specialised magazines, the aim is to highlight how, along with mediating synthetic fibres towards manufacturers and professionals, the Centre also served as a platform of experimentation and dissemination of knowledge, practices and tools relating to colour. Revisiting the history of the Centro Design Montefibre, situated at the intersection of production, mediation and consumption in design and fashion, appears particularly significant in light of current debates on colour culture and practice within these fields.

KEYWORDS Centro Design Montefibre, synthetic fibres, colour, mediation, design culture, fashion forecasting, *design primario*

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1. Introduction

The history of colour is not only a narrative of scientific and technological innovation. Especially throughout the twentieth century, this story also developed through complex processes of mediation between industry and consumer culture. As business historian Regina Lee Blaszczyk has shown, in fields such as fashion, automotive, domestic appliances, and interior design, a wide range of actors – including designers, marketing professionals, colour experts, trend forecasters, art directors, and advertisers – played a crucial role of guidance enabling those operating within the supply and manufacture chains to manage an increasingly broad palette of materials, colours, and finishes, and to translate them into goods that were both commercially attractive and culturally meaningful (Blaszczyk, 2012, 2023a, 2023b; Blaszczyk and Wubs, 2018). Frequently invisible to the wider public, this work materialised in the development and circulation of a broad spectrum of informational and operational tools. Instructional and advice literature, sample collections, prototypes, semi-finished products, and promotional materials themselves acted as intermediaries, contributing to the shaping of fashion and design cultures and practices – in other words, expressions of what Grace Lees-Maffei (2009) has described as *design mediation*.

Within this framework, the present article revisits the experience of the Centro Design Montefibre (Montefibre Design Centre) during the 1970s. Established in Milan in 1973 within the marketing division of Montedison [1] – the textile branch of the Italian chemical group Montedison – the Centre was part of a broader investment strategy aimed at strengthening Montefibre's position in Europe during a phase of industrial and market transformation. Inspired by contemporary style agencies and trend-forecasting services, and organised into two units dedicated respectively to textiles for fashion and apparel and for furnishing and design, the Centre brought together experts from different fields, ranging from marketing and forecasting to architecture and industrial design. Although its mission was to enhance the value of synthetic fibres, the Centre also became a space for the elaboration and dissemination of knowledge on colour. Beyond serving as a cultural intermediary, colour itself – particularly in relation to design – was conceived and examined as an object of specific concern, a central quality of contemporary objects and living environments.

The Centre's activities have received attention, albeit unevenly. The design section, active only between 1973 and 1978, has reappeared in debates on Italian design thanks to its visibility in specialised magazines and the accounts of its protagonists (Branzi, 1984; Trini Castelli,

1985, 2006, 2024; Mitchell, 1996). More recently it has been revisited in the historiography of material design (Lecce, 2014; Ferrara & Russo, 2018) and in studies on the role of colour in twentieth-century design culture (Oppedisano, 2015, 2019). By contrast, the fashion section – although active for almost twenty-five years and closely integrated with industrial practice – has remained largely overlooked, relegated mainly to company archives and specialised magazines (Fava, 2018, 2022).

By contextualising the experience of the Centro Design Montefibre within the evolution of industry and consumer culture in the 1970s, and through the analysis of company documents, first-hand accounts from former collaborators, and specialised magazines, this article compares the approaches developed within the Centre's two sections – fashion-apparel and furnishing-design – and the role attributed to colour within them.

Revisiting the history of the Centre, a mediation and experimentation structure situated at the intersection of production, design, and consumption appears particularly significant in light of current debates on colour education and culture within the fields of design and fashion.

2. Mediating Synthetic Fibres and Colour at the Centro Design Montefibre

Montefibre was established in 1972 to bring together all Montedison's plants dedicated to fibres, which at the time included both semi-synthetic and synthetic types [2]. Its foundation coincided with a particularly turbulent decade for the chemical and textile industries. The oil crises of 1973 and 1979, overcapacity and market saturation, and competition from East Asia undermined the post-war growth cycle. In Italy, these difficulties were compounded by rising labour costs, weak innovative capacity, and the dependence of the few major companies on political and financial logics rather than effective industrial strategies – factors that would eventually undermine the very future of both Montedison and Montefibre (Fauri, 2000; Owen, 2011; King, 2015). Within this context, Montefibre nonetheless emerged as Italy's leading fibre producer and aimed to strengthen its position in Europe by focusing on synthetic fibres and textiles (Montedison, 1972).

Alongside the rationalisation of production, Montefibre developed a market-oriented strategy that presented itself as a centre of services for its clients and for operators in the textile chains of fashion and furnishings. Launched in 1973, this programme combined technical and research assistance with managerial and advertising support, and also included an ecological centre and a design centre (Montefibre, 1974b). The latter was intended to assist manufacturers and professionals in applying synthetic

fibres, bridging production with the emerging dynamics of consumption, fashion, and lifestyles.

Montefibre was by no means the first company to offer information, know-how and tools to its clients (Garofoli, 1991, pp. 55-63). The distinctive feature of its Design Centre lays rather in its late arrival on the scene, at a stage when, in addition to the structural and contingent difficulties mentioned above, industry had to face a consumer culture undergoing profound transformation: increasingly segmented, subject to rapid shifts in fashion and taste, influenced by the media and youth culture, and marked by purchasing behaviours that emphasised individuality and self-expression (Paris, 2006; Blaszczyk, 2012). For companies in clothing and, to some extent, interior textiles, this situation represented an opportunity, provided that firms adopted market-oriented strategies (Shephard, 1985). With regard specifically to synthetic fibres, after decades of growth and consolidation, their market appeal was beginning to decline: while their ease of use and maintenance suited the accelerated rhythms of consumption, they were increasingly affected by rising costs following the oil crises, and by the renewed interest in natural fibres fuelled by countercultural aesthetics and emerging ecological sensitivities (Ward, 2021).

In this context, providing consultancy for interpreting and anticipating shifts in taste could be an effective strategy, particularly suited to a production system characterised by small and medium-sized textile enterprises such as those predominant in Italy. These firms were more flexible than the large industrial conglomerates typical of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, but often lacked the resources for market analysis and stylistic research (Shephard, 1985).

2.1. Centro Design Montefibre between Production and Consumption

The idea of establishing a design centre was suggested to Montefibre's management by Elio Fiorucci, a well-known fashion entrepreneur who, at the time, was also a consultant to Montedison [3]. Since the 1960s, Fiorucci had shown a keen ability to grasp and interpret the evolution of consumer culture – particularly among young people – promoting a playful, non-prescriptive, mix-and-match approach to dressing. His store, opened in 1967 in central Milan on Corso Vittorio Emanuele, offered a kaleidoscope of garments and accessories, both from international producers and his own lines, in a wide variety of materials and colours, inviting customers to create their own style freely. The conception of the Centre resonated with Fiorucci's trend-watcher approach.

The Centro Design Montefibre – also located on Corso Vittorio Emanuele, in a building at Montedison's disposal

– was organised into two units dedicated to redefining the identity of textile products in the fields of clothing and of interiors and furnishings, in other words dedicated to *fashion* and *design*, as the two sections were often described [4]. To coordinate them, Fiorucci called on figures with whom he had shared experiences and ideas: Ampelio Bucci, a business consultant and trend forecaster, for the first; and the architects and designers Andrea Branzi, Massimo Morozzi, and Clino Trini Castelli for the second [5].

Independent from one another, the two units followed distinct paths. The clothing section developed forecasting tools designed to support the textile–apparel chain in integrating with the rhythms and trends of fashion. The other section, instead, adopted a more conceptual approach, taking synthetic fibres as the starting point for a reconsideration of the disciplinary scope of design, refocusing it on the “soft” qualities of the living environment. In these activities, colour came into play as one among other factors enhancing the use of fibres, with a dual significance: on the one hand as a technical tool for production planning, on the other as an autonomous subject of study and design. The following paragraphs are devoted to examining these two perspectives.

To supplement this analysis, it is important to highlight an aspect that has not yet been addressed in studies on the Montefibre Design Centre: the role played in its activities by another Montedison company, the Azienda Coloranti Nazionali e Affini (ACNA). An Italian leader in the field of dyes and pigments, ACNA was founded in 1929 and, from the early 1930s, came under the ownership of Montecatini, subsequently playing a key role in national colour programming policies under Fascism, particularly in relation to fashion (Lupano and Vaccari, 2009, pp. 85-87). For the Design Centre, ACNA served as the point of reference for all information relating to colourimetric definition and the application of colour to different materials. At the time, ACNA was beginning to suffer from international competition – from lower-cost productions, or conversely from higher-quality ones –, not to mention mounting criticism regarding the environmental impact of its plants (Poggio, 2014). It is plausible to argue that, in this situation, the emphasis placed on colour by the Centre aligned – if not by direct mandate, then at least indirectly – with Montedison's interest in supporting its subsidiary.

2.2. The Fashion Unit: The Lens of Trend Forecasting

In the 1960s, trend definition became a central issue for the Italian and European fashion systems. The crisis of haute couture and the rise of the ready-to-wear industry and market opened up a space to be filled: the challenge was to connect mass production and consumption through the provision of fashion qualities attentive to trends. It was

during this period that forecasting bureaus with a new approach emerged. Departing from the dirigiste strategies of national fashion councils as well as from the focus on high-end fashion typical of style services from the first half of the century, they turned instead to the developments of street styles, aiming to help the fashion industry grasp and anticipate consumer desires (Paris, 2006, pp. 366-367; Blaszczyk, 2023a, pp. 1283-1284). In Paris, within just a few years, Promostyl (1966), MAFIA Maïmé Arnodin Fayolle International Associées (1968), and Peclers Paris (1970) were established.

The Montefibre Design Centre – and its fashion section in particular – drew inspiration from such agencies (Bucci, 1978). Its aim, however, was to provide Montefibre's clients – namely textile operators in Italy and across Europe – with free general guidance on seasonal trends, which companies could then choose to align with according to their own production structures and target markets. Being part of a chemical group that supplied heterogeneous operators along the textile-apparel chain clearly did not allow the Centre to articulate a customised service. On the other hand, its position made it possible to connect forecasting activity with the study of new fibres and the promotion of new industrial products, and to foster synergies between the fashion consultants and the technical laboratories of the production plants (Bê Khanh in Becciani and Moro, 1973, pp. 22–23).

The fashion unit essentially carried out research on basic trends, which were then distilled and disseminated every six months through different sets of “trend books”. These were generally organised around macro-themes and dedicated respectively to “colours”, textile “patterns”, and lines for “garments” and “knitwear”, with proposals for women, men, and kids [6]. The research followed the seasonal rhythm of fashion collections (spring/summer and autumn/winter): it was initiated twenty-four months before the launch of the finished product and presented – also through dedicated events and showroom meetings – to textile producers about a year and a half in advance (Spaggiari, 2020).

The books, first issued for the autumn/winter 1974-1975 season, were prepared in several languages – initially Italian, English, French, German, and Spanish – confirming the European scope of the initiative. They contained technical-operational information and, in some cases, historical-artistic notes on the meanings of decorations, colours, and styles, accompanied by bibliographical references. In addition to silhouette drawings, details of collars and sleeves were often presented, as well as enlargements of textile weaves and, naturally, yarn and knitted fabric samples. The latter were produced by Montefibre's clients on the basis of trend

inputs supplied to them by the Centre itself (Bignami, 2020; Fava, 2022).



Fig. 1 Centro Design Montefibre, summer 1983 knitwear trends (top) and winter 1983-1984 knitwear trends (bottom). Ornella Bignami Fashion Elements Archive. Photo by Sissi Cesira Roselli. For the knitwear sector, the trend inputs provided by the Centre's fashion unit during regular meetings with customers were developed by the latter in the form of yarns or knitted fabrics. These samples, which embodied the results of research into colour trends, yarns and knitting stitches, were then collected by the fashion unit in folders, which served both as promotional material for the customers involved and helped to strengthen the collaboration between Montefibre and its clientele.

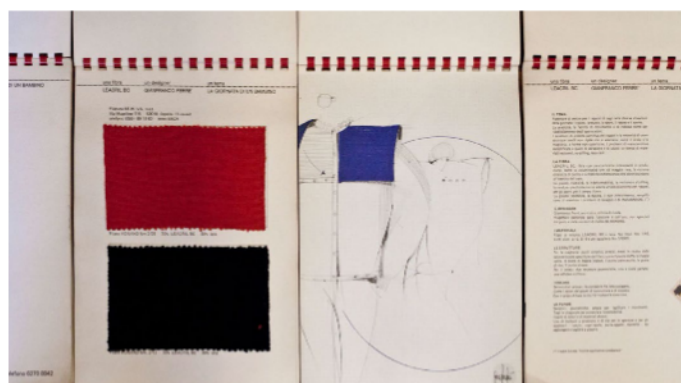


Fig. 2 Centro Design Montefibre, “Quaderno n. 5, Una fibra: Leacril BC. Un designer: Gianfranco Ferré. Un tema: la giornata di un bambino” (One fibre: Leacril BC. One designer: Gianfranco Ferré. One theme: a child's day, 1979), Ampelio Bucci Archive. Photo by Sissi Cesira Roselli.

From 1975 onwards, alongside the “trend books” the Centre also issued the “Quaderni”, studies without a fixed periodicity that addressed specific aspects of clothing – short-term fashion news, technical or design information – with the aim of providing inspiration and tools for the use of synthetic textiles. In particular, to highlight the

technological performance of Leacril – an acrylic fibre that remained central to the fashion section's communication strategy until the 1980s – the Centre involved both established and emerging Italian fashion designers, such as Mariuccia Mandelli (Krizia), and Gianfranco Ferré (Centro Design Montefibre, [1979a], [1979b]).



Fig. 3a-b Centro Design Montefibre, colour trend books. Ornella Bignami's Fashion Elements Archive. Photo by Sissi Cesira Roselli. Unlike the sophisticated layout of the manuals produced by the design section of the Montefibre Centre, the purpose of the tools developed by the fashion section was clearly technical and operational, in line with the tradition of trend books. Characterised by simple, uniform graphic layout and (at least during the Centre's first decade of activity) by plastic spiral binding, they were intended as a working tool to offer textile operators an overview of the basic fashion trends of the season and identify the general trends that each company could adapt to its own production and market.

While Montefibre's synthetic fibres were already well positioned in the high-end knitwear segment – as shown, for example, by advertising pages dedicated to the creations of Krizia and Missoni featured in *Vogue Italia* in the 1970s – the forecasting services offered by the fashion section of the Centre were mostly directed at processing and manufacturing firms engaged in mid-range

production, which often lacked in-house designers or were unable to afford the expensive trend books issued by the Parisian bureaux de style.

Ampelio Bucci, de facto coordinator of the section, gathered around him international collaborators and consultants who acted as trend watchers. According to the forecasting Delphi method he adopted, the key was not so much to follow consumers as to consult experts in the field (Bucci in Becciani and Moro, 1973, p. 23; Bucci, 2020). Among them were textile artists and designers, illustrators, and fashion designers such as the American Nancy Martin and Popy (Annalisa) Moreni, Italian by origin but trained in France. Others were figures with different backgrounds, such as Ornella Bignami, who, formerly employed at Rhodiatocce, a company of the Montedison group, had gained experience in the field of techno-fibres (Giertz-Mårtenson, 2018), or were at the beginning of their careers, such as Rita Spaggiari, who at the Centre had the opportunity to acquire hands-on experience [7]. Martin, Moreni, and Spaggiari themselves, at different times, worked on colour research for the trend books.

In general, within the process of trend development, colour research takes place at the upstream stage of the textile–apparel production chain; it therefore needs to be carried out quickly and disseminated at least two years before finished products reach the market. The colour books produced by the Design Centre followed this timing, serving as a key tool of orientation for planning industrial production starting from the yarn, that is, from the processing of the synthetic fibres manufactured by the company.

From a technical point of view, until the summer of 1985 the books carried the statement “colours produced with ACNA dyes – ACNA Spa / Montedison Group – Milan”, guaranteeing the industrial feasibility of the proposals. Each season a palette of around twenty colours was developed, numbered sequentially, divided into colour families – normally four – and organised into harmonies. The aim was not only to propose individual colours but also to define combinations capable of capturing and translating the rapid shifts of fashion and cultural phenomena. The use of colours was also adapted to the stylistic trends identified in the “line” books, thereby offering practical guidance for manufacturers' choices.

The fullest expression of the fashion section's colour proposals lay in their materialisation through textile samples developed by the clients themselves, based on the inputs provided by the Centre and included in the trend books dedicated to the “lines” – in particular knitwear, the sector on which the activity of the fashion section increasingly focused from the mid-1970s onwards. These samples made it possible to appreciate not only the colour

research but also the investigations into blends, the appearance and handle of yarns, and knitting stitches.



TENDENZE COLORI
INVERNO 1982/83

RICETTE PER FIBRA ACRILICA

COLORANTI STENACRILE	COLORI													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Giallo 3SL extra conc.	%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Giallo oro SL extra conc.	%	,007	-	,036	,05	,012	,004	,09	-	,50	,475	-	,19	-
Rosa G	%	-	-	-	-	-	-	,05	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rosa 2RL conc.	%	-	,065	-	-	-	,027	-	,50	-	,02	,15	-	,95
Rosa 3SL extra conc.	%	,09	,03	,16	,011	,006	-	,75	-	,25	,135	,105	,15	,80
Violetto brill. 3RB	%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	,40
Blu RL extra conc.	%	-	-	-	-	-	-	,045	-	-	-	-	-	-
Blu 5SL extra conc.	%	,022	,003	,007	,005	,03	,121	,039	-	,067	,19	,39	,225	,125

COLORANTI STENACRILE	COLORI													
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Giallo 3SL extra conc.	%	-	-	-	-	-	,25	,30	-	-	-	-	-	-
Giallo oro SL extra conc.	%	-	,625	,15	,15	-	,80	-	-	-	,004	,006	,095	,013
Rosa G	%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rosa 2RL conc.	%	,18	-	-	,20	,70	,33	-	-	,06	-	-	-	-
Rosa 3SL extra conc.	%	1,0	,082	,075	-	,15	-	,025	-	,02	,007	,045	,325	,45
Violetto brill. 3RB	%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Blu RL extra conc.	%	-	-	-	,95	,011	,016	-	,05	,30	,29	-	-	-
Blu 5SL extra conc.	%	,002	,025	,75	-	-	-	,325	,23	-	,003	,025	,165	,40

Fig. 4 ACNA, "Tendenze colori inverno 1982-83, ricette per fibra acrilica" (winter colour trends 1982-83, formulas for acrylic fibre). Ampelio Bucci Archive. The colour research conducted by the Centre's fashion department was processed by ACNA technicians. This company, part of the Montedison group, served as a point of reference for all information relating to colorimetric definition and the application of colour to different materials – in this case the acrylic fibre marketed under the name Leacril.

2.3. The Design Unit: Colour and Primary Design

For Montefibre, home and interior textiles mainly meant carpets and furnishing fabrics in Meraklon, the polypropylene fibre developed and marketed by Montecatini from the late 1950s, and whose patents expired in the early 1970s (Garofoli, 1991; Veit, 2023). In a market already dominated by international players such as Bayer – with its acrylic Dralon (1954), used in both clothing and interiors – competition was no longer limited to durability, ease of cleaning, safety, or cost, but centred on the ability to capture shifting tastes – or, as some

contemporary advertisements suggested, to offer *prêt-à-porter* solutions.



Meraklon per la vostra casa

Vi sembra troppo nuda? Si può vestirla bene con una spesa ragionevole.

Magari con un « prêt à porter ». Un vestito pratico per gli ambienti di casa più « impegnati ». Un soffice pavimento tessile di Meraklon a quadrelle autoadesive, che si posa con facilità. Ecco un lavoro che, volendo, può fare vostro marito (se non ne ha voglia incaricate un altro: vi costerà meno lo stesso). Giudicate poi, a lavoro finito: sul vostro pavimento c'è tutta la resistenza e l'antimacchia che avete desiderato, per tanta fatica di meno. E un altro ineccepibile vantaggio: quello di portare via con voi le vostre quadrelle – sempre nuove anche dopo anni – quando cambiate casa. Tutto questo vi dà Meraklon con una spesa ragionevole (da L. 3.500 al mq.).

POLYMER Gruppo Montecatini Edizioni

Fig. 5 Polymer, Gruppo Montecatini, "Meraklon per la vostra casa" (Meraklon for your home), advertising page, 1970. Among Meraklon coverings, the self-adhesive square tiles in various colors – produced in early 1970s under the Polymer brand, which later merged with Montefibre – were promoted not only for their durability but also as a practical *prêt-à-porter* covering for the home.

The two units of the Centro Design Montefibre originated from common premises, yet Andrea Branzi, Massimo Morozzi (officially the coordinator of the design section) and Clino Trini Castelli did not adopt a forecasting or marketing model in the strict sense. Rather, they interpreted the Centre's "service" function in design terms and as a *meta-project* activity, not aimed at producing new objects but at elaborating information and tools to guide and support designers – an approach they called *design primario*, "primary design" (Centro Design Montefibre, 1975c, 41). Unlike the fashion section, moreover, these designers did not operate only behind the scenes: in addition to documenting and disseminating their work and

ideas through magazines, they also extended their *design primario* expertise beyond Montefibre's client network by engaging in independent consulting activities [8].

One major channel of promotion was the publication, between 1974 and 1976, of seven bilingual articles (Italian/English), signed simply as "Centro Design Montefibre," in the architecture and design magazine *Casabella*, then directed by Alessandro Mendini and receptive to a critical and speculative approach to design (Centro Design Montefibre, 1974a, 1974b, 1975b, 1975c, 1976b, 1976c).



Fig. 6a-b "Introducing House & Garden Colors for 1974" *House & Garden*, September 1973. Since the 1950s, with the consultancy of colour expert Faber Birren, the American magazine 'House & Garden' had been proposing a yearly selection of trend colours (Błaszczuk, 2012, pp. 236 ff.). The campaign targeted both manufacturers, designers and decorators, and it was also addressed to consumers. The magazine urged them to "[b]e on the same colour wave length", to look in shops and department stores for products made in the proposed colours and bearing the campaign's identifying label (to help them, colour chips were also offered in a small format, strung on a key chain). As shown in the 1973 issue, the presentation of trend colours was often accompanied by images illustrating how the atmosphere of a room – and even its "attitude" – could be transformed simply by changing colour.

As the *Casabella* articles show, in venturing into the world of fibres, Branzi, Morozzi, and Trini Castelli not only investigated their technical and production aspects, but also considered the historical, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of yarns, textiles, and colour. To this end, they collaborated with experts including Adela Turin-Coat (textile design), Alessandro De Gregori (colour design), and the historian Franco Brunello, author of a book on the

history of dyeing (1968). At the same time, the design unit looked at commercial trends, examining magazines and forecasting tools developed by various international players operating at the intersection of fashion and design, such as the agency MAFIA, the British International Color Authority (ICA), and the American magazine *House & Garden* (Centro Design Montefibre, 1975b, 45; 1976b, 40).

What ultimately emerged from this work of information gathering and research was a shift of focus from fibres and textiles as such to the qualities they could "support" and enable. Light, climate control, acoustic insulation, and, above all, colour and decoration – features that were at the time commonly highlighted in advertisements and interior design magazines to promote synthetic coverings and fabrics – were progressively integrated by the design unit into a critical discourse concerning the contemporary artificial environment and the role of designers within it. Describing those qualities as "soft" and "immaterial," the design section framed them as "structures" capable of shaping the perception, experience and use of products and spaces at a deeper level than the hard, formal, and compositional structures traditionally addressed by modernist design and architecture (Centro Design Montefibre, 1975b, 44). The study of these soft structures – the identification of their parameters and the development of tools to support their conscious management – became the core of *design primario* (Centro Design Montefibre, 1975c).

The direction taken by the design unit clearly drew on approaches already matured in their careers. Branzi and Morozzi, protagonists with the Archizoom collective (1966-73) of the radical design season and critics of modernist functionalism, had moved between the 1960s and 1970s from a pop phase, in ironic dialogue with consumer culture, to the dissolution of all formal structure and the extremisation of industrial rationality with the diagrams of *No-Stop City* (1970-71) and the essential clothing system *Dressing Design* (1970-72) (Fava, 2018). Trini Castelli, with his technical and professional training and experience at the Fiat Style Centre, had developed a systemic and no-form approach to design through projects for Olivetti's office and corporate identity departments and thanks to his encounter with American Minimal Art, with its concepts of anti-form and primary structures (Trini Castelli, 2006; Moro, 2009; Trini Castelli, 2024). In 1972, Archizoom and Castelli both contributed, alongside other designers, to a project for an exhibition promoted by Abet Print (but never realised) that invited experimentation with laminates as a "neutral surface" available for a radical rethinking of the domestic environment. The strategies of the Montefibre Design Centre, with its conception of synthetic fibres as supports for environmental qualities and as enablers of

new experiences and behaviours, continued this line of research.

Overall, the Centre's design unit produced various outputs, including manuals, semi-finished products, and image repertoires. Several of these, in addition to being described in *Casabella*, have been further examined by other scholars (Trini Castelli, 1985, 2006, 2024; Lecce, 2014; Oppedisano, 2015). This article focuses only on *Fibermatching 25* and *Colordinamo* as expressions of a mediation not *through* colour but *of* colour itself, conceived as a *primary* concern, preceding forms and materials. Central to their development – and to the broader prominence attributed to colour within the Centre – was the contribution of Trini Castelli who introduced concepts, references and tools previously unfamiliar to Italian design (Branzi, 2021). Among these, the international Munsell system of colour identification, based on hue, value, and chroma (Castelli, 1978), which provided an important framework for rationalising the Centre's work.



Fig. 7 Centro Design Montefibre, “Colordinamo 1976: manuale per uso professionale - Pre-synthetic colour”, Montefibre, 1976. Photo by Sissi Cesira Roselli. The “Colordinamo” folders, carefully designed in every detail and made of different materials, included colour charts with spectrophotometric values on the back, complete colour tables, masks for isolating and combining shades, and composition guides.

Fibermatching 25 was a system designed for industry, particularly for Montefibre, and addressed a specific limitation of polypropylene fibre, i.e. Meraklon: due to its chemical inertness it had poor dyeability and could only be mass-dyed during spinning, not afterwards (Trini Castelli, 2006; Veit, 2023). Mass-dyeing, though relatively fast and economical, proved however restrictive and disadvantageous in view of market demand for new colour options. In the case of Meraklon, standard production was limited to 30-40 shades based on requests from

processing industries. To overcome this, new tones were typically obtained by mixing available colours, a practice constrained by the limited palette and by the risk of coarse, uneven *mélanges*. *Fibermatching 25* introduced principles and tools for rational control of such mixtures: a set of 25 colours – 20 saturated, three greys, two “neutral”, plus black and white – together with application guides, samples, and formulae for hundreds of combinations, capable of generating thousands of shades. Exploiting partitive synthesis, fibres were conceived as elementary particles of colour which, when blended and viewed from a standard distance, produced the appearance of solid colours. Central was the use of greys, which made it possible to adjust intensity. Although rooted in fibre technology, the system placed colour to the fore as an autonomous dimension, anticipating developments that Castelli would later pursue with other materials in office tile carpet systems (Trini Castelli, 2006).

As for the *Colordinamo* manuals (1975-1977), these were annual operational tools aimed at designers [9], each offering a selection of 40 colours accompanied by historical information, theoretical reflections, and design aids: swatches, colour charts, masks for isolating and combining tones, and composition guides. Their aim was to provide a practical and intermediate repertory, compared to the vast range of international codes (the Munsell system counted c.1500 samples), and to support designers in the informed definition of colour atmospheres (Centro Design Montefibre, 1977). Colours were grouped into families and selected around a monographic theme. These were not intended to make market predictions, but rather to help understand and contribute to the evolution of the “international colour culture”, that is, the circulation of chromatic standards across industrial society and global markets. The first issue was dedicated to the “colour of energy”, inspired by hues generated by electronic media; the second to the “pre-synthetic colour”, based on recipes of ancient dyers and critical of strong hues promoted by marketing; the third to the “environmental colour of the 1970s”, drawing on the analysis of the *House & Garden* campaigns, identified hues that had proved stable throughout the decade (Centro Design Montefibre, 1975a, 1976a, 1977).

It is important to note that *Colordinamo* was not limited to synthetic fibres but addressed any industrial product within a perspective of environmental design. Collaboration with ACNA dyeing company, noted in the folders, ensured the industrial reproducibility of the colours and offered application tests on different supports. A trademark inspired by the Munsell colour solid was used to designate products manufactured according to the processes described in the manuals.

Il problema del colore è superficiale solo in apparenza.



Da oggi lo studiano insieme in Colordinamo:

Abet, Acna, Bassetti, B&B Italia, Carrara & Matta, Croff Centro Casa, I.V.I., Kartell, Merloni Elettrodomestici, Montefibre, Tappetificio Radici, Rossi di Albizzate, Zanotta, Zucchi.

Se c'è qualcosa di superficiale, nel problema del colore, è solo il modo con cui è stato affrontato finora, a livello industriale. Partendo da questa constatazione, 14 aziende italiane, si sono associate in Colordinamo, "Gruppo Ricerca-Colore per l'Ambiente". Per offrire una coscienza critica del colore come problema di primaria importanza e per studiarlo in maniera continua, sistematica e interdisciplinare. È l'unico modo, secondo le aziende promotrici di Colordinamo, per colmare il "gap" nella cultura del colore che separa l'Italia dai paesi europei industrializzati e per arrivare ad un uso del colore più consapevole e più corretto. Con tutti i vantaggi industriali e commerciali che ne derivano: non perché sia questo l'obiettivo primario di Colordinamo ma perché è nella logica delle cose che un uso più razionale del colore porti anche immediate vantaggi di questo tipo. Al di là di questo è chiaro che rimonitore il "gap" che ci separa dalle altre nazioni è un'operazione di larghissimo respiro culturale, e che l'Italia parte in ritardo. Questo, paradossalmente, può diventare un vantaggio, perché ci permette di capitalizzare le esperienze fatte all'estero senza ripeterne gli errori. Ed in particolare evitando di affrontare i problemi coloristici con forti limitazioni settoriali, come è avvenuto in Francia ed Inghilterra, o con fini dichiaratamente ed esclusivamente corporativi, come è avvenuto in Germania. Colordinamo potrà "apportare" del fatto di esser nato nel 1977 per far meglio di chi è partito parecchi anni prima! Per informazioni su Colordinamo potete rivolgervi al Centro Documentazione Colordinamo, che raccoglie e organizza informazioni sul colore da tutto il mondo e mette a disposizione degli specialisti il "Manuale per uso professionale Colordinamo 1977" (a cura, per Colordinamo, di Centro Design Montefibre. La segreteria ed il Centro Documentazione Colordinamo sono in: C.so Magenta 65, a Milano. Il telefono è 898934).

COLORDINAMO
Gruppo Ricerca-Colore per l'Ambiente

il marchio della Montefibre S.p.A.

Fig. 8 Colordinamo Gruppo Ricerca - Colore per l'Ambiente, "Il problema del colore è superficiale solo in apparenza. Da oggi lo studiano insieme in Colordinamo" (The issue of colour is only apparently superficial. From today, we [the companies listed below] are studying it within Colordinamo), advertising page, 1977.

In 1977 the Colordinamo project expanded with the creation of the Gruppo Ricerca - Colore per l'Ambiente (Research Group - Colour for the Environment). As stated in a leaflet enclosed with the third manual and in announcements in trade magazines, the group brought together 14 Italian companies from the synthetics, furniture and kitchen, textile and household appliance sectors to promote a "broader awareness of colour issues among professionals and household users" through interdisciplinary initiatives. At the Salone del Mobile in September 1977 – according to a subsequent advertisement – more than 160 products developed with Colordinamo were presented. Traces of the group and its work with companies were however soon lost, and it is likely that this experience had already come to an end by 1978 [10]. However, confirming its relevance in supporting the spread of colour culture, in 1978 it promoted a seminar on "colour and environment", which saw some of the Design Centre's leading figures, such as Bucci and Trini Castelli, discuss colour with other international experts.

3. Conclusion

This article has traced the history of the Centro Design Montefibre in the 1970s highlighting how this department, created by a chemical conglomerate to consolidate its position in the synthetic fibre market, opened up a space for the elaboration and circulation of knowledge, tools, and languages relating to fashion and design, in which colour, too, acquired significance. The Centre was tied to an industrial and marketing rationale; however, this mission was interpreted in different ways by its two sections – a divergence that certainly reflected the distinct professional and cultural developments within their respective fields of fashion and design.

The fashion unit, by adopting a trend-forecasting model, aligned itself with a risk-reduction policy for operators in the textile-clothing sector, at a time when this sector was consolidating in Italy and Europe yet still had to contend with the fluctuations of taste. The trend books were therefore orientation tools reserved for operators in small and medium-sized enterprises, enabling them to interpret and respond to market expectations. In this context, colour functioned as a necessary instrument of mediation. The design unit, by contrast, adopted a more conceptual approach and intertwined its work with a critical reflection on – and against – the dominant formalism of the modernist tradition and of design production. From this perspective, colour itself – together with other "soft" environmental qualities – was proposed as a primary subject and object of design, rather than as a mere ancillary attribute of form and materials. The manuals, prototypes, and tools developed by Branzi, Castelli, and Morozzi certainly included features useful for the rational management of production. However, these initiatives – and their promotion through *Casabella* – above all revealed the idea that the contemporary living environment and its parameters should be guided by designers, who, in turn, had to equip themselves with new tools of scientific and cultural understanding.

The experience of the Centro Design Montefibre – and above all its impact – still leaves open questions, providing further scope for investigation.

The fashion unit continued its work for over twenty years (1973-1998) – a sign of its successful integration into the production system – the design section concluded its work within a few years (1973-1978). In both cases, however, the Centre's experience allowed figures from different backgrounds to form or develop skills and interests that would be increasingly in demand in the professional market in the years to come. The Centre's legacy must also be gauged in the long term. Figures such as Branzi, Bucci and Trini Castelli, in addition to developing their approaches in the professional context, joined by other

colleagues, also brought their vision to the educational sphere, helping to train new generations of designers in conceptual and operational models in which aspects such as colour, materials and systemic design coordination were central. The courses at Domus Academy in the 1980s were emblematic in this respect (Trini Castelli, 1985; Falabrino, 2004).

In recent years, various calls have been made for colour literacy and, more specifically, for the meaningful inclusion of colour education in design curricula (Calvo Ivanovic, 2024; Hirschler, 2018). We believe that historically reconnecting the discussion of design and fashion with the practice and culture of colour is essential to supporting this process.

Authors' contribution statement

The paper is the result of shared research undertaken by the authors. However, paragraphs 1, 2 [introductory paragraph], 2.3 were edited by Maddalena Dalla Mura; paragraphs 2.1, 2.2, 3 were edited by Elena Fava.

4. Conflict of interest declaration

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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6. Short biography of the authors

Maddalena Dalla Mura PhD in Design Sciences, Associate Professor at the Università Iuav di Venezia, specialises in the history of design and graphic design, with a particular interest in historiography and design mediation. Her recent publications include, with Carlo Vinti, the chapter on Italy in the third volume of *World History of Design* edited by Rebecca Houze and Sylvia Margolin (Bloomsbury, forthcoming). She is President of AIS/Design - Associazione Italiana Storici del Design (2021-2025).

Elena Fava PhD in Art History, teaches at the Università Iuav di Venezia. Her research focuses on the critical analysis of archives and on the intersections between the fashion industry and design and design culture, with particular attention to radical and post-radical design movements. On these topics she has published essays in

academic journals and collective volumes, and the monograph *Vestire contro: il dressing design di Archizoom* (2018).

Notes

[1] The Centre's position within the marketing division is explicitly stated in the company's management documents (Montefibre, 1974a).

[2] At the time, Montefibre's production – mainly in plants in Italy and in some facilities run by subsidiaries in Spain, France, and Malta – was focused on both semi-synthetic fibres (acetate, modal, viscose) and synthetic fibres (polyamide [nylon], acrylic, polyester, polypropylene, PVC) (Montefibre, 1974b).

[3] At the time, Fiorucci was a consultant to Montedison for the relaunch of the Standa department stores, of which the group held the majority share (51.63%), adding youth fashion to their broad product range. The partnership was formalised in 1974 with the “marriage” of Fiorucci and Standa (Giagnoni, 1974). For further information on Fiorucci's role between fashion and design, see, among the disparate literature, the texts by Maria Luisa Frisa (2018) and Gianmarco Gronchi (2024).

[4] The names varied both in internal documents (Montefibre, 1973) and in communications addressed to the public. The documents and manuals produced by the two sections were sometimes signed as “Centro Design Abbigliamento”, and at other times simply as “Centro Design Montefibre”, without further specification.

[5] Ampelio Bucci and Fiorucci had met during a forecasting project carried out by the former (with the consulting firm Fintesa-Admeco) for IMEC, a women's lingerie brand (Bucci, 2020). As for Archizoom, of which Branzi and Morozzi were members, Fiorucci had supported their first *Dressing Design* project (1970-1972), an experiment in industrial production and ready-to-wear fashion that consisted of a unisex clothing system composed of a few items made of synthetic fibres, offered in different colours and open to individual consumption and customisation. As for Trini Castelli, Fiorucci co-founded Intrapresa Design (1967-1969) with him, a studio dedicated to projects straddling fashion and design (Fava, 2018; Trini Castelli and Musante, 2019).

[6] In the 1980s, trend books dedicated to “yarns” were also introduced, while the description of lines for “knitwear” – the sector on which, from this decade onwards, the Centre's forecasting activity would focus, replacing “garments” – was presented in illustrated posters accompanied by brief textual notes.

[7] Nancy Martin, a textile designer, contributed her expertise as both scholar and practitioner in textile design to the Montefibre Design Centre, with which she collaborated from the mid-1970s for over a decade. Similarly, Popy Moreni, designer and founder of the eponymous label launched in 1980, had previously gained experience in trend research, first with Maimé Arnodin's style office and later with Promostyl, before working as a fashion consultant (ca. 1977-1995). For Rita Spaggiari, consultancy at the Centre (ca. 1978-1996) provided the opportunity to open her own style studio, continuing trend forecasting as a member of committees such as Première Vision and of national and international colour associations (Color Coloris, Intercolor). Ornella Bignami, finally, continued her collaboration with the fashion section until the closure of the Centre, even after founding her creative consultancy Elementi Moda in 1979, still active in Milan.

[8] In 1974, Trini Castelli, Branzi, and Morozzi founded in Milan a practice named CDM, Consulenti Design Milano, whose acronym ambiguously echoed the initials of the Centro Design Montefibre. For a brief period, Alessandro Mendini and Ettore Sottsass Jr. also joined the project.

[9] The manuals state that the ACNA published a manual for “applicators” containing “colour samples and recipes for their reproduction on certain

types of substrate". To date we have found no evidence of the actual existence of these documents.

[10] As far as companies are concerned, the review of Italian design magazines did not yield any further information on their involvement in the research group, except for the carpet manufacturer Sit-In, which between 1979 and 1980 still referred to the work of the Colour for the Environment Research Group in its advertisements.

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