ITALIAN AND NORDIC DESIGN CULTURES
IDENTITIES IN TRANSITION 1925–2025

EDITED BY
MADDALENA DALLA MURA
ANDERS V. MUNCH



EDIZIONI QUASAR

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Preface

The international prominence of both Italian and Nordic design grew during the same decades, across the same markets and within the same Mid-Century Modern style of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, despite this parallel rise, the two seemed to have been cast to different roles on the international lifestyle scene, shaped by their contrasting cultural contexts and distinct national and regional identities. Although these identities have since been transformed and repeatedly questioned through developments in industry, markets and media, national and regional clichés still exert a powerful influence, circulating through communication, branding and the professional cultures of design and production.

This volume explores these diverging design cultures and identities in transition across ten decades. It is based on a seminar at the Danish Academy in Rome in May 2023 arranged by Design Culture Studies, University of Southern Denmark. We would like to thank the Danish Academy and the former director, Charlotte Bundgaard, as well as the current director, Mikkel Harder Munck-Hansen, for both hosting the seminar and including this volume in its book series Analecta Romana Instituti Danici Supplementum, and we are especially grateful for the help of Maria Adelaide Zocchi as editor of this series.

On behalf of both the seminar participants, the authors and ourselves as editors, we also wish to thank the Carlsberg Foundation warmly for their full support of both the seminar and the publication.

Maddalena Dalla Mura,
Iuav University of Venice
Anders V. Munch,
University of Southern Denmark

Italian and Nordic Design Cultures: Identities in Transition 1925–2025

Maddalena Dalla Mura and Anders V. Munch

This book emerges from the seminar *Design Cultures in Italy and the Nordic Countries* organised by Anders V. Munch and Sisse Tanderup from the University of Southern Denmark and held at the Danish Academy in Rome on May 15–16, 2023. Reflecting recent developments in the fields of design culture and design history, this gathering aimed to establish a framework for transnational exchange and critical reflection on the identities of Nordic design and Italian design as dynamic and contested entities that invite diverse analytical perspectives and that allow for comparative investigation. The seminar's open call, intended to attract contributions that would challenge national and regional stereotypical and promotional storytelling, asked participants to consider broad aspects of "design culture" and to propose presentations related to one of the two regions or to any transnational relations between them. The same request was extended to a number of Italian scholars, who were invited to participate in the seminar and help expand the initial inquiry. This publication, therefore, features both national cases as well as comparative and transnational ones. It brings together studies that approach design cultures from different scales and perspectives, reflecting the variety of analytical and historiographical orientations that emerged in response to the initial call. In doing so, the volume considers both the national design identities of Italy and of the individual Nordic countries, and the broader supranational identity of Nordic design.[1]

Identities, Cultures and Histories

Three decades into the new millennium, everyday life is populated by myriad products, interfaces and environments with elusive origins, items that may be designed in one country and produced, sold and experienced anywhere in the world. Despite—or perhaps because of—this reality, national and regional labels continue to assert their influence on the production and promotion of design. The possibility of claiming an authentic or unique design identity rooted in "their" country or region—or having a design "DNA", as it is often called by marketing consultants—seems to offer firms and professionals an inexhaustible resource for branding to compete within global markets and media networks (Danish Design Council 2017). Designers themselves tend to project diversified and hybrid identities, emphasising national, regional or global connections in response to their target contexts and stakeholders. Imbued with their associated legacies of tradition and heritage, moreover, national and local labels also function as key markers for institutions, organisations and schools. However, a closer look easily reveals a more complex scenario. Much design production inherently contains a blend of elements and relies on chains of actors and processes that cross geographical and cultural boundaries. This becomes even more evident when considering that design today largely concerns not individual artefacts, but hybrid systems of products and services as well as platforms that connect objects and people at multiple scales (Julier et al. 2019, 2). Furthermore, if one shifts the focus from solely design production

1. We use "Nordic" to cover Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland, and refer only to "Scandinavian" as the international breakthrough of this label in the 1950s and its subsequent iteration and continuation (Skou and Munch 2016).

to include design mediation and consumption practices (Lees-Maffei 2009), and from designer culture to everyday life, the picture becomes even more articulated. By considering the use, representation and dissemination of design —which are also carried out through design —one quickly realises that design is a broad socio-cultural phenomenon that intersects with multiple individual and collective values and sensibilities that may transcend or conflict with established notions of nationality or regionality.

Exclusive national or local affiliations cannot adequately account for the essence of design or fully explain design cultures. However, as mentioned above, it is undeniable that the articulation of national and regional identities in networks and policies has nevertheless had, and still has, a significant role in shaping design practices, institutions and discourses. At the same time design economies and cultures impact on regional, national and global contexts. National or regional traditions, networks—as well as perceptions and memories—do exist; or rather, they perform and are performed: they morph over time, subjected to continual renegotiation among stakeholders and to constant interpretation and appropriation by consumers, users and larger communities (Mordhorst 2021). Rather than dismissing them as mere rhetorical devices, concepts of national or regional identities should be treated as constructs that require critical examination.

In this regard, we posit that "design culture", as an object of study and as a discipline concerned with the "networks and relationships between the domains of design practice and production and everyday life", as outlined by scholars like Guy Julier (Julier et al. 2019, 1; see also Julier 2000), can offer productive research and analytical frameworks. Cultures are entities that exist and evolve at multiple scales. Design cultures permeate various spheres and contexts from professional practice to daily routines, from institutional discourse to lifestyle media. They delineate both tangible and intangible dynamics within and between companies, professional communities, organisations and a multitude of publics (e.g. Deserti and Rizzo 2014; Manzini 2016). Within this framework, local, national or regional identities can emerge and assert their influence, resonating with distinct understandings of design, its traditions and contemporary conditions. This process in turn shapes specific national or regional design cultures. Their uniqueness becomes particularly apparent when contrasted with other, divergent cultures. It is against this backdrop that our book seeks to explore the terrains of Italian and Nordic design cultures, striving not only to juxtapose their distinct identities but also to interrogate the dynamics that transcend regional and national boundaries. As Joana Meroz noted, national design identities "may be imagined not in terms of points of origin, but of open destinations" (Meroz 2016, 283). Historical and critical understanding is therefore crucial. Cultures are never static entities and not determined by specific origins, so to comprehend their continuous redefinitions, one needs to trace their trajectories or "genealogies", as Michel Foucault puts it (Foucault 1971).

National and international perspectives and paradigms have dominated the early phase of design historiography, with hegemonic modernism viewed as inherently international. However, recent scholarship has challenged these perspectives, deeming them too restricted, predicated on essentialist categories and often relying on stereotypes that fail to account for the dynamic and hybrid processes that characterise the contemporary global conditions. Following developments in the humanities and social sciences—most notably post-structuralism and post-colonial theory—and the emergence, within historical studies, of world and global history, and of comparative and transnational approaches, design historians too have begun to explore and adopt more inclusive approaches, thereby expanding the geo-cultural reach of design history (Woodham 2005). Some scholars have championed the idea of a world history of design that would recognise and incorporate the diverse circumstances of design's development within the different cultures and communities (Margolin 2005, 2015). Others have instead proposed global history as a more open and better framework that acknowledges design as a multi-sited practice and that fosters an outlook that extends beyond geographical boundaries (Adamson, Riello and Teasley 2011).

The push to transcend Eurocentric and Anglo-American biases, as well as to break down persistent centre-periphery dichotomies—resilient even within the self-critical strand of design historiography—has led to multiple discussions of these new approaches and contributed to a more plural understanding of design culture that also considers the multi-directionality of influences, networks and flows and the interplay of different scales, ranging from global to regional, from national to local (Calvera 2005; Kikuchi and Lee 2014; Huppatz 2014, 2015). For instance, the Catalan design historian Anna Calvera highlighted the significance of Barcelona's unique design culture and the internationalism of the Spanish-speaking world compared to the overarching national framework of Spain (Calvera 2005). Increased attention to transnational, supra-regional and inter-regional dynamics has further illuminated the porous and constructed nature of national conceptions of design cultures (Aynsley, Clarke and Messell 2022; Fallan, 2012; Fiss 2009; Kikuchi and Lee 2014; Meroz and Gimeno Martínez 2016). Meanwhile, the notions of nationhood, national identity and national culture have experienced a resurgence of critical interest, with scholars scrutinising their impact on design and, conversely, the role of design and creative industries in their formation, especially in relation to nationalism (Gimeno Martínez 2016; Narotzky 2009; Yagou 2007).

In this new interpretive framework, the national category has therefore all but disappeared, or rather, it has gained a renewed understanding. No longer conceived as monolithic units bound by geographical confines, national contexts and identities have instead been recognised as dynamic and contested entities in active relationships with other regional, supranational and global identities, contributing to and influenced by these interactions. Indeed, even comparative, transnational and global histories ultimately reference national entities, albeit to re-examine them and provide more nuanced interpretations.[2]

Although design operates within the global industry and image economy, it remains shaped by conditions and generates context-dependent meanings at smaller geographical scales: "design might be more global than ever before, it is still conditioned by, and in turn informs, its global, regional, national and local contexts at once", as Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei (2016, 1) argued in the introduction to their edited volume *Designing Worlds*. While it would be limiting to confine our analysis within national boundaries, it would be equally reductive to disregard the national perspective. The national level of design culture often represents the richest and most detailed field of investigation, as cases and sources are often tied to languages, national institutions, media and organisations. Of course, design is rarely isolated inside national borders, but everyday life is often dominated by the closest issues, habits and understandings. As Fallan and Lees-Maffei put it "the relationship between design and national identity is both extremely practical, concrete and material, and operates at the level of the public imaginary, myth and symbol" (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2016, 9). People's relations to design oscillate between mute everyday experience and more articulate public imaginaries, where national myths and symbols play a more pronounced role along with other layers of identity, profession, lifestyle and social class. In this way, our cases span across very concrete practices and abstract imaginaries looking for ongoing exchanges and reversible relations.

As more regions of the world have started to gain visibility in the discourse and literature of design history, the diversified, critical understandings have also spurred scholars to revisit the stories of countries and traditions previously embedded in canonical accounts. Along these lines, the design histories and cultures of the Nordic countries and of Italy have also been the subject of renewed attention, featuring prominently in articles, monographs and edited collections (Fallan 2012, 2018; Fallan and Maffei, 2013; Dellapiana 2022; Ashby and Kallestrup 2023; Fallan, Zetterlund and Munch 2023; Gotlieb and Skjerven 2025). In particular, the volumes edited by Fallan and Lees-Maffei

2. "Ultimately, though, both comparative history and transnational history rely on the nation as an entity and conceptual category, and therefore produce histories that complement rather than contest national histories" (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2016, 6).

—*Scandinavian Design* (Fallan 2012) and *Made in Italy* (Lees-Maffei and Fallan, 2013)—have questioned stereotypical myths and transcended the boundaries of canonical narratives. Providing a critical reassessment of Scandinavian Design and Italian Design as analytical categories and sharing an approach that acknowledges the role of various actors and networks in the production, mediation and consumption of design, they have offered the framework for diverse viewpoints ranging from the local to the transnational. More recently, the anthology *Nordic Design Cultures in Transformation, 1960–1980: Revolt and Resilience*, edited by Fallan, Christina Zetterlund and Anders V. Munch (2023), has further advanced the exploration of Nordic design cultures by focusing on a period, the years between the 1960s and 1980s, that has often been overlooked in conventional narratives of Scandinavian Design but deemed pivotal for understanding the major features of contemporary Nordic design. Grounded in an inclusive conception of design culture, this volume has embraced a multidisciplinary and collaborative stance, gathering insights from various authors and contributors, both within and outside academia, emphasising a transnational and comparative lens.

Seeking to add to this body of literature, our volume aims to delve further into the design cultures of Italy and of the Nordic countries, providing a broad framework for reconsidering national design identities across diverse scales and for transnational discussion spanning a broad chronology, from 1925 to the present.

Intersections and Divergences of Italian and Nordic Design Cultures

There are certainly good reasons to bring together the design histories and cultures of Italy and the Nordic countries for both individual analysis and comparative examination. Both symbols of modern lifestyles and paradigms for design organisation, marketing and professionalisation in the mid-20th century, Italian design and Nordic design have subsequently become emblematic of the contradictions and transformations that have marked the evolution of design production and culture from the latter half of the century up to the present, especially in terms of industrial decline, critiques of capitalism, and the emergence of environmental concerns. Although the economic and cultural conditions of Italy and of the Nordic countries have changed significantly since the rise of the *Italian Line* and of *Scandinavian Modern* in the 1950s, these labels—and more recent ones such as *Made in Italy* and *New Nordic Design*, which imply unified and coherent identities[3]—continue to display unabated vigour.

Emerging in the mid-20th century with a focus on furniture and home design, Italian design and Scandinavian design shared some traits as successful contributions of the Mid Century Modern, when each was recognized as possessing a sophisticated aesthetic idiom and a unique identity in relation to the modernist tradition and representing in different respects a sort of "third" or "middle way" compared to the extremes of industry and craft, of standardisation and individual expressions. In this respect, the Italian and Nordic design communities, designers, firms and institutions also looked at and measured each other at particular times, seeking inspiration and reference and establishing successful commercial bridges. Articles and commentaries in magazines like *Domus* and *Stile Industria*, international exhibitions such as the Triennale in Milan, specialised shops as well as small firms such as Arform in Milan and the Home shop in Turin testify to this kind of attention in Italy to Scandinavian design in the 1950s. The attention was affirmed by the Italian award of the Compasso d'Oro in 1958 to Den Permanente, the international showroom of Danish design in Copenhagen.

The design communities of Italy and the Nordic countries engaged in a mutual gaze, driven not only by a willingness to learn but also by competition and the intent to promote and distinguish themselves in an increasingly international market. A later example of the reverse attention to Italy is a Danish report on Italian design in 1973, which is worth presenting as a minor transnational case here. The author was Frederik Fogh, trained as an architect in

3. For a discussion of these more recent labels, see Lees-Maffei and Fallan (2013) and Skou and Munch (2016).

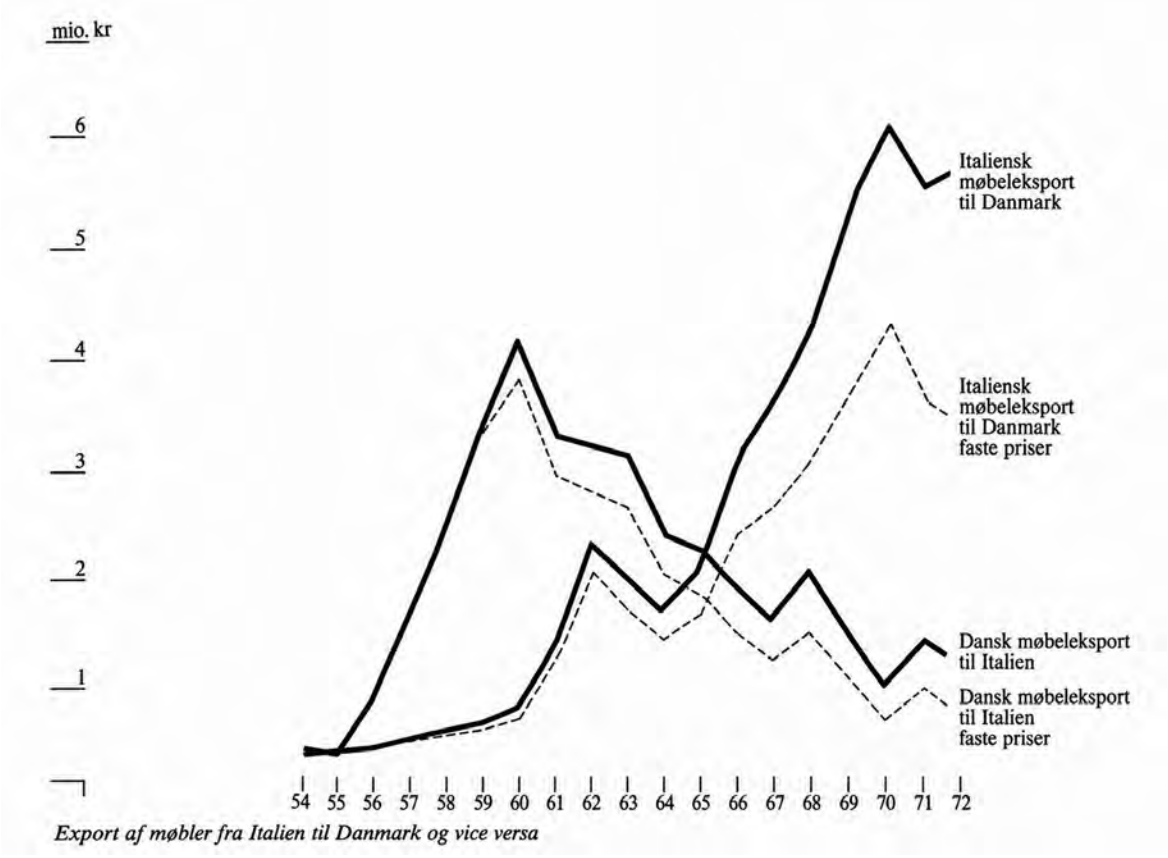


Fig. 1. Developments in export of furniture from Italy to Denmark and vice versa 1954–72. The dashed curves show "fixed prices", i.e. adjusted according to the price index. Frederik Fogh, "Italiensk formning", BID 10, 1973.

Denmark but living in Milan for many years and working as an architect on factory projects for the Italian furniture firm Cassina, later B&B. He knew the realities of big-scale industrial production and stressed the importance of industrial research to keep ahead of the development of markets and technologies. The report was commissioned by the Danish National Bank's *Anniversary Foundation of 1968*, recently established to strengthen both the arts and crafts and the design in Denmark. On the committee was Erik Herløw, the first Danish professor in industrial design and a strong promoter of this field, and a friend of Fogh from the Royal Academy School of Architecture. So Fogh was surely asked to give the Danish readers and authorities some facts on the role of design and the development of technology in industry to challenge the more conservative formula of Danish industrial art. The core message was very clear in the diagram (Fig. 1), with the development in the mutual export of furniture between Denmark and Italy. Denmark reached an early peak in 1959, but dropped, while Italy had a slower start, becoming much stronger in the 1960s and leaving Denmark behind.

Fogh would highlight three causes for the strength of the Italian furniture industry:

> Around 1960 it was usual to have fully industrialised manufacturing processes, even fully automated assembly line processes inspired by the car industry. New synthetic materials were on the market, much better suited to automatic manufacture than natural materials, and finally a huge, rather young audience grew forth, which not only has purchasing power on its own, but also in a much more decisive way than earlier affects the leading taste (Fogh 1973, 18).

While Fogh saw the Italian furniture industry adapting technology from car manufacture and embracing new synthetic materials suited for this, the Danish art industries still tried to balance technology and craft and only introduced plastic reluctantly. According to Fogh, the Italian industry also researched the market

and targeted an upcoming younger generation, while the Danish design industry reacted rather late and more defensively to this change in the market. The report highlighted the strength of a broad scope of industrial design through introductions to Olivetti and Italian car design. Denmark lacked such strong industrial locomotives to lead in design, while Sweden had large, profiled industrial firms in both the car and furniture industries.

Despite general points of mutual interest, the conditions of design production and development in the Italian and Nordic contexts were quite different, and their identities and cultures have been promoted and interpreted as representing distinct heritages, mentalities and societal conditions. The case of Nordic design serves as an illustrative example: it is a regional brand encompassing the five distinct yet interconnected design cultures of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. However, the promotion of Scandinavian Design in the 1950s was as precise and coherent as any national branding initiative, with few international consumers able to distinguish between designs from these countries. Even today, national labels and references to New Nordic or New Scandinavian Design are used without any clear discrimination (Skou and Munch 2016). Italy, conversely, with a population more than double that of all the Nordic countries combined, presents a contrasting situation. The concepts of nationhood and national identity give rise to different considerations here, as the country is marked by a profound internal diversity, entailing a series of economic, productive, social and cultural distinctions and intersections that operate at the local, regional and inter-regional levels. This diversity has also been played out at specific times in the international promotion of Italian design, giving rise to conflicting visions and interpretations of its identity. Thus, while the so-called Italian Line from the 1950s predominantly implied modern industrial design created in Milan and produced by companies in the north-western regions, the spread of design culture and awareness in various production districts, especially after the 1980s, led to other regions and even to single cities, claiming the distinctiveness of their own traditions and contributions as champions of Italian design.[4]

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, moreover, the identities of Nordic design and Italian design were contested, renegotiated and transformed multiple times. Following the 1950s, Italy and the Nordic countries entered international markets and responded to the new consumer society. Rapid industrialisation was soon followed by setbacks and crises. Economic, social and political agendas changed and transformed the focus and conditions of design and designers. As a critique of consumerism began to mature in society and also in the design community, and awareness of the social and environmental responsibilities of design matured, new areas of design took hold, including the birth of luxury brands out of craft traditions.

In 1972, when the architect and curator Emilio Ambasz presented the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he argued that the "achievements and problems" of Italian design offered a micro-model of the broader condition of contemporary design. This model, however, was loaded with contradictions. While in Italy the 1960s and 1970s marked the consolidation of the design profession in a wide range of sectors, the same period was also characterised by the rise of opposing pro- and anti-design attitudes, with the latter receiving the most media attention both in Italy and internationally. New approaches emerged that looked to the world of youth and protest movements, demystified the role of the designer and of industry, or conversely exasperated the conditions of the industrial system to liberate new behaviours and lifestyles. In the end, the radical aspirations and experiments of this period ultimately failed to transform the structural conditions of society and production. However, their break with the principles of modernism, rationalism and functionalism ultimately laid the foundations for the emergence of postmodern, disengaged and hedonistic design practices, as well as for the subsequent stylistic turns of the 1980s and 1990s.

4. Therefore, it is justifiable to perceive Italy as a collection of subnational regions, acknowledging the distinct conditions and production cultures in areas such as Milan, Venice, Florence, and extending to Turin, Parma and Naples.

While Italian anti-design and radical architects took the headlines, the Nordic design communities also met the challenges. The volume *Nordic Design Cultures in Transformation 1960–1980: Revolt and Resilience* has shown how design discourses, institutions and practices in the Nordic countries changed radically around 1970 (Fallan, Zetterlund and Munch 2023). While Scandinavian Modern was known mostly for its minimalist, elegant utensils and furniture for interior design by celebrated furniture architects, the scope of tasks and interests broadened, embracing other environments as well as social and environmental issues. In the Nordic design histories, this has mostly been read as some kind of decay from the golden years. However, as that book shows, it is precisely in those years of revolt and transformation that some of the most important roots of contemporary Nordic design can be found. Whereas parallel developments and trends can be traced in general terms, the Italian and Nordic design communities also offered diverging responses and even oppositions. Nordic designers tended to distance themselves from the Italian postmodern movements, and their criticism of modernism has been less dismissive. The following trends of neominimalism and supermodernism of the 1990s, however, had strongholds in both Italian and Nordic design (Johnsen 2003; Munch 2025).

In this volume, we seek intersections as well as divergences between Italian and Nordic design cultures through our selection of specific cases across the decades since 1925 and across different design sectors and practices. By mirroring these design cultures, we see how apparent historical similarities might rest on very different conditions in industry and society, but also how broad scopes of culture and historical trajectories might show other possibilities for comparison. We aim to show how the historical and contemporary transitions of design cultures have translated, transformed and transgressed stereotypes of identity, not only national identities, but also professional, institutional and other cultural identities of design. We track these transitions by searching broad aspects of design cultures, across industrial design, fashion, jewellery, glassware, graphic design, furniture, playgrounds and architecture, as well as activities like exhibitions, festivals and other kinds of cultural promotions and events.

Translating, Transforming, Transgressing Design Cultures

This book is structured in three sections that revolve around verbs characterised by the prefix *trans-*, which evokes motion and negotiation, suggesting acts of mediation, influence and infiltration that traverse boundaries. The notion of *trans-* provides a conceptual framework through which design cultures are understood as dynamic fields of ideas, artefacts, practices and people, constantly moving between geographical, cultural, temporal, disciplinary and professional contexts, acting as agents of exchange, resistance and critique. From this perspective, Italian and Nordic design cultures are conceived as evolving terrains shaped by processes of *translation*, *transformation* and *transgression*. These three trajectories offer complementary yet interconnected perspectives on design cultures as living systems of interaction, dialogue and renewal.

The first section, "Translating Design Cultures", presents both transnational cases of design transfer and mediation and comparative analyses of specific fields of design production during the second half of the 20th century. The introduction, display and promotion of ideas, approaches and styles from one context to another—whether from north to south or vice versa, and addressing either professional or general audiences—has often relied on, or reinforced, stereotypical views of the foreign counterpart. Sweeping conceptions of design tend either to assume similarities between countries due to international trends or, conversely, profound disparity due to divergent mentalities or centuries-old traditions and legacies. Deliberate attempts to translate design culture across geographical and societal distance thus often oscillate between these assumptions, resulting in the exoticisation of the "other" and even in self-exoticisation—when one performs to align with the other's expectations, or supposed expectations (Kahla 1998; Munch 2017). Going beyond prejudices and stereotypes, however, translations and appropriations from one cultural context to another—deliberate or not—can also be productive and add new layers of meaning. As

Kjetil Fallan has noted, "[i]n design culture, too, objects and ideas are subject to […] processes of translation, where resources are mobilized and interests aligned in the construction of cultural meaning" (2023, 292). This remark is stated in his epilogue to the recent volume *Nordic Design in Translation*, edited by Charlotte Ashby and Shona Kallestrup (2023), unfolding the theme of cultural translation in a very broad historical perspective. The chapters by Fallan and Astrid Skjerven in the first part of our book look into specific stories of design mediation and transfer, focusing respectively on the reception of Nordic industrial design in the Italian design magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, and on the Nordic reception of Italian postmodern design through an exhibition of the Memphis group in Oslo in 1985. The contributions by Alba Cappellieri and Beatrice Rossato and by Joachim Allouche compare and discuss the structural and cultural convergences and differences of Italian and Nordic design and production within the fields of jewellery and glassware respectively. Together, these contributions enhance an understanding of design that challenges simplistic notions of fixed identities.

The second section, "Transforming Design Cultures", focuses on issues of cultural positioning and change—either strategic or incremental—based on negotiations between tradition and modernity, local and global dynamics, tangible and intangible contexts and heritage, and between the implied design ideals and logics. Spanning the 20th and 21st centuries, the varied case studies collected in this part of the book—comparative, transnational, regional and national—illuminate how design identities can be reformulated through intimate exchanges with materials, technologies and skills, as well as through discourse and communication aimed at engaging specific networks and audiences. In their chapters, Anders V. Munch and Toke Riis Ebbesen examine design and culture as both material and ideological phenomena, investigating respectively how a Nordic culture of lighting was transformed, through architectural discourse and design, by the advent of electrical light, and how a specific marble was used in the functionalist design of a Danish town hall to challenge ideas of monumentality and to mediate between local modernism and international architectural languages. Focusing on the contemporary, Rita Marcangelo compares Italian and Nordic jewellery and discusses this as a key area of experimentation and cross-disciplinary reflection on crucial issues of globalised societies, from sustainability to cultural belonging. The processes and effects of globalisation are also focused on by Niels Peter Skou, who demonstrates how Nordic furniture is repeatedly promoted through natural imaginaries employed in the heydays of Scandinavian Design, however detached from any specific location and despite considerable changes in the design industry.

The third section, "Transgressing Design Cultures", turns from processes of transformation to acts of transgression—moments when designers, institutions and communities question the limits of their own disciplines and challenge the conventions of what design is or can be. Here, transgression implies critical expansion: a crossing of boundaries that can redefine the field's professional, social, political and cultural scope. The avant-garde and progressive ethos inherent in modern design—as a discipline that seeks not merely to adapt to social change but to provoke and shape it—has re-emerged repeatedly in different contexts throughout the 20th century, and again in the new millennium. Alterations may be urged by rapid economic development or by impending crises, with designers compelled to transcend conventional thinking or outmoded traditions and to seek new solutions and pathways. Design thus acts as a form of transgression both to expand its impact and to achieve greater coherence (Munch 2024). However, radical attempts to change practices, meanings and conditions can also put design and designer cultures under scrutiny, as their institutions, networks and models are contested, redefined and renegotiated. In this section, three national cases and a transnational case explore design as a practice of critical agency, capable of both revealing and reshaping the structures it inhabits. Focusing on Italy and the years between the 1960s and the 1980s when design culture was marked by a perceived professional identity crisis, Maddalena Dalla Mura and Elena Fava examine respectively the trajectory

of an art director who questioned the notion of graphic design's "public utility", and the radical convergence of fashion and industrial design in Archizoom's project *Dressing Design*, aimed at a critique of established production-consumption relationships. Remaining in Italy during the same period but adopting a transnational perspective, Denise Hagströmer analyses the concept and display of the co-Nordic exhibit at the 1973 Milan Triennale, revealing how its political agenda resonated across both Nordic and Italian design cultures. Finally, Annette Svaneklink Jakobsen brings transgression into the present, analysing a local community project in Denmark as a participatory reassembly of local heritage and collective agency that reconfigures the roles of designer, institution and citizen.

The studies collected in this publication contribute to evidence that translation, transformation and transgression are not only historical and structural conditions but also methodological stances that require changing perspectives through which design history and culture themselves are analysed and written.

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Translating Design Cultures

La Linea Nordica: Reading Nordic Design in the Italian Design Press in the 1950s and 1960s

Kjetil Fallan

Abstract

Both Nordic and Italian design experienced a remarkable surge in international recognition in the mid-20th century. There is by now a considerable amount of scholarship—ranging from the hagiographic to the critical—devoted to these cultural export adventures. But scant attention has hitherto been given to the relations developed in this period between the two "success stories". This chapter contributes to such a new direction of inquiry by studying how Nordic design was perceived in Italy at the time. Arguably, the international recognition of Nordic design peaked earlier than its Italian counterpart. Having enjoyed remarkable acclaim throughout the 1950s, Nordic design is often portrayed as gradually losing its appeal as the subsequent decade unfolded. Italian design culture, however, retained its lustre and avant-garde reputation throughout the 1960s. This staggered, partially overlapping timeline raises the question of if, and how, the Italian perception of Nordic design changed with these shifting fortunes of the two design cultures. The chapter probes this question through a close reading of how *la linea nordica* was presented in the Italian design press during the period. The study is based primarily on Italy's first magazine devoted entirely to industrial design, *Stile Industria* (1954–1963), supplemented for the subsequent period by the architectural magazine *Domus* (1928–), which also covered design—albeit in a different way.

Introduction

Both Nordic and Italian design experienced a remarkable surge in international recognition in the mid-20th century.[1] There is by now a considerable amount of scholarship—ranging from the hagiographic to the critical—devoted to these cultural export adventures. But scant attention has hitherto been given to the relations developed in this period between the two "success stories" (see Dellapiana 2022, 219–35, for a rare exception). This chapter contributes to such a new direction of inquiry by studying how Nordic design was perceived in Italy at the time. Arguably, the international recognition of Nordic design peaked earlier than its Italian counterpart. Having enjoyed remarkable acclaim throughout the 1950s, Nordic design is often portrayed as gradually losing its appeal as the subsequent decade unfolded (Hansen 2018). Italian design culture, however, retained its lustre and avant-garde reputation throughout the 1960s and culminated in the *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1972. This staggered, partially overlapping timeline raises the question of whether, and how, the Italian perception of Nordic design changed with these shifting fortunes of the two design cultures. The chapter probes this question through a close reading of how *la linea nordica* was presented in the Italian design press during the period, focusing on the influential magazines *Stile Industria* and *Domus*.

Italy's first magazine devoted to industrial design, *Stile Industria*, was launched in 1954. It was the brainchild of the young architect and designer Alberto Rosselli, who since 1949 had edited a column on industrial design in the architectural magazine *Domus*, founded and edited by his professional partner and father-

1. For consistency, I use the term "Nordic" throughout this text. In the mid-20th century (and later), Nordic design often sailed under the banner of "Scandinavian design". Both in popular and scholarly contexts, these denominations have become deeply entangled (Fallan 2012, 2–4).

in-law, Gio Ponti. Forty-one issues of *Stile Industria* were published before it folded in 1963: initially at quarterly intervals, then bimonthly. The new magazine quickly became a prime arena for debate in the consolidating industrial design community, and an important mediating channel employing an impressive group of Italian design professionals (Fallan 2013). An essential function of *Stile Industria* was to inform the Italian design community about the most important ideas, events and developments from hubs and hotbeds across the world. This is a particularly salient aspect given its period of publication, 1954 to 1963, which corresponds to an era of intense international exchanges in a field that was only now approaching maturity as a practice and a profession both in Italy and elsewhere. International networks and exchanges were therefore in everyone's interest as a way to share news and experiences, and magazines formed an important venue in this respect. Already from the beginning, then, *Stile Industria* featured a variety of international reports, reviews and contributions—both from the Nordic countries and elsewhere (Fallan 2022).



Fig. 1. Front cover of *Stile Industria*'s October 1954 issue devoted to the X Triennale di Milano. Cover design by Bruno Munari (Image courtesy of Paolo Rosselli)

Design as a Civilising Force

The Triennali di Milano of the 1950s became an important showcase for Nordic design in Italy (and beyond). Denmark, Finland and Sweden already made a splash at the IX Triennale in 1951. On the next occasion, in 1954, *Domus* editor Gio Ponti stated that "the Scandinavian countries are the true interpreters of the Triennale" (Ponti 1954, 18) and described Norway's debut as "this year's revelation" (Ponti 1955, 2). The significance of the Triennali is also reflected in the Italian design press, whose coverage of Nordic design was greatly influenced by what was shown at these events. This meant that the image of Nordic design presented in the press largely mirrored the highly "curated" portrayal of the region's design culture exhibited at the Palazzo dell'Arte (Fallan 2014). *Domus*'s feature on the Nordic contributions to the X Triennale is a case in point (Ponti 1954). Interestingly, though, the same coordinated Nordic national exhibitions in 1954 were not mentioned in *Stile Industria*—nor were any of the many other national exhibitions. This does not mean that Nordic design was not featured, but the newly established magazine was more preoccupied with exploring and promoting the practices and processes of industrial design, including its value to Italian industry, than it was in celebrating design's role in the cultural diplomacy of international events. Rather than its various national exhibitions, then, *Stile Industria*'s coverage of the X Triennale focused on its exhibition dedicated entirely and explicitly to industrial design (as opposed to the broader conception of design characterising the rest of the Triennale, including the national exhibitions) (Figs. 1–2). Of course, this prioritisation can also be explained by the fact that this show was curated by Alberto Rosselli, in collaboration with other prominent designers, including Marcello Nizzoli, Roberto Menghi and Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni (Triennale di Milano, 1954, 129). Presenting the ideas behind the show in *Stile Industria*, Rosselli proclaimed that it featured "almost all the European countries most representative in this field of design" and included both Denmark and Sweden in his list of examples alongside Britain, Germany, France, Switzer-



"Industrial Design" alla X Triennale

Con questa Triennale l'«industrial design» è giunto in Italia attraverso gli esempi di molte produzioni, una vasta documentazione ordinata in una mostra suggestiva. Sono presenti quasi tutti i paesi europei più rappresentativi in questo campo del disegno (Inghilterra, Danimarca, Svizzera, Germania, Francia, Olanda e Svezia) e, assieme a questi, gli Stati Uniti, che hanno la più lunga esperienza di disegno, ed il Canadà che si sta avviando verso una importante produzione.

L'accostamento di prodotti di ogni categoria industriale fornisce un ambiente di forme eccezionali, di una eccezione che significa soprattutto perfezione di tecnica e di disegno, originalità e fantasia, ben collegate però alla funzionalità dell'oggetto; tutto quanto rappresenta una reazione al brutto ed all'anonimo di molte produzioni. Si stabilisce così felicemente un rapporto fra gli oggetti, sulla linea di una comune concezione di disegno e appare possibile un confronto fra procedimenti tecnici, fra sensibilità diverse di artisti, fra valori di forma e di gusto che trovano origine nella storia e nel costume di ogni paese e danno il senso di una civiltà.

Si è voluto, in questa mostra, far risaltare quei particolari della forma di ogni oggetto (al di là del risultato in se stesso) che chiariscono il procedimento del disegno e possono essere intesi come valori costanti nella ricerca della giusta forma di un oggetto; rapporti tra forma e funzione, tra forma e meccanismo, tra forma e metodo di fabbricazione, tra forma e mercato.

Questa analisi richiama l'attenzione del pubblico sui particolari più significativi del disegno di molti prodotti: in un telefono è sottolineato l'interesse di alcuni particolari funzionali che sono anche motivo di un perfezionamento di disegno; in una maniglia, lo studio di una migliore presa dalla mano che dà una nuova caratteristica alla forma; in una tazza in materia plastica, la forma del manico e la perfetta inseribilità dei pezzi costituiscono il motivo di una ricerca collegata ai nuovi materiali; in un lavabo la forma nuova deriva dal superamento dei concetti tradizionali e dall'analisi delle dimensioni e della natura del materiale.

Dati come questi suggeriti dagli oggetti esposti rappresentano la più chiara ed efficace conferma che lo sviluppo della forma è assieme sviluppo di una sostanza tecnica e funzionale, e che al di fuori di questo principio non è possibile raggiungere quel risultato estetico che ci si propone.

La mostra si rivolge al pubblico, agli industriali, ai tecnici, agli artisti, e per ognuna di queste categorie dovrebbe essere ugualmente ricca di insegnamento. Al pubblico generico sarà apparsa intuitiva la bellezza di questi prodotti industriali ed evidente la possibilità di una scelta sempre maggiore che oggi gli è concessa fra oggetti di una pari perfezione tecnica, ma di forma differente; per gli industriali, questa scelta serve come indicazione del nuovo indirizzo di produzione che porta a far coincidere l'interesse di una tecnica progredita con quello di un disegno perfetto, i valori di una quantità con quelli di una qualità; i tecnici e gli artisti, infine, comprenderanno come la bellezza di un prodotto non sia il risultato a volte di una capacità tecnica, a volte di una capacità artistica, ma costantemente di un giusto e felice rapporto fra tecnica ed arte, fra funzionalità e fantasia.

red.

Fig. 2. Opening page of *Stile Industria*'s feature on the X Triennale's *Mostra internazionale dell'industrial design*, October 1954 (Image courtesy of Paolo Rosselli)

land and the Netherlands. What distinguished the accomplishments of these countries' production, he argued, was not only felicitous relations between form, function, manufacturing and market, but also that they emerge from "values of form and taste originating from the history and customs of each country to form a sense of culture" (Rosselli 1954, 2). From today's vantage point, this remark may smack of essentialism—exoticisation, even—but it most certainly reflected a genuine interest in, and respect for, Nordic design culture. The handful of photos accompanying the article highlighted several of the many Nordic products featured in the show, including Erik Herløw's melamine bread baskets for Dansk Bakelit Industri and his spiral hand press for J. Samson, as well as Jens Quistgaard's Anker-line cast-iron cookware for De Forenede Jernstøberier.

Nordic products shown at the X Triennale appeared in *Stile Industria*, also in content not related to the exhibition. For instance, Quistgaard's Anker-line cookware subsequently headlined an article about the evolution of design of traditional object categories, alongside other Nordic examples, including stainless steel ware by Magnus Stephensen, Åge Helbig Hansen and Sigurd Persson for Georg Jensen, Dansk Forsølvningsanstalt and Silver & Stål respectively. As this type of light industry, in which new technological advances intertwined with established artisanal practices, was prevalent both in the Nordic countries and in Italy, *Stile Industria* saw with great interest the achievements of their Nordic brethren specifically in this field: "Observing these examples of Danish production and considering the high level of their design, one immediately asks oneself if they represent the fruits of a civilisation in which cultural and traditional terms are perfectly conciliated with new factors of industrial manufacturing" ("Evoluzione di oggetti tradizionale" 1955, 19–25). Another article, by Carlo Santi, on new advances in cutlery design highlighted Erik Herløw's stainless steel flatware *Obelisk* for Universal Steel Co. as the epitome of technical finesse and aesthetic lightness, "corresponding to a humane utility" (Santi 1954, 18–19). This piece also showed cutlery by Jens Quistgaard (Fjord), Sigurd Persson (Servus) and Grete Prytz & Arne Korsmo (Korsmo)—all of which were award-winning contributions to the X Triennale (Fig. 3).

The attention bestowed on Nordic design in Italy both during and in the wake of the X Triennale may partly explain why *Stile Industria* sent an envoy to Helsingborg the following year to report from the *H55* exhibition and why the Swedish show was seen as a direct parallel to the Triennale. Somewhat curiously described as "the first exhibition of Scandinavian art", *H55* served to further consolidate the Italian appreciation for the region's design culture. According to the magazine's critic, the event virtually radiated with "a natural and very powerful equilibrium between objects on display and production, between public and exhibition", to the extent that it "certainly gave the impression of an order and of principles accepted by all, factors of a civilisation already accomplished" (Anon. 1955b, 4). Importantly, though, this perceived cultural achievement and harmony never regressed into essentialism or seclusion, they argued. On the contrary, *H55*, appropriately set in "the particular climate of a port city on the border of different lands", provided "an environment where the forces and interests of the Scandinavian countries and Europe can coalesce" ("Helsingborg 55" 1955, 4). One expression of this encounter in personified form can be seen when *Stile Industria* later featured a substantial presentation of Stig Lindberg's work for Gustavsberg: "His work was already in part known to us… through the last Triennali; but the *H55* exhibition, which we visited last summer in Helsingborg, introduced many of his beautiful new creations, which we have gathered on these pages" ("Ceramica di Stig Lindberg" 1956, 4). Centred on the *Terma* cookware and *Spisa* tableware ranges, the presentation also emphasised that his various tasks at the company included designing packaging, wrapping paper and marketing material. The key argument was not only to showcase the pervasive role design played in the company, but also how its design strategies and practices were both premised on and actively shaping everyday life and rapidly changing domestic cultures.

Internationalise to Professionalise

The working methods of designers and the organisation of design processes were a recurring



Fig. 3. A page from Carlo Santi's article on new advances in cutlery design showing recent models designed by Gio Ponti, Jens Quistgaard, Georg Nilsson and Sigurd Persson in *Stile Industria*, October 1954 (Image courtesy of Paolo Rosselli)

topic in *Stile Industria*. This trait can, at least in part, be ascribed to Rosselli's other roles, as a practising designer and educator of future designers. Also, as part of his tireless efforts to inform Italian design discourse through dialogue with international colleagues, the magazine regularly featured surveys where prominent professionals from across Europe and North America responded to issues raised by the editors (Fallan 2022). Combining these two efforts, one of the first surveys, conducted in 1955, requested reflections on design methods and collaboration with industry, publishing responses from four designers: the Swede Sigurd Persson, the American Peter Müller-Munk, the Dane Erik Herløw and the Italian Marcello Nizzoli. The fact that two of the four were Nordic is rather remarkable, but it reflects the magazine's keen attention to Nordic design in general. As industrially manufactured objects everywhere largely rely on the same production systems and are intended for uses which are relatively universal, Rosselli believed that industrial design lent itself more to international collaboration in terms of methods and principles than did artisanal products or architecture, which he described as intrinsically more regional in nature (Rosselli 1955b, 1). Persson took a slightly different view on this issue. He maintained that the problems to be solved by design will *not* be the same everywhere, citing as an example the highly diverging conditions of life in so-called "developing countries" and "developed countries". It follows, he argued, that "industrial design can not be given the same expression all over the world" (Persson 1955, 2). Müller-Munk assumed an intermediate position, acknowledging that industrial design is indeed an international phenomenon whose challenges to a certain degree require international approaches. At the same time, however, he hesitated to portray the US conception of industrial design as a model for other cultural contexts, putting him more in line with Persson's call for a socially and culturally attuned design practice (Müller-Munk 1955, 3). Rosselli remained convinced, however, that international conversations, collaborations and exchanges were essential to cultivating and consolidating the still emerging practice of industrial design in Italy—a process in which the Nordic region was a crucial reference. A 1957 presentation of the work of the Nordic region's first proper industrial design consultancy, Bernadotte & Bjørn (Fig. 4), argued that the "certain resistance to specialization" which characterised their "varied and versatile work" represented a sympathetic equilibrium between standardisation and eclecticism, held in check by a strong sense of culture and artistic individuality: "The intermediate position between the demiurgy of the do-it-all architect, common in countries where industrial design is still not widespread, and the excessive specialisation of the designer engaged by those who produce only one kind of object, can still make a significant statement, if not in terms of efficiency, then at least in terms of taste and culture" ("Rassegna della produzione" 1957, 20).

As a practice, industrial design is profoundly influenced by international regulations on manufacturing and trade. In the wake of the Marshall Plan and the establishing of the OEEC (Organization for European Economic Cooperation, est. 1948), and with the imminent founding of the EEC (European Economic Community, est. 1957) and EFTA (European Free Trade Association, est. 1960), the manufacturing industries of (Western) European countries found themselves in the midst of a complete transformation of trade conditions and market situations. Domestic markets were no longer protected by import tariffs, but the same mechanisms also entailed entirely new opportunities in terms of exports. According to Rosselli, this ongoing internationalisation of trade meant that manufacturers had to rethink their product development and design strategies, abandoning the "politics of isolation" in favour of practices and processes better calibrated for international markets: "The levelling of the principles of production is not a result of the progressive attitude of a few major industries alone, but the inevitable phenomenon of a production which today can not survive on its own without an intimate relation of knowledge and consequence with the outside world" (Rosselli 1955c, 1). Reflecting further on the possibilities of Italy's ongoing professionalisation of industrial design, Rosselli referred to design's high degree of integration in US industry with admiration, but at the same time point-

Rassegna della produzione

Sigvard Bernadotte (nella foto a destra) e Acton Bjorn, di cui pubblichiamo alcune opere in queste pagine, sono titolari a Copenhagen di un'agenzia la cui consulenza si estende a numerose industrie della Svezia e della Danimarca. La loro opera varia e duttile alle diverse esigenze, al punto di sfiorare l'eclettismo, rappresenta validamente quella posizione tipicamente europea dell'*independent designer* che conserva un'individualità artistica anche nelle forme esteriori dell'esercizio professionale, sottraendosi all'inquadramento nei ruoli di un'industria. Sebbene quest'ultimo destino debba divenire fatalmente il più comune (essi stessi lo auspicano in uno scritto che ci hanno recentemento inviato) e ciò appaia, in definitiva, augurabile a chi metta in primo piano i problemi produttivi, non possiamo vietarci di considerare con simpatia anche una certa salutare resistenza alla specializzazione che, quando sia sorretta da sufficiente cultura e individualità, è un atteggiamento utile e interessante. La posizione intermedia fra il demiurgismo dell'architetto tutto-fare, caratteristico dei paesi in cui il design è ancora poco diffuso, e la specializzazione eccessiva del designer ingaggiato nei ruoli di chi produce un solo tipo di oggetti, è ancora suscettibile di dire una parola significativa, se non sul piano dell'efficienza, almeno su quello del gusto e della cultura.











Sopra, dall'alto: Calcolatrice elettrica in acciaio stampato con dettagli in plastica. Particolarmente curato il disegno dei tasti, diversi a seconda della posizione del dito cui sono destinati, prod. Aktiebolaget Atvidabergs Industrier, Stoccolma. Bruciatore per piccoli impianti di riscaldamento a nafta, prod. A.B. Hugo Tillquist Oljeeldning, Stoccolma. A sinistra, stufa a carbone in ghisa fusa e smaltata in grigio. Prod. N.A. Christensen e Co., Nikobing Mors (Danimarca).

Hand-operated electric computor in pressed steel. The keys are specially designed to suit different fingers. Made by Aktiebolaget Atvidabergs Industrier, Stockholm; small central heating system fuel oil burner. Made by A. B. Hugo Tillquist Oljeeldning, Stockholm. Left, cast iron coal stove gray enameled. Made by N. A. Christensen & Co. Nikobing Mors (Denmark).

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Fig. 4. Opening page of *Stile Industria*'s presentation (February 1957) of the work of the Nordic region's first proper industrial design consultancy, Bernadotte & Bjørn (Image courtesy of Paolo Rosselli)

ed out that, on its own, this feature is limiting and to avoid a perception of design as "industrial fashion" requires a relation to "'culture' understood as a tradition of design, way of life, and aesthetic and sensibility and balance"—a relation he seemed to find more prominent expressions of in Nordic design (Rosselli 1955a).

Fraternise to Modernise

For the XI Triennale in 1957, Rosselli once again took part in curating the *Mostra internazionale dell'industrial design* (International Exhibition of Industrial Design), this time alongside Gillo Dorfles, Marco Zanuso, Leonardo Ricci and Angelo Tito Anselmi. The objects displayed at the exhibition were selected from the previous three years' production, based on the criterion that they should, in the best possible way, illustrate and evaluate the international situation. The curators' main preoccupation was the cultural and organisational context in which the designer worked—how industrial design was influenced by cultural surroundings and restrictions in production methods. The organising committee also sought to emphasise the different approaches to projects, the environmental and functional motivations that determined the market demand, and the different education of designers (Pansera 1993, 152). Design was now approaching a more mature phase, they argued, and a design exhibition therefore needed to be correspondingly more sophisticated. Rather than showcasing objects as forms or focusing on the careers of successful designers, the ambition was to provide an analysis of the working methods of designers—an ambition only partially fulfilled due to insufficiently precise briefs for the contributors (Anselmi 1957). Nordic designers were generously featured at the *Mostra internazionale dell'industrial design*, including many figures who were already well-known to readers of the Italian design press, such as Erik Herløw, Bernadotte & Bjørn, Jens Quistgaard, Kaj Franck, Sigurd Persson, Stig Lindberg, Tapio Wirkkala and Arne Jacobsen—in addition to less familiar names such as Per Heribertson (street lighting for Electroscandia), Åke Strömdahl (plastic containers for Polva), and Folke Arström (cutlery for Gense) (Triennale di Milano 1957, 135–45). So even if *Stile Industria*'s coverage of the Triennale once again paid scant attention to the national pavilions and focused instead on the international industrial design exhibition, Nordic design was prominently featured and consistently portrayed in generous ways.

The foreign participation at the XI Triennale rose to 19 countries from three continents, including for the first time several Eastern European countries and Japan. The participating countries were Spain, Switzerland, the USA, Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, Romania, Germany, Yugoslavia, Japan, Belgium, Austria, France, Norway and Mexico. This representation confirmed the Triennale's position as the world's most important exhibition of industrial design. In light of the broad participation, especially from Europe, and the recent signing of the Treaty of Rome, Alberto Rosselli pronounced it the "European Triennale". It was now impossible, he asserted, to assess what used to be a manifestation of Italian design and disregard the intimate relation it had developed with that of other countries. Even though, as he claimed, not all national or regional design cultures could be as thoroughly characterised by individual creativity as that of the Nordic region, design and production would always to a certain extent be coloured by its economic, technical, social, and cultural contexts *and* its interaction with the outside world: "Only formalism is today truly international" (Rosselli 1957). Reflecting on the international participation, Angelo Tito Anselmi commented on the immense difference between industrial design in the USA and in the Nordic countries: "Figures such as Kaj Franck, who designs glass and ceramics […] in limited series, and works with a couple of collaborators for a small Finnish company, [appear] extremely far from the climate of American studios in which tens of designers work on variations of minimum cost on the same object to be produced in hundreds of thousands of copies" (Anselmi 1957, 4). (Franck was awarded that year's Gran Premio Internazionale Compasso d'Oro; the next edition of the award went to Den Permanente, Copenhagen.) Once again, the different types of relations between design and industry were debated. It had been an important issue at

the X Triennale's international congress of industrial design (Fallan 2013, 265–67) and kept resurfacing whenever the working methods and conditions of design practice in Italy were thematised. Anselmi portrayed Italian design as perched between the two extremes represented by the US and the Nordics, where its "mind" might be foreseeing a future more like the US experience, but where its "heart" lay closer to the Nordic one. This is also confirmed by Rosselli's report from Expo 58 in Brussels, where he yet again emphasised the harmonic balance between the artisanal and the industrial to explain why Nordic design culture was so in tune with the countries' traditions (Rosselli 1958). In a subsequent discussion on the prospect of national design cultures, he juxtaposed Italy and the Nordic region as both having strong artisanal traditions with considerable creative potential, and therefore now facing the same challenges: "to manage an evolution from crafts to industry while keeping intact the principles derived from a particular culture" (Rosselli 1959, 1). These debates illustrate how these Italian missionaries of industrial design struggled with the issue of "intermediate" industrialisation, and how they often looked to the Nordic countries in this context. They admired Nordic design for its simplicity and honest use of materials, but the attempts to adopt its characteristic organic forms into Italian design were one of the experiments that caused critics to scream *neoliberty* when the occasion arose (Fallan 2009).

The Tide Turns

Whereas the Triennali of 1954 and 1957 were considered highly successful, the XII Triennale in 1960 stirred some significant criticism: "While the industrially most advanced countries, like the US, Germany, France, and Japan exhibit almost exclusively forms of industrial production, and the Nordic countries confirm the development of their thinking and their work in relation to the times, Italy seems intent to abandon the recent tradition of industrial design" (Rosselli 1960, 2). And while both the previous editions had featured a *Mostra internazionale dell'industrial design*, with Rosselli amongst the curators on both occasions, the XII Triennale did not—prioritising instead activities related to the general theme of the house and the school (*La casa e la scuola*). Unsurprisingly, *Stile Industria* considered this to be a decisive step in the wrong direction—and it might also explain why the magazine this time around, unlike in 1954 and 1957, *did* cover the national exhibitions, perhaps in search of conciliation or corroboration. The Norwegian, Danish, Swedish and Finnish sections were located side by side (as they had also been at the X Triennale), occupying about a quarter of the ground floor of the Palazzo dell'Arte, giving the Nordic presence a sense of joint force.

There is an intriguing ambivalence to *Stile Industria*'s presentation of the Nordic exhibitions and their treatment of industrial design. The case of Finland is telling in this regard:

> Liberating itself from the limits of the theme [the house and the school], Finland has followed the tradition from previous Triennali and prepared an exhibition centered around the work of her best artist-designers: Products of great quality, but not of wide distribution. Tapio Wirkkala, Ruth Brick [sic], Ulla Procope and others are represented with objects which might seem to be on the level of handicrafts. But these are in fact prototypes that will define the output of national glass and ceramic industries. And if more complex objects and equipment are absent, these would be found within the industrial structures of Finland, which does not possess mechanical industry of any great significance (Rosselli 1960, 7).

These remarks are curious in many respects. Firstly, the judgment passed on the Finnish mechanical industry seems either overly harsh or outright ignorant, considering the success of Asko and UPO home appliances, Sisu trucks, Valtra tractors, Fiskars tools, Oras faucets, Salora home electronics, Kone elevators, a major shipbuilding industry, etc. And at this very time, this sector of Finnish industry was profoundly refining and professionalising its approach to design (Korvenmaa 2014, 220–42). Secondly, why—or where—should we expect to find "more complex objects and equipment" in "the industrial structures of Finland" if her mechanical industry was so insignificant? Moreover, the claim that the exhibited objects only resembled handicraft but were in fact "prototypes" for industrial production seems dubious. If anything, this old notion of "art in industry", which had charac-

terised the Nordic applied art movement from the early 20th century on, was now crumbling, crushed between the consolidation of industrial design as a distinct practice on the one side and the beginning reorientation of handicrafts toward the realm of art on the other (Fallan 2017, 135–52). Rosselli thus appears to be grasping at straws here, so unwilling to criticise a design culture he had developed a profound fondness and respect for, that he would look for any explanation, no matter how implausible, to make it fit his conception of good industrial design.

Intriguingly, Rosselli was less apologetic about the Swedish section: "Sweden, too, was unable to show at the Triennale examples of industrial design which move beyond the most basic equipment for the house, flatware, glassware, ceramics. Her exhibition is not representative of any real standard of production, but rather of a particular mode of understanding the limits (or maybe self-limitation?) for participation in the Triennale" (Rosselli 1960, 10). So, unlike Finland, Sweden got no free pass for leaving industrial design at home, but was criticised for being overly conservative when interpreting the remit of the institution. Whereas Sweden failed for what was missing, Rosselli's critique of the Danish section focused on what was present—a present that he now deemed to be stuck in the past: "Denmark's exhibition design and most of the objects shown provoke the doubt that the current of Danish design may have exhausted its emotional capacity. A sense of coldness and uniformity is the price to pay for an exhibition which purports to be serious, but ends up being severe" (Rosselli 1960, 11). Danish and Nordic design were in danger of becoming a victim of their own success, Rosselli argued. An examination of the individual objects confirmed "the all-Nordic capacity for excellent finishes and unassumingly designed details, and for ennobling materials, such as plastics, which elsewhere are treated very vulgarly. The extraordinary coherence of the exhibited work undoubtedly represents a guarantee of qualitative seriousness and a force, even if not anymore, as in previous years, a force of avant-gardism" (Rosselli 1960, 11).

However, *Stile Industria* reserved the shortest shrift for Norway (Fig. 5): "Based completely on artisanal products (maybe not artisanal in terms of production numbers, but certainly in terms of design criteria), the Norwegian exhibition was immersed in a cobalt ambience, which gave the impression of a freshness which in reality was non-existent" (Rosselli 1960, 13). The Norwegian section at the XI Triennale had featured plenty of non-artisanal objects, largely due to it having been organised by the Norwegian Group of Industrial Designers (ID, Norsk gruppe for industriell formgivning [ID-gruppen], est. 1955). For the XII Triennale, however, the National Federation of Norwegian Applied Art reassumed that responsibility—and it showed. As I have described elsewhere: "Gone were the washing machine, the kitchen stove, the refrigerator, the water heater, the cash registers, and the calculating machine shown at the XI Triennale. At the XII Triennale, Norway once again appeared as the epitome of the old Paulssonian idea of more beautiful everyday goods (*vackrare vardagsvara*)" (Fallan 2014, 15–16).

Industrious, Not Crafty

Stile Industria's review of the Nordic countries' sections at the XII Triennale in 1960 represents a marked shift in the magazine's perception of Nordic design culture. What up until this point had amounted to sheer reverence, bordering on idolisation, had now transmuted into a far more critical appraisal, where the lingering preoccupation with artisanal approaches and obsession over formal details and material treatment was increasingly perceived as regressive rather than progressive. Crucially, though, this critique was aimed at how Nordic design was presented at the Triennale, not necessarily at Nordic design per se. This perspective should be understood in light of Rosselli's conviction that design had to adapt to the dramatically changing market situation facing European industry now that international free trade was let loose. To him, this new paradigm left no room for traditionalism and aestheticism, but mandated a conception of design focused on innovative technology, efficient manufacturing, and economies of scale (Rosselli 1961). *Stile Industria* was so preoccupied with the impact of European political-economic integration on industrial production and design that they returned to a favourite mode of



Fig. 5. A page from *Stile Industria*'s coverage (October 1960) of the XII Triennale showing the Norwegian section (Image courtesy of Paolo Rosselli)

inquiry to gather intelligence on the issue: the international survey. Responses from industrial managers and designers across Europe were published across two issues (December 1961 and February 1962). In contrast to the 1955 survey on working methods and collaboration with industry, this time only a small fraction of the respondents, 3 of 19, were Nordic. None of them were designers, they were all company managers: Johan Beyer of Orrefors Glassworks, Runar Hernberg of Villayhtymä Oy wool mill and Arthur Hald of Gustavsberg. All three insisted that national characteristics in design would remain equally important, if not more so, in the new world order of international free-trade (Beyer 1961, 9; Hernberg 1961, 2–3). Their view on this matter might have been coloured by the fact that they all represented the traditional home goods sector, where a product's or a brand's identity is arguably more dependent on its national origin than in the realm of consumer durables and mechanical industry, which was Rosselli's main interest.

When an international photo exhibition of industrial design was organised in Venice in 1961 on the occasion of ICSID's (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) second congress, it may have worked as something of a surrogate for the absence of a *Mostra internazionale dell'industrial design* at the XII Triennale the previous year, so lamented by Rosselli and his colleagues (Rosselli was one of the main speakers at the congress). If the Nordic presence at the XII Triennale had reverted to artisanal aestheticism, visitors to the Venice show got to see a very different selection of the region's design culture, albeit entirely through the medium of photographs. The exhibition consisted of contributions from 17 national organisations affiliated with ICSID, and featured many Nordic products beyond the stereotypes of "home goods", including machine tools (e.g. a pneumatic drill designed by Rune Zernell for Atlas Copco, reduction gearboxes by John Meilink for ASEA, a planetary mixer by Kaas Claesson for Wodschow & Co), vehicles (the Volvo 122 designed by Jan Wilsgaard, the Saab 95 by Sixten Sason, an electric train by Rune Hasp for the Swedish State Railways, a moped by Björn Karlström for Crescent), precision mechanics (a radiator valve and thermostat designed by Bernadotte & Bjørn for Danfoss), office machines (a control panel designed by Rune Monö for Karlstads Mek. Werkstad, a control table by Carl A. Acking for ASEA, an intercom by Jacob Jensen for Stentor, another intercom by Hugo Lindström for ABN-bolagen), in addition to more conventional product types such as tableware by more familiar designers such as Tias Eckhoff, Stig Lindberg and Sigurd Persson. The exhibition was presented in *Stile Industria* over no fewer than twenty pages (Fig. 6), giving its readers an alternative view of Nordic design to that presented at the most recent Triennale ("La mostra internazionale dell'ICSID" 1961).

Coda: Diverging Design Cultures

When *Stile Industria* folded in 1963, it left a vacuum in the Italian design press.[2] Despite the close relations between *Stile Industria* and *Domus*, the two titles' approaches to design as a subject matter were remarkably distinct. As we have seen, the former dug deep into issues of design processes/methodology, manufacturing technologies, industrial organisation and market structures, and it covered a broad range of design practices, including much "hardcore" industrial design which rarely received attention in design magazines. *Domus*, on the other hand, apparently had no interest in these kinds of practices, nor in the methodological and organisational sides of the design profession, but was chiefly concerned with the formal and aesthetic aspects of design.[3] Moreover, as it was primarily an architectural magazine, it focused on the kind of design most closely related to the *domus* (home): interiors, furniture and home goods.

This changing of the guard is also clearly reflected in the Italian reception of Nordic design. At the same time, both Nordic and Italian de-

2. The title arguably closest to eventually taking its place is *Ottagono*, first published in 1966, but this magazine was founded and funded by a group of Italian furniture companies, so it is hardly a place to look for mediation of Nordic design.

3. In a rare example of comprehensive, explorative design journalism of the kind habitually published in *Stile Industria*, the December 1964 issue of *Domus* included a 16-page feature on the Konstfack College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm (Ponti 1964).



la mostra internazionale dell' icsid

A lato dell'Assemblea ICSID alla Fondazione Cini, è stata allestita una mostra internazionale. Hanno partecipato 17 dei Paesi associati all'ICSID. Le caratteristiche della mostra, realizzata con pannelli fotografici 50x50, erano state fissate da un comitato ristretto presieduto da Pierre Vago. La mostra, mantenuta entro questi schemi, ha offerto l'occasione per un'analisi del disegno fino ad oggi forse mai realizzata: e per questa ragione abbiamo creduto opportuno documentarla quasi integralmente.

macchine utensili



1



2



3

1 Germania *Testina portapezzo per affilatrice, dis. D. Oestreich prod. Franz Kuhlman.*

2 Germania *Pressa idraulica, dis. O. Klose, prod. F.M.A. Pokorny.*

3 Stati Uniti *Tornio, dis. J. M. Little e ass. prod. Clearing division U.S. industries.*

mezzi di trasporto



1



2



3



4



5

1 Stati Uniti *Autovettura Continental, dis. E. Bordinat, prod. Ford Motor Co.*

2 Svezia *Autovettura, dis. J. Wilsgard, prod. Volvo.*

3 Svezia *Autovettura, dis. S. Sason, prod. Saab Aircraft Co.*

4 Giappone *Motociclo "Lilac", dis. I.D.K.A.K. prod. Mazusho Motorcycle Co. Ltd.*

5 Germania *Autobus urbano, dis. K. Flesche, prod. MAN.*

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Fig. 6. Opening page of *Stile Industria*'s representation (October 1961) of the international photo exhibition of industrial design on display in Venice in connection with the 1961 ICSID congress (Image courtesy of Paolo Rosselli)

sign cultures were on the cusp of major transformations in the mid-1960s, also shifting the dynamic between the two. The changing status of the Triennali, too, played into this. The Nordic countries no longer considered it an essential venue for export promotion or design diplomacy. The Norwegian design magazine *Bonytt* concluded that the contributions to the Triennali had probably not been worth the considerable costs and happily waved "good bye Milan" (Remlov 1967). Whereas the Nordics had been copiously represented in 1951, 1954, 1957 and 1960, only Finland returned to Milan for the 1964 edition. Presenting the Finnish section, *Domus* commended its "poetic image" created through showing "rowing boats, sledges, forests, lakes, knives, rifles" ("Alla XIII Triennale" 1964). This exoticisation of everyday life in the rural subarctic would come to dominate Domus' portrayal of Finnish design culture. Anything Finnish, from Timo Sarpaneva's icicle-like glass pieces for Karhula Iittala and Tapio Wirkkala's plastic(!) picnic tableware for the German manufacturer Thomas Porzellanfabrik to Rut Bryk's mono-coloured woven textiles, was given the wilderness treatment ("A Milano, nuovi vetri di Timo Sarpaneva" 1965; "Un servizio in plastica" 1965; "In Lapponia" 1965).

Domus continued to monitor Nordic design, but both the *what*, the *who* and the *how* of the coverage changed significantly in the late 1960s. Shows dedicated to Finnish and Swedish design were amongst the first events when the magazine opened its own exhibition venue in Milan, Centro Domus ("Finlandia al Centro Domus" 1967; Schmidt 1968c). Here, however, as on the magazine's pages, the people and products presented were not the usual suspects of the "golden age" of Nordic design, which now seemed increasingly sedate and passé in the context of an Italian design culture of rapidly rising confidence and "coolness". In their place, *Domus* introduced to an Italian readership a new generation of Nordic (furniture) designers, including Grete Jalk, Verner Panton, Nanna Ditzel, Yrjö Kukkapuro, Mikael Björnstjerna and Jørn Utzon ("Visti a Colonia" 1964; "Dalla Finlandia" 1966; Schmidt 1968a; Schmidt 1968b; "Flash dalla Danimarca" 1968; "Grete ci manda" 1969). In their use of colorful thermoplastics, sculptural fibreglass and modular upholstered furniture, the work of these designers plugged into the emerging Italian "pop-", "anti-", and "radical" design culture in a way that the Nordic office machines, ceramics, flatware, utensils, etc. so avidly discussed in *Stile Industria* never could have.

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“Good Design” in Italian and Nordic Silver Jewellery

Alba Cappellieri and Beatrice Rossato

Abstract

This chapter delves into Italian and Nordic jewellery, intending to draw a comparative parallel between these two rich traditions, focusing on silver jewellery as a best practice. Firstly, the role and characteristics of “good design” are introduced, describing its evolution in the Italian and Nordic design context. This is a seminal step in understanding the historical legacy of both cultures. Secondly, the role of silver as a precious and democratic material and an original key to analysing Nordic and Italian jewellery is presented. As an accessible and versatile material, silver has played a radical role in the production of both jewels and precious objects of the last century. Subsequently, relevant examples in the context of jewellery are presented, moving between natural inspiration, organicism and abstraction, with references to both Italian and Nordic design. Finally, a reflection on contemporaneity and future theoretical developments is proposed. This contribution offers a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances and heritage of two important jewellery traditions considered from the design perspective, fostering future discussion on the meeting point between Italian and Nordic cultures.

Introduction

The evolutions and developments of Italian and Nordic jewellery from the last century to the present day have outlined two rich traditions with strong contemporary resonance. Geographically distant and with different historical legacies, both traditions are told through the system of objects (Baudrillard 1968), the materials, values and functions connected to them, and have been able to define complex and multifaceted cultures. Jewellery has not been exempt from the system of objects, but rather, in its various declinations (Cappellieri 2021), has become a spokesperson for Italian and Nordic design cultures, eventually combining common features and intentions. Despite cultural distances, it emerges as necessary and interesting to draw parallels which, looking at history, can stimulate new hybrid and heterogeneous territories of current research and in-depth analysis between Italian and Nordic cultures, with particular reference to the silver jewellery design creations. The literature widely discusses how these cultures represent the reflection of the broad context of good design (Polster 1999) which crosses the boundaries of national or regional peculiarities and extends from north to south. Indeed, the term *good design* evokes a conceptual complexity that can encompass various interpretations, particularly when contextualised in geographically distant contexts such as those under examination. It is a highly contested term, sometimes used improperly, but which, in its evolution, has promoted strong resonances in the design of objects. In 2019, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMa) proposed an exhibition entitled *The Value of Good Design*, which raised questions about what good design might mean today. This is a particularly timely question that opens up space for renewed contemporary discussion here addressed to bring to light common evidence and peculiarities in both the history of Nordic and Italian design.[1] This chapter unfolds methodologically, starting from considerations around the development of Nordic *Good design* and Italian *Bel design*, propos-

1. See also the chapter by Marcangelo for parallel readings of contemporary jewellery of both regions.

ing it as a common characteristic to understand both cultures and then focusing on a comparative analysis between Nordic and Italian jewellery. The reasons why it is important to analyse jewellery linked to the Italian and Nordic design panorama are presented, highlighting the centrality of the use of silver as a democratising factor. The chapter also aims to underline some common characteristics in Italian and Nordic jewellery production, such as the strong inspiration and closeness with nature, later expressed through organicism, and the value of rejecting any form of unnecessary ornamentation, developed through a high abstraction of shapes. The main objective is to propose an original perspective that translates individual identity features into common representations of the spirit of the time, which jewellery, as well as design, has always had the great ability and significant duty to materialise.

"Good Design" between Italian and Nordic Perspectives

It is hard to proceed with an analysis of Italian and Nordic jewellery without first introducing the peculiarities that have characterised the design of these countries over the last century. In particular, we refer to the debated common characteristic of these two cultures of having managed to propose a "good design" that combined the formal expression with the usefulness of the function. In this regard, the concept of *kalokagathia* developed in Ancient Greece, a term composed of the Greek words *kalos*, beautiful, and *agathos*, good or virtuous, can become a theoretical near concept. The term was used to express the ability to combine external beauty with internal virtue in the representation of an ideal individual. Translated through artistic and sculptural representation, the concept proposed a balance between aesthetic appearance and moral objectives. According to this principle, beauty was not explicable only in the apparent ornamental form but had to be sought in combination with a virtuous ideal principle. This is not to deny beauty, as Christianity would later do, but rather to focus on the harmony between aesthetic taste and moral utility. The Greek theorisation of *kalokagathia*, supported by Plato's interpretation in his theory of ideas, has found numerous philosophical interpretations throughout history which have contracted and modified its meanings. Among these, it's proper to remember the Roman concept of *bonum et aequum* which led the Greek individual idealisation to privilege the social sphere to deduce moral and ethical norms in favour of public life, or the Enlightenment aesthetics where the indomitable Baroque ornament is replaced by a more reasoned artistic thought (Limone 2018).[2] During the 20th century, both Italian and Nordic design developed approaches that reflected the idea of *kalokagathia* as the harmony between beauty and goodness. Designers sought to unite aesthetic quality with ethical and social responsibility, creating objects that were not only beautiful and functional but also respectful of craftsmanship, production traditions and people's everyday needs. The pursuit of beauty and functionality often went hand in hand with the social goal of improving collective well-being and making good design accessible to all. The roots of this trend can indeed be traced back to the end of the 19th century, and in particular to the theoretical influences of the American architect Louis Sullivan, who in 1896 coined the expression "form follows function" (Sullivan 1896, 408). Pure form is made a consequence of the function of the object, and the study of shapes is treated with formal accuracy and extreme scientific dedication. This design methodology will influence modernity, both in the European Modern Movement of Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius and in the subsequent Italian Rationalism of MIAR (Movimento Italiano per l'Architettura Razionale) (Domus n.d.). Overall, the Modern Movement successfully raised questions of democracy in design, asking how to maintain product quality while meeting mass production

2. In this context, the major references to support the current discussion are inserted in the text. The concept of kalokagathia, however, was widely interpreted with the advent of Christianity, as briefly mentioned, which rejected its aesthetic value and shifted attention to divine action as a supporter of goodness and criticised the ephemeral character of external beauty. Furthermore, the Kantian conception of aesthetics rejects the association between ethics and beauty, considering the latter a purely subjective criterion. For further philosophical insights, see Limone (2018).

requirements. While some outcomes struggled to achieve true accessibility, they helped lay the cultural foundations for subsequent attempts at democratisation that influenced design, including jewellery. Secondly, in the first half of the 20th century, the brutality and devastation of war had strongly marked the Western productive and social landscape, especially in the period between the two world conflicts. If on the one hand the industrialisation and serialisation of products had grown, on the other hand a strong social awareness was emerging, sharpened by pessimism about the future and by the strict regulations that the advent of fascism and the economic crisis had raised. However, in this context, design culture emerges as a response to a social need for renewal, where needs are translated into design challenges to create products with a functional and simple design, although not without evident ambiguities and paradoxes.

The Nordic context is often traced back to the ability to combine good design with the production of everyday household objects (Leslie Cheek quoted in Polster 1999). In particular, it is deeply influenced by German and French Modernism as well as by significant past contributions of Nordic design culture. For example, *Ett Hem* (At Home), a book of illustrations published by Carl Larsson in 1899, started depicting a simple and domestic lifestyle; in the same year, the famous pamphlet published by Ellen Key, *Skönhet för Alla* (Beauty for All), linked ethics and aesthetics; and in 1919 the *Vackrare Vardagsvara* (More Beautiful Everyday Objects) by Gregor Paulsson further investigated well-designed democratic objects for the working-class (Fiell, Fiell, and Englund 2017). As of the 1940s, the traits of a democratic, aesthetically pragmatic and pleasing design which aimed to improve people's quality of life began to be more clearly defined (Polster 1999). The floral tapestries and period furniture were replaced by formal cleanliness, while at the same time design continued to cultivate good taste and enhance Nordic classicism. The objects had a practicality of use aimed at satisfying people's fundamental needs: they had to be "so evident as to go almost unnoticed"[3] (Kaj Franck, in Polster 1999, 65). Among the greatest representatives of Scandinavian modernism, Gunnar Asplund evoked surprise with the minimal pavilion at the Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, criticised for its essential lines too close to the functionalism of the Bauhaus; Kaare Klint combined the traditionality of materials, and in particular of cabinet-making, with rationality of forms; and the Aaltos, with a holistic vision of the project, became the greatest exponents of organicism, with an aesthetic close to nature and strongly aimed at social commitment. As Fiell, Fiell, and Englund (2017, 8) recall, the fragmentation between the Nordic countries was present and high but the "promotion of high-quality goods for everyday use had an underlying humanism that offered an alternative understanding of Modernism and ultimately reflected the democratic principles upon which the governance of these Nordic countries is based". At the same time, and conversely, Davies (2003, 105) reflects on how this very characteristic has not only defined but also flattened and homogenised Scandinavian design, making it appear to external observers as a uniform whole, devoid of the intrinsic nuances that have always been a part of its identity. Translating "good design" into a democratic concept appears as a controversial notion in the history of Nordic design production, oscillating between the development of a mindset characterised by "a shared ethical attitude" (Skou and Munch 2016, 8) with strong political resonance and the paradox of a quite affordable luxury, where extreme formal simplicity sometimes evolved into a complex stylistic exercise incomprehensible to most. Similarly, Hayward (1998) already examined the contradictory nature of "good design" with an analysis more focused on British style, highlighting how the idea of equality and efficiency was somewhat at odds with the "tone of an elitist taste culture" (1998, 218). In these terms, "good design" reveals a dual nature that oscillates between the social ambition of promoting democratic wellbeing and a taste that becomes strongly elitist. Beyond Britain, similar tensions emerged in Nordic and Italian contexts, reinforcing the contemporary difficulty of defining "good design". Objects, often

3. "Tanto evidenti da passare quasi inosservati". All translations from Italian are by the authors.

conceived for the masses, remained or evolved as exclusive, often difficult to produce or expensive. However, it is undeniable that the process of democratisation has raised an ideological and cultural position rooted in design thinking that, although not always economically accessible, has changed the paradigms of the system of objects.

In Italy, *Bel design* emerged in the 1950s from the critical issues and the desire for redemption after the Second World War and the intention emerged to transform aesthetics in a widespread way "from the spoon to the city", in the words of Ernesto N. Rogers. The good and beauty of Italian design emerged in its ability to combine Italian taste with the functionality of objects, which are socially useful and democratic also thanks to the materials with which they are produced, e.g. with plastic materials which have been widely used since the mid-1960s. Likewise, in Nordic design there is a refusal of furniture with nineteenth-century references and with the publications of *Domus*, a magazine founded by Gio Ponti in 1928, a new architectural and furnishing culture is declared. Gio Ponti published a book, *Amate l'Architettura*, in 1957 which opens its first chapter with "loving architecture is loving your country"[4] (Ponti 1957) and underlines the fundamental relationship between beauty and usefulness, as well as the architectural product and the landscape in which it is inserted, a concept also applicable to product design. A social value close to both Nordic thought and the proposed connection with the concept of *kalokagathia* previously exposed. Italian *Bel design* also drew strength from artisanal traditions, transforming them into industrial mastery. The use of lightweight woods, later combined with plastics and other affordable materials, played a key role in making sophisticated design accessible to a growing middle class. This recalls Nordic approaches, where cabinet-making and silversmithing evolved into mass production aimed at improving daily life. Consider Gio Ponti's *Superleggera* chair, made of beech and straw to achieve a low weight, which clearly represents the possibility of making beauty useful and accessible to a wider audience, as well as durable and resistant over time, or the objects produced by Kartell that use plastic as their primary material. Indeed, as previously mentioned, even in the Italian context of *Bel design,* contradictions are not lacking. Examples such as the slender metal legs of the *Lady* armchair by Zanuso, which support heterogeneous padding, or the *Arco* lamp by the Castiglioni brothers, which revolutionises the concept of the suspension lamp and the relationship between objects and the environment in which they are placed, highlight the role and value of Italian design between technical efficiency, productive mastery and creative genius (Cappellieri and Pirola 2020). However, they cannot be considered completely democratic objects, either in terms of price or distribution. While highlighting the contradictory nature of the democratic nature of objects from that period, these projects represent a clear intent to rethink the domestic environment in a more functional and accessible way.

Rather than dwelling on the advancement of Italian or Nordic design dominating the 1960s and their subsequent identity affirmations, it is interesting to underline how both these cultures—if not without contradictions—have developed interpretations of how "good design" can be translated, i.e. characterised by a strong reference to the democracy of objects and architecture, experimenting with materials without forgetting traditional cultures, and paying attention to ergonomics and the human factor. The *kalokagathia*, the good, democratic design, or the *Bel design* concept proposes a strong comparative link between the two design cultures, as a meeting point between the two traditions, and this is a necessary starting point to operate our subsequent analysis between Italian and Nordic jewellery.

Silver as a Democratic Choice from Homeware to Jewellery

Among the heterogeneous production of objects between Nordic and Italian design, jewellery is a useful subject for carrying out parallelism. It would seem a paradox that the object, dressed in gold and precious stones, that most repre-

4. "Amare l'architettura è amare il proprio paese".



Fig. 1. Georg Jensen, *Moonlight Blossom*, early 1900s, brooch 159, sterling silver



Fig. 2. Henning Koppel for Georg Jensen, *Splash*, 1950s, bracelet, sterling silver

sented values such as social status, luxury and power, is instead discussed here with reference to the democratic characteristics of design production. However, this connection is possible especially when considering silver jewellery. One interpretation of good design and a democratic spirit was indeed well represented by the role that silver had as a material accessible to most people, versatile in its declinations from household products to body jewellery and strong in a rich artisan tradition, both in the Nordic panorama and in the Italian one. The use of silver has always accompanied the history of the production of both objects and jewels, alongside its eternal golden companion. We can mention the Phoenician amulets, the Greek technical accuracy and the Etruscan granulations and filigrees which then influenced the art of Romans in their chisels, embossments and engravings, up to the Early Christian and Byzantine styles, or those from beyond the Alps which include the Viking productions of jewels with zoomorphic motifs based on techniques such as weaving or filigree (Philips 2003; Cattaneo 1967). Silver belongs to the category of precious metals and is characterized by its beauty, brightness and malleability. The accessibility of silver was marked by the Modern Age and the discovery of new deposits in America, especially in the Spanish colonies, which increased overseas imports and reduced the value of the material, making gold prevail. From the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, silver was widely used following the Industrial Revolution and the large-scale production of objects, especially for cutlery and household items. Polster (1999, 10) mentioned how "the Swedish silversmiths, faithful to the motto "the most beautiful objects for everyday life", were committed to trying to combine good quality and mass production at the same time".[5] Aav et al. (2012) also underline how the Finnish production of Elis Kauppi was in support of silver jewellery, recognising its value like gold, even though it could be obtained at a lower cost. In this regard, the democracy of silver emerges precisely in offering objects of extreme manufacturing quality at accessible prices.

Georg Jensen is certainly the most prominent silversmith in Nordic culture, not only for the production of silver hollowware and cutlery but also above all jewellery. His training as a sculptor and metalsmith was fundamental in building a profound relationship with silver, especially because he understood its plastic properties with accurate technique. Anscombe et al. (2005) recall in particular how the initial

5. "Gli argentieri svedesi, fedeli al motto 'oggetti più belli per la vita di ogni giorno', si impegnarono nel tentativo di combinare contemporaneamente buona qualità e produzione in serie".

production of the Jensen workshop focused on silver jewellery because it required a smaller quantity of material to be produced and reflected a democratic spirit: "true to Jensen's Arts and Crafts philosophy, in order to make jewellery accessible to more people, it was fashioned of silver instead of gold" (Anscombe et al. 2005, 26). The evolution of the Jensen style over time marked the passage of silver among the main artistic currents of the 20th century, making use of close collaborations with great exponents of Scandinavian design of those years, also after the death of the founder. Between Skønvirke aesthetics, Art Deco, Functionalism and modern abstraction, Jensen's legacy has been perpetuated and interpreted by designers such as Sigvard Bernadotte, Arno Malinowski, Jørgen Jensen, Henning Koppel, Nanna Ditzel, Wiwen Nilsson and a host of others (Anscombe et al. 2005), intersecting the world of jewellery with that of design.

In Italy, silver jewellery has been valued in a similar collaborative approach by Ciro Cacchione with the San Lorenzo company. In 1970 he invited some renowned Italian designers, including Franco Albini and Franca Helg, Massimo and Lella Vignelli, Afra and Tobia Scarpa and Antonio Piva, to revalue silver in jewellery collections designed to be produced in limited series. This collaboration represents the first encounter between design and Italian jewellery, which, however, at the time remained unnoticed, relevant more to experts in the field than to the general public (Cappellieri and Romanelli 2013). Indeed, it represented a silvery expression that places the value of design at the centre, distant from classic craftsmanship that flaunted the aesthetic virtuosity of its work, instead preferring the "invisibility of the technical solution"[6] (Bazzo 1998, 11). The San Lorenzo jewels were able to hide their functioning—which went unnoticed—to reuse the words of Kaj Franck (quoted in Polster 1999, 65). It was not so much the technical artifice of the creation that was privileged, but rather a design with modern, elegant features, stripped of excess and profoundly innovative in form, technology and materials. This is the case of *Senza Fine* by Massimo and



Fig. 3. Nanna Ditzel for Georg Jensen, *Design no. 111*, c. 1956, bracelet, sterling silver

Lella Vignelli, an articulated necklace created in 1992 that makes the joints of the jewel invisible thanks to the technological application hidden between one joint and another. Its design managed to combine the versatility of silver with that of the wearability of the necklace, challenging the production process needed to create it.

The aspiration to improve industrial production technologies, the "poetry that has become technique"[7] (Polster 1999, 10), characterises both the Italian and Nordic jewellery fields. Economic accessibility and tradition together with its strong workability and shiny and modern aesthetics elevate silver as an excellent democratic material. These characteristics are expressed through specific stylistic intentions which distinguish both Nordic and Italian production. The initial natural inspiration, clearly inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, proposes more or less faithful versions of the surrounding natural environment. The Skønvirke or Art Nouveau style influences jewellery production, visible in Georg Jensen's initial production as well as in the work of Vincenzo Miranda and Giovanni Ascione. The growing organicism of forms, also inspired by the American Streamlining of the 1930s and visible, for example, in the curvilinear works created by Alvar Aalto, such as the *Savoy* vase (Anscombe et al. 2005), is grafted onto the International Style, marking the triumph of the Modern Movement (Cappellieri 2018). Pure formal abstraction is emphasised, which will become a distinctive stylistic inter-

6. "Invisibilità dell'accorgimento tecnico".

7. "Poesia diventata tecnica".



Fig. 4. Lella and Massimo Vignelli for San Lorenzo, *Senza Fine*, 1992, necklace, silver 925

pretation in Nordic jewellery production, especially between the 1950s and 1970s (Fiell, Fiell, and Englund 2017; Cappellieri 2018), while in Italy, with the economic miracle of the 1960s, it will leave space for more pop interpretations which will also influence the Nordic colleagues (Polster 1999). Organicism and abstraction, between natural representation and technical experimentation, are precisely the threads firmly woven into the Italian and Nordic jewellery traditions.

Nordic and Italian Jewellery between Organicism and Abstraction

Nature, more than mere stylistic reproduction, represents a widespread inspiration for Nordic silversmiths from which to translate reality into the artificial shapes of objects. Jensen's early production was faithful to naturalistic motifs such as flowers, leaves or berries, but without ever sterilely duplicating their appearance. His works were always characterised by his reinterpretation filtered through his hands and his mind, which expressed Jensen's stylistic codes. An example of this is the 1914 *Moonlight Brooch* with voluptuous silver and fluttering leaves (Fiell, Fiell, and Englund 2017), different, for example, from Lalique's naturalistic interpretations. Indeed, the presence of nature in the production of jewellery is a constant in all cultures. As for the Italian panorama, it is impossible not to mention the remarkable production of Buccellati, whose tradition of working silver combined with yellow gold often draws inspiration from nature, as well as that of Sotirio Bulgari, founder of the brand, who began his career as a silversmith. The Buccellati silver tradition dates back to Contardo Buccellati's first workshop in Milan and accompanies the history of the brand to the present day, especially with regard to the legacy represented by the production of Mario Buccellati. His prolific relationship with Gabriele D'Annunzio, for example, produced numerous objects and jewels in silver and gold which the goldsmith designed for the poet (Cappellieri 2022). Buccellati's unmistakable style with its hand-made burin engravings manages to modify the surface of the metal, transforming its cold and smooth appearance into a soft and light-sensitive material, almost approaching the appearance of fine fabrics such as silk, linen, brocade or damask. The openwork of the *a tulle* technique recalled Burano lace, *telato*, *rigato* and *segrinato* became iconic codes of the brand, and the *agemina* process exploited the chromatic contrasts of the two metals, where silver becomes a source of light to exalt both itself and the gold at his side. Attention to the surface of silver is a common trait between Buccellati and Jensen, as the Danish silversmith preferred to maintain the hammer marks on the material rather than flatten the surface. Moreover, Buccellati's household objects, like Jensen, elevate the artisan tradition by borrowing now formal organicism, now a subjective reproduction of nature in pumpkin-shaped rice bowls,

shell-shaped ashtrays or centrepieces that extensively explore Buccellati's iconic leaf motif. The organic nature of the shapes is expressed by the softness and malleable appearance of silver which becomes like a living fabric in the hands of its owner.[8]

Organicism, as anticipated above, found its maximum expression in the 1930s, albeit with different polarities for the Nordic and Italian panorama. Italy oscillated between the research jewel, whose greatest exponent is recognised by Gio Ponti in the goldsmith and silversmith Alfredo Ravasco, and the traditional jewel of the goldsmiths, with particular attention to the silver production of Buccellati (Cappellieri 2018). Melissa Gabardi recalls how in this period Art Deco geometry was rejected and "we witnessed the victorious return of the curved line, the circle, volutes, spirals, with an asymmetrical design"[9] (Gabardi 1995, 12). A similar approach is recognisable in the productions of Harald Nielsen, Arno Malinowski, Sigvard Bernadotte or Georg Jensen himself for the Georg Jensen Company between the 1930s and 1940s (Anscombe 2005). Subsequently, the interpretation of rounding and formal organicism is explicitly expressed by Henning Koppel, who produces some of the main jewels belonging to biomorphic streamlining design for the Georg Jensen Company. The *Splash* silver chain bracelet is particularly famous: modules with an asymmetrical and wavy design and different thicknesses are connected using their shape, without the need for any additional circular element to link them. This approach, present in most of Koppel's jewellery, worked on single repeated modules, a feature that was later criticised by his colleague Hans Christensen, who claimed that it reduced the jewel to a mere transposition of sculptural works in a reduced dimension. However, Koppel's approach, as Fiell, Fiell and Englund (2017, 505) recall, "pushed not only the physical properties of silver, but also the patience of Georg Jensen's silversmith" and is key to understanding biomorphic jewellery design interpretations in Jensen's production.

The plasticity of silver is a key factor in enabling the extreme abstraction of forms, which, with Koppel, had already become a distinctive feature of Nordic design. In this regard, the Finnish sculptor Tapio Wirkkala was defined by Fiell, Fiell, and Englund (2017, 526) as the "form-giver without equal". Polster (1999, 67) also mentions a quote from the sculptor that clearly describes both the link with natural abstract forms and the working methodology used to create his pieces: "Take a stone smoothed by running water in your hand and you will find our culture in it".[10] This extreme sculptural plasticity of silver is also highlighted in the works of Nanna Ditzel and Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe for the Georg Jensen Company, with particular attention to the ergonomics of the objects and their relationship with the body as protective shields applied to it (Anscombe 2005). Both designers represent on the one hand the plastic liquidity of silver and on the other a progressive abstraction in shapes. The search for the relationship between jewellery and interaction, with a non-decorative aesthetic, belongs to the production of Gabriele De Vecchi. Founder of Gruppo T, his kinetic jewels from 1963 overlook the plasticity of the material, focusing more on the interaction between them and the surrounding environment. Silver becomes invisible, achromatic and transformable depending on what is around it (Anceschi et al. 1995). Movement, sound and perception are also part of Kiki Vices Vinci's jewellery production. A multifaceted artist who was linked to the art jewellery period developed in Italy between the 1950s and 1960s, she created some art jewels during the following decade that explored the democracy of silver between its plasticity and interaction with the body. The brushed silver bracelet from 1964, made directly on metal plates, is one of the artist's most iconic pieces of jewellery. Its sophisticated structure allows you to wear the jewel as you wish; composed of

8. A similar statement was made by the Duke of Wellington's niece, Lady Westmoreland, who is said to have never let anyone touch her Buccellati silverware, which she wanted to polish personally due to the emotion she felt in feeling the vitality of the material under her hands (Corgnati 1998).
9. "…si assiste al ritorno vittorioso della linea curva, del cerchio, di volute, spirali, dal disegno asimmetrico".
10. "Prendi in mano un sasso levigato dalla corrente e troverai in esso la nostra cultura".

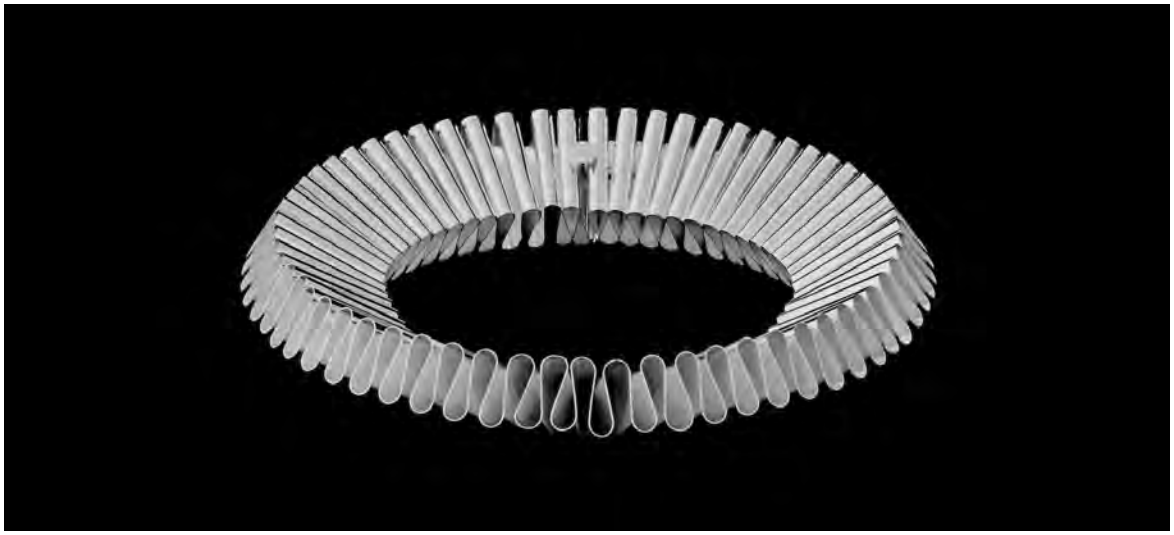


Fig. 5. Lella Valle Vignelli for San Lorenzo, *Seicento*, 2003, necklace, silver 925

a central circle structure, it is possible to decide whether to leave circles free on the outside of the wrist or not, and even specifically choose which and how many you want to leave to the movement. From the same year, a series of brushed silver band rings with circles soldered onto them produces a waving movement accompanied by the jingle given by the contact of the rings. Strongly influenced by the expressive freedom of the art jewellery of the 1960s, Norwegian Tone Vigeland finds in silver jewellery the possibility of exploring her stylistic identity, while maintaining attention to wearability. Indeed, her production has undergone variations depending on the stylistic oscillations of the 20th century, but Brundtland, Holzach and English (2003) underlined an overall continuity in the importance of the experimentation with simple shapes and the use of the material as the only "palette" (Brundtland, Holzach and English 2003, 92) of Vigeland's works. In particular, in the production of sculptural jewels for the body, the authors state that the artist "was wrestling with the problem of how to create pieces which were not stiff and hard, but soft, sensual and tactile. […] The aim must have been for her jewellery to say something about free and easy people in motion" (Brundtland, Holzach and English 2003, 25). Silver once again lends itself as a democratic and versatile material to achieve this purpose.

In the Finnish context, the extreme rejection of naturalism emerges in Elis Kauppi's works from the 1950s. According to Kauppi, nature should not be unduly emphasised, although it remains the main inspiration for goldsmith production (Aav et al. 2012). The jewel in this case reduces ornaments to a minimum, preferring abstract shapes, whether they are decisive and sharp or soft and curvilinear. During Kauppi's period of production in the 1970s, in Italy Bruno Munari introduced his *Constellations of the Zodiac* pendant collection. Simple silver discs were machine-drilled to abstractly reproduce the composition of the constellations in the sky; an exaltation of industrial production that well reflects a refined naturalistic abstraction of the silver jewel that colleagues from the north were promoting. Also in Finland, Björn Weckstrom for Lapland jewellery[11] worked with a softer abstraction, largely exploiting the plasticity of silver that Wirkkala would have praised so much. The *Planetoid Valleys* necklace from 1969 is composed of silver modules folded like small square fabric tiles, with an aesthetic close to the far north but also influenced by the Space Age that was raging in those years (Aav et al. 2012).[12] Returning to Italy, we can, as one would expect,

11. Company he founded together with Pekka Anttila in 1963 and main producer of his jewellery (Fiell, Fiell, and Englund 2017).

12. Interestingly, the necklace will also be used in George Lucas's 1977 Star Wars (Fiell, Fiell, and Englund 2017).



Fig. 6. Marco Romanelli, *Acqua*, 2004, necklace, silver 925 (Antonella Marchetti Collection, Milan)



Fig. 7. Odo Fioravanti Design Studio, *Perseo*, 2013, necklace, silver and enamel (Photo: Dario Sigona)

mention Bulgari. The brand returned to focus on the creation of objects for the home, especially since Nicola Bulgari joined the company. Starting from the end of the 1970s, in parallel with the development of modular jewellery, Bulgari began to produce lines of silver objects whose common denominator was simple but recognisable lines, where the decoration was an integral part of the design. Among the most famous pieces, the *Borromini* centrepiece from 1987 exemplifies the brand's ability to make silver come alive, thanks to a constant play of light reflected from the convex and concave surfaces. Above all, for Bulgari, silver products had to be not only beautiful to be admired, but functional to be used (Mascetti and Triossi 1996).

Contemporary Interpretations and Future Discussions

The production of silver jewellery in the last century has intersected with the contemporary world in an increasingly fragmented system of values and contexts. The new experiments with materials, plastic and fibreglass, with bright, almost unnatural colours, however, continue to increase the nuances of the interpretations of "good design", the ergonomics of shapes and democratic beauty. Brundtland, Holzach and English (2003, 72) highlighted how the later production of Vigeland little represented the democratic style she presented during the "tradition of Scandinavian Design". However, the same ideal of simplicity was equally explored in her later works, particularly exploring sculptural, unique and simple shapes. This evolution of the concept was reflected in the artist's production mirroring the stylistic influences of that period, making the silver jewellery a promoter of the legacy of "good design" as much as a manifesto of the spirit of the time. With the new millennium, echoing some interpretative cuts discussed in the previous paragraph, experiments with silver jewellery continued to emerge. Among San Lorenzo's proposals, we can mention the *Seicento* necklace by Vignelli which recalls the historical gorget by folding a silver fabric into regular ruffles. The *Hokusai* necklace by Afra Bianchin Scarpa reinterprets the chain by curving simple square-section silver threads and chaining them to each other. Using the modules in the chain to create a link between them is the same approach Koppel used for Jensen back in the 1940s. Contemporary designers such as Odoardo Fioravanti use the reflectivity of silver and enamel to create the illusion of colour, while Marco Romanelli with the *Acqua* necklace manages to capture the essence of a cascade of rushing water in silver. In 2013, Emanuela Frattini Magnusson proposed *Polsini*, silver bangle bracelets that enhance geometric simplification and reflect on the relationship between fashion and jewellery. Wearability is a theme also ad-

dressed by Paola Volti in the *Armatura* collection with jewels that cover the hand like plates, or by Riccardo Blumer and Matteo Borghi in *Lalinea*, a forearm bracelet in silver and carbon fibre (Tenuta 2021; Cappellieri and Romanelli 2013). Silver, among the different stylistic interpretations, remains a living material even in the contemporary context. This chapter aimed to propose a parallel between Nordic and Italian jewellery, precisely through this material, much explored in its forms as well as in its workmanship, often challenging the production processes. The accessibility of its cost together with its malleable plasticity establishes it as a democratic material close to the interpretations of "good design" discussed above. Echoing the question posed by the MoMA exhibition mentioned in the introduction, i.e. what can be considered "good design" today, the proposed contribution aims to lay the foundations for future discussions in the contemporary world. In particular, it aims to foster the critics on the role of a possible interpretation of *kalokagathia* in translating the heritage of both Italian and Nordic cultures and reflecting on the value and function of silver jewellery; a function that is not strictly that of an object used for a practical application, but which can belong to a whole range of intangible values, representing meanings, ways of life, national legacies and transnational grafts.

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National Design Cultures of Production: A Comparative Study of the Danish and Italian Glass Design Cultures

Joachim Allouche

Abstract

The chapter explores the glass design cultures of Murano, Parma and Denmark in the second half of the 20th century through the lens of production, identifying three distinct design cultures: Murano's luxury mouth-blown glass, Parma's industrially produced functional glass and Denmark's machine-assisted mouth-blown glass. By examining the influence of production techniques on design outcomes, the study demonstrates that designers were not the sole authors of their work; instead, entire production systems, including engineers, craftsmen and machinery, shaped what was economically viable, thereby determining the design cultures' output. As these production systems were affected by national factors, such as market conditions and state policies, they not only shaped the design cultures but also connected them to the national construct, turning them into national design cultures. While the cases underscore the continued relevance of national design cultures as an analytical entity, they also reveal that the same cultures exist within a complex, multidirectional framework influenced by both global and regional factors. Thus the chapter demonstrates how a focus on production can offer new insights into how national design cultures are constructed and maintained in a world where design is both global, national and regional.

Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, three distinct glass design cultures developed in Denmark and Italy, each with its own method of producing glass. Two appeared in Italy: one in Murano, which emphasised handmade luxury designs based on a long craft tradition, and a second in Parma, which focused on machine-made glass based on new technology from the glass container industry. In Denmark, a middle ground was tried, focusing on mouth-blown glass made with the help of machines in an industrial setting.

While only the Danish and Murano glass designs have come to be acknowledged as objects of national design culture (McConnell 2006, 86, 138), all three design cultures have created distinct glassware influenced by a broad array of regional, national and international factors. The following question then arises: what makes a design culture national?

Recent research has argued that the design cultures in both Italy and Denmark changed drastically in the second half of the 20th century because of shifts in production, consumption and ideological paradigms.[1] This has coincided with a new interest in production within design history as a possible way of exploring previously unseen actors in the design process. Inspired by these developments, this chapter explores how production can "make" a design culture national, demonstrating that the study of production still holds great potential to gain new insights into national design cultures. This exploration is conducted by mapping out how national factors such as market and policy affected the glass design cultures in Italy and Denmark through their respective modes of production.

In Denmark and Parma, the object of analysis was naturally limited by the number of glassworks "in" the design culture. In Murano, the

1. For Scandinavia, see Fallan, Zetterlund and Munch (2023) and Lees-Maffei (2022). For Italy, see Lees-Maffei and Fallan (2013).

design culture contains over twenty glassworks (Pinetti 2022). Therefore, to create an analysis that fits within the scope of this article, Venini has been chosen as the focus of the analysis, as the company is both representative of the design culture and was crucial in shaping it.

The chapter will mainly focus on the period after 1950, but as both countries' glass design cultures are defined by the preceding period, I will draw lines to the years before 1950 where relevant. The analysis used company directories and books that described the countries' glass industries. The most dominant companies in the cultures were subsequently analysed via a critical reading of company histories, product catalogues and other sources. The chapter will start with a presentation of the two main concepts, *production* and *national design culture*, followed by a mapping of the three design cultures and ending with a combined discussion and conclusion.

Defining Production

Thoroughly examined within early design history (Dilnot 1984; Fallan 2010; Lees-Maffei 2009; Walker 1989) and left as an area already explored since then (Shales 2012, 215), production is a deceptively easy concept that everybody can define but nobody seems to agree upon. In this chapter, I have chosen to define production as "the making of a physically designed object". This definition may appear relatively uncontroversial. However, as Jesse Adam Stein points out, in the main body of design history, production has mostly been used to describe stages in the design process rather than the making of objects (Stein 2019, 289). This understanding of production has its roots in one of the founding works of design history, Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1936). In this work, Pevsner explores how designers came to terms with the impact of industrialisation on production and style in the 19th century (Pevsner 1991, 19.67), emphasising the intellectual discussion among designers and schools of thought as the leading cause of the period's designs. While Pevsner's overall analysis of the design process represents a rare perspective today, his view of production has to some degree prevailed throughout early design history. It can be found in works such as Jeffrey Meikle's *Twentieth Century Limited* (1979) and Arthur Pulos's *American Design Ethics* (1983), which defines industrialisation as the creator of circumstances for modern design, but explores the changes in design as a result of the designers' ideation and cultural context.

However, it is not the only perspective. In Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948), production is analysed as the concrete making of an object. This analysis can be seen in Giedion's chapter on 19th-century French upholstered furniture, where he points out that the furniture's form was a combination of a fascination with the Oriental, an ability to machine-produce textiles and cheap metal springs, and a newfound use for wool combings[2] as stuffing (Giedion 2013, 377). Giedion's mantle was taken up by authors such as Adrian Forty in *Objects of Desire* (1986) and Judy Attfield in her exploration of English furniture makers (Attfield 2007, 53–62). In recent times, this perspective has gained traction with design historians working with craft, such as Jesse Adams Stein, Elise Hodson and Ezra Shales, who explore the production of objects as something that may affect the design process (Shales 2017; Hodson 2019; Stein 2019), refusing the notion that the creation of design can be separated from production. As Hodson describes in her thesis, this new perspective goes beyond the idea of production setting boundaries for the designer; instead, it challenges the notion of the designer as the sole author of the designed object (Hodson 2019, ii).

With their new perspectives, authors such as Stein and Attfield also open up production as a world in itself, which can be affected by external factors such as market prices, technology and politics (Stein 2019; Attfield 2007). Thus, their studies indicate that production, apart from being a discrete variable worth studying when trying to understand design, can also be an intermediate through which design can be affected by factors external to the design process. This understanding of production leads to my next point: production as an important factor when defining a national design culture.

2. A by-product of the textile industry.

A National Design Culture of Production?

As expressed by Guy Julier and Anders V. Munch in *Design Culture* (2019), design culture studies developed as design history moved away from its initial concern with design processes (production) to include—and focus on—philosophies, theories and histories (Julier et al. 2019, 1). Thus, design culture represents a move away from the field's initial interest in production, although production is not entirely abandoned. Julier writes in his foreword to the third edition of *The Culture of Design* that while it was not the sole focus of his work, his interest was to "bring more precision to the discussion of design as a creative industry and also placing a bigger role for materiality therein" (Julier 2014, XIV). Even when production is not the main focus, its importance in design culture is acknowledged. For instance, in their book *Nordic Design Cultures in Transformation, 1960–1980*, Kjetil Fallan, Christina Zetterlund and Anders V. Munch argue that changes in Nordic design culture in the 1960s were due to shifts in production, consumption, institutions, policy and ideological paradigms (Fallan, Zetterlund and Munch 2023, 1), an observation that could also be applied to Italian design culture (Lees-Maffei and Fallan 2013, 16).

The question, then, is how production contributes to defining a national design culture. Given my initial argument that it is an intermediate, production should be understood not just as an isolated factor in design culture but as a pervasive phenomenon that is influenced by and influences actors within and outside of the design process. Therefore, production also holds the potential to bind the design culture to the national construct. As Anders V. Munch and Maddalena Dalla Mura point out in the introduction to this anthology, there has recently been a move away from simply critiquing national design cultures towards an understanding of it as something that can be relevant in a world where design culture is connected to regional and global factors.[3]

An important factor in this new understanding is the spatial dimension of the national construct. As pointed out by Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei, even in a global world, nations and regions can be considered essential areas of manufacture, mediation and consumption, where resources and expertise are gathered and maintained, thereby affecting the design culture of the area (Lees-Maffei and Fallan 2013, 6). The connection of production to the national construct goes beyond its physical location within the territory of a nation. In producing, the producers will inevitably come in contact with the nation-state through the rules, regulations and institutions that it encourages and enforces, which again may come to define how and what they produce.

Inspired by these assumptions, I understand production as something that can make a design culture "national" because it takes place within a national border, where it will inevitably be embroiled in the area's institutional, cultural and economic context. These factors will both be influenced by and influence the design production.

The Glass Industry at the Start of the 20th Century

At the start of the 20th century, glass was still produced relatively uniformly all over Europe. It was mouth-blown, with a varied number of supporting machines and industrial organisation. Except in the case of the most expensive glassware (Jackson 2000, 6), the designs were also similar across Europe, relying on the same limited historical patterns produced throughout most of the 19th century (McConnell 2006, 26–27).

In the years leading up to World War II, European glassworks began to employ designers to make glassware for a broader audience. Thus, a difference in designs from country to country began to appear (McConnell 2006, 30–31). In production, the rupture came after the Second World War, as an increasing number of glassworks began to install production apparatus capable of producing glassware through fully automated processes. These machines would become more refined during the second half of the 20th century, forcing European glassworks to invest in production capacity for machine-blown glass or invent alternatives to machine-made designs (Jackson 2000, 7). The

3. See Introduction to this book.

Danish and Italian design cultures would be defined by how they reacted to these new types of production.

The Glass Design Culture in Murano

In the glass research literature, 20th-century Italian glass design culture is almost uniquely associated with the glassworks situated on the island of Murano near Venice (Klein and Ward 1984). Created long before the Italian state, the Murano glass design culture can be traced back to Venetian merchants who, after the sacking of Byzantium in 1204, brought glassmakers and expertise from Outremer to the then-small glass production of Venice (Heyl and Barovier Mentasti 2006, 101). The glassworkers, capable of making sophisticated glass, mainly focused on producing exportable luxury glass for Europe's upper class and helped maintain Venice's trade balance (Klein and Ward 1984, 68–69). This production was encouraged by the city-state's policies, including statutes prohibiting foreign workers from working in Venice in 1271 (Klein and Ward 1984, 67–72) and giving the glassmakers hereditary privileges in 1376 (Rasmussen 2012). In 1292, the Doge decreed that the glassblowers would be relocated to the island of Murano to mitigate fire hazards (Rasmussen 2012, 68). This move brought a spatial element into the design culture; as the glassblowers were now isolated and situated next to each other, a specific craft culture began to develop. Dominated by master glassmakers working in relatively small workshops bound together by family ties, this culture resulted in the evolution of a unique style known for its use of glass plasticity and new techniques, such as *filigrana* (Heyl and Mentasti 2006, 102–11). This style fell out of favour in the 18th and 19th centuries as the European upper-class preferences shifted toward cut glass (Klein and Ward 1984, 120).

Murano and a National Design Culture

In the 1920s, the glass culture was revived as a group of Murano's glassworks broke with the antiquated baroque style and started blending old Muranese Renaissance techniques with modern, clean lines, leading to a new wave of modern glass designs (Heyl and Mentasti 2006, 157). The revival began with the establishment of the Venini glassworks in 1925 by Paolo Venini (1895–1959) (Jackson 2000, 213). The Venini glassworks comprised the owner, who oversaw the commercial aspects, the master glassblower, who led the production, as well as external designers, who created the designs. Thus, Venini broke with Murano's craft tradition in which glassblowers were themselves both owners and designers.

Although the Venini workshop introduced new designs and an industrial organisation, the realisation of the designs depended on the glassworkers' skill in freehand glassblowing. Thus, the characteristic Murano production process remained. The economic sustainability of this type of production relied on the company being able to sell a few expensive glass objects and light installations instead of mass-producing glass, which meant that the glassworkers had to sell their glass to an international upper class.

This need to sell to an international audience led to the glassworks' employment of international designers. In 1935, Venini employed its first international designer, Tyra Lundgren. From the 1950s, the firm employed a long list of foreign designers, including Eugene Bergman, Ken Scott, Lyn Tissot and the Finn Tapio Wirkkala (Deboni 2007, 43).

The significant influence of foreign designers on Venini's production could lead one to question just how Italian or Muranese the designs were. However, Wirkkala's work in particular demonstrates how much production can affect design. At Venini, Wirkkala moved away from Scandinavian minimalism, which he had practised at Iittala, toward wild experiments with colours and Murano techniques such as *incalmo* and *filigrana* (Jackson 2000, 217). The Venini model of creating modern designs with old Murano techniques in relatively small workshops became the modus operandi for other major glassworks at Murano, such as Nason and Moretti, Vistosi and Fratelli Toso, although they did not use as many foreign designers (Jackson 2000, 146; 2008).

While the many tourist shops with colourful glass trinkets may be the most visible for visitors to Murano, for Venini and many other prominent glassworks on the island, the production mode of a few talented glassworkers



Fig. 1. Muranese glassware purchased by the Danish king Frederik IV in 1709 during his European travels (Photo: © The Royal Collection, Rosenborg Castle, 2024)

making luxury items and installations remains the primary way to sustain their companies and define the design culture that they are a part of.

The case demonstrates that Murano's production was affected by local factors and history, and in turn had a significant impact on the designs produced on the island. Thus, production became an intermediate through which Murano's designs came to be affected by the local history and geography. Considering what has been described until now, Murano's design culture was national insofar as it was situated within the territory of Italy. However, this location is not the only way in which it was connected to the national construct.

In the 20th century, the Italian state did more than inherit the design culture—it began to order installations from Venini. In the 1930s, these installations comprised restrained, modernistic light installations for public buildings and train stations. By the 1950s, however, they had become dominant art pieces in the Italian pavilions at international exhibitions—such as the polyhedrons chandelier in the Italian Pavilion at the Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles in 1958—and in public buildings in Italy, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1959) and the Parliament's Chamber of Deputies (1968) (Barovier and Sonego 2022). These installations solidified the Murano glassworks' place among recognised modern Italian designs. Furthermore, the orders allowed Venini to invest in the production of light installations and created exposure for the company, securing increased international demand for its (and the rest of Murano's) light installations (Barovier and Sonego 2022). This demand ensured that the glassworks' production remained dedicated to producing luxury goods. To this day, Venini is given public orders in Italy (Venini 2024). Thus, the glasswork maintains its distinct production, which connects it further to an Italian national design culture.

The Glass Design Culture in Parma

While Murano's glassworks are the best known in Italy, another group of glassworks with its own design culture exists. This design culture originated in 1759 with the commissioning of Parma's first glassworks Reale Fabbrica della Maioliche e dei Vetri in Parma by the principality of Ferdinando di Borbone-Parma (Bianchi 1967, 39). In 1854, the brothers Carlo and Rocco Bormioli bought the glassworks and renamed it Vetreria F.lli Bormioli (renamed Bormioli Rocco in 1880) (Parma Manufacturers Association 2020, 45). Unlike the Murano glassworks, the Bormioli family expanded production beyond their familial confines, continuing to develop the glassworks' industrial character, growing the number of employees from 50 in 1854 (Dondi 1992, 50) to 300 in 1913 (Bianchi 1967, 107).

Production in the 19th century at Bormioli Rocco had a regional character insofar as it was spurred on by the pre-unification regional protectionism. Within this regional tariff wall, it provided the duchy of Parma with a wide range of mouth-blown products, including bottles, lamps, vases, mortars and tableware that could have been produced anywhere in Europe (Dondi 1992, 51).

National Needs

The first steps toward developing a unique design culture came after the unification of Italy in 1861, when the glassworks' focus tilted toward machine-made container glass (Bianchi 1967, 72). This development was connected to the glassworks' position as the producer of container glass for the broader alimentation and perfume industry in Parma, which grew as Italy began to industrialise (Parma Manufacturers Association 2020, 45). In 1903, this growth materialised in the glassworks' move to a new industrial area in Parma to access the newly established railroad connecting it to the greater Italian market (Dondi 1992, 82). The company then began to mechanise its production, first with new tank furnaces and supporting machines for mouth-blown production, and later with new machines, which streamlined production. In the process, the craftsmen were demoted to industrial workers, reduced to carrying out only one operation in the production. To pay for the investments, the company expanded its sales of container glass to the whole of Italy (Dondi 2002, 123).

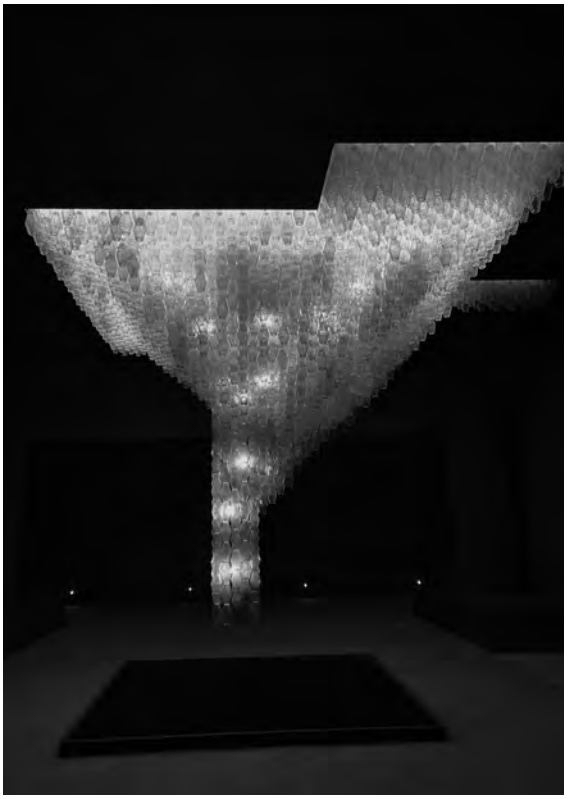


Fig. 2. Chandelier designed by Carlo Scarpa for the Veneto pavilion at the 1961 *Italia 61* exhibition in Turin, on display at Le Stanze Del Vetro, Venice, 2023 (Photo: © The Author, 2023)

Thus, glass production in Parma was shaped by the creation of the Italian state and market. This entanglement with the national construct gained an extra dimension with Italy's involvement in the First World War, as the need to provide the Italian army with food and medicine created an increased demand for glass bottles. To meet the army's requirements, Bormioli Rocco focused on expanding and rationalising its container glass production, making it the dominant container glassworks in the region (Dondi 1992, 85).

This predominance continued after the war, with the glassworks purchasing its first semi-automatic Owens machines in 1938 and investing in the capacity to develop and maintain automated glass production. In this period, glassware was phased out of production (Dondi 2002, 134–37).



Fig. 3. Machine-made glassware from the 1960s, from Bormioli Rocco (Photo: © Lorenzo, 2024)

Reentry into the Glassware Industry

This interconnection with the needs of the Italian army affected the glassworks again during the Second World War when, along with the rest of Parma's industry, it was deemed to be of strategic importance and destroyed by heavy bombing (Dondi 1992, 88). When the glassworks was rebuilt in 1948 as part of the Marshall Plan, Bormioli Rocco began to produce glassware again. The re-establishment of its glassware production was influenced by its expertise in the mass production of container glass, as glassware was produced on semi-automatic machines previously reserved for container glass (Dondi 2002, 154–55).

By 1955, the glassworks had its first fully automatic IS-Machine for glassware production (Dondi 1992, 88). From the beginning, the new glassware designs were shaped by the machines that made them. The first pieces of glassware were in bright colours and mixed patterns, hiding the seams and blurred glass walls that could not be avoided in producing the first machine-blown glass.

With time, the company invested heavily in its machine-blown glassware production, leading to increased sophistication in machine-made glassware. In 1970, it managed to automate the welding of stems to glass goblets, thus fully automating the production of stemware. In 1998, the company developed fine-pulled stem glass, which enabled the production of strong stemware with thin edges and a smooth transition between stem and cup (Bormioli Rocco, 2025), a design that could not be mouth-blown.

The period after the Second World War also saw the establishment of two new glassworks in Parma with similar types of production: Borgonovo, founded in 1950, and Luigi Bormioli, founded in 1946. Over the years, Luigi Bormioli came to match Bormioli Rocco in production volume. Initially, the glassworks specialised in perfume containers, the production of which it automated in 1955. The company used this expertise in 1973 to enter the glassware market with the machine-blown stemware series *Light and Music*. Following the same path as Bormioli Rocco, the company invested in machine-blown production and improvements in the durability of its glassware to create a glassware design that played on the strengths of machine-made glass (Bormioli Luigi 2024).

Today, the companies' design cultures adhere to an engineer's ethos, prioritising functionality and technological innovation over artistic development. This prioritisation can be seen in their catalogues, which downplay the aesthetic development of their glassware. Instead, all energy is dedicated to describing the improvements in their glassware's durability, recyclability and clarity (Bormioli 2019; Bormioli Rocco 2023). Furthermore, both companies have sought to improve their glassware's function as a "tool" for wine drinking by cooperating with sommeliers in stemware production (Bormioli 2014, 51–52; Bormioli Rocco 2023, 35–36).

This design culture persists in Parma's two other glassworks, Borgonovo and VDGLASS (founded in 2000) (Vetreria Borgonovo 2024; Vdglass Company 2024). While the glassworks in Parma have never been called upon to represent Italian design, their production and design culture were undoubtedly shaped by the establishment of the Italian market and the needs of the Italian state.



Fig. 4. Machine-made glass from Luigi Bormioli; notice the reference to its strength and functionality on the package (Photo: © Museum of Southeast Denmark, 2024)

The Danish Glass Design Culture

From its inception, Danish glass design culture was firmly connected to the Danish home market. It began in 1825 with the establishment of Holmegaard Glasswork to create a facility for the national production of glass after the country's loss of Norway in 1814, where glass production had been situated (Buchwald and Schlüter 1975, 11–14). The glassworks started with producing bottles, but soon broadened its production to glassware. It provided the Danish market with copies of Central European designs (McConnell 2006, 74), making it nonsensical to talk about a Danish glass design culture. Like Bormioli Rocco, its production was mouth-blown, but organised as an industry (Schlüter, Riismøller and Larsen 1963).

As Denmark began to industrialise in the 19th century, more glassworks appeared with the same broad production systems. These glassworks started to merge in the second half of the 19th century. Thus, by the start of the 20th century, there were two companies in Denmark: Kastrup Glassworks, which specialised in container glass, and Holmegaard Glasswork, which specialised in glassware, providing the Danish market with everything from pressed glass to cut crystal (Schlüter, Riismøller and Larsen 1963). Together, they shared the Danish home market, protected by tariff walls, as had been the case in Parma.

A Danish Style?

During the first half of the 20th century, both glassworks began moving into each other's markets, producing container glass by machine and glassware by hand (Schlüter, Riismøller and Larsen 1963). The two glassworks began to develop a design culture based on functionalism and the vision of providing glassware at every price range in the Danish market (McConnell 2006, 138–59).

With the introduction of machine-blown glass in Europe in the 1950s, both companies conducted their own experiments. Kastrup made some machine-made glass (Kock 2001), but invested little in its production. Holmegaard Glasswork explored the options of investing in machine-blown glass (Holmegaard Glasswork's Archives, box 309). However, it eventually decided that there was little incentive to risk capital



Fig. 5. The technological system that assisted Holmegaard Glasswork's mouth-blown production in the 1970s (Photo: © Museum of Southeast Denmark, 2024)

investing in such a system, as the Danish market could not absorb the volume that would be produced (Holmegaard Glasswork's Archives, box 98). The company decided to focus on mouth-blown glass instead. Thus, the size of the Danish market limited the glassworks' production.

As foreign glassworks began to enter the Danish market, the Glassworks found themselves needing to restructure to meet the competition. This led to the two glassworks merging into the company Kastrup-Holmegaard Glassworks. At the same time, the production of glassware and art glass was placed at Holmegaard Glasswork (Schlüter, Riismøller and Larsen 1963, 33).

To face the international competition from machine-made glassware, the new company began producing a line of glassware designs in 1966 that made a virtue out of being handmade (Lütken 1986). These designs were known as rustic stemware because of their heavy mass and thick edges, which ensured that they could only be mouth-blown (Schou-Christensen and Bendtsen 2002, 114). The first glass in the series, *Tivoli of Copenhagen*, was made for the German market, but its instant success convinced the glassworks to introduce it, and similar designs, such as *Skibsglas, and No. 5*, in Denmark as well. The designs became hugely popular in the 1970s and early 1980s, and together with a series of art glass, fostered the first unique Danish glass design culture (McConnell 2006, 138; Jackson 2000, 90).

In contrast to Parma, the Danish glass design culture distanced itself from machine production, focusing instead on mouth-blown glass and design as an expression of the designer's artistic inclination. This focus was evident in their sales material, which showcased the designers and the aesthetics of the glassware. Additionally, Kastrup-Holmegaard Glassworks' production of glassware was on a much larger scale than that of the glassworks in Murano, and it was assisted by different machines and molds. The use of machines reduced the production cost and the glassworks' dependency on the glassworker's talent.

This production system meant that the glassware, although more expensive than machine-blown glass, could still be bought by the

average Danish consumer. The glassworks thus managed to create a line of designs that could fulfil its ambition of producing for the entire Danish market. At the same time, the focus on making affordable mouth-blown glassware meant that the designs had to be produced within the confines of what the machines and moulds allowed. Thus, the Danish glassworks could never produce the more refined glassware that could be made in Murano.[4] This mode of production ensured that Kastrup-Holmegaard, to some extent, tried to compete on price with glassworks that made machine-blown glass, putting pressure on the company as machine-made glassware became increasingly sophisticated and salaries grew (Holmegaard Glasswork's Archives, box 339).

During the 1980s, the *Rustic glassware* fell out of favour, and Holmegaard Glassworks (Kastrup-Holmegaard Glasswork changed its name to Holmegaard Glassworks in 1978) tried to find a new design. Still attempting to produce for the entire Danish market, the company attempted to make more sophisticated stemware within the confines of its production apparatus while revisiting its ambitions to make machine-made glassware by installing a centrifuge machine (Lassen and Schlüter 1987).

The centrifuge was a compromise dictated by the company's lack of confidence in the small Danish market's ability to buy enough glassware to support the investment in automating production. The machine could automate the production of bowl-shaped glass, but not stemware (Cummings 2002, 170), thus creating two different modes of production for the glasswork. The machine was used to make the hugely popular *Lotus* candleholder at a fraction of the cost of a handmade piece of Holmegaard glassware (Steinbeck 2020, 176–77). While the *Lotus* was an individual success, it led to an undermining of the glassworks' image as a higher-end brand producing glassware whose qualities could not be matched by machine-blown glass. By the 1990s, the increased sophistication of machine-made glassware, together with the undermining of its brand, caused Holmegaard to begin losing customers, culminating in its closure in 2008 (Steinbeck 2020, 182).



Fig. 6. Holmegaard Glasswork's Skibsglas from 1970 (Photo: © Museum of Southeast Denmark, 2024)

Binding Design and Nationality with Production

Examining the glass design cultures of Murano, Parma and Denmark reveals a clear connection between their designs and production. In Murano, the glassworks chose to produce luxury items that could be made only by a few skilled glassblowers. They did not participate in the glassware industry's automation, which was gathering momentum in the 1950s. In contrast, the glassworks in Parma embraced automation, creating designs that drew on engineering, functionality and durability over artistic aspiration. The Danish glassworks found a middle ground by combining handcraft and machines to mass-produce mouth-blown glass, resulting in a design style that aspired to an artistic, aesthetic quality while still being affordable.

4. By interview with master of the glassmakers at Holmegaard Glasswork Eric Engelbrecht (2022) and glass designer Peter Svarre (2023).

Murano's glassworkers could probably have made convincing copies of Bormioli Rocco's early stemware, or there may have been glassworkers at Holmegaard Glasswork capable of recreating Venini's designs. However, none of the glassworks could have done it in an economically sustainable way. Thus, their designs were dependent on their production apparatus. As discussed in the section on the concept of production, this understanding of the interconnectedness between production and design has recently been explored by craft design historians, such as Jessie Stein, Elise Hodson and Ezra Shales (Stein 2019; Hodson 2019, ii; Shales 2017). The cases discussed in this paper could be understood well through the lenses of these authors. Exploring the production of glass designs in Parma, Murano and Denmark reveals that the designer was, as Hodson (2019, ii) argues, far from the sole author of the designed object. The cases also demonstrate that production cannot solely be understood within a binary categorisation of industry and craft, where production impact declined as industrialisation increased. Instead, most production can be found on a spectrum between the two poles—a concept explored by Ezra Shales in *the Shape of Craft* (2017). Shales argues that industrial production can contain significant agency, embedded with the hidden labor of craftsmen who make such production possible. This idea translates well to the glassworks presented in this study, which employed a multitude of craft masters, including grinders, glassblowers, patent makers and tool makers.

However, the radically different modes of the glassworks' production and the resulting designs demonstrate that this authorship cannot be limited only to craftspeople, but must also be understood as being influenced by the entire system, including engineers, machines and organisational structures. This system affects not only the details of how a designer's drawing may be operationalised, but also what they may design in the first place. Therefore, by influencing design culture, production becomes an essential intermediate through which a design culture can be affected by the factors that affect production itself, including national factors.

As Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei have pointed out, the increasing attention given to globalisation has put the "national" as an analytical category under pressure in the humanities and social sciences (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2016, 2). To some degree, the focus of this analysis on production in glass design cultures can justify this pressure—in both the Danish and Italian cases, the glassworks and their designs were affected by external factors, such as foreign techniques, competitors, and markets that inspired or compelled them to adopt specific modes of production. Nevertheless, by focusing on the design culture's production, its connection to the national construct through the politics and territories of the nation-state is clearly revealed.

In the case of Murano, the Italian state's decision to order light installations from Venini ensured a continuous demand for the industry's niche production because of the exposure that came with those orders. In the case of Parma, the creation of the national Italian market and later the economic demands of the Italian army were crucial for the glassworks' ability to invest in machines that could mass-produce glassware. In Denmark, the national impact came from a limited domestic market that dictated the type of production the glassworks found viable to invest in. And the glassworks attempted to face international competition in the Danish market. Thus, the cases support the notion that even in a global world, nations still play a role (Lees-Maffei and Fallan 2013, 6).

As globalisation represents a challenge to the idea of a national design culture, so does the increased attention on regions and cities. While this may not be the case in Denmark, whose size limits the formation of strong regional identities, the cases in Italy demonstrate that the regions played an essential role in defining distinct glass design cultures, especially in the case of Murano, whose style and form were older than the state of Italy. While this may seem like a clear challenge to the notion that Murano was a part of a national design culture, this may not be the case. Following the proposition of Manuel DeLanda (2016) that cultural phenomena are an assemblage that can exist within another assemblage, one can argue that the regional and

national can coexist without the need to build a hierarchy between them. For instance, in the case of Murano's glass industry, its glass came to be associated with Italy, which helped the industry maintain its production method in the long run. In Parma, one can go even further, as the growth of its glass industry and the region's industrialisation were connected to the unification of Italy. Thus, much of what can be seen as specific regional modes of production and design in Parma was dependent on the region's role within Italy.

These examples of interplay between regional and national identities point to the need to understand design cultures that Munch and Dalla Mura describe as existing in a room with a "multi-directionality of influences" and in "the interplay of different scales ranging from global to regional, from national to local". Production is far from the only relevant way to explore multi-directionality. However, it is an important aspect of the study of national design culture, both as production in itself plays an important role in defining design culture, but also as a medium through which design cultures are connected to the economic, material and political factors that define the nation that the design cultures are a part of.

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A Foreign Provocation: Memphis Milano in Norway

Astrid Skjerven

Abstract

The design studio Memphis Milano (1980–81), led by the Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass Jr., was internationally (in)famous for its unorthodox design and critical attitude to functionalism. The exhibition *Memphisgruppen* (The Memphis Group) at Galleri F15 outside Oslo in 1984 was the studio's first broad presentation in the Scandinavian countries. The event constituted a provocation to the design community. The article discusses the background to the event and its impact on the various parts of the design and crafts community as well as the business world, in comparison with the situation in Italy. The analysis reveals that it represented a break with the prevailing style and ethos of modernism and Scandinavian design traditions. Only the museums of decorative arts and a few connoisseurs purchased objects from the exhibition. A few companies attempted to produce cheap furniture in the same style, but these ventures turned out to be a commercial flop. Some of the leading furniture designers were inspired by the group's work, and the same was the case with a few design students. For the craftspeople, the event constituted an incitement to explore new ways of expression without regard to functionality. The event contributed to greater diversity and a more exploratory way of designing. Most importantly, it dealt a serious blow to the authority of the design establishment. The group's critical attitude and semantic approach were only partly understood, due to different traditions, attitudes and competence in Italy and Norway, and therefore only briefly adapted.

Background

After World War II, Italy had become a leading international design nation with producers spanning from large commercial companies to small experimental groups. Many of the designers had an architectural education which was based on classical principles. In contrast, Norway's production of design artefacts and the number of people working in the field were very small and based on crafts skills. Workshop training played an essential part in the education. The National Federation of Applied Art (Landsforeningen Norsk Brukskunst) was an authoritative bastion in the field of design. Its ideological and aesthetic views constituted a canon. Since its foundation in 1918 (then called Foreningen Brukskunst), its goal had been to gather professional forces for the sake of modernity, i.e. design without historic references (Hylbak 2007). Its leading figures were limited to a few persons who also played principal roles in the museums and in design education. Since the inter-war period, the organisation had been an ardent follower of modernism and the principles of functionalism, with emphasis on functional form, truth to material and simplicity. This conception continued in the post-war period, when the idiom of "Scandinavian design" further emphasised the values of craft skills and what was understood as the inherent beauty of natural materials (Skjerven 2001). From the late 1960s and onwards, the organisation experienced that the young generation was questioning the established values and seeking other ways of expression. Some of them left and established their own associations.

Interest in postmodernism had existed in Norway since the 1960s. The phenomenon had been fiercely debated among architects since

the first Venice Architecture Biennale in 1980, where postmodernism was the main theme (Grønvold 1985). The designers followed suit, particularly the furniture designers, the dominant designer profession in Norway. But as a profession based on craftsmanship and tacit knowledge, it was less engaged in the public written and oral discourse and displayed its attitudes mainly through its objects. The most renowned of these furniture designers, Peter Opsvik, embraced postmodernism from the mid-1970s. His colleague Svein Gusrud related his engagement directly to the Memphis group and characterised the first Memphis show at the Milan Design Week (Salone del Mobile Milano) in 1981 as an eye-opener which immediately led to a new direction in his work (Lombardi 1985). An example is the leaning utensil *Stand In* from 1982, painted in bright contrasting colours, which offered the user an alternative way of resting without leaning on a slanted board (Fig. 1).

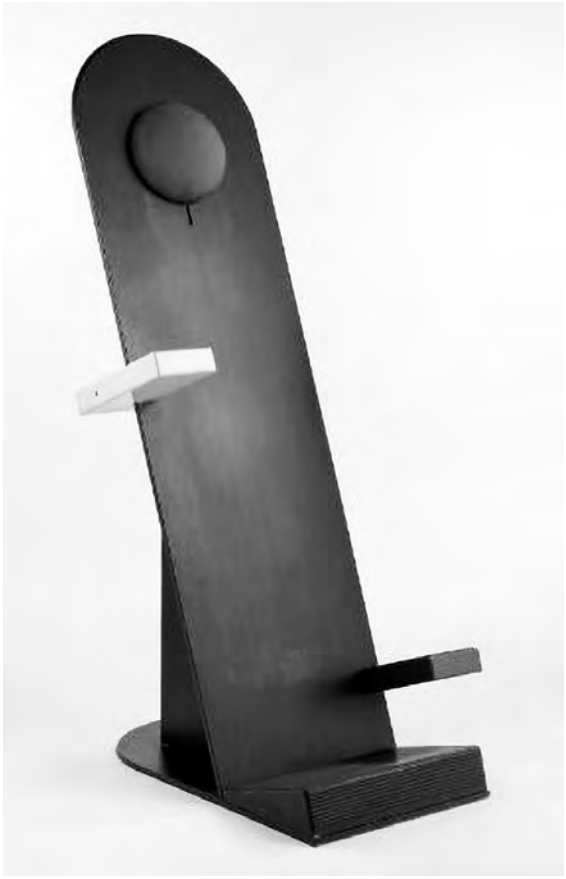


Fig. 1. Svein Gusrud, *Stand In*, Westnofa Workshop, 1982 (© The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo)

The Italian design group Memphis Milano, founded by the architect and designer Ettore Sottsass Jr., was one of the most spectacular exponents of postmodern design. During its existence from 1980 to 1987, it served as a playground for his ideas. In contrast to the architectural conception of postmodernity based on the writings of the American architects Robert Venturi and Charles Jencks, the group made little use of historic elements. It focused on phenomena in contemporary society, and its imagery drew on stereotypes and banalities in trivial culture, such as cartoon figures. The objects had unorthodox, ambiguous shapes and were made of a mixture of precious and non-precious materials in bright colours. In this way, they questioned modernistic conventions. More than being useful appliances, the objects constituted a language that mediated critical comments on the shortcomings of functionalism (Radice 1984). Sottsass was particularly engaged in how people relate emotionally to artefacts and sought to identify the nature of the object as a sensory experience, a field that functionalism had neglected (Barbero 2017). He regarded his work as critical statements: "I saw the private environment as the stage of a drama, rather than a place where you put objects. I read the environment as an anthropological event, in that every piece of furniture, every object […] is the result of a certain intellectual and political condition" (Sottsass 1982).

Despite his radicalism, Sottsass belonged to an Italian elitist architectural tradition which had its roots in classical principles. He explicitly referred to the writings of the 15th century architect Leon Battista Alberti (Thomé 2017) and used them as a point of reference in his playful and questioning explorations. He liked to compare the impact of the group's work with that of early Cubism: although existing for only a short while, it initiated a major change in the field (Thackara 1998).

The group's first exhibition took place at the Milan Design Week in 1981 and created a media frenzy (Adamson and Pavitt 2011). From then on, Memphis Milano was a pivot point in the discourse on postmodern design. It had a controversial status in the international design community, whose ruling idiom was still

modernism. One of its leading bastions, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, refused to display and acquire products designed by the group (Reed 1984).

The Memphis exhibition in 1984 at Galleri F15 at Jeløya outside Oslo came about thanks to the initiative of Fredrik Wildhagen, a young design historian and teacher at the National College of Art and Design (now Oslo National Academy of Arts). As an ambitious and socially engaged professional, Wildhagen saw the need for innovation. Through his connection with Stephen Bailey, the Director of the Boilerhouse Project at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (later to become the Design Museum), where the exhibition *Memphis in London* was shown in 1983, he managed to organise a similar event in Norway. It was quite a coup for him to present an exhibition of this avant-garde group in a remote country with limited international design reputation. In fact, it was its first broad presentation in the Scandinavian countries. Initially, the Memphis group was reluctant to the idea, but finally accepted when they were offered an agreement of pre-purchase of the objects for a certain sum of money (Bentzerud 1984). Wildhagen had studied art in Italy and his knowledge of the language was probably an advantage in the negotiation process.

Wildhagen joined forces with Lars Brandstrup, the unconventional and successful director of the newly established art gallery Galleri F15. He had made the place a public attraction, following his motto "people will come to art if we show art that engages people" (Bolin 2023). This was the first time a design exhibition was shown in a gallery dedicated to fine art in Norway. This was a transgression of disciplinary borders and constituted a provocation to the design establishment of the Federation of Applied Art and its allies. Such events traditionally took place at one of the three museums of decorative arts in Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim.

According to Wildhagen, the intention behind the exhibition was "to challenge our usual conception of functionality as decisive for how things should look. Functionality is not enough to create appealing environments. Today, we are about to transfer to a new value basis in our view of shaping the local environment". Wildhagen and Brandstrup wanted to reach a broad audience (Wildhagen and Brandstrup 1984). The exhibition was funded by Alitalia and other Italian and Norwegian companies with the help of the Italian-Norwegian Chamber of Commerce (Camera di Commercio Italo-Norvegese) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ibid.). The graphic design studio Art Aid, already an admirer of the Memphis group and, like them, describing itself as "a kind of guerilla" in the field of design (Adamson and Pavitt 2011; Jørgensen and Lindberg 2005), designed the catalogue and a series of three posters without charge. To facilitate critical discussion, a one-day seminar for designers, craftspeople and other stakeholders was held with the presence of Sottsass as the main attraction (Fig. 2).

Reception

The exhibition was a major public success, attracting some 50,000 visitors (The Galleri F15 Archive). Brandstrup's motto of making people "come to art" was certainly fulfilled. Another sign of its success was that the posters by Art Aid were frequently stolen from the poster stands, probably to be used as decoration in private homes (Flesjø 2024) (Fig. 3). The mass media embraced the spectacular event and published reports with illustrations of the eye-catching objects. The exhibition was even featured in a television programme (Sottsass 1984). Sottsass gave interviews in which he presented a simplified version of his views. He argued that the concept of functionality had to be viewed from a new perspective. Furniture should possess a certain life and not be shaped primarily in accordance with its use. It should appeal to the senses and at the same time give a picture of contemporary society. The intention was not to provoke but to shake people out of their indifference (Bugge 1984). According to the agreement, a large number of the objects on display were purchased by the museums of decorative arts in Norway. In addition, Danish and Swedish museums, as well as a few Norwegian collectors, acquired objects (The Galleri F15 Archive).

In the design community, the exhibition evoked mixed feelings. To mainstream practitioners, it was a provocation that evoked as-

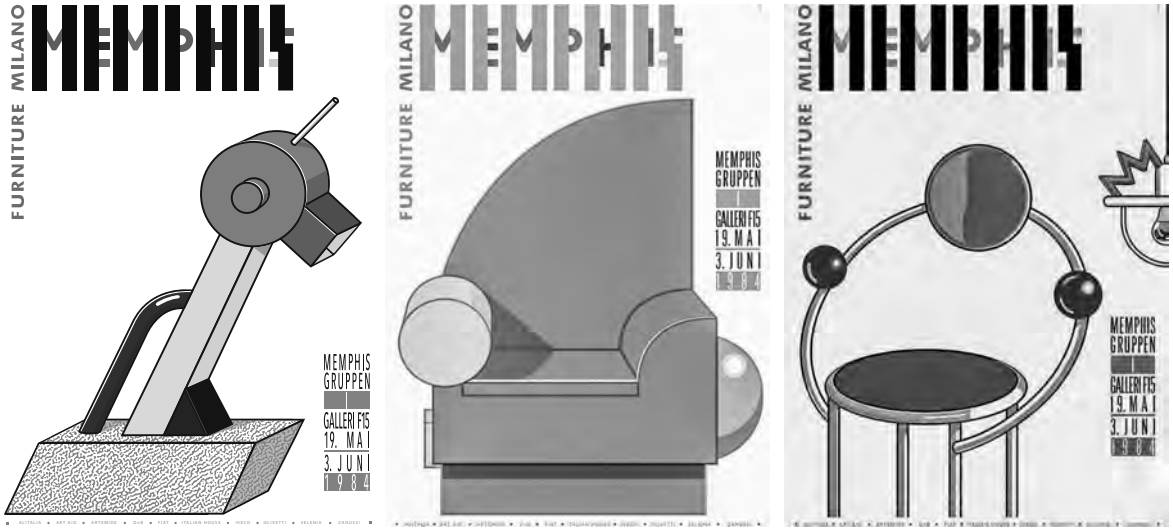


Fig. 2. Posters designed for the exhibition by Art Aid, 1984 (© GRID)

tonishment and negative reactions. The various standpoints became evident in the accompanying seminar as well as the reviews. The seminar was titled "Changing Values: Designing for a New Ambience". It gathered seventy-five designers, craftspeople and representatives of companies, museums and organisations. Sottsass held an introduction on the underlying ideas of the group, titled "The Conceptual Basis of the Memphis Approach to Design", while his manager and wife Barbara Radice, presented their work. It was followed by a panel discussion. According to one of the participants, Jan Michl, the audience was at a loss as to how to interpret both the objects and Sottsass' talk; consequently, the following debate was rather tame (Michl 2014). Sottsass had even included an appeal to the senses with explicit references to sexuality, which might have caused a certain feeling of intimidation in the audience. Michl was an associate professor in design history and an ardent critic of functionalism. Without being invited to do so, he presented a paper outlining his attitudes. He regarded Memphis as a formal style that contributed to pluralism, but not necessarily as an ideal to be followed (Michl 1985). The representatives of the museums, teachers and professional organisations seemed to have remained silent.

Although the feature sections of newspapers published spectacular reports, their art reviewers were negative. Even Hebbe Johnsrud of Norway's most renowned paper, *Aftenposten*, compared Memphis with "The Emperor's New Clothes" (Johnsrud 1984). The ultra-conservative art critic Paul Grøtvedt characterised the objects as "neo-functionalistic" and "a patchwork of clichés" (Grøtvedt 1984). Unfortunately, he missed the point: that the presentation and questioning of clichés was exactly the group's intention. Conversely, the anti-modernist painter Anders Kjær, protested against these viewpoints and called *Aftenposten*'s reviewer "a bad-tempered modernist" (Kjær 1984).

Most designers were reluctant to accept the work of the Memphis group. The most authoritative of their reviewers, the furniture designer Trinelise Dysthe, admitted the "need for ideological innovation", but claimed that Memphis did not contribute in a positive way. She argued that the group benefited from the current vacuum of innovation in Norway and, with implicit reference to the broad media coverage, accused them of creating a "media cocktail" which included the "most important ingredients: the shocking, the striking, the provocative—and above all —the most sellable—something new". She interpreted the many purchases by the design museums as a wish to be "modern". She probably did not know that the purchases constituted part of the deal to bring the exhibition to the country. Furthermore, she argued that the group's adoption of the slogan "form follows *fantasia*", rather than the functionalistic "form follows function", resulted in a narcissistic aesthetic and the neglect of the users' needs. Therefore, their prod-



Fig. 3. Ettore Sottsass Jr. at the exhibition *Memphisgruppen*, 1984 (© GRID)

ucts could not be defined as furniture (Dysthe 1984). Her attitude to postmodernism in general was that it was a self-centred expression of eclectic images without roots in ethical values. This summarised the attitude of those designers who were critical of the group:

> The house as an *image*, the chair as an image, reveals a superficial take—a decadent reflection of life, as far from reality as the screen's images. With postmodernism's *experience*-design the aesthetic becomes narcissistic. It becomes a means to egocentric self-cultivation which reflects all that we want to be—all that we want to have. It no longer deals with values, but with expressions. And that is perhaps the most terrifying with the eclecticism of the current eclectic style, that it reveals our lack of attitude-creating values (Dysthe 1985).

A few students were present at the seminar and reacted positively. The metalsmith student Kyrre Andersen regarded the event as "confirming and inspiring" for their professional development, and saw Wildhagen as an enthusiastic promoter of their work (Andersen 2024). They found the exhibition refreshing and enjoyed the humour of the objects (Lombardi 1985).

The representatives of the crafts community found the exhibition and the seminar inspiring. The glass artist Ulla-Mari Brantenberg stated that the event was an incitement to experiment freely, regardless of prevailing conventions in the professional milieu and the current taste among most Norwegians, who still embraced rural traditions: "What made the largest impression was the inventive way they combined colours and the freely shaped furniture. The 1980s were characterised by pine, and the era of peasant furniture still prevailed. Memphis touched and contributed to the wish of the time to become free, be free, and to shape freely" (Brantenberg 2024). Besides the incitement to liberate oneself from aesthetic conventions, she mentions the prevailing vogue of wooden furniture, particularly pine, embraced both by designers and consumers, as a particular obstacle. Liv Mildrid Gjernes, who worked with a combination of various materials, shared her positive attitude (Gjernes 2024).

IKEA was among the few companies represented. The director of its Norwegian division, Ken Muff Larsen, interpreted the unorthodox objects in a positive way and expressed enthusiastically: "This is a great provocation that we have to take into consideration." In accordance with his company's goals, he promised to offer similar products 100 times less expensive than the ones from Memphis ("Ikea-direktør om utstillingen på Alby" 1984).

Impact

The event led to a follow-up exhibition of Memphis and Italian art design at Galleri F 15, *Meta Memphis*, featuring sophisticated objects by the Memphis group and *Arte Povera* artists (Flesjø 2024). It transgressed the disciplinary borders between art and design. The reviewer for the design journal *Bonytt* disregarded the minimalist, *Arte Povera*-inspired aesthetic and the linguistic qualities, dismissing the exhibition as a mere display of exclusive objects lacking functionality (Christiansen 1990).

Wildhagen's connections in the Italian design environment also contributed to an exhibition of products from Alessi, another postmodern group with a less provocative idiom, which took place at the Museum of Decorative Arts in

Oslo in 1991–92. The company represented a less controversial kind of postmodernism than Memphis and could therefore easily be accepted by both the museums and the public.

The exhibition *Interiør Nå* (Interior now), held at the National Museum of Decorative Art and Design (Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum) in Trondheim in 1984, gave an overview of Norwegian furniture related to Memphis and other postmodern trends. The objects were experiments in shape, ergonomics and functionality rather than critical and semantic mediations. Several of them were prototypes that never went into production. An exception was Terje Ekstrøm's chair *Ekstrem*. It was a bold experiment in ergonomics in accordance with the current interest in the theme. Ekstrøm had not visited the Memphis exhibition and regarded the group's work as interesting but concerned only with appearance (Lombardi 1985). A few fabrics in bold colours and patterns were also displayed, most of them prototypes. The textile designer Pia Bjørnstad recalls that she "for once was allowed to do something which the management of her employer, the textile producer Gudbrandsdalens Ullvarefabrikk, knew would never come into regular production". Therefore, she was allowed to experiment. As for Memphis' impact on the textile industry, she argues that "Memphis arrived, was observed—and that was that" (Bjørnstad 2024). This probably displays the general attitude among the producers. Opstad, the young director of the museum, had previously expressed his enthusiasm for Memphis. He had purchased a large number of objects at the exhibition in 1984 (The Galleri F15 Archive). He even planned a special "Memphis" room as an addition to the museum's "Jugend" and "Scandinavian design" room (Lombardi 1985). This was never realised, but a large number of Memphis objects have since been displayed in the museum's permanent exhibition (Flor 2024).

The various disciplines within design and crafts all reacted in their own way. The most direct impact was probably in the field of graphic design, for which the striking posters by Art Aid had paved the way. The posters were a self-dependent paraphrase of the Memphis idiom and achieved international approval. They were awarded the gold medal Form 83, arranged by the Norwegian advertising industry, and acclaimed as one of the world's fifty best posters by the leading graphic design organisation Graphis in the same year. They are included in the collections of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, in Design Museum Denmark and the Stedelijk Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and Design (Myrseth 2024). One of Art Aid's members, Reidar Holtskog, claimed that Sottsass considered these posters the best ever produced for the group (Jørgensen and Lindberg 2005). Today the posters are collectors' items and have also been reprinted. Their success was a spearhead for a broader postmodern approach to visual communication (Veiteberg 1998).

As previously discussed, the attitude among the furniture designers was negative, with a few exceptions among the elitist designers and the new generation. The attitude among the interior designers was the same. Those who were enthusiastic about postmodernism, however, had different ideals. They did not engage with Memphis but followed the Jencks-inspired path of the architects. Petter Abrahamsen was one of the most prominent. He was not present at the seminar and did not care to see the exhibition. Except for the patterns, he found Jencks and the other American architects more exciting, as they were more engaged in totality and architecture (Abrahamsen 2024). Abrahamsen specialised in the design of spectacular restaurant interiors (Thorvik 2020). They constituted a perfect scene for the young urban VIP crowd (Skjerven 2024).

Among the new generation of craftspeople, the attitude was yet another. Because of their break with the designers in the early 1970s, they had worked out a statement that defined the profession as more concerned with expression than function (Opstad 1989). They were pleased to have their belief in the necessity of experimenting with aesthetic means confirmed by the exhibition, although they did not regard Memphis as an ideal (Brantenberg 2024; Gjernes 2024). As Gjernes puts it: "Above all Memphis represented somebody who was engaged in the same [as us], but from a slightly different perspective. They have never been a direct inspiration source for me but represented radical forms in

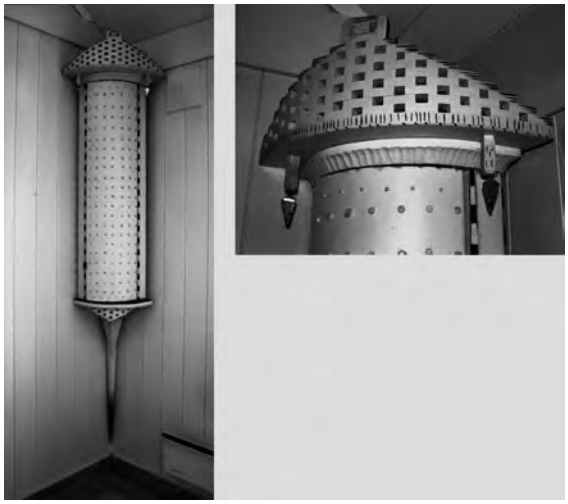


Fig. 4. Liv Mildrid Gjernes, *Gammel Jente i Hjørnet* (Old Girl in the Corner), 1985. Various materials (© The Artist)

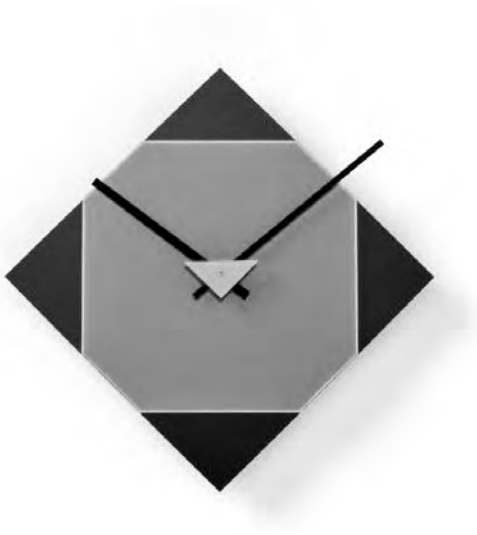


Fig. 5. Kyrre Andersen, Wall clock, self-production, c. 1984 (© The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo)

a common world of expression" (Gjernes 2024) (Fig. 4). In 1985, she was represented at the exhibition *Homo Decorans* at Louisiana Museum of Art outside Copenhagen along with Sottsass and other postmodern exponents (Gjernes 2024). Many craftspeople worked within a mode of expression that combined various historical and vernacular styles, which was called "international freestyle classicism" (Wildhagen 1988).

As for design and crafts education, the impact seemed to be restricted to a few students, of whom two had been present at the seminar. They were members of the group Trikk, whose products were the most prominent examples of Memphis influence. Kyrre Andersen, who had attended the seminar, designed a wall clock which was clearly inspired by Memphis (Fig. 5). Another of Trikk's members, Liv Blåvarp, described their work as part of a larger transformation: "We liked to regard ourselves as an instigator in a grand radical movement within our disciplines" (Ylvisåker and Skeide 2017).

The impact on producers was limited and not very successful. As early as the autumn of 1983, the year before the exhibition, IKEA launched its first Memphis-inspired product. It was a bookshelf that was a simplified version of Sottsass' *Carlton* bookshelf, which copied its oblique angles and bright colours but was mass-produced out of cheap materials. In this way, the Memphis idiom had been "democratised" and had become affordable to a broad customer group, but lacked the linguistic dimension and refinement. The undertaking had a short life and had little impact on the company's later product range, except for a slightly livelier colour scheme and a few geometric patterns (IKEA catalogues 1983–86). As Scandinavia's biggest producer of furniture, this demonstrates that after a short craze, the broad public was not particularly enthusiastic about Memphis. It was no competitor to the pine vogue.

In the early 1980s, the well-established furniture company Ekornes, which was Norway's biggest and covered the mainstream domestic market, was investigating ways of reaching the new generation of young, fashion-oriented consumers. One of its initiatives was a collection called "BIK BOK Casa", made in cooperation with the fashion company BIK BOK, which had specialised in making informal teenage clothes. The collection was colourful and characterised by oblique angles, and the advertisements displayed young people in unconventional sitting postures (Fig. 6). However, it was not suited to the company's production facilities and could not be delivered to the retailers. The experiment led to an increase in Ekornes's already accelerating debt due to foreign competition (Høidal 2009). The only option in order to survive was to return to producing more traditional furniture.



Fig. 6. Advertisement for the furniture collection "BIK BOK Casa", Ekornes, 1984 (© Ekornes)

A few companies in other fields had similar experiences. The porcelain factory Porsgrunds Porselænsfabrik launched a few coffee services designed by the ceramicists Poul Jensen and Grete Rønning, but they soon disappeared from the market. The earthenware manufacturer Figgjo produced a few cups and bowls with angular shapes and patterns for a short while (Figgjo 2001). As regards high-end retail, the leading avant-garde furniture shop Expo Nova in Oslo sold a few Memphis pieces to collectors in addition to its selection of modernist classics. One of the shop's leading staff members visited the exhibition and found it interesting, but the only consequence of his visit was that he purchased the posters privately (Madshus 2024). During the years 1985–86, the design journal *Bonytt* published a few presentations of Memphis-inspired interiors, before reverting to displaying more traditional and nostalgic interiors, dominated by pine and other wooden furniture.

Conclusion

In sum, the impact of the Memphis encounter was limited, but significant. The group acquired few supporters among the designers, but the encounter led to a more diverse, experimental and less dogmatic approach to modernism. Some of the ideas were transformed and integrated into the modernistic idiom, which meant a more inventive approach to ergonomics, the use of bolder colours and hints of product semantics. A few young designers created Memphis-inspired objects for a short while. Petter Abrahamsen's restaurant interiors were dismantled as soon as the VIP vogue was over, and he continued with commissions with other concepts. The market flop of "BIK BOK Casa" and the resulting economic loss made the furniture industry stick to a conservative idiom in line with the taste of the common consumer. The museums continued to show exhibitions with objects that usually fulfilled the requirements of the modernistic canon. In contrast, the young generation of

craftspeople embraced the playfulness and aesthetic experimentation of the Memphis Group, although not its style. For them, it provided encouragement to move beyond functionality and to explore aesthetic and material concersn.

To the National Federation of Applied Art and other representatives of the establishment at the museums and design schools, the Memphis event was a serious blow. It had evoked a critique of modernistic values in a way that was difficult to counteract, to such a degree, in fact, that its coryphées lost their already deteriorating power. Consequently, the new generation achieved more power and opportunities to diversify.

In the series of reactions and undertakings during and after the Memphis event, there is a striking vacancy of serious analysis of the group's ideas and intentions. The event was conceived as an aesthetic experiment that criticised functionalism and disregarded functionality—a superficial and media-appealing show. Its critical reflection on contemporary society and the attitude to objects as sensorial artefacts was barely touched upon. Its explicit intention of being a temporary phenomenon also added to its low status as it was against the positivistic ideas of modernism. Not even the initiator Fredrik Wildhagen regarded the event as more than a break with tradition that questioned the prevailing values of modernism, but he did not mention how. This was in accordance with the ruling, tacit and non-discursive competence and tradition. It displays the gap between the Norwegian and the Italian design tradition. Ettore Sottsass Jr. and Memphis Milano represented a critical, conceptual and anti-ideological approach to artefacts, where practical skills and everyday practicality belonged to another sphere. The Memphis message was alien to the Norwegian audience, both in terms of competence and attitude, and thus represented a double provocation.

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Transforming Design Cultures

Nordic Lighting? Poul Henningsen, Christian Norberg-Schulz and the Myths of Scandinavian Twilight

Anders V. Munch

Abstract

The Danish designer Poul Henningsen developed elaborate theories of interior lighting from the mid-1920s onwards. He opposed the cold and reductive light quality of electric bulbs and sought to tame and cultivate this technology by design. He aimed for richer light for domestic use and achieved it through lamp design, colour reflections and the differentiated use of multiple lamps in the room to produce subdued yet varied lighting with subtle contrasts. It was a "culture" of lighting, he promoted, but he did not see it as specifically linked to the Nordic countries or traditions. His sensibility towards subdued nuances of light, however, parallels the highly praised variations and transitions of daylight in the North, often endorsed in both Scandinavian Design and Nordic painting. These are interpreted together in *Nightland*s by Norwegian architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz, based, however, on a dichotomy of North versus South, where cultures mirror geography and nature. A parallel reading of Henningsen and Norberg-Schulz thus highlights the understanding of lighting while calling for critical reflection on regional identities. From this perspective, the case of domestic interior lighting is worth investigating to discuss whether the experience of nature and climatic conditions truly play a key role in Scandinavian Design, as often stated. This discussion contributes to both understandings of interior lighting and critiques of Scandinavian Design and its transnational relations.

Northern Latitudes and Scandinavian Design[1]

It has repeatedly been claimed that Scandinavian Design reflects the nature and the climatic conditions of the Nordic countries both functionally and aesthetically. This claim seldom refers to the design of outdoor equipment for rough weather but rather to design for domestic interiors, for the home. Such sweeping statements specify neither the climate—which varies greatly from Copenhagen to Tromsø—nor the traits of the cited designs—from icicle glasses from Iittala to hi-fi devices from B&O. The claim recurs so frequently and loosely in both official and commercial promotion of Scandinavian Design, and usually without convincing examples, that it seems almost impossible to substantiate or meaningfully investigate. Large photo prints of landscapes from the four Nordic countries were part of the exhibitions of Scandinavian Design at the Milan Triennali in the 1950s, and they still seem to lurk behind as a kind of mental backdrop for the branding of Scandinavian or New Nordic Design (Skou and Munch 2016), as also discussed by Niels Peter Skou in this volume.[2] The repeated references to nature and climate have been part of a self-exoticisation, where Nordic designers and firms perform according to the international image of the Nordic countries, that is, both highly modern and still firmly grounded in age-old traditions developed out of natural conditions (Munch 2017). A contemporary example of the cliché is a designer statement on the homepage of the Danish firm Muuto:

1. An early version of this chapter was published as a paper without illustrations in the proceedings of *Back to the Future. The Future in the Past*; ICDHS 10th+1 Barcelona 2018, edited by Oriol Moret, 825–28.
2. The use of "Nordic" and "Scandinavian" is often arbitrary and confusing. I use "Nordic" in a broad, descriptive sense and refer to "Scandinavian Design" as a specific understanding of design ideals related to the successful promotion of mid-century lifestyle design from the Nordic countries. The confusion is never-ending, though, and the firm Muuto, mentioned below, has, after its early success as promoter of New Nordic Design, changed all references of "Nordic" to "Scandinavian". This happened after Knoll became owner of the firm in 2017.

> The result of a Scandinavian life, with its abundant seasons, is a sporadic culture with both extrovert and introvert periods. The dark and long winters leaves [sic] us inside our homes for a great amount of time, whereas the short but intense summer makes us spend as much time outside as possible. It prompts us to have high expectations to the objects that we surround ourselves [sic] (Muuto n.d.).

It makes sense to speak of Scandinavian design traditions reflecting significant home cultures in the Nordic countries that historically might have had an initial impulse from rural households and sparse conditions (Gelfer-Jørgensen 2003). But in modern urban housing, very little design seems to respond to climate or constrained living conditions. If the home cultures still carry references to this, it has gone through several reinterpretations, because the rural and functional style fitted into national romanticist ideals of the home, especially moulded by artists around 1900 (Lane 2000), and later became part of visualising the ideal of the welfare state as better homes and everyday design for everyone (Mattsson and Wallenstein 2010). If Nordic citizens today spend both more time and money on interior design than those in other parts of the world, this relates more to the cultural status of homes shaped by this tradition than to climate alone.

One interior design issue, however, that might have the most direct relation to the geographic conditions of living at the latitudes of the Nordic countries is lighting. The huge differences in natural light across the seasons and long transition periods between day and night, as well as many cloudy days, can make lighting of the home a different challenge than in countries further south. Again, this is also shaped by national or regional habits and home cultures that call for highly differentiated lighting. But it has a direct relation to geographical and climatic conditions and basic experiences of daylight. Anthropologists can detect how modern urban dwellers in Denmark use very differentiated lighting across seasons, daytimes and social occasions (Bille, 2015). Other people living at the same latitudes and under comparable conditions might have some of the same habits, but the warm Gulf Stream makes the Nordic countries more inviting and populated than other areas on the same latitude. Significant uses and designs of lamps for domestic lighting have evolved as integral parts of the home cultures of the Nordic countries.

It is also difficult to qualify the issue of lighting as a relation of design and geography, but we have two different entrances here that make it worth investigating and discussing a possible cultural nexus in this case. The functionalist theory of lighting and lamp design developed by the Danish designer Poul Henningsen (1894–1967) elaborates on highly differentiated lighting and a finely tuned sensibility to both aesthetic and functional qualities of light (Henningsen 1974). From a completely different angle come interpretations of such a sensibility and experience of light expressed and elaborated in traditions of Nordic architecture and painting. They are presented by the Norwegian architectural historian Christian Norberg-Schulz (1926–2000) in his 1996 book *Nightlands*. Norberg-Schulz represents a phenomenological, Heideggerian understanding of the regional traditions as to how architecture and design are embedded in local conditions, *Genius Loci*. An intriguing aspect of a comparison between him and Henningsen is that the latter, as a left-wing modernist, became known as an internationalist and rejected national or local peculiarities (Munch 2020). Phenomenological understandings of the experience and quality of light connect these two, rather diverging lines of thinking and make the comparison worthwhile. My critical reading is both a contribution to historiographical discussions on the geography of design (Calvera 2005), as well as to theories on interior lighting and lamp design, where Henningsen's extensive writings are a valuable source, only randomly introduced in English. Where Norberg-Schulz argues on the grounds of local values, place, soil and climate, Henningsen insists on universal physical facts and physiological needs.

The research literature on light, lamps and lighting is rather diverse and represents diverging perspectives and disciplinary interests. In architecture there is a strong focus on how to use both daylight openings and artificial lighting to express spaces, surfaces and volumes in the design of buildings. A chapter in *Experiencing Architecture* by Steen Eiler Rasmussen

unfolded the many subtle ways architecture uses light to produce spatial experiences across history (1959), and many other books have followed internationally. Rasmussen, however, also introduced interior paintings to show the adjustable and rich lighting of Dutch 16th-century homes, and this leads us to the field of art history, where both interior and landscape paintings are studied for evidence of different experiences of lighting. The idea of a specific light in the Nordic countries was unfolded by Kirk Varnadoe in an exhibition catalogue, *Northern Light*, on paintings around 1900 (1982), and this has been a reference in both Norberg-Schulz and later books on light in Nordic art and architecture (e.g. Sørensen and Haug 2012; Mathiasen 2015). Interpretations of the Nordic light in paintings and poetry have, however, produced romantic and mythical understandings of the North as a mystic world in itself, clearly stated by Norberg-Schulz (1996).

A very different kind of approach is the literature on lamp design, which focuses on the shapes, styles and inventions, rather than the light produced by the lamps. Interestingly, Scandinavian and Italian lamp design are often mentioned in relation to each other because of their leading roles in mid-century lifestyle design (Koch 1994). But the different cultural contexts, uses and understandings of lighting are rarely investigated in these kinds of design histories (Bassi 2004). You need to go to broader cultural histories like *Anden i lampan* (The Spirit in the Lamp) by the Swedish ethnographer Jan Garnert, who uses all kinds of sources, including paintings and later advertisements to understand the cultures of lighting from traditional to modern societies (1993). Most literature on light design is either rather technical in the attempt to control and reproduce lighting (Cuttle 2003) or based on phenomenology to understand experiences of light, and my cases are closest to the latter. Where Norberg-Schulz built on Martin Heidegger's sense of place, other phenomenologists like Gernot Böhme discuss lighting as part of spatial atmospheres, seen in a broad spectrum from nature to event design (2017). This chapter is neither on the design of architecture nor lamps, but on the design, use and understanding of lighting in Nordic home cultures connecting the mentioned lines of research.



Fig. 1. PH lamp advertisement, "1000 lights in the eyes without a blink", Louis Poulsen & Co. *Kritisk Revy*, 1926

Cultivating the Defective, Electric Light

Poul Henningsen was trained as an architect but was most active as a writer of cultural criticism in Danish newspapers and journals. His international fame is, however, based on his lamp system, the *PH* lamp, presented at the Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in 1925 and further developed over decades together with the Danish manufacturer Louis Poulsen & Co. From the 1920s onwards, he wrote many articles presenting his understanding of light and his lamps and engaged in continuous debates with engineers about the quality problems of electric light. His basic view was that the light of the electric bulb was damaging in domestic interiors, both to use value, comfort and aesthetic experience. In one

of his early texts from 1926 on *Modern Lighting of the Home*, he states: "It is a fact that the electric light is defective, and its defects should not be endured in a room where people stay" (Henningsen 1974, 38).[3] Consequently, he adds, it is regarded as a "necessary evil among civilised persons". Henningsen urged the engineers to improve the light qualities and not only work on the efficiency of the electrical bulbs. But technological development went in the wrong direction, as later electric bulbs produced an even colder light than the original carbon-filament bulbs. And if the engineers would not solve that problem, the designer had to tame electric light through lamp and interior design. In the advertisement (Fig. 1), he demonstrates how his design protects even a child from looking directly towards the strong electric light source. The innocent child holding his initials is used to brand his product in this rather improvised but innovative advertisement, characteristic for the journal *Kritisk Revy*, of which he was the editor-in-chief.

In his texts, Henningsen used physical theories of the colour temperature of different wavelengths in the rays of white light, as well as his own practical experiments. His mission, though, was basically to save and develop a sense of differentiated lighting from the home culture traditions. "The lighting of the home must be warm. It is a tradition, but women's heroic fight against cold light bulbs shows that it is living. After the cold light of the day, it is a rest that evening light is warm", he explains in 1945 (Henningsen 1974, 113). It is, however, not only a question of light temperature, but also of having all colours represented in the white light, so that all colours in the room stand clearly, either through a rich light source or enriched by reflecting walls and surfaces with different colours. "Reflex light is by composition the richest light in a drawing room. It has touched all coloured things in the room and comes back as a soft and beautiful light. It is the best illumination of paintings" (Henningsen 1974, 47). This is not only an aesthetic issue of the experience of paintings, but also of working with handicraft. The quality of work depends on the quality of light. "To produce the genuine effect light must be so rich that it does not deprive the object any of its material or colour properties" (Henningsen 1974, 44).



Fig. 2. Poul Henningsen, recommended lighting in a living room. *Kritisk Revy*, 1927

The photograph of a *PH* lamp hanging in a living room (Fig. 2) shows how Henningsen wanted his lamp to highlight the table and here the delights of wine and glasses on it, while casting a more diffuse light across the rest of the room. We can also notice how the painting is seen not only in the lamp's light but also in the reflected light from the white tablecloth and other parts of the interior. It is interesting to no-

3. All quotations from Poul Henningsen are translated by the author.

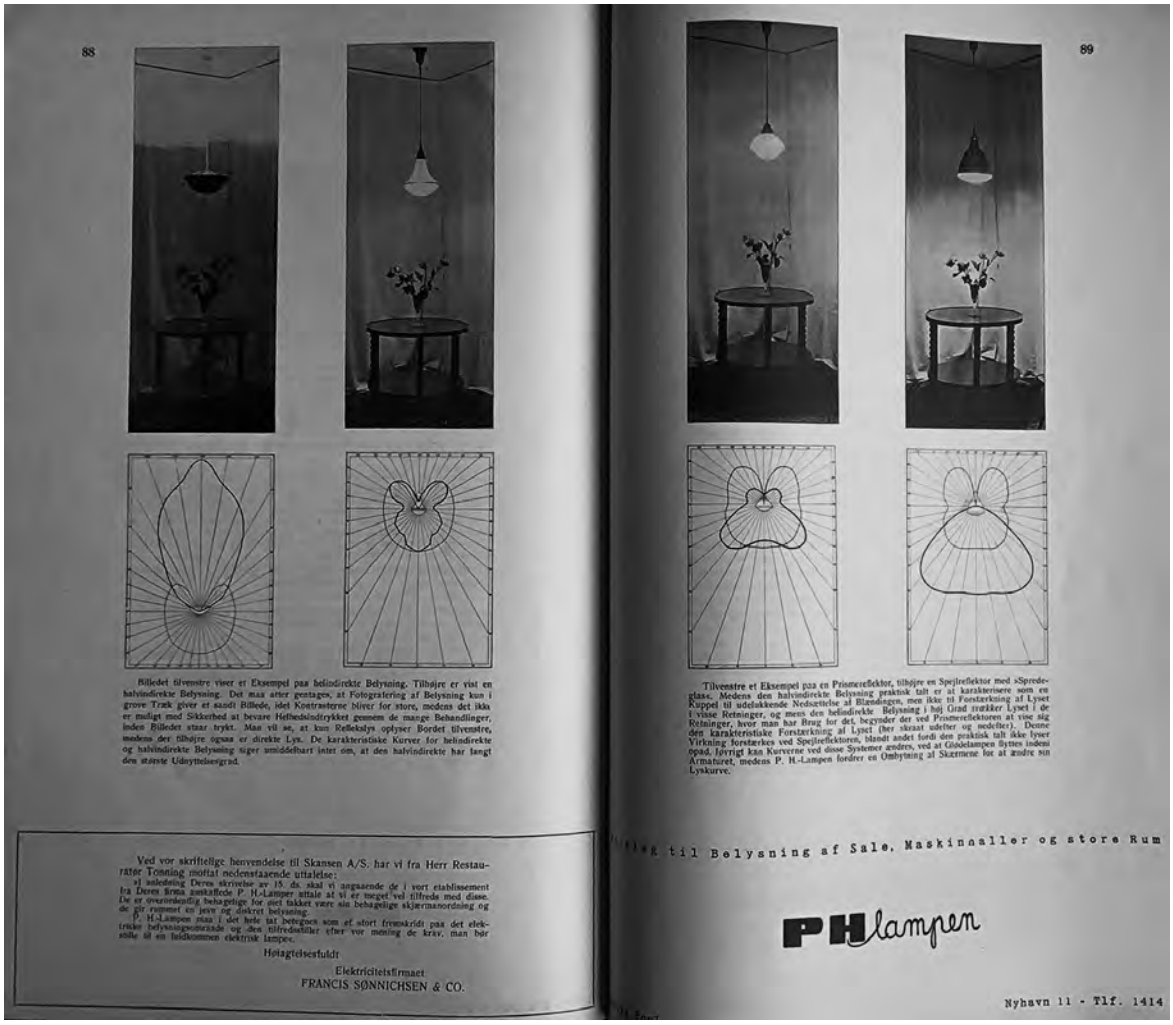


Fig. 3. Poul Henningsen, illustration of contrasting lighting effects. *Kritisk Revy*, 1927

tice here that Henningsen chose a photo from a rather old-fashioned interior. He clearly saw his *PH* lamp system as modern design and part of the modernist struggle against aristocratic and bourgeois lifestyles. In the case of lighting, however, he wanted to demonstrate how modern design helped to create a richer experience of light and objects, in line with the popular wisdom of women's home culture. The *PH* lamp was designed to hang relatively low to achieve its differentiated lighting effect. Often, however, it was installed to provide general lighting as well, because it did not blind the eyes, as the bulb was covered. But the reduced light made it suboptimal for this purpose. The *PH* lamp system was received as a design icon of international modernism around 1930 and selected by modernist architects such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, J. J. P. Oud and Alvar Aalto. They also used it for general lighting only, so it was chosen more as a sign of modernity than out of an understanding of its cultivating lighting effects. This distinction is crucial to Henningsen, however. His many articles on lighting show his effort to educate the Danish public to appreciate and practise a richer and more diverse lighting. In other photographs (Fig. 3), he sought to demonstrate the effects of other lamp designs producing different degrees of light, ranging from fully indirect to fully direct lighting, and how this changes the experience of the room and its objects and surfaces. His articles were not translated, however, and this partly explains the divergent uses by international modernists. His ideas were presented comprehensively in English only much later (Jørstian and Munk

1994).[4] Another explanation is that Louis Poulsen sold a lot of *PH* lamps in Denmark and abroad for general lighting in exhibition halls and workspaces, where they were cherished for being glare free, so this was the public image of the lamp.

The rich and functionally adjusted lighting is, furthermore, not complete with only one light source, but demands more lamps used in variations. "The home with correct lighting has clear variations in the light. The most important spot is best illuminated; the inferior parts lie weakly illuminated. Variations in light can be very large", he argues in the Norwegian journal *Byggekunst* in 1928 (Henningsen 1974, 18). Practicalities of use, comfort of rest and wellbeing, as well as aesthetic experience, are tightly linked in his arguments for optimizing the holistic effect of lighting the domestic interior. The composition of the right light source, enriching colours, reflecting elements and various placing of lamps adjust the light for its purposes in the home. His texts are written to architects and individuals to promote a cultivation of the use of electrical light, an educated domestication of this modern technology. As such, Henningsen's texts were part of the advice literature on home interiors written by the functionalists and other modern reformers (Lees-Maffei 2003). He called for a modern culture of lighting, and this is manifest in the missionary claim of 1928: "It does not cost any money to light up a room correctly, but it demands culture" (Henningsen 1974, 24). The right use of electric lighting in both homes and urban spaces was a general concern in the Nordic countries in that period, and Sweden even had the Swedish Association of Light Culture to give advice and promote ideals (Garnert 1993, 178).

A Nordic Experience of Daylight?

As mentioned, Henningsen tried to argue based on science and practical experiments, but the aesthetic and cultural assumptions behind these are obvious. When he claims, for example, that the model of interior lighting should not be the

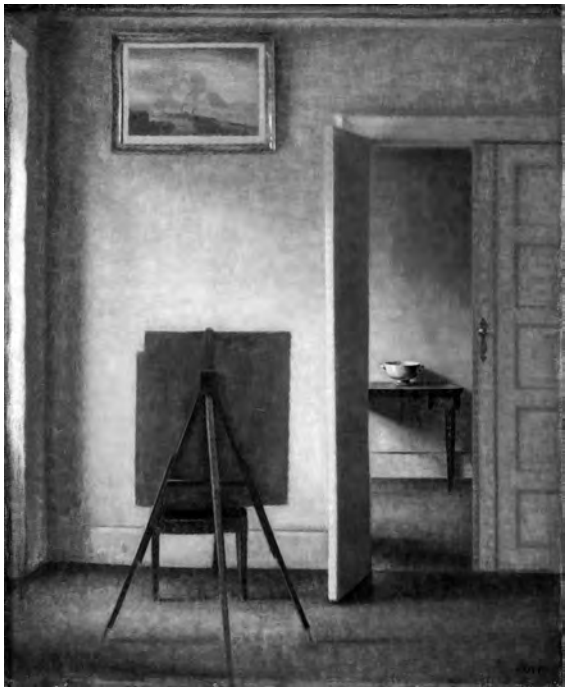


Fig. 4. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior with Easel*, 1901 (© SMK / National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen)

clear daylight at noon, but the warmer and dimmer light at sundown, it sounds like a fact of natural science. "First, daylight is not a specific kind of light, but a whole range going from candlelight to the light from a blue north sky on a summer day. […] Relatively, the eye sees better by the warm light of sunset and sundown than by the cold at noon" (Henningsen 1974, 112). But this is chosen as an aesthetic ideal to emphasise the more toned light and oblique rays, here in line with traditions of Danish home culture. The last rays of daylight were to be enjoyed and exploited for appropriate tasks as the family gathered in the prolonged *heure bleue* to save the fuel of the kerosene lamp. As Henningsen in his later years considered the very different lighting culture of Southern Europe—often with full illumination by fluorescent tubes—he only deduced that these countries did not know about the "cultivation of the light of the light bulb that went on in the Germanic countries" (Henningsen 1974, 214). He thought they were lacking the cultural development of this field.

4. See also the Italian introduction of Henningsen's work and ideas in *Domus*, presenting him as the most overlooked designer in lighting design (Tropeano 1995, 80). I thank Maddalena Dalla Mura for checking references to Poul Henningsen in *Domus*. A photo of his PH5 lamp was published in 1960, as it was displayed together with his *PH Artichoke* lamp at the Milan Triennale that year, but without any explanation of the underlying ideas ("Alla XII Triennale" 1960, 26).



Fig. 5. Vilhelm Hammershøi, *From Fortunen*, 1901 (© SMK / National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen)

But this difference is clearly not only a matter of a universal process of domesticating electric light.

The experiences of the slow transitions in daylight across seasons and weather conditions are different in the Nordic countries, and this has created different needs and sensibilities to more subtle effects of lighting. In *Nightlands*, Christian Norberg-Schulz points to Nordic examples of both interior motifs and landscape paintings working with subtle degrees of grey and dim nuances depicting a reality other than clear forms and colours. One example is the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916). His paintings of interiors from the 17th- and 18th-century quarters of Copenhagen are very precise studies of sparse daylight. "All is subdued, becomes still, intimate, and the world is clothed in nuanced greys. At the same time, things exist precisely and with clear identity, but they do not possess the character of *Gegenstand* with eidos-forming shadow, and thus they lack southern plastic presence" (Norberg-Schulz 1996, 13). To Norberg-Schulz, this is evidence of how the misty but forceful world of *Nightlands* even influences the interiors and the way light affects people of the Nordic countries. It stems from a different, natural light and how it shows the landscape in a more blurred, but dynamic way. "Here in the North, the sun does not rise to the zenith but grazes things obliquely and dissolves in an interplay of light and shadow. The land consists not of clear massings and distinct spaces; it disperses as fragment and repetition in the boundless" (Norberg-Schulz 1996, 1).

This reading of a North versus South dichotomy is labelled as "hyper essentialistic" by Mari Lending, and she regards it as a blind reproduction of stereotypes in historicist and early modernist architectural theories. It is common across the writings of Norberg-Schulz but appears most idiosyncratic in *Nightlands* (Lending 2006, 21).

Such reflections on cultural geography reinvigorate an older tradition of German philosophy. This was widespread in early German *Kunstwissenschaft* as an attempt to explain art forms and periods going beyond or against the classic norms of Antiquity and Italian Renaissance. An example is *Abstraction and Empathy* from 1908 by art historian Wilhelm Worringer:

> Northern man's relationship to nature was undoubtedly not that state of familiarity which we found amongst the Greeks […]. The Northern peoples experienced within a harsh and unyielding nature the resistance of this nature, their isolation within it, and they confronted the things of the outer world and their appearance full of disquiet and distrust (Worringer 1997, 107).

These stereotypical interpretations contrasting North against South—a Mediterranean, distinct and empathic worldview contrasting with a Northern, abstract reaction to a bewildering world—became popular and widespread to promote cultural identities of Northern Europe against the classical heritage of the Roman world. They were used from the 1890s on to promote ideas of a distinct Germanic mentality by the populist, *Völkisch* movements, as well as in the later *Myth of the 20th Century* by the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg. A scholarly value of Worringer's book, however, was to investigate and explicate diverging kinds of aesthetic expressions and perceptions which were relevant to the expressionism and abstraction in modern art and architecture.[5] In the same vein, we can pick aesthetic observations on Nordic light phenomena and depictions from Norberg-Schulz without accepting his cultural dichotomy of North and South. Living in the Nordic countries might give people more occasions to dwell on diverging weather and daylight phenomena in Nordic cultures, but they are hardly foreign to other people's experiences or life worlds.

On one occasion, in an article in the Swedish art journal *Paletten* in 1945, Henningsen also uses painting to explain the complexity of ideal interior lighting, and he points to one of the masters of Northern European art, Rembrandt van Rijn. "He was surely an artist of lighting! In his pictures, you find the harmonic range from deepest shadow to highest light, while we are living in rooms more reminiscent of woodcuts without shades, tone in between or nuances" (Henningsen 1974, 111). For Henningsen, the point is to criticise the use of only one, unshaded light source in the room producing hard contrasts and few nuances in colours and shapes. That performs like a woodcut print compared to a painting. Rembrandt—as the master of *hell-dunkel* painting, or *chiaroscuro* as the same phenomenon is known in Italy—is mentioned to inspire a more nuanced and consciously composed lighting of rooms. Back in 1928, Henningsen highlighted both functional and aesthetic advantages of this. "It is the tones in between half shadows that make it possible for the eye to glide from illuminated to shadowy surfaces (only lit by reflex light) and at the same time experience details in the shadowy surfaces" (Henningsen 1974, 21). This kind of lighting produces dynamic relations between surfaces and colours, space and objects, producing both atmosphere and differentiated light for multiple purposes.

As in a *hell-dunkel* painting by Rembrandt, differentiated lighting can "carve out" appropriately illuminated spaces in darkness, where space, objects and actions are seemingly the same substance as part of a common atmosphere, a mood changing dynamically with graduations of light. Conversely, the general lighting from one light source tends to split things by harsh contrasts. Norberg-Schulz tries to explain the differentiated lighting through the Nordic climate. "In the North we occupy a world of moods, of shifting nuances of never-resting forces, even when the light is withdrawn and filtered through an overcast sky" (Norberg-Schulz 1996, 2). And he thinks this experience of "never-resting forces" is forming the understanding and perception of the world. "This entails that Nordic inhabitants cannot isolate themselves from things but become drawn into a dialogue with the given; hence things are not objects but effective forces" (Norberg-Schulz 1996, 197). This is his version of a phenomenological understanding of our being in the world. Through the case of lighting,

5. This contribution has even had a recent reassessment both in theories on Minimalism, through Robert Smithson, and Film Studies, through Gilles Deleuze.



Fig. 6. Interior at the Danish Academy in Rome with *PH* lamps (Photo: © The Author)

this perspective becomes relevant to an understanding of how the design of objects and interiors tries to meet and adjust to users in Danish functionalism, as expressed by Henningsen.

Light is not only a precondition for seeing as such, but specific lighting conditions shape how we experience, understand and use things and spaces. Differentiated lighting lets us experience how space, body and matter "fold" into each other and perform together using a Deleuzian concept (Deleuze 1993). The reference to baroque painting, however, opens a further, critical question on whether the Italian *chiaroscuro* paintings expressed a different spatial experience, and if so, how this might relate to more recent cultures of interior lighting in Italy? It is very relevant to this volume on Italian and Nordic design cultures, but I must leave this question to experts on Italian home culture and interior design.

Gernot Böhme has elaborated on the concept of "atmosphere" to investigate both perception and aesthetics; how spaces, things, colours, light, sounds, bodies as well as practices interact and produce a coherent atmosphere that moulds how we act and perceive. Light is, as mentioned, a precondition for seeing, but "we have to ask whether light as lighting may not be even more important, insofar as it allows us to see the world in a particular way and thereby founds our affective participation in the world" (Böhme 2017, 156). Nordberg-Schulz's descriptions of the dim and moody light of Nordic landscapes, where objects and spaces seem woven together, are obvious examples of this understanding of atmospheres and ecstasies of things (Böhme 2017, 20). The Danish anthropologist Mikkel Bille has applied Böhme's concept of atmosphere specifically to domestic, interior lighting based on field studies in Copenhagen (Bille 2015). He discusses how emotions and culture play a role when inhabitants install and light up the home with lamps, candles, etc. throughout the day and the seasons. "Attention to orchestrations of light in shaping the presence of the world hence also brings focus on the

atmospheres that people are opting for and the dynamics through which they are engaging the world by tying together vision and cultural expectations, material culture, emotions, and bodily gestures and practices" (Bille 2015, 57). He observes that attention to elaborate lighting—using many different light sources and patterned lighting routines—is in line with the advice of Henningsen and his understanding of the cultivation of light, preserving the role of shadow and the richness of colours and moods. "In this sense, the light from the bulb, candle, sun or moon may visually present the world but it is in the nuances of darkness and shadows —in the absences and invisibilities—that the particular atmosphere comes to life by oscillations between connecting and separating things and people" (Bille 2015, 61).

The Heritage of Nordic Light Culture

It is still an open question as to what extent we can say that such a sensibility and attention to lighting is tied to the living conditions of the Nordic countries or merely survive through ideals of home culture. Asking Henningsen, we should recall that in the development and use of electric light, he saw a lack of culture. He called for the cultivation of a technology that had erased earlier practices of lighting. According to him, the sensibility had vanished, so it was not present as part of the Danish home culture any longer. Artificial lighting has only increased since then, continuing to level out differences in daylight and climate—especially for urban dwellers. Henningsen himself embodied an educated, professional sensibility, trained through architectural and painterly attention to space, colour and light. He sought to promote a new culture—and explain the right installation and use of his own lamp system. Perhaps this complex understanding represents an elitist, professional attention rather than a general sensibility among the Nordic people? Norberg-Schulz's exotic examples from *Nightlands* are above all an inspiration to architects and artists attentive to Nordic traditions. Anthropological observations, however, reveal a rich and vigorous practice of elaborated lighting among present-day Danes. They respond to the changes of daylight and seasons and explain how they want to achieve the moods of cosiness and security, *hygge* in Danish, creating either individual comfort or social framing. Yet again, these are urban dwellers living in central Copenhagen apartments, not responding to nature or climate in other ways. Lighting does play a specific role in current Nordic home cultures, but this is formed by historical conditions and current lifestyle trends together with seasons and climate.

Neither the universalism of Henningsen nor the cultural dichotomy of North and South of Norberg-Schulz fully explains a specifically Nordic practice of lighting. But the subtle and useful advice from Henningsen and illustrative examples and descriptions from Norberg-Schulz point towards a complex understanding of light and interiors that influences both design and everyday life. Together, they outline the conditions of a Nordic light culture, in which the experience of natural light connects with cultural practices and aesthetic sensibilities—also evident in artworks—and influences design practice. Such experiences are hardly an exclusively Nordic phenomenon, yet knowledge of Nordic understandings and practices might enhance similar experiences, expressions and practices of lighting, atmosphere and spatial coherence elsewhere.

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Marble, Monumentality and Modernity: Italian Connections in the Aarhus City Hall

Toke Riis Ebbesen

Abstract

Materials were radically re-valued in early and postwar modernist design and architecture with conflicting views on culture, heritage and politics. The debate about the Aarhus City Hall (1937–42) and its connections to then contemporary Italian architecture sets the scene for understanding the special role of marble in Denmark. When Arne Jacobsen and Erik Møller won the architectural competition for the new Aarhus City Hall, their project was a stark, flat-roofed, functionalist iron-reinforced concrete building. On its completion, the city hall had an "Italian" tower and was clad in marble, due to a popular demand for a more monumental and less functionalist building. However, the monumentalism was more akin to traits in contemporary Italian rationalist architecture than classical buildings of power and wealth. The Porsgrunn marble from Norway that was chosen did not resemble the classical marble types associated with the monumental, but rather resembled concrete—of a very fragile and porous kind. This chapter will argue that this particular marble was deliberately chosen to subvert monumentalism and ease tensions with Danish regional modernism and the concept of nature stone.

Introduction

This chapter exposes the clash of values in the application of marble in the Aarhus City Hall, designed by Erik Møller and Arne Jacobsen (1937–42). Through this case, pre-World War II modernist valuations of marble in modernist architecture and design and the striking connections of the building to Italian rationalist architecture connect with how marble and Italianicity affected—and were evaluated in—Danish mid-century design and architecture.

The word marble derives from Aegean Greek, *marmaros*, "a snow-white and spotless stone, a rocky mass" (Mammoni and Mammoni 1985, 10). By geological definition, marble is a metamorphic calcite rock (limestone), often polluted with minerals which create the characteristic marbling patterns. Melted under heat and pressure, marble has a fine-grained and highly stable crystalline structure (Lefteri and Lefteri 2014, 216). This makes the material comparatively easy to sculpt and polish and also useful for load carrying elements. However, marble is much more than just a material; it is connected with power and discourse throughout history.

Since the temples and palaces of classical Greece and the Roman empire, marble has been a symbol of monumentalism and connection with the past (Napoli and Tronzo 2018, 2). Although marble had in ancient times vied with clay as everyday kitchen vessel material in the Mediterranean area, by the classical period marble and other coloured stones like porphyry had come to bestow a sense of the monumental, closely associated with the hierarchical power of grandiose palaces, churches, triumphal arches, memorials and towers. Since then, waves of period styles have employed marble to connect with hierarchical, godly or economic power display, whether through the white marbles of renaissance statues, American governmental buildings or baroque churches with multicoloured marble mosaics and pillars.

As pioneering modernist designers and architects of the early 20th century aimed at urgent radical departure from past traditions and towards social reform through design, the association with elitism and tradition led many of them to denounce the monumental. Pioneer modernists instead embraced relentless pro-

gress, technology and social reform. An internationalist outlook meant a distancing from the nationalistic historicist and classicist architectural styles of the preceding period (Greenhalgh 1990, 10). Lewis Mumford fittingly wrote in his disavowal of the monumental as being too inflexible and inadaptable to the needs of modernity: "a modern monument is a contradiction in terms: if it is a monument, it cannot be modern, and if it is modern, it cannot be a monument" (1938).

Furthermore, modernism's fascination with new synthetic materials based on industrial technology and fossil fuels, such as steel, concrete and plastic, made these an essential component in the movement's creation of a new system of expression. Therefore, the value of non-synthetic materials came to be contested within modernist design and architecture (Rifkind 2018, 133). Marble, being both associated with the monumental and the non-synthetic, accordingly became a less preferred material for modernist thinkers within design and architecture, at least initially. As an example, Le Corbusier used the Parthenon temple's "noble spirituality" (Le Corbusier 2003, 122) as a reference for standardisation in modern architecture. However, the construction material of the Parthenon, a white-yellow Pentelic marble, was absent from his account of the values of the Greek standard. Modernity was instead to materialise in steel, glass and concrete. Although figures such as Loos and Hoffmann had used marble where appropriate for symbolic purposes, by the 1930s most modernists had an antagonistic relationship to marble.

Marble as Material and Its History in Denmark

In the second half of the 20th century, the petrochemical revolution, subsequent technical advances and a globalised mass production led to a worldwide, widespread propagation of marble in both architecture, interior and product design. Until then, however, marble remained expensive to quarry into larger uniform plates for building purposes and was equally costly to transport over long distances. As a result, while desired for its sculptural qualities, colours and patterns, for most of history marble remained an expensive and rare stone in countries like Denmark, which had no naturally occurring marble deposits. While pre-modernist Danish architects and designers admired and were inspired by buildings which were clad in marble in countries like Italy, they used it sparsely, mainly for sculptures and the occasional detail of a building, not in design or as facades in architecture.

In the early 1800s, sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen had become world-known for his marble sculptures in Rome. However, on his return to Denmark in 1842, the recently built Thorvaldsen museum erected in his honour was not to be clad in marble. Even the so-called Marble Church in central Copenhagen, which began construction in 1770, remained uncompleted for a long time, mainly because of the expense of the marble. The church was only completed in 1894 by harnessing other materials like sandstone, local Faxe limestone, cement plaster, stucco and painted marbling decorations. Right up to the end of the 20th century, marble largely remained absent and outright rejected by Danish architects and designers. In short, marble in Danish design and architecture was widely regarded as pretentious and associated with a kitsch, overeager display of power.

This chapter attempts to address this discomfort with marble as a material by revisiting the history of the Aarhus City Hall and its relations with Nordic regional modernism and Italian rationalism, informed by interdisciplinary diversions into the geological, aesthetic and sensory properties of the material and its relation to the notion of nature stone.

The Genesis of the Aarhus City Hall

The Aarhus City Hall was the result of a public architect competition that directly opposed the monumental tradition, as did the competition winners, Erik Møller and Arne Jacobsen. In the years leading up to 1937, the growing city administration had been scattered throughout the city centre. The competition thus called for a new city hall that would contain assembly and council halls, as well as administrative functions of the city. As a contemporary reviewer, the architect Gunnar Krohn, wrote in praise of what he described as the qualities of a non-monumental building, "nobody should feel

oppressed by a building's unapproachableness" (Krohn 1945, 216).[1] This was exactly what the architectural competition had aimed at when it stressed that the building was to be "shaped like a distinct administrative building, a work building, with no pompous pretensions and without a forlorn 'city hall' style" (1937 architectural competition rules, Fode 1991, 10). Thus, the new city hall was to signal a radical departure from the past and showcase the open democratic spirit of the city's social democratic government. Furthermore, the forlorn city hall style probably referenced the largely historicist city halls of the other larger Danish cities, Odense, Roskilde, Aalborg and, most importantly, the city hall of the Danish capital, Copenhagen. Designed by Martin Nyrop in 1890, the Copenhagen City Hall borrowed partly from Italian renaissance architecture, but it was also known as one of the main expressions of the national-romantic *Skønvirke* style (Millech 1977, 218), which preceded functionalism in Denmark.

Both Møller and Jacobsen were trained in a neoclassicist tradition (Thau and Vindum 2005, 37ff) by figures such as Kay Fisker and Ivar Bentsen. However, by the end of the 1930s, both architects were more closely aligned ideologically with European functionalists such as Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and with the Nordic variation of functionalism, which emerged after the 1930 Stockholm exhibition. Consistent with this ideology, buildings were to be clear manifestations of their function or idea and advances in the technical means available, and vanguards of the Nordic social democratic welfare state (Trägårdh 2012), not signature projects of an architect creator or elitist power display.

Since his graduation in 1928, Erik Møller had been employed at Arne Jacobsen's office. By 1935, he had made a name for himself with his project for a public library in the Danish town of Nyborg, praised as a democratic, unpretentious building. As an early example of regional modernism, which Finsen has termed "Danish functionalism" (Finsen 1986), the library fitted in well as a mediator between the typical provincial townscape of Nyborg and the stark red-bricked mediaeval Nyborg Castle. With its simplified and subdued townhouse style, clad in red bricks with a raised, unornamented roof, it integrated modernist construction principles with local materials and an interpretation of local vernacular style. While the regional modernism in Danish design and architecture incorporated a positive valuation of perceived local stylistic elements and materials, which it inherited from the preceding Skønvirke style, it remained distinctly modernist in its praise of simplified form, innovative technology and construction techniques.

Today, Arne Jacobsen is best known in popular culture for his post-war sculptural furniture. His preceding architectural projects often carried a poetic touch, similar to the lines of Aalto or his main inspiration, Gunnar Asplund (Thau and Vindum 1999, 15–16), which set them apart from mainstream European functionalism. The completed interior of Aarhus City Hall did, in fact, display organic lines and elegant furniture. However, on an ideological level, Jacobsen was an uncompromising functionalist at the time he and Møller conceived the Aarhus City Hall. Thus, in their original competition bid, the architects conceived the building's exterior and constructive elements as a highly functionalist structure (Fig. 1). After winning the competition, Arne Jacobsen declared in a statement that "the time is not for surplus luxury and decoration" (Fode 1991, 15). Compared to Erik Møller's 1935 library or the similar yellow-brick buildings of local Aarhus University from 1931, the city hall project made few concessions to tradition, to the style of surrounding buildings, or to monumentality. The project used the latest steel and concrete structures, and each part of the building was adapted to specific civic functions.

These visions were soon to be contested. By the end of 1938, outspoken criticism from conservative notaries of the time led to a revised requirement from the city council; the city hall was to appear more monumental—less a common building and less undignified for its purpose. Most Danish architects supported the original project, among them notably the Danish design

1. All quotes from Danish are translated by the author.



Fig. 1. Aarhus City Hall. Drawing from the winning project by Erik Møller and Arne Jacobsen without a tower and covered in white plaster, 1937 (Photo: The Arne Jacobsen Archive at the Royal Danish Library, © Erik Møller and Arne Jacobsen, 1937)

critic Poul Henningsen (Fode 1991, 18), but the debate ended with a compromise with the outspoken critics, who claimed that the building defied centuries of architectural tradition. As the mayor said, "a middle ground between functionalism and conservatism must be possible" (Fode 1991, 17). Jacobsen and Møller initially opposed this, arguing that the simplicity of their proposal manifested the democratic and approachable ideals of Danish and local politics. In fact, when compared to some of the other proposals for the competition, Møller and Jacobsen's project arguably was one of the less radically modern. But in the end, the two architects were firmly told to revise the project according to the monumentalist demands (Fode 1991, 15).

While adhering to the demands of the conservative criticism on a formal level, it is difficult not to evaluate the resulting building as more or less subtle mockery. A revised project, accepted by the city council, had a slightly more raised copper roof, smaller window frames in untreated pine and teak instead of white paint, a less withdrawn entrance, a new clock tower and a stone facade. In the words of the contemporary modernist architect Gunnar Krohn, the city hall satisfied functionalist demands, being "a beautiful example of our time–Industrialisms–products: steel, concrete, glass, and the ability of machines to produce what you wish for" (1940, 214). Far from being in line with hundreds of years of tradition, most changes were quite impalpable, bringing the project subtly more in line with the by then relatively established regional modernism, exemplified in Erik Møller's 1935 library. The monumentality of the revised project was most evident in the two aforementioned amendments: the tower and the facade. The sketches now depicted the facade as a light-yellow tinted natural stone, a significant change from the white plastered cement facade of the original design (Fode 1991, 19). On a formal level, this adhered to the demands of the conservative criticism, as represented in the revised drawings presented to the city council.



Fig. 2. Aarhus City Hall today (Photo: © The Author, 2023)

In practice, the execution of both changes undermined the earlier wish for monumentality (see the finished city hall as it appears today in Fig. 2). Significantly, marble was never mentioned in the revised description.

Italian Inspirations

The two monumental changes were ostensibly inspired by, or shared, ideas from Italy, at least on a symbolic level. According to the received literature, the inspiration for the tower came from personal travels to Tuscany (Thau and Vindum 1998, 83; see also Krohn 1945, 217). Perhaps what was alluded to was Jacobsen's study trip to North Italy in 1925, from which he brought back numerous sketches of old palaces, piazzas, fountains and towers (Thau and Vindum 2005, 15–20). We may indeed find some of the most direct inspirations in Italy, but not in the picturesque inspirations evoked in this pretty account of Jacobsen's trip, as I shall argue. Such storytelling may also have served to embed the tower neatly within the same Italian narrative as the historicist city halls of the two other major cities in Denmark, Copenhagen and Odense, both partly inspired by the Siena City Hall. However, when looking at the architectural elements introduced, the changes more plausibly found inspiration in a broader modernist impetus and in similar preceding Italian architectural projects.

In Italy, rationalist architects had, in the decade leading up to 1937, struggled to create a radical modernist architecture for the new fascist Italy headed by Mussolini. While rationalism was concerned with connecting spiritually with the classical imperial past and embodying the revolutionary politics of fascism (Rifkind 2018, 144), it sought to achieve this through the modernist means and logic of the machine age (Frampton 1992, 203). Among the most important examples are buildings such as Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como (1932–35), the projects of the never-completed Esposizione 1942 city plan in Rome, as well as buildings in central Milan (Vadalà 2018).

In the Como project, Terragni aimed to create a transparent, modern space. This space was intended to be accessible to the masses and designed to display the revolutionary and regenerative power of fascism (Rifkind 2018). In contrast, the Danish city hall sought to embody a democratic and welcoming environment, accessible to the individual citizens of the welfare state, but also for serious administrative work. While different in ideology to the directives of the Danish competition, there remain particular commonalities in the actual building. Stylisti-



Fig. 3. Casa del Fascio in Como, by Giuseppe Terragni, 1932–35. Facade in white Botticino marble and visible frame structure of the roof terrace (Photo: Wikimedia, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, © Danny Alexander Lettkemann)

cally, Møller and Jacobsen's sketches of the city hall for the winning proposal resemble many of these buildings, as they shared skeleton-like reinforced-concrete structures, wide glass sections, radical scaffold-like towers and novel uses of marble-covered facades.

Notably, The Aarhus City Hall tower was extremely avant-garde for its time, shaped like a kind of fat chimney with an outside frame or scaffolding, with the tower clock unconventionally placed at the middle of the spire's height. Foremost, this kind of frame, which revealed the bare steel-and-concrete structure, was a recurring theme in Italian rationalist architecture. Hence, at least two very similar rationalist tower sketches preceded that of the city hall revision. Terragni's original competition sketches for the Casa del Fascio in Como clearly pictured a tower with an outside railing or scaffolding, while the finished main building partly kept a similar frame structure (Fig. 3). Similarly, Ignazio Gardella's 1934 proposal for a *Littoria* (fascist party) tower at the Piazza del Duomo had a central chimney with an outside frame. While never realised, both proposals bore an uncanny likeness to the later city hall in Aarhus. Likewise, the skeletal elements of the tower were explored in other finished and widely publicised rationalist buildings of the period. The temporal succession of elements goes from Italy to Denmark, but in the absence of evidence, proving a direct influence is not possible. Nevertheless, these resemblances suggest a shared pursuit of radical new forms within the broader functionalist movement, of which some of the most important traits found their most radical expression in Italy in that period.

The skeletal tower and ideological differences aside, many of these high-prestige fascist projects were also embellished in marble. They could have been white cement plaster, like so much contemporary modernist architecture outside Italy, but significantly they were not. As Terragni wrote, "if […] a plaster wall is as good as a marble wall, for the representational nature of a building, only the marble wall will do" (Terragni, 1934, quoted in Rifkind 2018, 151). By employing various marble types, most



Fig. 4. Montecatini offices, 1936–38 (Photo: Wikimedia, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license © Arbalete, 2014)

prominently a beige-white Botticino marble, Terragni connected to the power architecture of the past in order to create a work "at once tectonic, meticulous and monumental", according to Frampton (1992, 206).

Evidently, the Aarhus City Hall did not employ these classicist white marbles of the Terragni building facades. It was covered in a mushy grey stone carved at a quarry in Porsgrunn, near Lien, Norway. The most obvious recent inspiration may have been the Montecatini offices in Milan (1936–38), designed by Italian architect Gio Ponti. The Montecatini building had large, green Cipollino marble clad facades, with smaller cell-like regularly distributed windows, quite similar to the Aarhus City Hall (Fig. 4). According to Thau and Vindum (2005, 77), this makes the Montecatini offices one of the more likely inspirations for the Danish architects. Another trait that supports this interpretation is that the Montecatini building's facade slabs in Cipollino marble were cut against the grain, creating an especially expressive *tempesta* (stormy) surface texture (Gio Ponti Archives, n.d.). However visually and technically related, there was more to it than the mere imitation of Ponti's building. The Porsgrunn marble allowed the architects to negotiate tensions inherent in modernism, especially aspects of nationalism, and its relation to the natural and monumental.

The Choice of Porsgrunn Marble

While any marble carved from the ground is a natural product in the widest sense, the choice of the particular Porsgrunn stone as the nature stone employed in the city hall is remarkable. If we were to believe the architects, it was chosen because it was the most suitable material the local masonries could provide (Thau and Vindum 2005, 17), by implication not the first choice of the two architects. Arguably, there were other reasons for choosing this particular material.

First, the Norwegian Porsgrunn stone may have been an inexpensive choice. However, it

seems unlikely that other marble types would not be available at the outset, as this predates World War II and the subsequent difficulty of transporting materials by a year. Moreover, if local availability was the problem, lighter Norwegian marble types, or even the more local Faxe limestone used at the Copenhagen Marble Church, could have been chosen, as the Porsgrunn stone still had to be carved and transported from Norway to Aarhus under dire circumstances during the war. On the contrary, a stone of Norwegian origin did not fit well with a Danish national or "local" narrative. A more obvious option for marble originating within the Danish kingdom would then have been the grey-white Greenlandic marble. Since 1934, the material had been sourced from Danish colonial territory. The Social Democratic government subsequently promoted it as a local, honest and national resource. Combined with its very classical white marble aesthetic, they presented it as a superior and more accessible option. But the stone from Greenland had met fierce resistance from the Danish architects and designers, even though the government tried to pressure them to use it. The architect of one of the few completed buildings of the period clad in Greenlandic marble—the administrative building Overformynderiet—namely the functionalist Fritz Schlegel, declared outright that he never wished for the marble in the first place. He claimed to have always favoured a plastered finish (Foote 2023, 185). In effect, lighter marble types, which could be associated with the classical, were clearly not a desirable modern material among professionals.

Furthermore, the Porsgrunn marble is cut from an un-metamorphosed limestone, which from a strict geological viewpoint is not marble (yngvek 2019). Neither was it a classical-looking white marble, nor was it polished to a shine, like most other marble buildings and interiors. It would therefore initially be more correct to describe the choice of "Porsgrunn marble" as a linguistic simulacrum of traditional marbling techniques: Instead of surface paint resembling marble stone, *naming* it as marble was used to satisfy the monumental demands of the conservative critics. However, the choice of Porsgrunn marble also connects with the then emerging use of so-called "nature stone", i.e. non-synthetic rock materials such as granite or sandstone, carved with a minimum of artistic intervention. However, what precisely conferred upon the Porsgrunn material the characteristics of a natural stone?

Modernist Nature Stone

Similar to clay bricks, the Porsgrunn marble was in fact never completely natural, untouched by human hand. It was carved using high-powered machines at the Lien quarry in Norway, freighted with great difficulty by ships and trains, machine-carved and surface-treated with steel grain. The appraisal of some stones as more "nature" than others was arguably a part of a renewed fascination with the natural ornament of materials, very different in appearance from the energetic patterns of the nature fascination in earlier art nouveau (Trilling 2001, 187). The idea of nature stone had both an Italian origin, a specific Nordic interpretation and a modernist meaning.

Rough, fractured stone surfaces first came into vogue in mediaeval Florence, and such rustic stones were subsequently understood by baroque architect-thinker Serlio as refined, yet common and rural. Much later, Scandinavian architects employed similarly rough but refined stones, which became one of the hallmarks of the 19th century Danish national style movement Skønvirke. These stones were, as Foote notes, "a coded reference to the link between the people (Danish 'folk') and the original values born from the national soil" (Foote 2022). Thus, the description of the facade as nature stone in the revised plan for the city hall could be seen as linguistically satisfying the demand for a connection with the national-romantic style found in the Copenhagen City Hall.

But nature stone was no longer only a national-romantic ideal. After years of uniformly plastered facades in modernist buildings, nature stones were again part of a wider trend in international architecture at the end of the 1930s, as exemplified in Swedish architect Gunnar Asplund's forest graveyard (1935–40), which employed sandstone. By this time, natural stone has been employed in the creations of some of the most influential modernist architects. Al-

ready in 1912, Loos had used an eye-catching Cipollino marble to associate "honest", yet exclusive values to the lower part of the Goldman and Salatsch Building in Vienna (Trilling 2001, 183). Van der Rohe's influential 1928 Barcelona pavilion similarly employed various marbles and precious stones, although in a highly polished form (Napoli and Tronzo 2018, 8–9). The high polish of the pavilion stones revealed the patterns inherent in the materials for maximum effect and allowed them to function as a more honest material, because the decoration constituted by these irregularities was not artificial, and therefore truer to nature. Thus, anti-monumental, even anti-designed, nature stone eradicated any sense of "dishonest" artistic value in the pavilion (Munch 2003, 8).

In other words, when these modernists valued natural stone, it was because their inherent decorative elements were uncovered, thus not hiding the truthfulness of the materials. Coincidentally, this meant a closer alignment with the reigning Danish regional modernism, which, in addition to valuing the marks of human agency in the form of craft in design and architecture education, also valued a narrow range of so-called natural materials, such as wood and clay bricks.

The limestone sediment excavated at the Porsgrunn quarry in Lien, Norway had a particular feature that may also have made it attractive for the city hall architects: because it has not been exposed to violent heat in its past, it contains many fossil sediments (Fig. 5). As Lisbeth Tarp writes on the long tradition of "fertile stones" in western tradition, in the renaissance stone fossils became associated with nature as a non-random, independent agency, with the ability to impress patterns in the final work (Tarp 2023, 436). In other words, fossil stone was endowed with an agency of nature from the creatures which impressed its shapes. While any granite may be a natural stone, the fossil material of Porsgrunn marble could then be understood as such a fertile stone. As a stone endowed with natural agency, its decorative patterns would be not as much in opposition to nature as the artifice of human decoration, which contemporary modernists loathed. This interpretation would explain the choice of this particular nature stone, aligning with the modernist aim to reveal truth through nature's own decoration.



Fig. 5. Aarhus Raadhus today. Close-up of facade elements, with fossils visible (Photo: © The Author)

A Concrete Look

As a final aspect of the discussion concerning the naturalness of the Porsgrunn stone, from a distance the grey Porsgrunn marble at the Aarhus City Hall appears to the casual onlooker more similar to untreated grey concrete than any precious stone. As Danish stone enthusiast Finn Kiilerich Jensen duly notes in his review of the building, the marble on the city hall "is easily confused with a dirty and slightly dull, grey concrete at the distance" (Kiilerich Jensen 2010, 9). In comparison, the building just opposite the City Hall, the Bank of Commerce, which in 1944 replaced earlier neoclassicist buildings, similarly seems to manifest the functionalist values originally espoused by Jacobsen and Møller. It is clad in concrete plates and frankly hard to distinguish from the—according to Gunnar Krohn—not-so-monumental marble facade of the city hall just across the street. In effect, Møller and Jacobsen's linguistic gesture in identifying the Porsgrunn limestone as marble satisfied the monumental and natural stone demands of the public debate, while achieving the functionalist synthetic appearance they truly aimed at. I will thus argue that the choice of Porsgrunn stone made it possible to associate with some of the positive connotations of concrete, as both an efficient and modern material, and as a material with attractive properties during its degradation.



Fig. 6. Nordstjerne was among the first Danish companies to use coloured marble in interior design in 2013. Soap dispenser in green Guatemala marble and copper (Photo: © Nordstjerne)

Adrian Forty writes in his seminal historical exploration of concrete as modern material, *Concrete and Culture* (2012), that materials associated with the natural conventionally improve through age and use. He cites Leatherbarrow and Mostafavi: "buildings are incomplete until weathering 'completes' them—what man begins is finished by nature" (Forty 2012, 53). These authors in turn refer to Ruskin's fascination with ruins in his *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in which he accentuates the role built-in remembrance can play in the perception of architecture. Hence, while the classical, polished opaque marble facades associate with timeless beauty, power display and elitism, the decaying Porsgrunn stone can associate with a picturesque patinated historical legacy. In this respect, Adrian Forty eloquently writes on concrete: "What discomfort at the erratic ageing of concrete draws attention to is not its 'unnaturalness', but rather our over-attachment to the appearance of human skin as the aesthetic criteria by which we judge materials. […] If concrete offends, it is not so much for being 'unnatural', but rather because it threatens the convention of the division between nature and the non-natural" (Forty 2012, 59).

In summary, it is the argument of this chapter that the Aarhus City Hall shared commonalities with some well-known projects of the Italian rationalist architectural movement. While these connections could be coincidental, the similarities of the tower and marble treatments are evident, as is the common aim to unite the classical with the modernist ideology of truth of materials while connecting with a welfare nationalist narrative through the use of a nature stone with qualities similar to concrete. While the concept of nature stone has a complex history, using the Porsgrunn marble as nature stone allowed an ambiguity which satisfied both the functionalist aspirations of the architects and the sentiments of nationalist critics. Similar to the rationalist projects, Møller, and Jacobsen aimed for the city hall to be inviting to the wider public, although the rhetoric of the Danish architects was that of democracy, not fascism.

Aftermath: Marble in Post-War Danish Design

Earlier reception has termed the Aarhus City Hall the last monumental city hall in Denmark (Lund, Balslev Jørgensen, and Nørregård-Nielsen 1985). In contrast, the use of the Porsgrunn marble is better understood as a precipitation of an intermediate period in Jacobsen's (but not Møller's) architecture characterised by a more subdued regional modernism, preceding his 1950s wholehearted turn to organic modernism in design and the international style in architecture. In later projects the two architects were involved in, they reserved Porsgrunn marble for a few buildings of a monumental character, such as the City Hall of Søllerød (1940–42) and the National Bank of Denmark (1961–78), both designed by Jacobsen. And, of course, none of these buildings included towers. In Arne Jacobsen's most famous building, the SAS hotel, which itself towers in the centre of Copenhagen, he fully embraced an elitist international style which fit the functional requirements of Scandinavian Airlines, an international luxury airliner company. Indeed, the main building was a high-rise tower, clad in steel and glass, using highly-polished marble inside, in a style not too dissimilar to Mies' Barcelona pavilion. But this was an exception in the larger context of Danish design culture.

Thus, the success of fitting a stone called marble into a discourse of regional modernism at the Aarhus City Hall did not entail Danish designers and architects adopting marble as material. Remarkably, post-war professional Danish designers and architects largely abstained from using marble to any significant degree. A survey of Danish professional design and architecture journals conducted in the preparation of this chapter reveals that marble as material was scarcely mentioned in editorial content.[2] When marble *was* referenced, it was as something used in Italy or elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world, or in older neoclassical bank buildings, the latter with very negative connotations. The overarching negative classical monumental image of marble remained, rather than that of the non-monumental marble at the Aarhus City Hall.

In the wider picture of international modernism, both the Aarhus City Hall and the architecture of the pre-war Italian rationalists appear as innovative precursors. Adrian Forty (2021, 253) claims that marble was only used extensively by modernist architects as an all-over cladding material from the 1960s on. However, it is apparent that the examples exposed here predate this development, in which marble became just another industrial material, where consistency was more important than variation. In this, the similarity of Porsgrunn marble to concrete probably helped.

In conclusion, the monumentalism of the Aarhus City Hall was subverted by using a polyvalent facade material associated with the natural, as well as by the addition of the most radical modern tower realised in its time. This was most similar to immediate rationalist Italian predecessors, who sketched monumental towers with modernist aspirations. It is evident that marble is not an inherently fascist or imperial material; it can also become associated with more liberal social ideals through clever design choice. The immediate result of the Aarhus City Hall's use of Porsgrunn marble was not a renaissance in the use of marble in Danish design and architecture discourse; on the contrary, marble remained something associated with exotic Italy or irrelevant old-fashioned architecture, outside the scope of Danish design culture.

With respect to the Aarhus City Hall, paradoxically, if patina is a marker of human presence, it also strengthens today's reception of the Aarhus City Hall as a monument. Not a monument of the city, but of the exclusivity and high-end appraisal of its architect makers today, especially Arne Jacobsen. Regardless of the actual connections with Italian architecture, it is fascinating that Italy and Italianicity have played such a large role in defining the values and appropriations of marble in Danish design culture.

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2. The survey was conducted by searching the digital archive Formkraft.dk for the word *marmor* (Danish for marble) and interpreting the context in journals of the Danish Arts and Crafts and Industrial Design organisation, which under shifting names of the organisation and journal names were published between 1948 and 2009. Additionally, the digital archive of the architect journals Architekten and ArkitekturDK from the same time span, located at arkiv.arkitekten.dk was included in the survey. Marbling paint techniques were excluded from the search.

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Italian-Nordic Dialogues: The Expanding Territories of Contemporary Jewellery

Rita Marcangelo

Abstract

This chapter examines the evolving landscape of contemporary jewellery design and its role as a medium for cultural expression and identity formation. It explores how the discipline crosses boundaries between art, design and craft, functioning as personal adornment and cultural communication. Through diverse approaches, the study examines relations between material choice, method and identity in globalised contexts. It considers how makers navigate tradition and innovation, using conventional and unconventional materials to convey meaning and question value. Key themes include digital technologies and design democratisation, attention to personalisation and sustainability and the integration of interdisciplinary methods. It also addresses the convergence between jewellery and alternative forms of body decoration, reflecting broader cultural shifts in self-expression and identity negotiation. A comparative thread explores Italian and Nordic perspectives on the values and methodological practices applied in this field of artistic research. Ultimately, contemporary jewellery emerges as a dynamic field that reflects and shapes cultural dialogue, adapting to technological change while remaining a vehicle for personal and collective meaning.

Introduction

Jewellery emerges as a distinct category of objects, serving as a nexus for the complex interplay between human interaction, communication and identity. A comprehensive examination of its design cultures necessitates analysing the transformative forces, influences and impacts within the field. This chapter aims to elucidate the sector's evolution by examining how societal norms, aesthetic shifts and cultural changes drive the development of design cultures. It assesses conventional norms and repositions jewellery in a broader cultural context, highlighting its dual role in reflecting and shaping societal changes.

Interdisciplinary methodologies facilitate a holistic viewpoint, enabling a meticulous examination of the diverse aspects influenced by cultural, technological and socio-economic factors. These components serve as drivers of change within this evolving field, with particular emphasis on the impact of technological advancements and the growing focus on sustainability. This investigation also delves into the function of contemporary jewellery as a conduit for artistic expression and cross-cultural dialogue, highlighting the distinctive features and divergences between Italian and Nordic design cultures.

Within this context, various territories offer compelling narratives on the evolution of identities. Each boasting its own profound design heritage and aesthetic ethos, they provide unique perspectives on the development of cultural identities through the medium of jewellery. The interplay between these design cultures within the broader jewellery landscape signifies a dialogue of innovation, where traditional demarcations are challenged and identities are perpetually redefined through material practices, digital democratisation and transdisciplinary collaboration. This chapter scrutinises the engagement of these distinct design cultures with dynamic shifts in identity and expression, alongside their adaptation to the global landscape of the discipline and emerging convergences with alternative forms of body decoration.

Understanding Contemporary Jewellery

Contemporary jewellery resists straightforward definition, yet this complexity proves essential to understanding its cultural significance. It functions as both a medium of artistic expression and a platform for disputing conventional notions of value tied to precious materials. Departing from traditional evaluative frameworks, it foregrounds aesthetic and conceptual dimensions, highlighting its transformative potential as a vessel for artistic discourse and innovation.

Emerging as an artistic discipline in post-war Europe, this practice evolved through a critical reassessment of preciousness, influenced by modernist principles and technological advancement. Makers sought creative autonomy, democratising jewellery and challenging elitist heritage (Bernabei 2011; Turner 1996). The pursuit of expressive freedom aimed to foster broader appreciation and artistic independence (Broadhead 2005; Derrez 2005). Yet, as Kodres observed, this jewellery "was still flirting with its historical past" (2008, 28).

This deep-rooted tension reveals the field's complex relationship with modernist principles, particularly the Bauhaus legacy that simultaneously celebrated functional design while maintaining hierarchical distinctions between "fine" and "applied" arts. The democratisation movement in jewellery occurred alongside broader challenges to cultural authority in post-1968 Europe, yet it paradoxically maintained exclusionary practices through gallery systems and art world validation mechanisms[1]. Understanding this contradiction requires examining how the discipline positioned itself against both traditional goldsmithing guilds and fine art establishments, creating what Pierre Bourdieu (1996) would term a new "field" of cultural production with its own specific forms of capital accumulation and legitimation strategies.

The cross-disciplinary nature of this jewellery dissolves traditional distinctions between art, design and craft, while the creator's identity transcends specific labels. Accordingly, the terms designer, artist and maker are employed here to reflect diverse approaches to creative practice rather than to categorise individuals.

Contemporary jewellery defies convention, redefining adornment and value. Its alignment with art and design norms complicates acceptance, yet this very tension underscores its autonomy. Its polymorphic character fosters innovation while hindering institutional recognition. A meaningful understanding requires acknowledging its transdisciplinary essence and resistance to rigid categories, demanding re-evaluation of established norms as it operates across traditional disciplinary boundaries rather than as a singular art form.

Material Matters

Materials serve multiple roles in jewellery design, conveying narratives and ideologies through two key functions: externalising the artist's vision with unique properties and inspiring artistic creation as muses with their intrinsic characteristics and histories. Contemporary jewellery's unconventional material use reflects broader cultural shifts towards inclusive materiality, where exploring new possibilities equals conveying predetermined meanings.

The inclination towards alternative materials within Nordic design cultures reflects deeper philosophical engagement with human-nature relationships and systematic investigation of material potential beyond traditional frameworks. This contrasts significantly with Italian approaches, which maintain sophisticated dialogue with precious materials through conceptual innovation rather than material substitution. Artists such as Giampaolo Babetto and Graziano Visintin demonstrate how traditional materials can carry radical conceptual investigations; Visintin's deconstructed golden forms investigate classical proportions and contemporary spatial relationships simultaneously, while Babetto's surface treatments reveal hidden material properties through systematic exploration of goldsmithing techniques.

Nordic material practices emphasise ecological connectivity and social relationships through unconventional materials, reflecting deeper questioning of value systems rather than mere environmental pragmatism. Janna Syvänoja from Finland exemplifies this approach, in-

1. See also the chapter by Cappellieri and Rossato for a discussion of the ambiguous idea of silver as "democratic".



Fig. 1. Janna Syvänoja, untitled, necklace, 2015. Recycled paper, steel wire (Photo: Andrea Lombardo)

corporating recycled materials like paper maps or telephone directories into her creations since the late 1980s. Her works preserve disappearing communication systems as cultural artefacts, transforming obsolete data carriers into memory vessels that bear new meanings while retaining traces of original functions (Fig. 1). Karin Roy Andersson of Sweden transforms recycled plastic bottles into explorations of bodily integration and material hierarchy, affirming material democracy while questioning conventional values.

The fundamental difference lies in temporal and cultural orientation: Italian makers predominantly treat materials as accumulated cultural knowledge requiring contemporary interpretation, while Nordic makers approach materials as carriers of ecological and social relationships demanding transformation.

These methodological approaches align with Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenology of perception", wherein materials function as extensions of embodied experience rather than passive substances awaiting manipulation (Hale 2016). Italian makers like Babetto engage with what Heidegger (2013) termed the "thingness" of materials, with their ability to reveal being through skilled practice. The sophisticated dialogue with precious metals reflects a phenomenological understanding that materials carry cultural memory within their physical properties, requiring what Richard Sennett (2008) describes as "intelligent hand" engagement that synthesises technical knowledge with interpretive sensitivity. This contrasts with industrial material processing that treats substances as neutral inputs for predetermined outcomes.

The material choices examined above, from Syvänoja's information archaeology to Italian makers' conceptual investigations of precious metals, reveal how materials themselves function as active cultural agents. They shape meaning through their historical associations, influence viewer perception through established cultural codes, and guide creative processes through their inherent material properties. This material agency forms part of a broader understanding of how contemporary jewellery functions as an active participant in cultural discourse rather than a passive object of adornment, with materials serving as primary vehicles for cultural investigation and commentary.

Agency in Contemporary Jewellery

Agency in this field sits at the intersection of art, design and embodied adornment, forming a complex paradigm. Here, agency is construed as the capacity of jewellery to function as an autonomous vector, exerting influence not only upon the wearer but also upon the observer, thereby transcending traditional confines of ornamentation and symbolic representation. In this evolving design territory, which markedly deviates from conventional aesthetic norms, the embodiment of agency is distinctly pronounced. This stems from jewellery's intrinsic relationship with the body, positioning it as a powerful medium for personal and political narratives (Skinner 2013).

The concept of agency within this context functions as what Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) term "extended mind" technology, wherein worn objects become integrated into cognitive processes of self-representation and environmental interaction. This theoretical framework distinguishes current jewellery practices from traditional adornment, positioning them within a posthumanist discourse on hybrid human-object assemblages.

The physical engagement of jewellery, its tactile presence and corporeal visibility, endows it with an exceptional capacity for communication and interaction within social spheres. Practitioners in this discipline often exploit this

inherent agency to subvert established social paradigms, interrogate cultural mores and instigate discursive engagements (Skinner 2013).

The deliberate selection of materials, design methodologies and contexts of adornment become pivotal instruments in these artistic endeavours. As evidenced by the preceding example of Syvänoja's work, the integration of non-traditional materials, such as repurposed objects, can metamorphose a jewellery piece into a commentary on consumerism or environmental conservation. Moreover, agency within this form of adornment profoundly influences the discourse of identity and self-representation. These artefacts, as extensions of individual personality, offer wearers a platform to manifest various aspects of their persona, encompassing gender identity, cultural heritage or ideological stances. This dimension of agency also extends to its potential for interaction and participatory engagement. Jewellery that incorporates dynamic elements, whether kinetic, transformative or digital, invites direct engagement from both the wearer and the observer. This interactive attribute amplifies the communicative efficacy of these works, rendering them active agents in the dialogic interplay between wearer and viewer.

Danish designer Kim Buck is renowned for his distinctive conceptual methodology, creating audacious sculptural forms from unconventional materials. His work is defined by thought-provoking concepts, innovative materials and robust artistic vision. In his *Opblæst* series—Danish for "inflated" but also meaning arrogant or given to empty speech—the balloon-like pieces feature fragile metallic structures that encourage the wearer's active engagement. The components may dent over time, gradually diminishing their inflated appearance and embodying the series' conceptual duality. Buck's methodology connects to performance art lineages established by artists like Rebecca Horn, whose 1970–80s investigations of body-object relationships prefigured the performative dimensions of experimental jewellery. Horn's 1972 *Finger Gloves* demonstrate how jewellery-like objects can function as prosthetic extensions that alter bodily capabilities and social interactions. This genealogy reveals the medium's debt to performative practices that reframed the notion of decorative versus functional objects, establishing theoretical precedents for jewellery's capacity to function as a critical cultural tool rather than mere adornment.

When speaking of agency within this domain, it is essential to situate it within larger socio-economic and cultural contexts. The agency of a jewellery piece extends beyond its material and aesthetic qualities, emerging as a profoundly rich and dynamic construct. It encapsulates its ability to function as a conduit for personal and societal expression, a catalyst for interactive engagement and a reflective medium for cultural and political discourse. As the field evolves, its agency remains a central topic of academic and artistic debate.

Identity in Contemporary Jewellery

Contemporary jewellery exemplifies the dynamic interplay between material culture and identity formation, extending beyond traditional boundaries to engage with broader cultural, philosophical and aesthetic discourses. It both articulates and actively participates in dialogues with users and global communities, revealing its aesthetic, functional and symbolic significance.

This medium serves as a potent vehicle for identity construction rooted in shared heritage through distinct mechanisms revealing fundamental Italian-Nordic differences. Bernabei (2011) notes that this field distinguishes itself through content approach, manipulating materials and aesthetics aligned with intended concepts. It transcends purely formal concerns, prompting existential questions while functioning as sophisticated identity technology actively constructing rather than reflecting identities.

Italian identity construction mobilises jewellery as a genealogical record and portable archive, enabling the maintenance of historical continuity across displacement. Identity here is conceptualised as inherited cultural capital, necessitating both preservation and contemporary reinterpretation through ongoing material engagement. Conversely, Nordic identity formation emphasises individual agency within collective frameworks and democratic values prioritising personal narrative over inherited

scripts, treating identity as dynamic exploration rather than fixed inheritance.

Scarpitti (2021) asserts that this evolving art form embodies profound collective identity transcending traditional notions. Its value encompasses community interaction, cultural investigation and historical documentation as "object-discourse", a tangible expression of shared values and identity technologies actively shaping social relationships.

Contemporary jewellery embodies rich and evolving narratives rooted in shared traditions, interweaving philosophical, aesthetic and temporal strands into material practices. Far more than mere adornment, it operates as a dynamic medium through which group identities are constructed, negotiated and transmitted across generations and geographical boundaries. It challenges and shapes societal norms through active dialogue with audiences, transcending physical form to function as ongoing discourse reflecting contemporary societal complexities and facilitating identity exploration within specific communal frameworks.

In the Italian context, the Padua School exemplifies systematic identity construction through jewellery education and practice. This movement encouraged departure from conventional techniques while maintaining sophisticated dialogue with Italian heritage through contemporary artistic expression. The pedagogical innovations of the School emerged from the specific sociohistorical conditions of post-war Italy, particularly the reconstruction of artisanal identity within rapidly industrialising economies. Founder Mario Pinton's emphasis on self-expression, in dialogue with inherited tradition, responded to broader debates about Italian authenticity in the context of this rapid modernisation. The school's methodology synthesised pre-industrial artisanal knowledge with contemporary artistic concepts, capable of valorising traditional forms through radical reinterpretation rather than nostalgic reproduction. This methodology influenced students such as Stefano Marchetti in developing practices that maintained ties to Italian historical memory while rejecting the commodity logic of commercial jewellery.

This Italian model of identity through material engagement is further exemplified by Maria Rosa Franzin, a prominent figure of the School. Her autobiographical approach illustrates how inherited cultural capital can be reactivated through intimate, material-based inquiry. Treating personal history as a living archive, Franzin positions the maker as both custodian and interpreter of familial memory, blending preservation with transformation through contemporary artistic processes.



Fig. 2a. Maria Rosa Franzin, Il viaggio, la vita, necklace, 2021. Silver, patina, laminated photos (Photo: Silvano Longo)

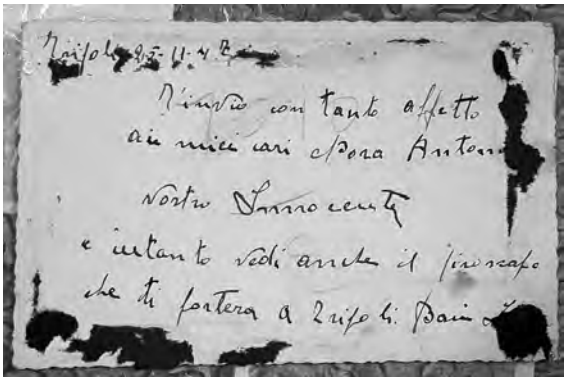


Fig. 2b. Maria Rosa Franzin, postcard from Tripoli to Padua (Photo: The Artist)

A recent necklace exemplifies this approach, presenting a montage of family photographs that trace the lives of her parents and grandparents from the 1940s to the 1960s, marked by separation between Tripoli and Padua (Figs. 2a-b). Accompanied by personal dedications, the images evoke letters that sustained familial ties across distance. Her work emerges as a potent embodiment of identity, functioning as both archive and artistic expression, foregrounding memory's role in preserving identity and symbolic inheritance.



Fig. 3. Marie Louise Kristensen, *Waiting To Hook Up*, pendant, 2017. Silver, gold, steel, amber, wood, hematite (Photo: Dorte Krogh)

Danish artist Marie Louise Kristensen demonstrates Nordic identity construction through narrative experimentation and auto-fictional methodology, creating comedic pieces from personal events that incorporate ambiguity and encourage diverse interpretations facilitating democratic dialogue (Fig. 3).

Identity manifestation through these diverse expressions encompasses personal, societal and experimental dimensions reflecting fundamental differences between Italian and Nordic approaches. Italian makers like Franzin and Marchetti treat identity as cultural inheritance requiring preservation and contemporary reinterpretation, employing jewellery as genealogical documentation and archaeological investigation. Nordic makers like Kristensen address identity as a democratic process of personal exploration and narrative construction, creating spaces for identity experimentation and social critique within collective sociocultural frameworks.

As emphasised, Italian identity jewellery foregrounds memorialisation, preserving communal memory through material practice, whereas Nordic practitioners emphasise exploration, testing possible selves through narrative experimentation. Differences in temporality, agency and inherited capital are revealed.

Contemporary globalised contexts complicate these identity expressions through increased intercultural mobility and digital communication, fundamentally reshaping how identity construction operates through material practices and cross-border dialogue within international artistic communities.

Reshaping Identity

In this era of blurred national boundaries and rising global interconnectedness, contemporary jewellery design finds itself navigating a complex interplay of intercultural exchange and identity redefinition. The once rigid concept of *national style* in jewellery is being transformed, now encompassing a broader spectrum of influences that span regional, supranational and universal aesthetics.

This discipline serves as a crucible where national and global narratives intermingle and evolve. However, globalisation's impact on Italian and Nordic jewellery practices reveals different strategies for maintaining distinctive identity frameworks within international contexts rather than mere cultural erosion. By examining these intricate interactions, we gain a richer, more nuanced appreciation of how contemporary jewellery functions as a medium for cross-cultural translation and methodological innovation. Indeed, in the present context, the notion of national categorisations in jewellery design has evolved beyond historical limitations while paradoxically intensifying expressions of identity as a response to globalisation pressures.

Italian makers increasingly use cultural translation, recontextualising familiar Italian references for global audiences through nuanced interpretive strategies. This approach preserves identity specificity while fostering international dialogue, positioning Italian culture as

a globally relevant aesthetic and conceptual resource. Their practice emphasises heritage export through material and theoretical innovation, sustaining a distinctive identity while engaging international artistic communities through shared visual languages.

Nordic makers demonstrate different globalisation strategies, often emphasising universal human experiences accessed through particular regional methodologies rather than specific symbolic content. This approach uses Nordic conceptual frameworks such as emphasis on landscape, migration, democratic processes and environmental relationships as methodological tools applicable to diverse global issues and settings. Nordic approaches present cultural practices as analytical frameworks rather than fixed expressions of heritage, enabling international application while maintaining a distinctive approach.

Bucchetti et al. (2023) highlight the evolving nature of identity, particularly in the context of multicultural and intercultural exchanges. This evolution challenges traditional views of cultural identity as fixed sets of common elements, proposing instead dynamic, multifaceted perspectives that acknowledge both cultural specificity and methodological transferability across different contexts and communities.

These dynamic perspectives require engagement with post-colonial theory, particularly the concept expressed by Homi Bhabha (1994) of "cultural hybridity" and its critique of essentialist identity categories. Bhabha's notion of "third space" provides a framework for understanding how makers in this field navigate between cultural specificity and global circulation without falling into either cultural appropriation or defensive nationalism.

The interplay between national and global influences has generated new vocabulary in jewellery design through sophisticated processes of cross-cultural translation and methodological adaptation. Makers are increasingly incorporating elements that reflect interpretive heritage engagement rather than simple hybridisation, creating works that maintain tradition-based integrity while engaging international artistic dialogue. Contemporary jewellery, therefore, functions as a medium for symbolic and societal investigation, weaving stories of interpretive practices and methodological innovation rather than fusion or erasure of identity.



Fig. 4a-b. Babette von Dohnanyi, Medici 1, brooch, 2020. Sterling silver, black plated, earth pigment, stainless steel. Front and back (Photo: Federico Cavicchioli)

The works of Babette von Dohnanyi and Inger Blix Kvammen illustrate these transformation processes through distinct approaches to regional positioning and methodological application. German-born von Dohnanyi, who established her artistic practice in Florence, demonstrates cross-tradition translation through interpretive engagement with Italian historical contexts. Von Dohnanyi incorporates Italian medieval references through distinctly German conceptual frameworks emphasising philosophical investigation and systematic analysis, creating new interpretive possibilities for both identity-rooted traditions while maintaining methodological integrity (Fig. 4a-b).

Kvammen's explorations of indigenous cultures and intercommunity exchanges exemplify methodological application to global heritage investigation rather than conventional appropriation or simple multicultural fusion. Based in the Norwegian Barents region, she undertakes systematic projects on migration and intercultural exchange, applying Nordic methodological approaches to diverse geographical and tradition-based contexts. Her *Memory Archives* from her travels to the Nenets Autonomous Region and Turkey-Armenia border regions demonstrate how Nordic analytical frameworks can illuminate universal human experiences of displacement and cross-contact while respecting specific local contexts and maintaining methodological distinctiveness.

Both makers' creations embody sophisticated heritage engagement that transcends simple tradition-innovation dichotomies, demonstrating how globalisation can intensify rather than dilute regional identity through conceptual innovation and interpretive sophistication. Their works resonate with larger societal shifts brought about by digitalisation and globalisation while maintaining integrity through systematic analytical approaches and respectful interpretive practice.

This jewellery functions as an analytical lens through which to examine shifting personal and collective identities in digital, globalised contexts through cultural translation and methodological innovation. It reflects dialogue between inherited identities and methodological transferability, capturing how national traditions adapt to global contexts through interpretive sophistication rather than homogenisation. This recontextualisation within global design discourse offers richer interpretation of contemporary jewellery as a form of symbolic investigation and methodological development.

The significance lies in fluidity and dynamism of cultural methodologies rather than identity loss in our increasingly interconnected world. As designers contribute to transnational dialogues through interpretive practice and methodological innovation, contemporary jewellery remains a significant, evolving marker of symbolic investigation and interpretive sophistication. What once appeared as localised cultural expressions now demonstrates renewed relevance through global application of specific methodological approaches and systematic identity-based translation practices.

This sophisticated approach to cultural positioning in jewellery design has been accelerated by technological innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration, enabling more precise interpretive translation and methodological development. As boundaries between cultures become sites of interpretive investigation rather than simple dissolution, boundaries between traditional craft practices and emerging digital methodologies create new possibilities for cultural analysis and methodological innovation within contemporary artistic practice.

Transdisciplinary Dialogues in Jewellery Design

In recent years, the conceptual foundations of jewellery have undergone a notable shift, significantly influenced by evolving consumer attitudes. A prominent trend is the increasing emphasis placed on the personalisation of jewellery, even extending to DIY approaches. In today's consumer landscape, individuals seek jewellery pieces that reflect their unique personalities, experiences and identities. The ability to customise and personalise jewellery allows individuals to imbue pieces with sentimental value and meaning, transforming them into treasured mementos. This emphasis on individual expression signifies a departure from traditional notions of jewellery and underscores a deeper connection between individuals and their accessories. As consumers continue to prioritise self-expression and individuality, the demand for bespoke and meaning-driven jewellery is expected to grow, reshaping the landscape of the industry, and driving innovation in design and customisation options.

Bernabei (2014, 18) explores the impact of digital technology on what she terms the "democratisation of jewellery". She specifically highlights the role of methods like 3D printing in increasing customisation, affordability and consumer engagement within the jewellery industry. However, she notes that true customisation is still constrained by imposed, predetermined design parameters. Digital technologies have opened opportunities for amateurs and

professionals to participate in jewellery design and manufacturing. These methods have indeed engendered a democratisation of jewellery consumption, primarily attributable to reductions in unit costs and the advent of internet-mediated sales platforms.

Transitioning from aspects of technological impact, Scarpitti (2020) asserts that transdisciplinary approaches in the field of design are essential for navigating future scenarios, elucidating intricate interdependencies among various knowledge domains, and redefining the very essence of the design discipline. She further maintains that contemporary design culture now pivots towards a multitude of potentialities, undergoing perpetual renewal through the infusion of diverse knowledge bases and the scrutiny of emerging imperatives. This opens new scenarios for jewellery design. In an example presented (Scarpitti 2020, 106), the *Flussi* project illustrates scientific dissemination within emerging post-digital contexts at the intersection of art, design, neuroscience and technology. The project utilised brain-machine interaction to translate individuals' thoughts into wearable objects, specifically brooches. These brooches were designed based on neural frequencies, allowing for a direct link between the wearer's brain activity and the final design of the jewellery. Approximately fifty participants engaged in the project, listening to specific neural music during ten-minute sessions to facilitate relaxation and alpha wave processing. The recorded sequences and peak relaxation points were translated into a volume and then consolidated into a brooch. The brooch form was influenced by the flow visualised through the BCI MindWave Neurosky software, resembling a digital cloud. The workshop generated three unique brooches in gold and transparent resin, crafted through the hybridisation of goldsmith techniques and 3D printing, each representing an individual's distinctive experience.

Such projects exemplify innovative approaches to transdisciplinary collaboration while raising important considerations about technological mediation of human experience. Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of "surveillance capitalism" (2019) provides valuable frameworks for evaluating how behavioural data functions within creative contexts, highlighting questions of consent and individual autonomy that merit careful consideration.

On the other hand, Darbellay, Moody and Lubart (2017) elucidate the multifaceted nature of collaborative methodologies and how the amalgamation of expertise from distinct fields can lead to interesting results. The text outlines interdisciplinary collaboration methods, including concept migration across related fields. It explores the operationalisation of mechanisms such as hybridisation, transgression or transformation during instances of interdisciplinarity, where disciplines intersect and interact. Moreover, it delves into the emergence of novel research domains through the synergistic fusion of two or more practices, illustrating the dynamic potential for the creation of innovative territories through transdisciplinary coupling. In essence, it advocates thinking beyond conventional boundaries.

Because interdisciplinarity thrives at disciplinary interfaces rather than replacing them, its effects become legible in practice-based collaborations (Di Lucchio 2021). An intriguing initiative that explores the intersection of different design disciplines is the *Lacrima* project, developed and co-curated by Chiara Scarpitti (2020, 114) (Fig. 5). The process involved collecting tears that represented three different emotions: sadness, compassion and joy. These tears, preserved at low temperatures in vials, were sent to scientist-photographer Maurice Mikkers' laboratory *Imaginarium of Tears* in Amsterdam. There, they were analysed under a microscope in a controlled temperature environment. Images were obtained from the process, printed onto silk, and transformed into jewellery using various techniques, such as chemical photo etching, laser cutting and digital printing on silk, combined with traditional jewellery crafting techniques. The complex procedure utilised specialised tools from various fields in addition to goldsmith tools. This jewellery stands as both the outcome and symbolic representation of transdisciplinarity within the jewellery field. Ultimately, the human body was envisioned as a territory for radical exploration, aiming to amplify its expressiveness.

The evolving discourse within the jewellery design realm reflects a profound shift towards



Fig. 5. Chiara Scarpitti, Tear, brooch, 2017. Silver rhodium plated, black steel, pure silk, plexiglass, digital print, laser cut, hand sewing (Photo: Amedeo Benestante)

recognising the intricate interdependencies between humans, the environment and technology. This conceptual transformation is eloquently articulated in the exploration by Annarita Bianco (2023) of jewellery design practice within the "entanglement era". Bianco emphasises that jewellery serves as an epistemological tool, capable of probing the complexities of coexistence among diverse entities. This perspective is rooted in the intersection of humanistic and techno-scientific research, revealing that every entity on Earth is part of a vast network of interspecies interconnections.

Bianco's analysis underscores a post-anthropocentric approach that dissolves conventional categories, allowing for the emergence of new paradigms in jewellery design. Through various case studies presented, she demonstrates how the medium transcends mere aesthetic or decorative functions, embedding immaterial values and intellectual provocations that challenge and expand our understanding of human and non-human relationships (Bianco 2023).

In this context, contemporary jewellery is characterised by its multifaceted and experimental nature. Designers increasingly incorporate unconventional techniques and materials, bridging the gap between fine jewellery, fashion and avant-garde art practices. Furthermore, practitioners in the field are leveraging emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and gene editing to explore these interspecies relationships.

The implications of this entanglement paradigm extend beyond the aesthetic, urging designers to consider the ecological impact of their creations. In summary, jewellery design in the entanglement era signifies a radical reimagining of the medium. It is not merely about adornment, but about embedding profound cultural, social and ecological narratives within the jewellery artefact. This evolution in jewellery design practice highlights the interconnectedness of all entities and the potential for jewellery to foster a greater understanding of our place within intricate social networks.

Redefining Adornment Through Body Decoration

The contemporary ascendancy of body decoration represents a profound cultural transformation that extends far beyond aesthetic preference, fundamentally challenging the traditional dominance of jewellery in personal adornment. This shift embodies a comprehensive redirection of how individuals negotiate identity, materiality and social belonging within contemporary societies. Rather than constituting a transient trend, the movement towards permanent body modification reflects deeper societal reconfigurations of value systems, identity expression and cultural authenticity that potentially herald a fundamental restructuring of the adornment industry.

At its core, this transformation manifests as a fundamental semiotic shift from external signification to embodied narrative construction. Traditional jewellery operates through temporary, extrinsic relationships, wherein removable objects merely symbolise status or cultural affiliation without becoming integral to the wearer's corporeal identity. The symbolic function remains external to the body, creating a clear distinction between the adorned subject and the adorning object. Conversely, tattooing establishes permanent, corporeal inscriptions that liter-

ally embody personal narratives within lived experience, effectively transforming the human body into what might be conceptualised as a "living archive" of identity negotiation and cultural memory.

This phenomenological distinction gains theoretical sophistication through the analysis Merleau-Ponty (1962) made of embodiment, which elucidates how tattooing incorporates cultural symbols directly into corporeal experience. Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh" (1968), understood as the medium uniting self and world, is relevant here, as tattoos form enduring hybrids that unsettle the subject–object divide in Western material culture theory. Unlike jewellery, which preserves the separation between body and ornament, tattooing dissolves these boundaries, creating integrated corporeal-cultural formations that resist traditional categorical frameworks.

Building upon this phenomenological foundation, the argument by the anthropologist Daniel Miller (2008) that objects actively participate in identity construction through ongoing relational processes rather than merely reflecting human intentions finds particular resonance in tattooed bodies. These corporeal inscriptions exemplify co-constitutional relationships, as designs age and evolve alongside their bearers, creating dynamic rather than static identity markers that participate in continuous biographical narrative construction. This temporal evolution distinguishes tattooed bodies from conventional adornment objects, which remain essentially unchanged regardless of their wearer's life trajectory.

The theoretical framework developed by Benasso and Stagi (2021), conceptualising tattoos as "multifaceted technology of the self", provides crucial analytical depth to understanding this transformation. Their analysis transcends simple decorative interpretations to examine intentional self-definition and narrative construction, wherein individuals selectively externalise aspects of subjectivity through deliberate corporeal declarations. This process facilitates sophisticated navigation and negotiation of identity within broader societal contexts, enabling the transformation of potential stigma into deliberate acts of self-definition while simultaneously strengthening diverse social affiliations through shared symbolic vocabularies.

Historically, tattooing typically functioned within relatively stable social hierarchies, encoding predetermined identities through culturally sanctioned symbolic systems that reinforced existing power structures. Contemporary practice, however, emphasises individual narrative construction and fluid identity expression, reflecting what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) characterises as "liquid modernity's" fundamental privileging of self-creation over inherited social status. This shift from fixed to fluid identity markers corresponds directly to broader transformations in social organisation and cultural authority.

The apparent binary opposition between body decoration and traditional jewellery dissolves under sustained analytical examination, revealing instead a sophisticated continuum of adornment strategies that negotiate complex relationships between permanence and temporality, individual expression and cultural belonging. Contemporary designers increasingly operate across these previously discrete boundaries, developing hybrid creative practices that position permanent and temporary adornment forms as complementary rather than competitive modalities. This synthetic approach suggests emerging paradigms that transcend traditional categorical limitations while expanding expressive possibilities for contemporary subjects.

The rise of ornamental jewellery tattoo styles demonstrates this convergence through a direct blending of aesthetics. Artists such as Ryan Ashley merge the visual language of fine jewellery with the permanence of tattooing, producing what can be seen as *wearable art* inscribed directly on the skin. This practice goes beyond borrowing motifs: it reimagines the body as a unified aesthetic surface, one that supports complex artistic interventions combining temporary and permanent forms of adornment.

Similarly, "piercing and jewellery curation", exemplified by studios such as Incan Gem Body Art, reflects this convergence through collaborative selection processes that align with an individual's anatomy, personality and identity. These practices blur the boundaries between jewellery and body art, creating personalised systems of

adornment that combine temporary and permanent elements within cohesive frameworks shaped by each wearer's body and life story.

Contemporary technological developments further enable this convergence through advanced digital design and fabrication techniques that expand creative possibilities across traditional boundaries. Artists like Lucy McRae blur disciplinary distinctions between body modification, wearable technology and performance art through experimental projects exploring "body architecture" and technological enhancement of human corporeal capabilities (2016). Concurrently, fashion designers such as Iris van Herpen integrate biomimetic forms and kinetic elements into jewellery that responds dynamically to bodily movement and environmental conditions, suggesting future adornment practices capable of synthesising diverse cultural approaches while addressing contemporary concerns about sustainability and technological integration.

This broader transformation reflects generational changes in value systems, particularly amongst younger demographics who increasingly prioritise authenticity and individualism over rigid social hierarchies inherited from previous eras. The distinct preference for permanent, self-authored corporeal marks over inherited or purchased symbolic objects represents a powerful assertion of personal agency within contemporary consumer culture. Benasso and Stagi (2021) characterise this phenomenon as "continuous overturning of social meanings" accompanied by movement from fixed social belonging towards "mobile interpretive frameworks" constructed through subjective choice rather than inherited social position. This shift suggests fundamental reconfigurations of how identity, authority and cultural meaning operate within contemporary societies, with significant implications for understanding broader patterns of social change and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Contemporary jewellery has evolved from a post-war craft practice into a sophisticated, epistemological tool capable of interrogating fundamental questions about identity, materiality and cultural belonging in an increasingly interconnected world. This investigation reveals how the field transcends traditional categorical boundaries to become what might be termed a "cultural technology", actively constructing rather than merely reflecting social relationships and individual subjectivities. The comparative analysis of Italian and Nordic approaches demonstrates that globalisation intensifies rather than dilutes cultural distinctiveness, with makers developing sophisticated strategies of cultural translation and methodological innovation that maintain authenticity while engaging transnational dialogue.

The convergence between jewellery and body modification practices signals a fundamental reconfiguration of adornment paradigms, reflecting broader shifts towards embodied authenticity and permanent identity markers. This transformation challenges the dominance of removable objects in favour of corporeal inscriptions that integrate cultural symbols directly into lived experience, creating hybrid entities that resist conventional subject-object distinctions.

Looking forward, the trajectory of this discipline suggests a future characterised by cross-disciplinary collaboration and sustainable innovation. As digital technologies reshape the landscape of design and production, the sector must strike a balance between embracing innovation and preserving artisanal traditions. This requires a concerted effort to bridge the digital divide, foster skill adaptation among makers and uphold the intrinsic value of craftsmanship. Digital democratisation will likely accelerate through advances in artificial intelligence and automated fabrication, potentially reshaping maker-consumer relationships while raising questions about authorship and cultural appropriation. The integration of biotechnology and responsive materials suggests jewellery that adapts dynamically to environmental conditions and bodily states, extending embodied communication.

Climate change concerns will probably intensify focus on circular material practices and regenerative design methodologies, potentially repositioning contemporary jewellery as a model for sustainable cultural production. Simultane-

ously, the expansion of virtual and augmented reality environments may create new categories of digital adornment that challenge physical materiality while preserving jewellery's essential function as identity marker.

Most significantly, this jewellery's capacity to function simultaneously as artistic medium, cultural translator and epistemological tool positions it uniquely to navigate future scenarios characterised by increasing cultural mobility, technological mediation and environmental constraint. Its inherent transdisciplinary nature and resistance to rigid categorisation suggest continued relevance as societies negotiate complex relationships between tradition and innovation within rapidly changing global contexts.

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Flowering Fields Forever: "Scandinavia" as Imagined Place in "New Scandinavian Design"

Niels Peter Skou

Abstract

This chapter investigates the visual and textual communication of the Danish design company Bolia, which has successfully branded itself as "New Scandinavian Design". The company was born digital and facilitates through its website a global network of designers, producers and customers. As such, it throws into question traditional notions of regional identity and places of origin under the condition of processes of globalisation and digitalisation. By comparing Bolia's communication of New Scandinavian Design with the staging of "Scandinavian Modern" in the 1950s, this chapter investigates how notions of nature, design and home are being renegotiated by Bolia in the present design culture. It is shown how a self-reflective use of virtual imagery and a dynamisation of the concepts of nature, design and creativity detach these notions from specific places and turn "Scandinavian Design" into a tool for individual well-being and the construction of temporary homeliness in a modernity where spaces have become fluid.

In 2022, the armchair *Bowie* was designed by the Milan-based Italian design studio Skrivo, founded by Croatian-Irish industrial designer Stefan Krivokapic. The chair is produced by Danish-Polish manufacturers KEBE in their factory in Częstochowa, Poland, for the Danish design brand Bolia (Fig. 1). Within the product portfolio of Bolia, the chair has become a centerpiece of what they have termed "New Scandinavian Design" and is described as a "modern take on traditional Scandinavian design" (Bolia n.d.-b). In this case, the modern version of traditional Scandinavian Design is thus a chair designed by an Italy-based Croatian-Irish designer, produced in Poland and named after an English musician. This reflects how Bolia can be considered an extreme example of a modern globalised design company. It was established in 2000 as a purely digital net-based company with neither its own production facilities nor physical shops (except smaller showrooms). The company has now established a network of shops and has recently skipped the ".com" after its name, but the concept is still that the virtual sale comes before the actual production of the product, whereafter the product is produced and shipped directly to the customer. As a result, the "New Scandinavian" chair might not even need to cross a Scandinavian border.



Fig. 1. Italian design turned "Scandinavian". The *Bowie* chair as presented by Italian interior shop Mohd using images by Bolia. Designed and sold in Italy, but branded in Denmark (© Bolia)

This example may be compared to the example that design historian Grace Lees-Maffei uses to question the concept of "Made in Italy" in the anthology by the same name (Lees-Maffei 2013, 287–91). Here, she describes how Romanian-German designer Roland Kreiter's *mysqueeze* lemon squeezer made for the English retailer mydeco.com has become "Italianised" by

being included in the product portfolio of Alessi as heir to their iconic lemon squeezer *Juicy Salif* (itself designed by a French designer, Phillippe Starck). The irony of these examples is that Italian Design is apparently designed in Germany while Scandinavian Design is designed in Italy! In these cases, it seems obvious that romantic notions of the special features of the products being the result of the designer growing up in a small Italian village or under the conditions of Nordic light have been emptied of whatever meaning they might have held; even if Bolia still tries to sell the *Kite Chair* designed by the Turin-based Studio Nooi and produced by Italsed in Udine as "inspired by the natural force of the Nordic winds" (Bolia 2024, 99).[1]

The examples described above are furthermore connected by the fact that it is the company brand rather than their places of ideation and production that subsumes them under a national/regional brand. Lees-Maffei thus argues that products branded as Made in Italy gain their meaning as much through consumption and mediation as through their place of production. Or as she puts it: "Narratives as well as goods are made in Italy" (Lees-Maffei 2013, 300). Following this notion, it might be argued that the most stable element in the design processes at Bolia that is actually "made in Scandinavia" is their branding and marketing—although, of course, they also sell products designed by Scandinavian designers including their own design team. Since 2022, Copenhagen-based communications bureau Uncle Grey has created a consistent visual identity for Bolia across branding materials and platforms. This includes their printed catalogue/magazine named *The Journal*, branding videos, homepage, social media platforms, etc. It is this material, especially *The Journal* and selected branding videos, that will be the case material for this chapter. By concentrating on the visual representations of New Scandinavian Design produced by Bolia, this chapter will look at images of Scandinavia in a double meaning, much in the same sense the Swedish art historian Jeff Werner uses the term *Sverigebilleder* (Images of Sweden) in his large study of *Medelvägens Estetik: Sverigebilleder I USA* as a term that describes the interplay between mental images of a nation or region and visual representations of and from that region (Werner 2008, 11).

What makes Bolia interesting in this context is that they actually do not claim to be "Made (or designed) in Scandinavia", but try to be transparent and even celebratory about themselves as a company that works as the coordinator of a global network of designers and producers rather than a traditional design company with its own production facilities. However, they still rely intensively on Scandinavian Design as the basis of their brand identity. In this way, they can be viewed as an example of what brand consultant Simon Anholt has termed "cuckoo brands", which build on and borrow established cultural brand meanings (Anholt 1998, 396). In this chapter, I will argue, however, that Bolia does not simply take over established meanings of Scandinavian Design, but rather interprets and negotiates them in a way that highlights present tensions between the global and the regional and between the digital and the physical. Traditional notions of Scandinavian Design being connected to specific geographical places, national design and craft traditions and the home as a cultural sphere are thus being renegotiated in often contradictory ways.[2] This creates a certain tension by which the constructed nature of Scandinavian Design becomes self-reflective but is still effective in selling a specific style or atmosphere rather than individual "classic" products.

The today still very effective brand of Scandinavian Design,[3] which was established in the

1. This chapter draws on material from a series of publications by Bolia named *The Journal*. These publications are part catalogue, part interior magazines. The bibliographical information on the printed versions of the issues in question is sparse.
2. For a discussion of the stereotypical connection between Nordic design and geography and nature, particularly in relation to Danish design and interior lighting theories of the designer Poul Henningsen, see the chapter by Anders V. Munch in this volume.
3. This chapter follows the principle of the introduction, that "Nordic" is used to refer to the Nordic countries while "Scandinavian Design" is used to designate a specific brand and the values and ideas linked to it (see above, page 9, note 1). Design historian Kjetil Fallan has similarly suggested distinguishing between Scandinavian Design and Scandinavian design with and without capital D to make the same distinction (Fallan 2012, 2). In this chapter, the nomenclature issues are complicated even further, since it will also discuss "New Nordic" as a brand.

1950s through a series of marketing efforts and exhibitions—especially the travelling exhibition presented in North America *Design in Scandinavia* (1954–57), which I will return to later—has been much scrutinised and criticised in design history writing for the last twenty years (see, for example, Guldberg 2011; Fallan 2012; Hansen 2016; Munch 2017; Mordhorst 2022). A common critique of the notion of Scandinavian Design is its exclusive and unrepresentative character, since, as Fallan puts it, "far from representing a cross section of Nordic design culture, the products promoted under the catchphrase—or brand—'Scandinavian Design' formed a particular and carefully orchestrated blend of gourmet objects selected from a very narrow segment of the region's design practice" (Fallan 2012, 3). Elsewhere, Fallan has demonstrated how the period in which Scandinavian Design was marketed as the harmonious synthesis between craft and industry was in fact the same in which craft and industrial design organisationally and ideologically fell apart (Fallan 2014). What is rarely questioned in the discussions of Scandinavian Design in the 1950s, however, is the geographical connection to the Nordic countries. In the case of Bolia, the forces of globalisation and digitalisation have created a radicalisation of the split between narratives and goods that Lees-Maffei described in the case of Alessi and Italian Design (Lees-Maffei 2013, 289), to the extent that the nature of Scandinavia as a place is brought into question. The concept of Scandinavian Design works in two ways for Bolia: firstly, as a predefined style of design that designers of all backgrounds may tap into. The *Bowie* chair is thus described as "[i]nfluenced by mid-century Scandinavian design" (Bolia 2025, 95), which also reiterates that the "Scandinavian style" is implicitly identified with mid-century Scandinavian Modern; and secondly, as a repertoire of discourses and imagery that the marketing of the product may tap into stemming from the same period.[4] This means that Scandinavian Design is "made" in Lees-Maffei's sense by reusing semiotic resources already established in the expectations of the consumers. Or as Stina Teilmann-Lock has put it more concisely regarding Danish design: "Danish design has a name because there was 'Danish Design'" (Teilmann-Lock 2016, 214). Here, it should be noticed that Bolia does not make references to Danish Design, but only to Scandinavian Design. When the concept of Scandinavian Modern was formed in the 1950s, it was important for the curators of the Scandinavian exhibitions to find a balance between national and regional identity, at the same time showcasing the similarities between the four countries as a cultural unit and the differences maintaining an individual identity for each country (Guldberg 2011). That the concept of a Danish design tradition is not important to Bolia as opposed to the majority of older Danish design companies might be seen as another indication that what is important is not claims of a specific place of origin, but the imaginaries of an international array of consumers for which Scandinavian Design is the established term. Business historian Mads Mordhorst (2022) has argued that while Scandinavian Design was constructed as a shared regional brand in an American context, the concept has been interpreted in contrasting national ways after being reintroduced in the Nordic context. There is thus an internal contrast between the notion of Danish Design as exclusive craft objects based on small scale production and the Swedish narrative of mass-produced, price-friendly industrial design as a tool for social progress embodied by IKEA. In this case, we will see that Bolia is still mainly based on the narratives of Danish Design.

Following these discussions of the trajectories of narratives, goods and places of origin, it may seem that the task of investigating Nordic and Italian design cultures as set out in this anthology has become completely futile in a contemporary setting. While it is true that any national identity narratives today should not be taken at face value, the purpose of investigating "Scandinavia" as a discursively constructed place is not simply to expose and deconstruct it. This is partly because Scandinavian Design companies, no matter how globalised, are still influenced by national or regional design organ-

4. See Guldberg (2011) on "'Scandinavian Design' as Discourse".

isations, policies and identity discussions. But, as will be shown, it is also because the concept might still have a function without claims of authenticity. The investigation into how historical discourses are being renegotiated in a modern context can in this way be used as a window to current design cultural dilemmas. As a newer Danish design company with no historical ties to the mid-century period and with an organisation fully geared towards digitalisation and a globalised market, Bolia may thus serve as an example of how relating to established national design narratives is still a part of modern national design cultures, but also of the dilemmas this entails.

From "New Nordic" to "New Scandinavian Design"

By using "New Scandinavian Design" as their secondary brand name, Bolia positions itself as heir to the concept of "New Nordic Design", which was introduced in 2006 by the company Muuto and marketed as a new regional brand for a number of new design companies. New Nordic was at that time termed as a renewal and revitalisation of Scandinavian design traditions and was part of a broader regional cultural branding strategy backed by Nordic exhibitions in North America like the *Nordic Cool* exhibition in Washington 2013 (Skou and Munch 2016). In a larger historical perspective, Strang, Marjanen and Hilson (2021, 31) have argued that New Nordic represented a turning point in the rhetoric of "Nordicness", where the focus shifted from internal cooperation to the logic of branding. It is not unlikely that the growing design historical awareness of the role of exhibitions, marketing and storytelling for the success of Scandinavian Modern in the 1950s (see e.g. Hansen 2016) led to a project of trying to repeat that success. However, in 2017 Muuto was acquired by US design company Knoll, which may be seen as a sign of financial success, but led to the discontinuation of the New Nordic brand in favour of a return to "Scandinavian Design". This may illustrate a point made by Mordhorst (2022, 251–52) to distinguish between branding as a strategic marketing tool and the meaning content of the brand, which might also be the unintended side effect of other cultural activities and dynamics. In this case, "Scandinavian Design" seems to have a deeper cultural foundation and resilience than the strategic marketing of New Nordic.

Design historian Anders V. Munch and I have argued that New Nordic as a phenomenon could be understood as a regionalisation of an international trend of neo-minimalism through the lens of a retrospective appraisal of the aesthetics and values of Scandinavian Modern (Skou and Munch 2016). Following this thesis, I will argue that what is left of New Nordic in Bolia is more to be found in the mediation than in the actual product design. In the following, by comparing the staging of Scandinavian Design in the 1950s with Bolia's present communication, I will look at the development of two central themes: the role of nature and landscape as a signifier of regional identity and place specificness and the role of design and the designer in the tension between product and process.

Nature: From Geography to Spirituality

The travelling exhibition *Design in Scandinavia* (1954–57) was arranged in cooperation by the national associations of craft, applied art and design from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden to meet a rather idealised interest from influential American editors and curators who saw Scandinavian Design as a model for an improved American design culture (Guldberg 2011; Mordhorst 2022). People visiting the exhibition were not immediately met by collections of Scandinavian Design, however. Instead, the introductory section was dominated by large photostats with images of Scandinavian landscapes (Guldberg 2011, 43–45).[5] When Bolia uses landscape images as an introduction to their *Journal*, they thus tap into an established tradition of presenting and explaining Scandinavian Design through landscapes. This does not mean, however, that the visual rhetoric connecting nature and design is simply carried on. On the contrary, I will argue that nature-related elements in visual representations and the implicit concept of nature play a

5. The use of landscape photography and the character of the depicted landscapes as part of Design in Scandinavia has been addressed thoroughly by design historian Jørn Guldberg in his 2011 article "'Scandinavian Design' as Discourse".

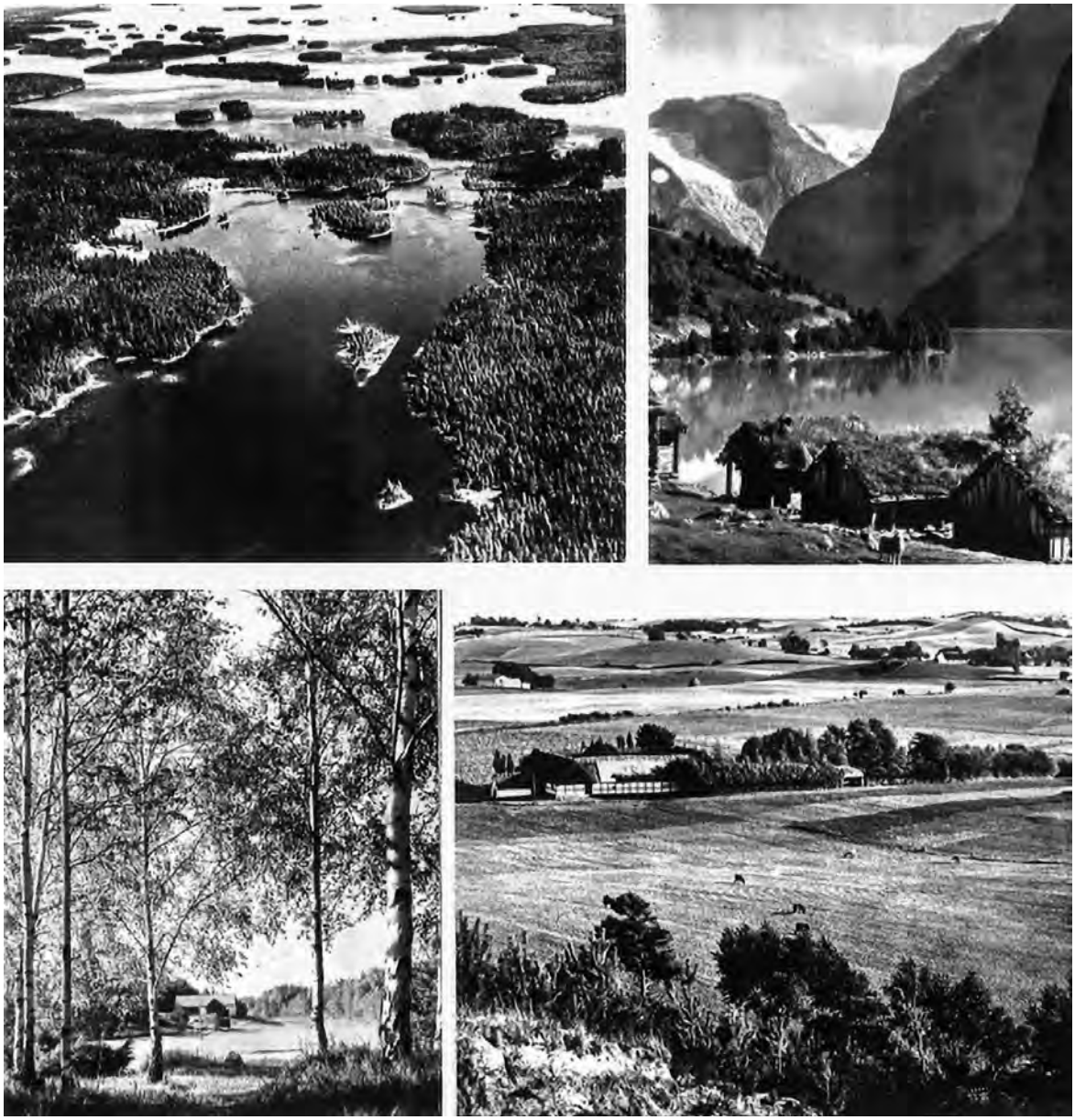


Fig. 2. Collage of the landscape images featured in the catalogue of the *Design in Scandinavia* exhibition: "typical" landscapes from Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark in a sequence from the untouched to the cultivated landscape (Cheek and Johansson 1954)

quite different role with Bolia compared to the exhibitions in the 1950s (Fig. 2).

In the *Design in Scandinavia* exhibition and exhibition catalogue, the landscape images were part of a balancing act between demonstrating unity and differences between the Scandinavian countries. The landscapes were thus united by being devoid of any references to industrialisation, but were also used to characterise each country by a typical landscape in a sequence of completely "wild" landscapes with no visible human interference—Finnish lakes and Norwegian Fjords to more cultivated landscapes like the Danish Farmlands.[6] The main catalogue text

6. It is perhaps not completely coincidental that the "youngest" nations—Norway and Finland, who had gained independence from Sweden and Russia respectively in 1905 and 1917—were considered more "wild" or"uncultivated" than the old regional powers Sweden and Denmark. On the notion of Finland as "primitive" within the Nordic reception in the 1940s, see Kalha (1998). See also Guldberg (2011).



Fig. 3. Landscape as retreat and catwalk (© Bolia)

written by Gotthard Johansson, president of the Swedish Arts & Crafts Society, argued furthermore that the different landscapes and living conditions were expressed in different folk art traditions, but that it was a common condition for the region that the craft traditions were alive and had moved seamlessly into a sense of modern design (Cheek and Johansson 1954, 12). This link between landscape, craft traditions and design is still one of the strongest narratives about Scandinavian Design, but even in those days, it was to a large extent a myth created by the Nordic craft organisations, as shown multiple times (e.g. Hansen 2016; Munch 2017). Still, if we look at the use of landscapes in the visual communication of Bolia, it is significant that only the first type of landscape, the scenic landscape with no human traces, is represented and also that the landscapes are devoid of any specific geographic markers connecting them to a specific country or place. The landscapes have become "placeless" in the sense that they represent generic landscapes, mostly with an inclination to being Scandinavian, but in some cases we also find deserts and typical Southern European landscapes. We also still find the claim that nature provides raw materials for the craftsmen producing the design, but again without any concrete link between specific geographic landscapes and products.

In the cases where people figure in the landscape images of Bolia, it is in the shape of smartly dressed young women walking in them (Fig. 3). In these cases, nature is presented as a retreat and source of inspiration, but it also works as a scene for presenting the model. One might even argue that the landscape in these cases is used as a form of catwalk.



Fig. 4. Overgrown interior (© Bolia)

While landscape imagery in Bolia's visual material still has a realistic reference, there is also another way of using references to nature in the material that transcends realism towards a purely symbolic function. This is when landscape and interior melt together, as in figure 4.

This image is set in a room that is identifiable as belonging to a historical upper-class building through its high panels and ceiling height but is otherwise generic. The only object in the room is a large modular sofa from Bolia's *Cosima* series in green with brown, grey and white cushions. The male model is placed on the sofa in the golden ratio, casually dressed in matching colors and barefooted as if the wooden flooring were actually sand on a beach. The image is thus quite traditionally composed, but the realism of the situation is disturbed by a large shrubbery in the foreground with no relation to the way plants would normally be present in an interior, as potted plants, for instance. The shrubbery rather seems to prolong the metaphor of the floor turning into a form of earth or sand. This is a typical type of image used by Bolia where plants or other natural elements are superimposed on otherwise traditional interior photography in an openly photo-manipulated way in order to create an almost surreal, dreamlike character. The purpose is to show the interior not so much as a physical composition, but as an experience or feeling which is symbolised by the blending of indoors and outdoors. In this case, the idea of "wild" nature as a spiritual source of inspiration is transferred into the interior. The rhetorical figure is thus that the spiritual values of nature are transferred in a chain from the landscape to the designer to the designed object to the user. The designer thus works as a mediator between nature and the user, transgressing the boundaries between outside and inside. Of course, more oppositional readings are also possible since the image may also allude to fairy tales and surrealist paintings where the uncontrolled intrusion of nature into the cultivated sphere becomes a symbol of demonic forces and repressed desires, but this is hardly intentional.

In the rhetoric of the *Design in Scandinavia* catalogue, landscape was the static backdrop for the development of culture. It was the apparent consistency of the landscape and the living conditions it offered that ensured the continuity between craft traditions and modern design as well as the general cultural evolution of the region in which there was supposed to be an unbroken relationship between tradition and modernity. With Bolia, nature becomes aestheticised as movement and process: "Nature is our muse. The seasons, the magnificent natural textures, the soft colours, the calming atmospheres, and the breathtaking landscapes. And like the changing seasons, we are constant-

ly moving" (Bolia 2025, 199). In this statement nature is positioned through its effects. It is "calming" and "breathtaking", mimicking the effects traditionally ascribed to the "beautiful" and the "sublime". But it is also ever-changing: "Our biggest inspiration for everything we do, we find in the ever-changing nature. […] like the changing seasons, we never stand still. We evolve, explore and find new ways of designing with nature's finest materials" (Bolia 2024, 12). The concept of nature that is activated here might be characterised as vitalist, combining a romantic-aesthetic notion of nature as a source of spiritual value and extraordinary experiences with an evolutionary notion where nature progresses through adaptation. It serves two purposes. For the consumer it holds the promise that the design objects or interiors through the translation of the designer can reinstate a therapeutic relationship with nature, where nature becomes the source of ease and mindfulness. For the company it legitimates their business model, where rather than producing a stable portfolio of "classics", they introduce biannual collections and develop around 250 new designs each year.[7] In Bolia's communication, the concept of nature is thus immersed in a tension between the static and the dynamic, rest and movement. And the static element is no longer the landscape itself, but a momentary feeling of calm and rest induced by nature with design as the medium. Bolia's promotional video "A World of Design" from 2023 simply starts with images of a young female model walking on a beach underlaid with ambient music which is interrupted by the speaker: "What if—just for a moment—time stood still?" (Bolia 2023, 0:11–17).

Dematerialisation of Design: Creativity and Atmosphere

The temporalisation of nature discussed above is transferred to the concept of design, resulting in a shift of focus from the material design objects to their creation and effects. Under the headline "New Scandinavian Design", Bolia explains: "For us, great design is not only what meets the eye, but just as importantly, how it is created—and the way it makes us feel. That is why our collection is created by a brilliant community of designers from around the world" (Bolia n.d.-d). Even though the marketing of Bolia has ample examples of imagery of craftsmen and small workshops, the "how it is created" is in this case identified with the design process. Bolia identifies itself as part of the creative industry to such an extent that the possibilities in the concept of creativity become almost endless:

> We believe that creativity is a catalyst for change, both within ourselves and in the world around us. In the same way as we mold our physical spaces, we also shape our relationships, communities, and society. Through acts of kindness, empathy, and innovation, we wield the power to create a more beautiful and harmonious world (Bolia 2025, 5).

In this statement, creativity is concerned with transformation of both the outer and the inner world. Design thus becomes ethical in an almost religious way. Saving the world can be done through a modular sofa! This ideological figure that connects aesthetics, taste and personal ethics has been a recurring figure in European design from the Arts and Crafts movement into modernism, but again, the focus in this case is switched from the appreciation of specific design objects and qualities to the phenomenon of creativity itself. This explains why the New Scandinavian Design chair mentioned in the introduction is called *Bowie* instead of a Scandinavian sounding name. David Bowie was the ultimate representative of ever-moving creativity, the musical chameleon who was continuously changing in terms of music styles, sexuality, etc.

Creativity also becomes key to the flexible "we" in the above quote where it is ambiguous as to whether it represents the company management, the whole chain of designers and producers or the whole of mankind. This ambiguity is solved by establishing Bolia as a community of creative people to which the customers can aspire to belong. The designers working for Bolia are characterised as a "community of designers from around the world", and under the headline "sharing creativity", Bolia has

7. Valid as of 2018 (Kristiansen 2019).



Fig. 5. Still from "New Scandinavian Design", 2022, 0:07. The image is intentionally blurred, adding to the dream-like quality (© Bolia)

furthermore made partnerships with a selection of other companies working within the fields of architecture, music, gastronomy and lifestyle. (Bolia n.d.-c).[8] An example is the so-called "Sofa Sessions", where Bolia collaborates with the producer of hi-fi equipment Pioneer and selected DJs and both deliver the setting for live performances and publish playlists on Spotify and other platforms for their customers to download.

Even though creativity is supposed to spring from nature, in some ways it also consumes it as a source of authenticity. To illustrate this, it might be instructive to take a closer look at the branding video entitled "New Scandinavian Design" from 2022 (Fig. 5).

In the introductory frames, the camera pans through a seemingly endless field of white flowers accompanied by ambient music and the words '"Bolia.com" and "New Scandinavian Design". The specific plant is hard to identify as something commonly grown in fields in Scandinavia and the images are intentionally blurred without a clear establishment of a physical setting. They rather connote "Scandinavia" through generic references to "nature" and the green-white colour scheme and bring to mind the general geographic vagueness in Bolia's use of landscape images described earlier. In the next frames, nature moves inside into an interior very similar to the one depicted in figure 4. The following part of the video alternates between images of landscapes and images of designers sketching and experimenting with prototypes, craftsmen hand polishing wooden details, interiors and close-ups of furniture details. This part reinforces in a quite conventional way the visual links between nature, craftsmanship and design products. However, after about a minute, the speaker says "We believe that new perspectives pave the way for change"[9] and the film is at the same time rolled backwards, creating the illusion of dew falling upwards towards leaves rather than downwards (Bolia 2022 at 0:50–5). Meanwhile, a rhythmic pulse is introduced in the underlying music. This short section works as a transition to a second part of the video addressing Bolia as a global design community, showing footage from some of the "Sofa Sessions". The reversal of the images thus mimics the way a DJ works with "scratching", using the record as an instrument by playing it forwards and backwards. In the context of the video, it also works as a break with whatever reality effect has been established, giving the video a self-reflective layer pointing at itself as a

8. This is not unique to Bolia, but rather a general condition also for more traditional furniture producers moving into the experience and entertainment economy. See, for example, Rosita Satell's 2015 article on the "Republic of Fritz Hansen".
9. The term "new perspectives" was earlier used by the company Muuto, who claimed that their company name was inspired by the Finnish term *muutos*, which they translated as "new perspectives" and used to characterise "New Nordic Design" (Skou and Munch 2016). This illustrates to what extent Bolia is building on the rhetorical legacy from the New Nordic wave.



Fig. 6. "Sofa Sessions" (© Bolia)

video. Similarly, the website of Bolia contains a behind-the-scenes section where the creation of the visual universe at The Lab studios in Copenhagen is documented (Bolia n.d.-a).

All the points discussed above are neatly summed up in a picture from the Sofa Sessions as illustrated in *The Journal* 2024 (Fig. 6). In this image, the female protagonist is centred in a room bathed in light from two large windows in an almost church-like fashion. The other elements in the room are a number of trees and branches, giving the setting a forest-like character, a modular sofa and a DJ Desk. The central vertical axis of the image is emphasised by the split between the sofa modules and forms a line that connects the sofa, the DJ desk, the body of the woman and a large tree behind her. The woman seems to be frozen in a moment with her eyes closed, either dancing or listening to the music. In this moment, the woman thus seems to absorb creative energy from both nature, symbolised by the light and the tree, and culture/art, symbolised by design and music. At the same time, the image is itself an openly staged symbolic product of the very creativity it is supposed to illustrate.

Blurred Lines and Safe Places

Another collaboration worth mentioning is the collaboration Bolia established in 2017 with the American producer of office furniture Steelcase. The background was a transformation of the traditional office space into work zones with a more homely character. Bolia's task was to supplement the functional office furniture from Steelcase with furniture and accessories, adding a homely touch or atmosphere. This blurring of the lines between home and office has of course only been enhanced by the Covid 19-pandemic and the widespread establishment of home offices (Lifestyle and Design Cluster 2022). Apart from the mild irony in the fact that Scandinavian Design, whose version of international modernism was coined as "functionalism" is supposed to supply anything other than functionality, this collaboration might at least partly explain the emphasis on whole interiors and moods rather than singular objects in the communication of Bolia. It also accounts for some of the ambiguity concerning who is addressing and who is being addressed. Bolia addresses both a professional audience, offering interior design of public spaces, and a private audience, offering accessories for their own home making. These audiences are separated on their website through "private" and "professional" sections. They are still connected, though, since addressing private consumers in a semi-professional way through mood boards, design ateliers and curated collections gives them the opportunity to experience themselves as their own interior designers.

Hereby it also becomes clear that no matter how much Bolia tries to root Scandinavian Design in specific Nordic values or a special relationship with nature, it functions first and foremost as a style, a visual language of forms, colour schemes and materials that can be learned and mastered, which is why the background of the designer becomes irrelevant. The discourse of Scandinavian Design also still plays a part, however. Scandinavian Design as identified with the style of mid-century Scandinavian Modern is still considered a more "liveable" version of modernism able to mitigate the stress of modern life and especially suited to provide homeliness in modern working environments.

This function is not limited to the workspace, though, since home and work are not the only societal spheres where limits have become blurred. The *Cord* storage series created by Bolia for the Pioneer equipment from the Sofa Sessions is presented as "an exclusive collection that blurs the lines between the vibrant club scene and the soothing ambience of home" (Bolia 2024, 183; 2025, 211). Bolia furthermore describes their shops as "a calming little sanctuary for you to feel at home in" (Bolia 2025, 232). As earlier described, Bolia was born digital with their website as their main platform, which accounts for the emphasis put on their visual communication in this chapter. Only later have they gradually established and expanded their network of physical stores, mainly in Northern European cities. This way they address a younger urban audience for whom the physical and the digital are interwoven, both with regards to shopping and work. The flip side of the home entering the workspace and shopping space is that the workspace and the shopping space have entered the home. It is therefore significant that while the stores are supposed to resemble homes, the interiors we have seen in Bolia's visual material do not resemble homes, but rather showrooms.

As a form of motto for their *Journal*, Bolia uses the phrase "The spaces we create are who we are" (Bolia 2025, 5). This might be read as a traditional statement of the home as a reflection of one's personal identity, but again, it is ambiguous. Is the "we" Bolia that creates spaces by providing interior design solutions or is it a general statement including the consumer? And where are the spaces located? The notion of the created space matches a situation where home is no longer a fixed place, but a project space created provisionally as a "safe space" in modernity. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the description Bolia gives of its shops:

> Welcome to a world of design. A world inspired by the vivid Scandinavian nature, inviting you to slow down and experience our beautiful designs—all crafted, tailored, and perfected by hand. Every Bolia space is a calming little sanctuary for you to feel at home in. So just come on in and close the door to the fast-paced world behind you.
>
> Nature serves as our main source of inspiration, and we continuously create small spaces and green sceneries that foster creativity, calmness, and serenity. Always freshly decorated and renewed in the beautiful homes that we call stores (Bolia 2025, 232).

Scandinavian Design in a Fluid Modernity

At first glance, the visual universe of Bolia offers familiar images of Scandinavian Design—scenic landscapes and interiors in subdued colour schemes and natural materials. On a second look, they seem to be immersed in an internal tension between nature and home as carriers of conservative values connected with stability and belonging, and a discourse of creativity and innovation celebrating globalism and movement. Looking even more closely, the concepts seem to collapse. The homes are not homes, but showrooms, and nature is not nature, but self-reflective symbolic images of nature. The discourse of creativity takes command in the sense that the familiar images and narratives of Scandinavian Design are at the same time deconstructed and celebrated as a *creative* construction.

The shops of Bolia are presented above as a "world of design", but they are described as a designed world. And this world is a reversal of the outside world, a world that is slower, calmer and more serene: "close the door to the fast-paced world behind you" (Bolia 2025, 232). This is the "Scandinavia" Bolia sells, a self-consciously imagined place that can be constructed as a temporary sanctuary from modernity using the visual language and narratives of Scandinavian Modern. In the *Design in Scandinavia* exhibition, the landscapes were, though strongly curated and misrepresentative, used to tie the

national design cultures to a specific geographical place. And the instigator of the exhibition, the editor of *House Beautiful*, Elizabeth Gordon, used Scandinavian Design to mirror what she saw as an authentic American lifestyle based on home, family and closeness to nature (Guldberg 2011, 47–48). With Bolia, both nature and home have become "placeless", detached from any specific location, but it is exactly this placelessness that makes it possible to reconstruct them as designed places. Read this way, nature and home in the universe of Bolia become symbols of what we are experiencing as threatened, and the designed spaces become temporary replacements. Their reinterpretation of "Scandinavian Design" hereby points towards an individualised modern culture where spaces have become fluid (see Bauman 2000). We recognise familiar notions of the home as a haven from the outside world, an expression of personality and a room for mental restitution. But the detachment of these values from specific places and landscapes, as well as the recurring address of the emotional effects rather than the functionality of the design objects, place the individual consumer in a therapeutic relationship with design, where it is seen as a tool for the optimisation of everyday experience, mindfulness and creativity.

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Transgressing Design Cultures

Graphic Design in the Middle of Communication, 1960s–80s: Gianni Sassi's Dilettantism and the Public Utility Movement

Maddalena Dalla Mura

Abstract

This chapter examines Italian graphic design culture in the second half of the 20th century, when it underwent a phase of transformation and identity crisis shaped by consumer society and an increasingly competitive communication market. From the late 1960s, efforts at professional consolidation fostered a discourse defined by opposition to advertising and by an emphasis on design as civic and cultural practice. Between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the notion of *pubblica utilità* (public utility) became a catalyst for this orientation, prompting debates and initiatives that soon exposed its contradictions. The discussion foregrounds the dissonant role of Gianni Sassi—graphic designer, art director and cultural entrepreneur—whose contribution remains overlooked in critical literature. Active since the 1960s across advertising, neo-avant-garde and countercultural networks, Sassi advanced a conception of communication rooted in a critique of the cultural industry and in a "dilettantist" stance that transgressed professional boundaries. His position underscores the difficulty of graphic design culture in confronting its entanglement with capitalism and mass communication—an issue still highly relevant today.

In May 1984, the cultural magazine *Alfabeta*—then one of the leading platforms for critical debate in Italy—gave visibility to a question animating the graphic design community: *pubblica utilità* or the public utility of design, understood as a civic, political and cultural practice, opposed to commercial communication and oriented toward serving public institutions, social organisations and cultural enterprises. Alongside articles on anti-terrorism legislation, the struggles of the publishing industry, nuclear disarmament and postmodern philosophy, the issue featured an essay by designer and theorist Giovanni Anceschi who framed debates on *pubblica utilità* as both the manifestation of a foundational "crisis" of graphic design and a stage in its maturation as visual communication design.[1] The same issue also announced the First Biennial of Graphic Design, to be held the following summer in Cattolica—a main initiative aimed at promoting and documenting graphic design of public utility—and was illustrated with graphics by the Biennial's promoters (Anceschi 1984a, 1984b). By placing the issue of "public utility" within the broader intellectual debate, *Alfabeta* provided an important platform for the graphic design community, which, under that banner, sought not only to assert its civic and cultural mission but also to gain greater public recognition.

Behind this positioning was art director and cultural entrepreneur Gianni Sassi (1938–1993), a member of the Biennial's organising committee and head of its press office through the cooperative Intrapresa, which also published *Alfabeta*. Thanks to his work in cultural and editorial production and his collaborations with social organisations, Sassi was then regarded as a representative figure of public utility design (Anceschi 1984a, 1984b; De Robertis 1984; Dolcini 1988).[2]

1. In Italian, graphic design, as a field and practice, is often rendered with the noun *grafica*, and graphic designer with the term *grafico*, from the Latin *graphĭcus*, ultimately derived from the Greek *gráphein*. These terms retain an association with drawing and writing, as well as with graphic arts, paper-based media and print. The emphasis in the 1970s–80s—and specifically within the debate on *pubblica utilità*—on the terms *design* and *visual communication* expressed the intention to establish a disciplinary and professional foundation more explicitly centred on the communicative function and on contemporary requirements of the communication and media systems.
2. See also subsequent accounts of those events by some of their protagonists, such as Morpurgo (2006), Pieraccini (2017) and Torri (2020).



Fig. 1. *Alfabeta*, 60, 1984, spreads, art direction Gianni Sassi

Yet his conception of communication diverged markedly from that framework—a difference he openly manifested. A self-taught designer active in advertising and art direction since the 1960s and connected to neo-avant-garde and countercultural networks, Sassi had developed a practice that transgressed professional boundaries and questioned any form of specialism as well as dichotomies such as public/private and cultural/commercial.

The promotion and debates around design's public utility between the 1970s and mid-1980s have often been depicted as a moment when values and aspirations emerged that later became central to Italian graphic design culture (Piscitelli 2019). However, as Sassi's involvement and stance made clear, that period was also marked by profound contradictions. In line with recent historiography seeking a more nuanced reading of its legacies (Pierini 2020), this chapter retraces the origins of the *pubblica utilità* discourse and examines Sassi's role within it. The aim is to add a neglected piece to that history and to contribute to a discussion of design practice attentive to its porous boundaries and cultural resonance beyond professional affirmation—where both *pubblica utilità* and Sassi's own *dilettantism* can be seen as challenges to narrower notions of designer culture.

Towards Public Utility: Graphic Design's Others

Away from Advertising

The promotion and discussion of graphic design's public utility in the 1970s and 1980s was the culmination of a longer process of professional and cultural differentiation developed within the broader rise of consumer society. During Italy's postwar reconstruction and economic boom (1958–63), graphic designers emerged and saw themselves as aesthetic and cultural guides within the convergence of industrial development and social progress. By the mid-1960s, however, the growing complexity of the communication market and shifting sensibilities generated uncertainty about their role. The spread of American-style full-service advertising agencies deprived designers of many clients, while their operational model—grounded in market research and centred on the copywriter-art director duo—relegated them to executive roles and reduced their autonomy and authorship (De Iulio and Vinti 2009). In response, some strengthened links with industrial design, adopting rational methods of visual systems' coordination, especially in corporate communication. Others turned towards art direction, coordinating photographers and specialists to maintain a guiding role within editorial and commercial communication.

Beyond these intersections of professional practices, however, a critical discourse took shape that sought to distance design from commercial promotion (Galluzzo 2018). Here, aesthetic and ethical issues were conflated. On the pages of *Linea Grafica*—the main graphic design forum since 1946—as well as in art magazines, advertising was constructed as design's negative *other*: a synonym of vulgarity, pollution and manipulation. By contrast, graphic design was associated with quality, experimentation, public responsibility and civic commitment. This stance intersected with wider debates on mass media and the cultural industry, animated by figures such as art historian Carlo Arturo Quintavalle and critic Umberto Eco. Yet designers rarely acknowledged their own implication in the broader system of mass communication. Moreover, when art directors or advertisers engaged in self-criticism or promoted social campaigns, commentators often dismissed these as "dishonest" (Schenone Garavoglia 1974)—even though, as Michele Galluzzo (2018) pointedly observed, such campaigns often proved more effective than designers' sophisticated solutions.

By the 1970s, the question of design's social and cultural relevance moved to the centre of debates about the profession's future. In a series of articles in *Linea Grafica*, Albe Steiner—who had practised graphic design as a form of civic engagement since before the Second World War—put forward *pubblica utilità* (public utility), that is, the service to public, social and cultural institutions and enterprises, as a concrete alternative to advertising (Steiner 1973a-d, 1974). Steiner argued that the professional methods of visual coordination originally devised for corporate clients could be effectively applied to these new contexts. A paradigmatic example was the project of visual identity and urban signage for the historic centre of Urbino (1968–69) in the Marche region, which he developed with students of the local school of graphic arts (CSAG, Corso Superiore di Arte Grafica).

Soon after, the nearby municipality of Pesaro commissioned one of those students, Massimo Dolcini, to design its identity and communication strategy. This led to a long collaboration (1971–90) in which Dolcini developed a narrative approach to institutional communication, with extensive use of illustrated posters. His work showed that distancing oneself from commercial propaganda did not require the adoption of modernist minimalism. His pop, figurative, low-definition style resonated with what contemporary magazines and publications described as *altra grafica*: "alternative" graphics produced outside or against capitalist society and its corporate imagery. This heterogeneous category encompassed avant-gardes, Cuban and Polish posters, Chilean and Chinese popular graphics, underground comics and DIY protest productions (Cirio and Favari 1972). At the time, some commentators considered such graphics, closely tied to popular visual culture, as a way to rethink design in terms of social participation (Barrese 1976).

The work of Steiner and Dolcini became important touchstones for designers in a phase when Italy's progressive administrative decen-

tralisation expanded opportunities for professional collaboration with local institutions, although these did not always guarantee the same conditions of political affinity, dialogue and shared intent that had underpinned those pioneering cases (Pierini 2020).

Promoting "Pubblica Utilità"

At the turn of the decade, the notion of *pubblica utilità* became a catalyst for debates on the recognition of the graphic design profession and on the quality of visual communication within an increasingly stratified media landscape. Exhibitions and conferences were organised across various Italian cities to showcase designers' growing involvement with local institutions and with political, social and cultural communication addressing citizens rather than consumers. These initiatives also revealed a new geography of the practice in Italy, no longer centred solely on Milan or other major urban hubs (Torri 2020). The most significant was the First Biennial of Graphic Design, held in Cattolica, Emilia-Romagna (1984). Focused on poster exhibitions and the creation of a dedicated archive, the Biennial sought to gather Italian designers engaged in *pubblica utilità* projects and assess their methodological and linguistic convergence (Anceschi 1984c) while also opening a dialogue with comparable international practices—the French collective Grapus were invited to present their work.

Promoted by a committee established in 1981 within AIAP—the association of visual communication designers[3]—the Biennial brought together practitioners from diverse backgrounds, active in both institutional and corporate contexts. Alongside early promoters like Gianfranco Torri, Roberto Pieraccini, Paolo De Robertis and Massimo Dolcini—by then recognised as the leading figure of *pubblica utilità*—was Gianni Sassi, most likely involved through his friendship with Dolcini. The committee also included the designer and theorist Giovanni Anceschi, who acted as critical interpreter of the movement, seeking to guide its evolution,[4] and Gaddo Morpurgo, lecturer at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (IUAV), whose interest in the role of communication in urban planning and transformation led him, in preparation for the Biennial, to organise a seminar on profession and professionalism in graphic design (1984).

As that meeting and the Biennial itself soon revealed, however, the label of *pubblica utilità* masked fragmentation rather than cohesion. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Anceschi noted that the only elements uniting designers were a certain ethical tension and an "oppositional" stance toward modernist language, favouring approaches closer to *altra grafica* (Anceschi 1984c). Divergences, however, ran deeper. Some grounded their identity in graphic culture, sophistication and print expertise while also asserting an authorial attitude; others feared this trajectory would prove a dead end, isolating designers from the evolving communication landscape. In the end, the very premises of *pubblica utilità*—and the effectiveness of its framework for advancing the profession—were called into question.

Remix: In the Middle of Communication

The critical reconsideration of *pubblica utilità* continued after the Biennial through exhibitions, conferences, and articles published especially in *Linea Grafica* and in *Grafica: Rivista di Teoria Storia e Metodologia*, founded by AIAP in 1985 as a forum for disciplinary debate. The main stages of this discussion have been traced by other scholars (Piscitelli 2019; Pierini 2020). Here the focus is on key issues raised by Giovanni Anceschi, Massimo Dolcini and Gaddo Morpurgo, central figures in that debate. Keeping distance from the more ideological positions, these authors dismantled much of the rhetoric surrounding *pubblica utilità* and redirected attention towards the evolving horizon of visual communication. Within their contributions, Gianni Sassi's work—developed independently

3. The acronym AIAP derives from the association's original name and composition as the Italian Association of Advertising Artists (Associazione Italiana Artisti Pubblicitari, 1945).
4. A former member of the programmed art movement and graduate in visual communication from the HfG Ulm (1966), Anceschi played a significant role in the development of visual communication design as a discipline in Italy, particularly from the 1980s onwards.

of concerns with professional identity or canonical standards of good design—was cited, alongside that of others, as an example.

One of the original pillars of *pubblica utilità* was the distinction between public and private patronage and between civic communication and commercial advertising. In practice, however, such boundaries proved untenable: in mass society, languages and practices constantly overlapped. After all, as Anceschi had already noted in the Biennial catalogue, all messages reached audiences "on equal terms" (1984c, p. 14).[5] The economic and social dynamism of 1980s Italy made these conditions even more evident. It was Anceschi (1987a, 1987b) who offered a way out of the impasse. Speaking at a conference in Ravenna and in a related article in *Linea Grafica*, he described, as if new, a double movement: public institutions increasingly drew on the services and codes of advertising, while private companies invested in cultural initiatives of public utility, opening opportunities for quality graphic work and even adopting the languages of *altra grafica*. He labelled this situation a "remix" (*rimescolamento*), celebrating it as an expansion and a victory for *pubblica utilità*. Designers, he argued, had become "people in the middle of communication": abandoning defensive and self-referential stances while maintaining graphic quality, they had developed flexibility and eclecticism to respond to diverse clients and contexts. In this perspective, public utility no longer depended on the commissioner but on the ability to reach the public with accessible, "popular" languages. Among the designers operating in this expanded field, Sassi was mentioned not for his cultural projects shown at the Biennial, but for an advertising campaign for Tenax, a sanitary ware producer.

Another limit that emerged concerned the conception of graphic design as a specialised, quasi-authorial practice, centred on print culture (Dolcini 1986, 1988; Morpurgo 1986, 1988). Drawing on his experience with local institutions, Dolcini in particular stressed the need for new approaches capable of meeting demands for more articulated communication strategies and addressing the expectations of an increas-



Fig. 2. Advertisement for Tenax sanitary ware, published in *La Gola*, March 1987, art direction Gianni Sassi. This type of work is cited by Giovanni Anceschi in 1987 as an example of the expansion of public utility design, beyond collaboration with public administrations

ingly discerning citizenry. He urged colleagues not to remain tied to the label of "public utility designer" or to a craft-based vision of the trade, but to explore a more entrepreneurial attitude. His proposal was the "public utility agency": a structure centred on design yet integrating managerial and technical expertise, modelled on advertising agencies. Dolcini soon moved in this direction, merging in 1987 his Fuorischema studio with the agency M&M, which also took on commercial clients (Campana 1987). In 1988, with *Linea Grafica*, he organised a training course on communication for public institutions that promoted this entrepreneurial turn and foregrounded the profile of the "graphic designer – art director – entrepreneur" (Dolcini 1988). Among those invited to share their experience was Sassi, who for over a decade had pur-

5. All translations from Italian are by the author.

sued communication as enterprise and creative coordination.

In the end, if the new horizon of the graphic design profession could no longer be defined by client type, visual style or individual specialism, what remained of the discourse on *pubblica utilità* was chiefly the opening of new opportunities across Italy. These, in essence, were the conclusions of Gaddo Morpurgo (1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1988). A lucid participant in the debate, he noted that *pubblica utilità* had been a way for designers to reflect on their role in shifting socio-economic conditions and to build networks in a country still lacking consolidated disciplinary venues. Years later, he would pointedly describe those initiatives as "collective self-promotion", a "counting in order to count" aimed at reinforcing cultural status (Morpurgo 2006). At the time, however, he also stressed other aspects: above all, that public investment went largely to cultural rather than informational services, and that it expanded without coherent strategies. Public utility graphics, he argued, made especially visible the growth of mass cultural production and consumption and the spectacularisation of culture—an "atypical market" where civic bodies increasingly competed with private enterprises (Morpurgo 1984, 1988). It was therefore culture as a product, more than the commissioner of communication, that required closer scrutiny. This line of reflection was not pursued. Yet at the seminar organised by Morpurgo in Venice, Sassi had already gone further, rejecting the very idea that culture could emerge from public institutions (De Robertis 1985, 75).

In the following years, as the social and political tensions of previous decades waned, and as designers enthusiastically embraced the expanding demand for visual communication and the segmentation of the market, debate shifted to more technical and specialist issues. The notion of *pubblica utilità*, while continuing to serve as an ideal reference, was progressively narrowed to designate a specific domain of practice: communication for institutions and culture.[6]

Gianni Sassi, Designing Culture between Activism and Entrepreneurship

Gianni Sassi's career can be divided into two main phases. The first, until the mid-1970s, was characterised by his early experiences in advertising and his involvement with neo-avant-garde and countercultural networks, which proved formative in shaping his critical and experimental approach to communication and the cultural industry. The second, lasting until his death in 1993, saw him engaged in consolidating the conditions for cultural production as an independent enterprise—an objective that was never fully realised.

Post-Advertising

Sassi began working as a self-taught graphic designer and art director in the mid-1960s in Calvairate, a working-class neighbourhood in Milan. With his friend Sergio Albergoni, he founded al.sa, a small agency that initially offered graphic and advertising services to local studios and businesses—the first notable clients included toy manufacturers Mebetoys and Polistil. Sassi took care of the visuals while Albergoni focused on copywriting. With entrepreneurial spirit, the two also partnered with a small printshop, La Monzese, to produce their work and increase profits. Gradually, a loose network of collaborators gathered around them, some of whom gravitated around the same local branch of the Italian Communist Party as Sassi and Albergoni. A brief partnership with Till Neuburg—son of Hans Neuburg, recently arrived in Milan—most likely helped al.sa to connect with professional networks. In the late 1960s and early 1970s their work appeared in directories such as the Art Directors Club Milano annual.[7]

Meanwhile, also through La Monzese, Sassi and Albergoni came into contact with artists and intellectuals linked to neo-avantgarde movements such as visual poetry and Fluxus, Situationist practices and counter-information activities. Despite their differences, these strands shared the recognition that art and culture—and their institutions—were embedded in capitalism, a system they sought to expose and

6. As such, from 1985 onwards it was listed in the pages of *Linea Grafica*, alongside fields such as corporate identity, typography and computer graphics.

7. In 1969 Sassi was also invited to become a member of the Art Directors Club Milano. So far, however, it has not been possible to clarify whether he did so.



Fig. 3. *bit: Art: what's happening in Italy today*, 4, ED912, 1968. Spread showing a layout inspired by DIY countercultural graphics. On the right-hand page, a *band détournée* by Gianni-Emilio Simonetti

perform. Retaining ties to the modernist aspiration of uniting art and life, they appropriated the languages of mass communication to demystify them, experimented with printing and publishing as institutional critique and at times infiltrated the very structures of the cultural industry. Exposure to these experiences enriched not only al.sa's visual style but, more importantly, its critical stance toward communication and the industry sustaining it.

A crucial encounter was the one with Gianni-Emilio Simonetti, an artist and agitator who combined research, documentation and organisational work. Together with him, Sassi and Albergoni founded the publishing house ED912, conceived as a vehicle for a "permanent cultural revolution anywhere, anytime and by any means". Involving artists, poets, graphic designers and exponents of counterculture, ED912 produced books, posters, gadgets and magazines (Boragina 2021). Among these was *bit* (1967–68), initially launched as a contemporary art bulletin but soon transformed into a platform amplifying student and artist protests, with layouts influenced by DIY countercultural graphics.

Situationist tactics of "deculturation", *détournement* and media parasitism gradually filtered into al.sa's commercial work. The agency infiltrated clients' promotional channels with content and imagery that articulated a radical critique of the capitalist system and a discussion of the economic and political value of culture and information within it. The house organs of the furniture manufacturer Gruppo Busnelli (*Caleidoscopio*, 1969–73) and of the ceramic tile producer Iris Ceramica (*humus*, 1973–74) were both used to extend the editorial project of *bit* (Vinti n.d.). In 1972, together with Situationist sympathiser Marco Maria Sigiani, Albergoni and Sassi gave shape and a name to this strategy: *dopo-pubblicità* (post-advertising). Rejecting the specialism and technical focus of market-driven agencies, their "global" approach promised clients communication embedded in


"pollution":
per una nuova estetica
dell'inquinamento

Fig. 4. Gianni Sassi, "Pollution, Per una nuova Estetica dell'Inquinamento", article featured in the first issue of *humus*, house organ of Iris Ceramica, April 1973. The article illustrates the rationale of the events organised by al.sa to promote Iris Ceramica during the 1972 SAIE Building Fair in Bologna

a wider cultural discourse and capable of having a real impact on society. Post-advertising relied on engaging non-specialists—such as artists, musicians or scientists—and on producing communicative "situations" beyond print media (Albergoni, Sassi and Sigiani 1972). One example was the promotion of Iris Ceramica, centred on a provocative discourse about quality of living and on a critique of the "fashion" of environmentalism. For the 1972 SAIE Building Fair in Bologna, al.sa staged *Pollution: Per una Nuova Estetica dell'Inquinamento* (For a New Aesthetic of Pollution) in a city square, combining a tile installation by Sassi, an art exhibition and a concert by the then little-known musician Franco Battiato (Kittler 2021).

In the 1970s, Sassi ventured into the music industry. Motivated less by expertise than by the recognition that music was a powerful tool for shaping the cultural system and reaching young audiences in particular, he regarded records as mass-produced editorial products to be reinvented beyond market genres (Sassi 1978, 1979b). This recognition drew on Adorno's analyses of the culture industry, but it was sustained by the avant-garde aspiration and confidence that contemporary culture could still be produced "in the interstices between modernism and mass culture" (Huyssen 1986, 43). After occasional collaborations with some artists, he co-founded the independent label CRAMPS (Company Records Advertising Management Promotion Service) in 1972.[8] Operating in areas neglected by the mainstream music industry and drawing on al.sa's network, CRAMPS produced progressive rock artists such as Area, as well as collections of experimental and avant-garde music by figures including John Cage and Demetrio Stratos. The label's identity—marked by the iconic face of Frankenstein, reportedly, an alter ego for

8. CRAMPS was founded by Sassi, Albergoni and the music manager Franco Mamone. Both Albergoni and Mamone, however, soon left the project.



Fig. 5a-b. John Cage, album cover and gatefold ("Nova Musicha" series, 1), art direction Gianni Sassi, CRAMPS, 1974

Sassi—relied on a recognisable repertoire: typewriter font, ambiguous still lifes of everyday and symbolic objects and layered codes mixing found images and visual poetry. As its acronym suggested, CRAMPS sought to control all aspects, from music production to promotion. This ambition, however, exposed Sassi to the structural challenges of distribution. Efforts to ally with other independent labels and to negotiate with major distributors failed, leading to the label's closure in 1980. Its comprehensive management model nonetheless remained a reference for Sassi as he turned increasingly to publishing and cultural organisation.

The Intrapresa Ecosystem

The second half of the 1970s marked a transitional phase for independent cultural production, moving from sporadic and often amateurish initiatives towards the ambition to establish structures capable of offering a lasting alternative—in terms of both content and operating models—to the oligopolies of the cultural industry (Lo Monaco 2020; Alferj and Mazzone 1979; Sassi 1979a). *Alfabeta* (1979–88) and Intrapresa were founded within this context.

Sassi's encounter with poet and artist Nanni Balestrini (1935–2019) was pivotal. A former member of the literary group Gruppo 63 (1963–69) and politically active in the extra-parliamentary left—involved with radical groups such as Potere Operaio (1968) and Autonomia Operaia (1976)—Balestrini believed intellectuals should play a "practical" role, linking artistic research with political engagement, as exemplified in his novel *Vogliamo Tutto*, which literally gave voice to the class struggle (1971; *We Want Everything*) (Picchione 2004). With the same intent, he contributed to journals and worked with leftist publishers like Feltrinelli as well as with small independent publishing ventures and authors' cooperatives. To support the latter, he co-founded, with Sassi and a financial partner, Ar&a (1976–78), an agency providing editorial, distribution and promotional services. Though short-lived—mainly due to financial difficulties—this venture offered Sassi the opportunity to reflect once more on the challenge of sustaining and distributing independent production (Sassi 1979a).

In 1979, reacting to an increasingly repressive political climate linked to the fight against terrorism and to the widespread *riflusso*—the retreat into the private sphere—Balestrini launched *Alfabeta*, aiming to sustain the critical spirit that had fuelled political struggles and artistic experimentation in the previous decades. The project quickly drew an exceptional editorial board of Milanese left-wing intellectuals, including Umberto Eco, poet Antonio Porta and literary critic Maria Corti. Art collector and publisher Gino Di Maggio provided initial funding, and Sassi was engaged as art director and member of the editorial team. In many respects indebted

to Gruppo 63's *Quindici* (1967–69), *Alfabeta* was characterised by a non-hierarchical, collective direction, a militant, anti-ideological and transdisciplinary approach to critical debate. Rooted in literature, art, philosophy and politics, *Alfabeta* approached every topic as inherently political and social, contributing to shaping key late-20th-century discussions while also amplifying marginal voices from outside established circles (Bossaglia et al. 2012). Printed in about 20,000 copies and sold at newsstands and via subscription, *Alfabeta* also manifested through its format and layout—similar to those of a daily newspaper—its intention to offer an alternative to the glossy excesses of mass culture. The magazine featured typographic and illustrated covers and dense interior pages with long-form articles, all set in Times, by then Sassi's hallmark. Interspersed images—drawings, graphics, comics, photographs—provided an independent visual discourse. A "remarkable quantity of signs" with "a very low aesthetic level", as design critic Aldo Colonetti (1988) put it.

From 1980, Sassi took on the publishing responsibilities of *Alfabeta* by establishing the cooperative Intrapresa (its name evoking both "enterprise" and "venture"). During the 1970s, the cooperative model had regained attention in Italy as a third way between capitalist businesses and public institutions, entailing a flexible, horizontal organisation, especially suited to services and culture (Fabbri, 2011). For Sassi, it offered the chance to structure his idea of an independent cultural enterprise—and for some years it effectively embodied this vision (Lodi and Sassi 1985).

To ensure *Alfabeta*'s independence and financial sustainability, Intrapresa devised a promotional microsystem revolving around the magazine, gradually generating a cultural network and its own readership. The magazine carried ads from publishers, associations and some companies, alongside initiatives produced by Intrapresa and Sassi, who at the time was also art director for leftist non-profits and cooperatives such as ARCI, Lega Nazionale delle Cooperative and COOP.

Over time, Intrapresa expanded, fostering other publications and building a rich catalogue of cultural events. Among its most successful offshoots was *La Gola* (1982–88), a periodical that—through an approach akin to *Alfabeta*—challenged the idealism still pervasive in Italian culture by focusing on food, the body and material culture as social and political issues. Initially responsible for its design, Massimo Dolcini helped define its "opaque" identity, deliberately opposed to the glossy aesthetics of culinary magazines (Colonetti 1987). *La Gola* also incubated new projects, including support for the Slow Food movement (1989), whose early identity bore the imprint of Sassi's low-definition style.

The project that engaged Sassi most from the 1980s until his death was, however, the poetry festival *Milanopoesia* (1984–92). For nearly a decade, this event brought to Milan—then dominated by hedonism and careerism—varied groups of international artists, directly engaging audiences with experimental poetry and artistic research through readings, seminars, performances, music and dance. Partly funded by the City of Milan, the festival represented a radical challenge to the cultural industry's ongoing commodification of art (Sassi 1989). This was one of the reasons why organising it became increasingly difficult, forcing Sassi to engage in repeated negotiations to secure funding and suitable venues. In the booklet accompanying the 1990 edition, he emphasised this situation, writing that despite the "general hostility and distrust" in which the festival had had to move for years, he would not adjust his lifestyle and work to the "prevailing cultural decay" or to external actors who "systematically lower the scope of their own ambitions" (Sassi 1990).

Versus Public Utility: Dilettantism and Independence

What has been briefly outlined in the preceding paragraphs is the cultural milieu and networks within which Sassi shaped his practice and operated when he joined the organising committee of the First Biennial of Graphic Design. For this event, besides contributing to the poster selection for the main exhibition, he assumed responsibility through Intrapresa for the catalogue's publication (issued by Mondadori), the press office and financial management. Eventually, Intrapresa's handling created friction with



Fig. 6. *La Gola*, 5, March 1983, graphic design Massimo Dolcini, art direction Gianni Sassi. As the designer of the first issues (1–7), Dolcini brought to *La Gola* his flair for the narrative power of illustrations. Like *Alfabeta*, *La Gola* was set in Times and had a newspaper-like format and paper

the Cattolica administration, which then chose not to pursue a second Biennial (Torri 2020). Nevertheless, despite his anti-establishment stance, Sassi continued for some years to participate in debates on public utility as well as to provide space for design issues in *Alfabeta*.

Uninterested in professional status, graphic culture per se or authorship and equally detached from any notion of "utility" or institutional service, Sassi's main concern was producing and communicating culture and securing the conditions to do so. This stance emerges in a long article published in the same issue of *Alfabeta* that announced the Biennial (Sassi 1984). Prompted by the financial crisis of the Turin-based publisher Einaudi and written at a time when Intrapresa itself began facing problems of economic sustainability, the text reflected on the obstacles to producing and distributing original culture. Arguing that the defining quality of any genuine cultural enterprise is independence—understood as the "absence of an immediate finality", that is, freedom from external logics—he examined, and ultimately rejected as inevitably instrumental, all forms of patronage such as sponsorship or subsidies, whether bourgeois or proletarian. He concluded that only by operating in the market could independence be secured.

While it made no mention of graphic design, that article could also be read as a commentary on designers' attempts to anchor their social role to public institutions. After all, Sassi advanced similar arguments in meetings on *pubblica utilità*. As Giovanni Anceschi recalled in the Biennial catalogue—where he outlined a first chronology of the main initiatives centred on *pubblica utilità* between the 1970s and the early 1980s—Sassi had already proposed to his colleagues "a radical change of perspective" at a conference in Ravenna in 1983, urging them to focus on "the production of culture", while expressing "a very sceptical attitude towards any view of the public authority as a provider of cultural services and graphic designers as mere intermediaries—whether neutral or trusted—of such provision" (Anceschi 1984c, 15). Likewise, during the seminar organised in Venice by Morpurgo, where participants were invited to discuss the novelty of their approach—and where Dolcini put forward the model of the public utility agency—Sassi pointed rather toward the profile of an "intellectual of communication, at once experimental and critical", autonomous and inquisitive like a "great dilettante" (Anceschi 1984c, 16; De Robertis 1985, 75). He would return to this notion the following year on the occasion of *Segnopolis*, a poster exhibition and seminar held in Turin (1985). In a short text titled "Elogio del Dilettante" (In Praise of the Dilettante) and featured in a brochure, he wrote:

> Graphic design […] derives its power from the virtual monopoly of a scarce and precious resource: "dilettantism". […] There are two types of dilettantism, and graphic design knows and practises both. The first, which we could call "vertical", fuels the metabolic exchange between producers and consumers, sedimenting categories and codes common to both. […] Even more important is the second type, which we could call "horizontal". In the era of super speciali-

> sations, we all become dilettantes […]. We would do well not to forget that the chances of knowledge exchange, or simply of communication with our peers, rely on non-specialised premises and techniques (Sassi 1985a).

By emphasising dilettantism—exchange between cultural producers and audiences and cross-fertilisation across disciplines—Sassi challenged any notion of professional identity and specialised boundaries. These claims, furthermore, were embedded in a broader reflection on design's role within the cultural industry. The text opened with a quotation from *Minima Moralia* (1949), in which Theodor W. Adorno denounced mass culture's barbarism and false splendour. For Sassi, graphic design could play a role in resisting this decay and fostering an authentic cultural alternative. However, in his view, such potential could never develop through institutional or political support, nor through public subsidies. It could only arise from widespread cultural entrepreneurship, built on small independent structures able to operate in the market while critically confronting the dominant media apparatus. Once again, he shifted attention from graphic design and its practitioners to culture, and from individual practice to structural issues.

It is worth noting that "Elogio del Dilettante" was a shortened and repurposed version of a text by Sassi (1985b) previously published in *Alfabeta* and dedicated to literature, a reuse that lends itself to multiple interpretations. One possible reading is Sassi's habit—developed since his collaboration with Simonetti in the late 1960s—of reusing texts and images and of circulating ideas across different channels. Another is that he regarded graphic design and literature, like other forms of cultural production, as subject to the same dynamics and difficulties, yet also capable of contributing to a cultural revolution—one that, not without contradictions and limits, he continued to pursue into the closing years of the 20th century, as *Milanopoesia* evidenced.

In the end, Sassi's emphasis on dilettantism, independence and entrepreneurship did not amount to an alternative designer culture but to an alternative conception of culture and of communication design within it—one that rejected the ideological and ultimately illusory separation from capitalism in favour of critical engagement with its apparatuses, nourished by dialogue across diverse forms of knowledge and practice. This vision informed work spanning art, music, poetry and material culture, as he and his collaborators created infrastructures for cultural production and circulation through multiple channels and publics. The significance of this endeavour is confirmed today by the recognition of Sassi's "other way of making culture" (Pennacchio 2023) across fields such as contemporary art and literary studies.

Conclusion

As Sarah Owens (2019) has noted, graphic design is "a highly permeable" practice, marked by heterogeneous intentions, methods and perceptions, yet also shaped by repeated professional and disciplinary boundary-making processes. The Italian *pubblica utilità* initiatives can be read in this light as an attempt to consolidate professional legitimacy by promoting "good design" grounded in social and cultural values, tied to public institutions and distinct from advertising and commercial propaganda. As this chapter has shown, however, that construction proved a *cul-de-sac*, and, in fact, positions within those events were diverse from the outset.

Recent re-readings of *pubblica utilità* have reconsidered its legacy in relation to contemporary design, shifting attention from ideology and aspirations to the reorganisation of work visible in specific cases—such as Steiner's civic projects or Dolcini's "public utility agency". These studies have also stressed its potential resonance for today's practitioners who pursue social transformation not through institutions but via autonomous or collaborative platforms (Piscitelli 2019; Pierini 2020). From this perspective, reintroducing Sassi's stance appears especially valuable. His neglect in most accounts likely reflects the persistent focus on canonical figures, on designers' relations with civic administrations—especially outside Milan, the centre of his activity—and, more broadly, on affirmative models of professional identity, which he never fully embodied. Sassi's trajectory was far from linear, and his approach, suspended between radical aspirations and entrepreneurial ambition, was not without compromises. For this reason, he

attracted criticism in the 1970s, particularly from exponents of counterculture. On the other hand, his approach to communication often led to friction with his clients. Furthermore, whilst he was recognised by his colleagues as a true organisational linchpin, many personal accounts also describe him as a forceful art director. Although he consistently foregrounded the conditions of cultural production and distribution, he gave little attention to the material conditions of intellectual and creative labour—an omission that strained relations with collaborators. The intention here is not to cast him as an alternative hero of design history—something he himself would have resisted. Rather, Sassi's perspective can help sharpen our understanding of *pubblica utilità* and expose tensions that remain salient in relation to the discussion of design's social and cultural role—particularly in the recurrent claims for design's autonomy and critical agency within capitalist and neoliberal systems (Julier 2013; Brown 2019; Lorusso 2023).

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Activity, Play and Self-Flagellation: The Nordic *The Child's Environment* Exhibition at the Milan Triennale 1973

Denise Hagströmer

Abstract

The XV Milan Triennale in 1973 was the first at which the Nordic countries exhibited jointly rather than as individual nations. They also broke new ground at this Triennale with a focus on ideas, ideology and discourse rather than displays idealising crafts and design objects. Responding to the theme of the XV Triennale, "The Habitable Space" (*Lo Spazio Abitabile*), *The Child's Environment* centred on the relation between children and their environment and initiatives in the Nordic countries dealing with that relation. This pan-Nordic exhibition was the only foreign contribution to receive a Grand Prix. Organised by the Nordic societies of crafts and design and financed by the Nordic Cultural Fund, the exhibition was initiated and designed by Finnish architect and political scientist Tapio Periäinen.

This chapter examines the exhibition content, its curatorial messages, conceptual inspiration and predecessors, alongside related Italian developments. Applying a transnational approach, it also examines and compares the responses to the exhibition in Italy and Scandinavia. *The Child's Environment* exhibition provoked discussion of its theme in Italy. It transgressed established conventions and can be placed within a succession of innovative, international, child-centred happenings around 1970. However, this event had a largely dystopian outlook, revealing deep self-criticism. It also marked the transition from a Golden Age to a new Nordic design ethos and identity.

Introduction: Entering the Exhibition

As visitors to the XV Milan Triennale in 1973 made their way up the grand staircase of the Palazzo dell'Arte, in an architectural setting designed for the occasion by Giulio Confalonieri and Nanda Vigo, they were met with a dramatic environment, a bare space with tiled walls and cold lighting, an austere interpretation of the Triennale theme "The Habitable Space" (*Lo Spazio Abitabile*). This Triennale was the first at which the Scandinavian countries exhibited jointly rather than as individual nations. They also broke new ground with a focus on ideas, ideology and discourse, rather than displays idealising crafts and design objects. Responding to the Triennale's theme, *The Child's Environment* focused on the relation between children and their environment and initiatives in the Nordic countries dealing with that relationship. This pan-Nordic showing was the only foreign contribution to receive a Grand Prix. Between 20th September and 20th November, the Triennale was attended by 100,000 visitors. Organised by the Nordic societies of crafts and design and financed by the Nordic Cultural Fund, the exhibition was initiated and designed by Finnish architect and political scientist Tapio Periäinen.

Design historical research into this exhibition has so far been slight, but a brief discussion of the event by Guy Julier and Kaisu Savola features in the anthology *Transnational Discourses in Nordic Design* (Skjerven and Gotlieb 2025). As its title suggests, *Finnish Design 2.0 at the XXII Triennale di Milano: Everyday Experimentation in Its Historical and Policy Contexts* mainly assesses the event's significance in relation to a contemporary Finnish context, but Julier and Savola do suggest that "[c]hoosing children's rights as the theme reflected the shared interest in social values within the countries' design fields, while keeping in line with the projected image of Nordic countries as modern and pro-

gressive" (Julier and Savola, 2025, 149). Periäinen stated that the exhibition's objectives were

> to convey that the situation for children and young people in the world is one of today's most serious problems and that an increased standard of living in the Nordic countries does not automatically offer a solution to the challenges faced by children and young people today, but quite the reverse for some large groups […] (Periäinen 1973, 22).

Based on the study of archival and secondary sources, this chapter examines the exhibition content, its curatorial messages, conceptual inspiration and its Swedish and Danish predecessors, alongside related Italian developments. Applying a transnational approach, this chapter also examines and compares the responses to the exhibition in Italy and Scandinavia.

The context of the event will also be related to the contemporary realities of a Nordic design establishment under serious challenge and a design profession in flux as they responded to a society and design culture in transformation. The early 1970s marked a turning point that was more than a design generational shift. The political unity and stability of the postwar era had come to an end. The cultural radicalism of the late 1960s, a growing criticism of consumer society and an increasingly ideological discourse all affected the design scene, as practitioners were concerned with environmental, societal and global issues (see also Hagströmer 2025). Also in stark contrast to past Scandinavian exhibitions, an antipathy to self-aggrandisement, coupled with self-doubt and even self-flagellation, will be related to concepts of identity, including the bigger picture of Nordism, or the concept of "Norden".

This chapter argues that *The Child's Environment* exhibition transgressed established conventions and can be placed within a succession of forward-looking, international, child-centred events around 1970. With its ideology and social agenda, the exhibition broke new ground on what a Nordic design exhibition could be. At the same time, it responded to the ideals and concerns of a new generation of design practitioners. Two years after the exhibition, in 1975, Periäinen would become Director of the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design (Suomen taideteollisuusyhdistys/Konstflitföreningen i Finland), taking over from Herman Olof Gummerus, who had been prominent in the international promotion of Scandinavian design and was also multilingual. He had been a member of the Triennale jury since the 1950s and was jury vice-chairman in 1973. Periäinen and Gummerus were leading lights of their generations and both were driving forces for the event. This exhibition furthered international discourse on a progressive theme which also resonated with its Italian audience.

Transgressing Established Norms and Looking Towards a New Nordic Design Identity

Marking a transition to a new design ethos and leaving the Scandinavian Design era behind, Tapio Periäinen announced:

> According to my view, the Triennale exhibitions have had great significance, the world needs such an international arena for dealing with object problems. During the 50s and 60s, aspects regarding the object's design, aesthetic and functional qualities were clarified. Now a change has taken place as regards our approach to these qualities: one wishes to solve the psycho-social impact on people. These issues are becoming increasingly important (Tengesdal Nordby 2015, 57).

At the time this progressive exhibition took place, the Nordic countries' design identities were being seriously challenged. In 1972, at a preparatory meeting, art historian Alf Bøe, Director of the Norwegian Design Centre (closed in 1973) and representative of the Norwegian establishment elite, acknowledged that, in the light of previous Triennali, Scandinavian Design as a "material realisation of a specific lifestyle" was "no longer as self-evident as before". At the same time, however, he asserted that as a result of Scandinavian Design, the Nordic countries nonetheless had a reputation to defend and that the best way to defend it was with an "innovative showing" (Tengesdal Nordby 2015, 60).

It is noteworthy that the first point the Nordic organisers agreed on when planning this collaborative event was that it would be "ideological and objectless […] not only critical, revealing and thought-provoking, but also positive and solution-oriented" (Julier and Savola, 2025, 149). At a pan-Nordic planning meeting, this point was explained further:



Fig. 1. *The Child's Environment* exhibition at the Milan Triennale, 1973 (Courtesy Triennale Milano)

> It is not so important to show material objects. More important is to make sure to convey our relation to our environment—to direct criticism at the adults' world—the passive adults' world — not just Scandinavian society, but against welfare society as a whole. The message must be positive activity […] keywords are: activity and inclusion (Himberg-Larsen et al., 1972 [underlining in the original source]).

Here, Periäinen and the other organisers identified what would become the exhibition's core message as well as its self-critical stance. Periäinen also led the working group: Danish photographer Karin Munk, Swedish architect Jan Berg, Norwegian educator and psychologist Edda West-Christensen and architecture and playground consultant Frode Svane (Tengesdal Nordby 2015, 57).

The exhibition was about children's marginalised conditions in challenging urban environments. It consisted of the evocation of a playground in a newly-built suburb, and within it, statues of small children rendered in plaster by Finnish artist Rauni Liukko, distorted in appearance and pale as ghosts, filling a fenced-in and cramped enclave on a concrete deck. These were representative of Liukko's satirical output at the time, which focused on children's and women's rights, influenced, she later explained, by her own motherhood, TV news coverage of the war in Biafra and American neo-realist art (Kivirinta 2007) (Fig. 1).

On the wall behind them, a large-scale photograph of nondescript concrete housing blocks; on other walls, blown up images of children and manifesto-like texts: "The child is a human being just as the adult is"; "During thirty percent of our lives we are children or young. That means thirty percent of our environment ought to belong to children and young people. Do we give children the space to live that they are owed?" Amid this, large free-standing red and white plastic spheres of different sizes stood on an asphalt grey carpet. The spheres also had texts on them: "Love", "Be kind to me", "Play with me!" (Fig. 2).

This encouragement to actively engage was an opportunity enthusiastically seized upon by

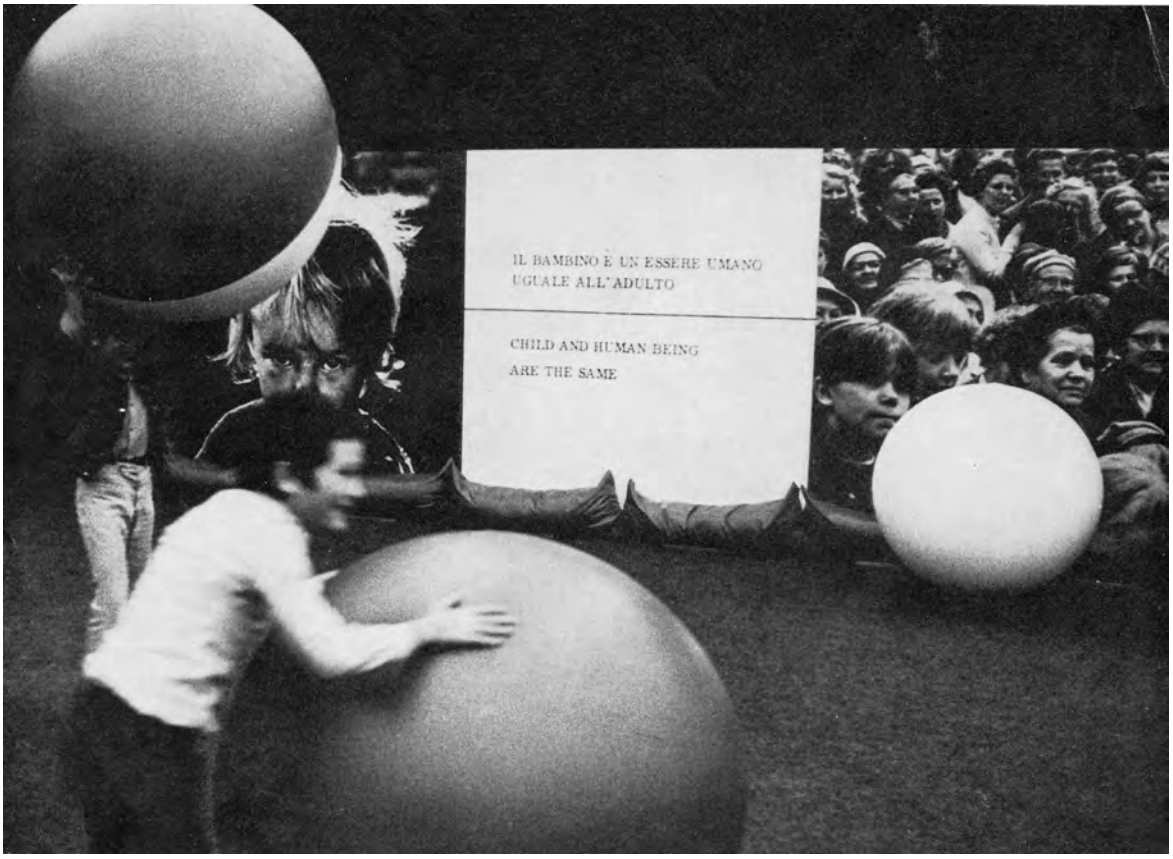


Fig. 2. *The Child's Environment* exhibition at the Milan Triennale, 1973 (Photo and courtesy: Björn Ed)

young visitors. As the Norwegian daily *Aftenposten* reported:

> The entire space was soon transformed into a playground of excitement and laughs, where children and adults kicked, rolled, pushed and fell about with abandon on the soft, light balls. Even the doorman, who at first was clearly nervous and anxious about this lack of calm and order, threw himself into the game (Hennum 1973).

The idea behind the plastic spheres was, of course, to activate the visitors and inspire social contact (Periäinen 1973, 22). This experiential exhibition approach succeeded, it seems, in breaking the ice. The *Aftenposten* review noted: "This is how the public interacted with each other and could more easily talk about the challenges of urban reality, with traffic chaos, pollution, violence and crime" (Hennum 1973). Periäinen revealed that another idea behind the spheres was to critique the restrictions of conventional displays: "a protest against the 'no-touching' attitudes of object exhibitions" (Periäinen 1973, 22).

This radical event was a mainly dystopian vision of the child's environment, a critical reflection on society's failure in answering children's needs, encouraging visitors to reflect on the society they were part of. However, in a corner of the main room, an arrow with the message "This is how it might be" led round a corner to a small and secluded area where visitors could take a seat and absorb a more upbeat perspective: a slideshow of Nordic initiatives for children and their environments (Fig. 3). This included visuals of nurseries, playschools, school playgrounds, institutions for the disabled and other environments for children, including photographs by Frode Svane of Norwegian suburban environments (Boman 1973, 376) (Fig. 4). Periäinen later expanded on the ideas behind this secluded section displaying "Nordic playgrounds and experiments". The slideshow was intended, he wrote, to be watched by "the really interested and active visitors". The examples shown represented adventure playgrounds where "the children themselves make their own play equipment

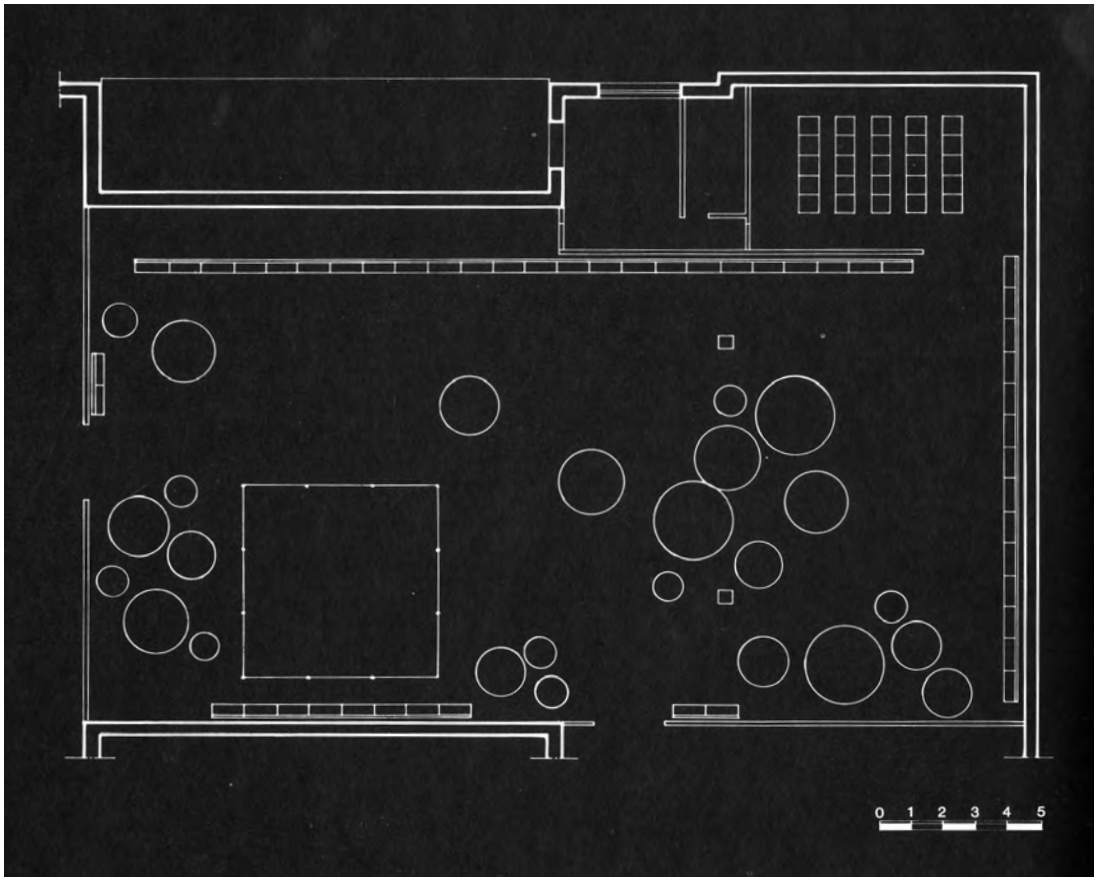


Fig. 3. *The Child's Environment* exhibition at the Milan Triennale, 1973, exhibition layout (© Triennale Milano)



Fig. 4. Community initiative adventure playground, Ås Municipality, Norway, early 1970s (Photo and courtesy: Frode Svane)

and build their own environments". Importantly, he wrote, these examples represented social diversity, "showing the integration of people of different ages and abilities, including the mentally disabled, into cooperation and togetherness" (Periäinen 1973, 22).

This secluded area also included images from a remarkable recent event at the Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki: the museum "was emptied of art and transformed into a mere play room" (Hennum 1973).

Yet, intriguingly, the progressive playground examples and other initiatives could only be discovered by the visitor in a marginalised space a tenth of the size of the main exhibition area (Exhibition Plan 1973). In other words, the *Child's Environment* exhibition's main space was dominated by a self-critical stance, what might be described as an early warning sign of an identity crisis. This Nordic outlook needs some explanation. Writing in 1984, Norwegian political scientist Bernt Hagtvet and historian Erik Rudeng stated that the Nordic countries,

> traditionally portrayed as the prototype of class reconciliation and political enlightenment, have increasingly been singled out as a prime example of advanced industrial societies in crisis, to some, even a nightmarish Orwellian projection of benevolent and ubiquitous control in the guise of a towering state (Hagtvet and Rudeng 1984).

Hagtvet and Rudeng singled out two kinds of criticism of the welfare state. First, the view that "the welfare state has not made good on its promises, that there are not only scattered pockets of poverty amid affluence, but that the distribution of services is systematically skewed in favor of the haves". Hagtvet and Rudeng quoted fellow Norwegian political scientist Knut Dahl Jacobsen from 1964, when, as they write: "a period when the financial foundation of extensive social programs looked quite secure". Dahl Jacobsen: "The greatest hindrance towards attaining the welfare state is the belief that we have one" (Dahl Jacobsen in Hagtvet and Rudeng 1984, 243). This view is dealt with in two books of the early 1970s: *The Unfinished Welfare* (Inghe 1970) and *The Hollow Welfare* (Radetzki 1974).

Second, there existed what Hagtvet and Rudeng call the "ambiguity of benevolence" theme, a broad criticism that, as they put it:

> goes beyond the mere existence of welfare institutions and directs its criticisms against "the middle way": the entire Nordic social formation with its belief in equality, its dense pattern of interest articulation and organization, its belief in the democratization of more and more realms of human activity, and its tendency to make the state responsible for broader and broader segments of social life, from child-rearing to old-age homes (Hagtvet and Rudeng 1984, 243).

This critique from Scandinavia's ideological opponents took different forms, from Roland Huntford's 1972 image of the Swedes as "the new totalitarians" (Huntford 1972), a predecessor being Kathleen Nott's dystopian 1961 book *A Clean, Well-lighted Place*, to German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger's "gloom and decay" of *Swedish Autumn* (1982). The fact that critique came not only from the Right but also the Left was particularly remarkable, as was the "mental openness" with which this critique was received, revealing, as Hagtvet and Rudeng state: "a deep seated sense of self-doubt" (Hagtvet and Rudeng 1984, 242). *The Child's Environment* exhibition's resistance to self-aggrandisement, coupled with self-doubt and even self-flagellation, was in fact an early manifestation of the severe self-criticism which would increase within Nordic identity in the decade that followed the exhibition. However, as with previous identity crises, this sense of uncertainty would be followed by debate, and then, most importantly, redefinition.

Nonetheless, the Nordic framework within which this exhibition took place was one of unity. Despite historical antagonism and competition between the Nordic countries, this exhibition exemplifies what might be described as a kind of emotional and historical community in the Nordic countries (Hettne et al. 1998). The concept of *Norden* is based on relatively similar political traditions and similar institutions, a tradition that is inherent within the "Nordic model". It is this institutionalised tradition that creates a Nordic community (Østerud 1987). The remarkable energy and significance of this cultural construction is still felt today, a result of the existence of a "delayed Nordism" (Hettne et al. 1998, 286, 290). One example is the Nordic Council of Ministers, founded in 1970. It represents a harking back to a shared cultural historical tradition, itself an invented or constructed tradition (Hobsbawm



Fig. 5. *The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society* exhibition at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, curated by Palle Nielsen and Gunilla Lundahl, 1968 (R.3566, MACBA Collection, MACBA Consortium, gift of the artist. © Palle Nielsen, VEGAP, Barcelona)

and Ranger 1983). "Nordism" became, and still is, a kind of "ersatz identity", providing an idea of plurality within a whole, an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). *The Child's Environment* exhibition defined itself against the collective memories of the past Scandinavian Design Golden Age in its effort to showcase a new progressive Nordic design ethos and identity. As an arena of mediation of a new Nordic design culture and societal discourse, this exhibition served as a "critical tool" to encourage active audience participation, an approach that in its turn was influenced by international child-centred events at the time (Zetterlund 2022).

The Playground Revolution: The Exhibition in Context

The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society (*Modellen. En modell för ett kvalitativt samhälle*) by young Danish artist Palle Nielsen and Swedish writer Gunilla Lundahl, which showed at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm for three weeks in October 1968, was an important inspiration for both the material and ideological content of *The Child's Environment* (Fig. 5). *The Model* was an adventure playground in which children could play, use tools, materials and paint, wear costumes and masks and play music. It attracted much press attention, and visitors queued to get in. As Lars Bang Larsen points out:

> *The Model* was concerned with the meaning of the social and subjective change that the playing child generates within the machinery of society. As such, the event was nothing short of a mass utopia of art activism, aimed at applying an anti-elitist concept of art for the creation of a collectivist human being (Bang Larsen 2010, 30–32).

The Model, as one reviewer wrote, was "almost frightening for adults". Like *The Model*, *The Child's Environment* sought to bring to light society's failure in providing for children's free expression. Photographs by Palle Nielsen of *The Model* were included in the slide show in the secluded section of *The Child's Environment* (Lundahl 2020; Zetterlund 2022; Zetterlund et al. 2015).

It is probable that Periäinen had also seen the "liberated play environment" of the *Kinderplanet* event at the Frankfurt fairground exhibition venue set up by design students and tutors from the Hochschule für Gestaltung, Offenbach, in 1971. Over a thousand children per day attended this three-week happening in July, where they were energetically involved in art workshops and active play, "hammering, gluing, painting and sewing" (O'Connor 2012, 223).

Aidan O'Connor, writing in the Museum of Modern Art's anthology *Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900–2000* (2012), regards the influential *Modellen* and *Kinderplanet* events as archetypes of that period. They took place at institutions that were rarely perceived as child-friendly. O'Connor argues that while there was an anti-institutional sentiment at the time that "swept through museums, exposing them to charges of elitism, conservatism, even authoritarianism by the public as well as by artists engaged in art activism", these examples showed that these institutions could be "if not fully radicalized—sympathetic to revolutionary spirits beyond their walls and, at least temporarily, dismantled by avant-garde artists and willing children" (O'Connor 2012, 223).

In the case of the Triennale, it could be argued, then, that what had traditionally been the Nordic design establishment's international arena of crafts and design objects mediation was dismantled and transgressed by *The Child's Environment*'s avant-garde curation, progressive social agenda and exhibition strategy, including the active participation of willing children.

The "playground revolution", a term originating in the 1960s, had challenged conventional ideas about environments for play. As Ben Highmore explains: "Rather than slides, swings and roundabouts, the new playgrounds encouraged children to build shacks and invent their own entertainment". He shows how "bombsites and waste ground were transformed into hives of activity by children and progressive educationalists" (Highmore 2024, 1; see also O'Connor 2012, 242). The radical "junk or adventure playground" had originally been introduced by Carl Theodor Sørensen in Copenhagen in 1943 during German occupation, a concept which in the postwar decades spread across Scandinavia, Britain and the Netherlands. O'Connor: "Images circulated in the press of children sawing, hammering and digging […] in bomb sites and desolate lots". It was thereby established that "playgrounds could be dynamic, rough, (but with, its advocates have maintained, only an illusion of danger), and educational" (O'Connor 2012, 242). In the United States, landscape architect, playground designer and architect M. Paul Friedberg became a leading figure of the playground revolution, publishing his "manifesto" *Play and Interplay* in 1970. Rauni Liukko's plaster sculptures of children in the fenced-in pen is a perfect illustration of what Friedberg calls "custodial cages for kids", meaning orthodox playgrounds (Highmore 2023; Friedberg 1970; see also Highmore 2024b, 2024c; Warsh 2019).

Another important source of inspiration for *The Child's Environment* was Swedish writer and social debater Ingrid Sjöstrand's 1973 book *Samhem*. Sjöstrand had introduced the *samhem*, or co-home concept, as a new domestic idea, a kind of open co-living in which the elderly, the disabled, children and adults would cohabit, thereby criticising modern society's unnatural "cell divisions" of compartmentalised society, the message being that the way we live shapes both us, and as a consequence, society. Jan Berg, mentioned above, and Swedish writer Marianne Kärre, both contributors to *The Child's Environment*, were also involved in the *Samhem*-project (see also Sjöstrand 1969).

The Child's Environment was a product of the economic and ideological hothouse of that era, taking place in the midst of what Swedish writer and debater Margareta Norlin labelled "the child's decades" of the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s; a pragmatic retreat from Ellen Key's "The Century of the Child" (*Barnets århundrade*), 1900. Childhood was no longer regarded as a mere prefix to adult life. This was a period that saw wide debate on childcare methodology and theory. Particularly significant was the extent of resources and the amount of effort spent on informing both nursery staff and parents how to create a stimulating environment for children. Interest in child psychology grew, in part perhaps as a reaction to the more rationalist approach of the previous decades. As the new disciplines of child psychology and pedago-



Fig. 6. Children playing, Rione Traiano, Naples, project initiated by Riccardo Dalisi, early 1970s (© and courtesy Archivio Riccardo Dalisi, MiC – Direzione Generale Archivi, Soprintendenza archivistica e bibliografica della Campania)

gy held sway, the focus of interest shifted from the offspring of the poor to those of the middle classes. After more than thirty years of debate, the Swedish government's 1968 childcare report formulated a programme for children based largely on the ideas of Jean Piaget. Standards were set for the design, planning and promotion of the rapidly increasing investment in children's material environment. The consensus, echoed in the design press, was that the nursery should be a comfortable environment for both children and adults. This encourages collaboration and dialogue, rather than one-way supervision or instruction, nurturing children's independence and initiative; approaches that attracted international attention (Hagströmer 1997, 189).

This approach of "nurturing children's independence and initiative" in the engagement of children was present in a significant and concurrent Italian event. During the Triennale, Neapolitan architect and educator Riccardo Dalisi was invited to give a talk at a conference entitled "Meaning and Creativity of Artisanal Work Today" (*Significato e Creatività del Lavoro Artigianale nella Realtà di Oggi*). The subject was his experiments in *tecnica povera* (poor technique). These were workshops that he had led since 1971 in the poverty-stricken Neapolitan Traiano quarter (Fig. 6). Dalisi's approach was, as Catharine Rossi identified, informed by "Arte Povera's interest in public participation and the use of unmediated or povera [sic] materials" and he encouraged the street children to make structures with the simple tools and materials that were at hand (Rossi 2011, 2013). Dalisi's revelation was that, as Rossi explained:

> He perceived a greater creativity among the "children of the lumpen proletariat" in comparison to his own architecture students, a lack of inhibition attributed to the fact that these children had not experienced the stultifying effects of Italy's education system or the repressive rhythms of the assembly line (Rossi 2013, 152).

Dalisi kept a diary and took photographs to record the children's behaviour, an approach re-

vealing the influence of anthropology on design at the time.

Together, these workshops, exhibitions, happenings and other initiatives all formed part of an international interconnected movement in the decades following World War II, when a new kind of playground emerged. Crucially, at the core of this movement, Highmore demonstrates how "a belief in the imaginary capacity of children shaped a new kind of playground, and how designers and landscape architects reimagined what playgrounds could be" (Highmore 2024a). What exactly playgrounds could be in the Nordic countries was visualised in the more secluded area of the Nordic exhibition.

Transnational Resonances: The Exhibition's Italian and Nordic Reception

While the XIV Triennale of 1968 had been subjected to student occupation, with banners proclaiming that "La Triennale è morta", protests at the XV Triennale of 1973 were less strident. At the opening, students distributed protest flyers, with three arrests being made. Criticism of the Triennale was directed at its leadership and the fact that a number of the exhibitions lacked societal relevance. Julier and Savola suggest that Periäinen's choice of exhibition theme could be seen as "a statement against the Triennale concept, which symbolised elitism and commercialism to the new generation of designers" (Julier and Savola 2025, 149). In comparison to other exhibitions at the Triennale, it seems *The Child's Environment* stood out, or in Periäinen's own account of the other contributions: "What is surprising about this year's Triennale is that there is so much missing: topicality, social issues, consumer politics, production policy, problems in developing countries, etc. Instead, there are so many outdated ideas and attitudes […]" (Periäinen 1973, 22).

Danish reviewer Svend Hansen reported in the *Politiken* daily that the Scandinavian exhibition was one of the few that won the anti-Triennale critics' approval. Disruption to the event was only minor, as "after just three quarters of an hour delay the private view guests in pearls and dark suits could be let in, as if nothing had happened" (Boman 1973, 376; see also Anonymous 1973e; Kruskopf 1975; Thygesen 1973). However, before the guests entered the building, they would have passed a performance by a twenty-two-year-old architecture and design student, Michele De Lucchi. Already associated with the radical design avant-garde, De Lucchi appealed to the ethical responsibility and social role of the architect-designer in his performance: wearing a bicorne hat and holding a T-square, he declared: "I am a designer general and in general a designer." Social engagement was thus stimulated both inside and outside the Triennale. Nonetheless, there was an opinion among the young generation of designers that the Triennale had lost its status as one of the most important international design events, being regarded instead as "irrelevant, old-fashioned and passive" (Julier and Savola 2025, 150).

As for the Italian reviews, they were, with only a few exceptions, overwhelmingly positive, engaging approvingly with the Nordic exhibition theme (Anonymous 1973a; Anonymous 1973b; Anonymous 1973c; Anonymous 1973d; Lili 1973; Mascherpa 1973; Ponti 1973; Tassi 1973; Valsecchi 1973; Zevi 1973). Several contrasted the exhibition content with that of the design industry on display in previous Triennali. Laura Lilli of *Il Globo* characterised it as "this year's powerful social accusation" and stated that "the Scandinavian display is one of the most sensational exhibitions" (Lili 1973), or as Carla Ponti, writing in *Home*, put it: "At last someone, i.e. Scandinavia, has taken into consideration a theme about children rather than adults" (Ponti 1973).

Before and after the Triennale, *Abitare* magazine devoted several features to the theme of children as a lens through which to direct critique at contemporary society. This tied in with the editorial commitments, ideologies and ideals of the *Abitare* founder and first director Piera Peroni. In the early 1970s, at the end of each *Abitare* issue, Peroni had initiated and introduced an insert, entitled "If" (*Se*), which was particularly progressive in comparison to the rest of the periodical (Formia 2017). In the March issue of 1974, both the cover and the *Se* insert included Scandinavian contributions. The cover headline "The city with no place for children" (*La città rifiuta i bambini*) was also the title of a long feature, written by renowned writ-

er, Marxist and environmentalist Dario Paccino. The city, Paccino wrote, "lacks space for coming generations, particularly space for games, for meeting, for physical education, for being creative, for living happily". There are playgrounds, he acknowledged, but they are "mostly ghettos, or worse still, stylised contraptions that parents like to have set up so that they can shut their children inside them". According to him, the answer was to "let the children form their own playgrounds". That way, Paccino wrote, "they would make less [sic] mistakes than we do in expecting to impose, even through playing, our criteria on them". In search of a model to follow, Paccino interviewed Periäinen and other Scandinavian academics, including the Danish architect Inge Heilesen and Norwegian architect Per Ivar Myklevoll, on recent initiatives and continued challenges in the Nordic countries. Paccino concluded that "compared to the Scandinavian countries […] we are practically at zero" (Paccino 1974, 154).

Accompanying the headline, the cover of this issue showed Finnish photographer Martti Brandt's eye-catching and ominous photo of two small children playing on a pedestrian crossing in a cityscape of cars (Fig. 7). It is likely that this image had been included in Brandt's "The Child and the City" exhibition (*Lapsi ja kaupunki*) at the Kluuvi Gallery in Helsinki in 1972 (Anonymous 1972).

In addition to Brandt's dystopian photography, the same feature article included a significantly more optimistic Danish photographic report. Looking back, photographer Karin Munk, who had been invited by the Danish Society of Arts and Crafts and Industrial Design (Foreningen Brugskunst og Industriel Design) as the Danish representative in the Triennale working group, recalls the preparations for the Triennale and Periäinen's role and input: "We studied children's environments, playgrounds and other places, all under the guidance of Tapio Periäinen. I took many photographs at an exciting playground, *The Children's Land* (Børnenes Jord), in Aarhus" (Munk 2024). It was those same photographs of that adventure playground, known today as "The Children's and Resident's Land" (*Børnens og Beboernes Jord*) that were included in the *Abitare* feature (Fig. 8). This particular



Fig. 7. *Abitare*, March 1974, cover (Photo: Martti Brandt)

initiative answered, it seems, what the *Abitare* feature was calling for, to "let the children form their own playgrounds".

Initiated in 1971 by parents, children and the local residents association of the Sjællandsgade area of Aarhus, this adventure playground had originally been inspired by a 1968 initiative in the Danish town of Vrå. Including animals and plants, the review opined on the progressive adventure playground approach, stating that "it is a place that changes continually since there is no fixed or permanent equipment. This carries on the spirit of the original concept: to be able to change what was already there, put something new in its place governed by fresh needs or merely by imagination". So successful was this initiative that, as the reader was informed, "the inhabitants of Sjællandsgade call this adventure playground 'the children's land' the 'happiest land in the world'" (Paccino 1974, 149). It is probable that the Scandinavian presence in both the reportage and photography of this *Abitare* issue was a result of, and had been inspired by, the Triennale. Press, PR and networking were among Gummerus' fortes, and the fact that he spoke fluent Italian was no doubt beneficial to the event's Italian press cov-

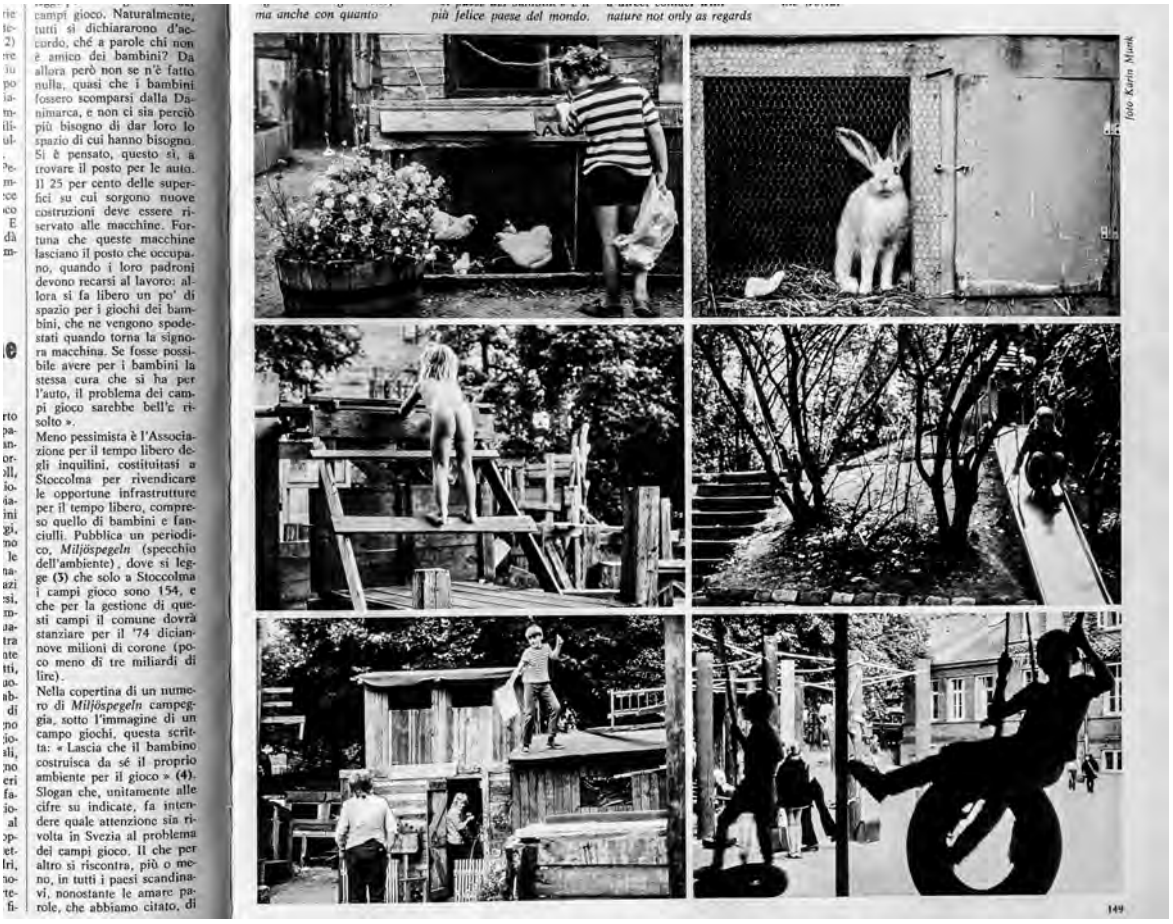


Fig. 8. *Abitare*, March, 1974, *The Children's Land* (Børnenes Jord) adventure playground, Aarhus, Denmark (Photo and courtesy: Karin Munk)

erage. Gummerus also liaised with the different Nordic nations' consulates general in Milan to establish contacts between Nordic and Italian individuals, child-related organisations and authorities (Himberg-Larsen et al. 1972).

The Nordic exhibition strategy was unanimously awarded a Grand Prix by an international Triennale jury—the only foreign contribution to receive one. The jury members were, however, intrigued and perplexed by the display's dominant self-criticism. One particular jury member was able to enlighten his fellow jurors on this subject: jury vice-chairman Gummerus. The minutes of the jury meeting inform us that Gummerus "explained that this severe self-criticism is something that exists in Scandinavia" ("Quindicesima Triennale Riunione Giuria Internazionale", November 5, 1973).

This exhibition was, it seems, a particularly early design manifestation of this "severe Nordic self-criticism".

Conclusion: Transgressing Conventions and Exhibiting a New Nordic Design Identity

The Child's Environment's curatorial concept transgressed established norms at a crucial time when a new Nordic design ethos and identity were being formed. It broke new ground as to what exactly a Nordic design exhibition could be. It fits into a succession of international child-centred events initiated by museums and educationalists in the years around 1970. This exhibition took place in the midst of a Nordic design scene in transition, marking the arrival of a nearly object-less design exhibition. Its stance was progressive, yet projected at the same time a remarkably strong element of societal self-criticism rather than self-aggrandisement, as the event's avant-garde initiatives took a more marginalised place in the exhibition space. *The Child's Environment* used the exhibition as a critical tool to promote the social tenets of "activity and inclusion", as presented within a unifying of-

ficial Nordic framework. This exhibition revealed common international concerns, mobilising and furthering transnational discourse, in this case in interaction with a receptive Italian audience.

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"Dressing Is Easy, for Elegance Is Dead": Radical Design and Italian Fashion

Elena Fava

Abstract

"Dressing is easy, for elegance is dead" was the slogan with which Archizoom introduced in 1972 its first dressing design project: a minimal clothing system conceived for mass production and maximum customisation. Framed within the group's Marxist-inspired critique of industrial society and of design and fashion as expressions of induced value, the proposal positioned ready-to-wear as a privileged channel to reach consumers and encourage new behaviours. This essay reconsiders dressing design in relation to Archizoom's broader activity (1966–73) and to contemporary developments in the industrial production of Italian fashion. Archival evidence shows that the project was not merely theoretical but a genuine exercise in industrial design. It thus challenges the notion of craftsmanship as the defining trait of Italian Radical design and highlights how fashion offered Archizoom a means to reflect on production-consumption relations and on design culture itself.

At times, historians artificially resort to occurrences of great symbolic value to mark a hiatus in the sequence of events and pinpoint a new beginning, a starting over "from ground zero", to borrow the expression that the American art critic Rosalind Krauss ([1981] 1986, 157) used in connection with the myth of a literal originality of the avant-gardes.

The destruction wreaked by the flooding of the Arno in Florence on November 4, 1966 has been used to mark the emergence on the scene of the Italian Radical avant-garde, ushered in by the experiments of the Archizoom and Superstudio Florentine collectives, both founded on the occasion of the exhibition *Superarchitettura* (Galleria Jolly 2, Pistoia, December 4–17, 1966). It is an idea that was born with an article about Superstudio written by Arata Isozaki (1971) and that was taken up, on different occasions and to different degrees, by the exponents of Radical architecture themselves (Natalini 1977; Branzi 2014; Toraldo di Francia in Mastrigli 2016, LXXXVII–CXVIII) and in recent reconstructions of its history (Brugellis, Pettena and Salvadori 2017).

The flood has also been used to draw a line in the history of Italian fashion. Alessandra Vaccari (2018) alludes to the destruction on that occasion of the archives of the Centro di Firenze per la Moda Italiana, the body that had been set up in 1954 to coordinate the fashion shows held at Palazzo Pitti and then Palazzo Strozzi, as symbolically marking the moment of discontinuity with respect to the glorious period in Italian high fashion that Florence had embodied up until that moment. Vaccari notes that it was in 1966 that the conditions were created for the cultural change that would lead in the space of a very few years to the emergence of a new system of production, that of *prêt-à-porter*, of a new professional figure, the *stilista*, and the establishment of a new capital of fashion, Milan.

However, the historiographical device just described also lends itself to an attempt at an integrated reading of these two Italian stories, that of the emergence of ready-to-wear, and more in general the rise of an industrial culture of fashion (Segre Reinach 2013), and that of "anti-design", "counter-design" or "Radical design" (Branzi 1984), which until now have been treated as separate sectors. The experiments in the design of clothing conducted by Archizoom Associati between the second half of the 1960s and the first half of the following decade, lumped

under the expression "dressing design",[1] epitomise the possibility of such an integration.

The critical literature on Italian fashion, which has been accumulating since the 1980s as a direct consequence of the international success of *prêt-à-porter* and the establishment of the figure of the *stilista*, has only occasionally included the research into clothing carried out by the Radical group. The latter has been viewed as an extension to the fashion system of the attitude of cultural provocation typical of the Florentine collective, aimed at undermining the functionalist orthodoxy still dominant in the architecture of the 1960s. It was a position, however, that did not in fact lead to a proper production of clothing (Bianchino 2004). Thus, it seems that what prevented critics from going beyond a view of these experiments as "utopias of dress" (Caratozzolo 2018) was not so much their effort to debunk the criteria of elegance of mainstream fashion as the failure to recognise any actual effect on production and their consequent essential exclusion from the fashion system.

Conversely, the academic interest that Italian, and in particular Florentine, Radical architecture and design have received over the last twenty years is reflected in an extensive literature that has updated and broadened the scope of studies of the activity of the individual exponents and the various collectives (see among others Mastrigli 2016; Lampariello, Anselmo and Hamzeian 2022). What has predominated, however, is a sectorial vision, in this case limited to the realms of architecture and design, that risks hindering the comprehension of interdisciplinary projects like Archizoom's dressing design. Even when a connection with the clothing industry is acknowledged, it has never really been investigated (Gargiani 2007).

So Archizoom's dressing design highlights the existence of a gap, an area left out by historians of the disciplines of design and fashion. This essay sets out to re-examine that experience in all its complexity, in relation both to the activity of the Radical group (1966–73) and to contemporary developments in the industrial production of fashion. Analysis of materials in the archives[2] has made it possible to establish the fact that dressing design was not solely theoretical, but conducted to all intents and purposes as an operation of industrial design (Fava 2018). Archizoom's critical approach to fashion-related themes and questions—through reflections on the body, on consumption, and on the production of clothing—was an expression of the group's desire to intervene in this sector, in ways aimed in particular at inspiring new modes of behaviour and new practices in the use of clothing. Its political orientation of a Marxist imprint, and thus highly critical of all the forms of seduction exercised by capitalism, did not stop the Radical collective from recognising the expressive possibilities that lay in fashion as a language of mass culture. In their development of dressing design, the group drew an accurate picture of the pivotal change that occurred in the system of production of Italian fashion at the end of the 1960s, something that was not grasped by the literature on the sector until later. In that period the demand for clothing better suited to people's lives, stimulated by the emergence of countercultural styles, undermined the relevance of the elitist model of high fashion and within the space of a very few years would lead to the industrial development of ready-to-wear fashion (*prêt-à-porter*) able to achieve high levels of aesthetic differentiation through the intervention of the *stilista*.

The motto "Dressing is easy, for elegance is dead" was the *radical* response to these changes, to what, at the time, was perceived as the opportunity to fill a professional vacuum. The slogan was translated into what Archizoom would define as a "system of clothing" composed of a few items for mass-production, "open" to individual consumption, and "neutral", i.e. with little or no connotations on the plane of taste and style. Central to this was the relationship between designer and clothing industry, necessary—in

1. In this essay, the expression "dressing design" is printed in roman type and with lowercase initial letters when it refers to the whole range of Archizoom's research into clothing and in italics with uppercase letters when referring to the specific project presented in *L'Uomo Vogue* in 1972.

2. Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive, Impruneta-Florence (ABF); Paolo Deganello Archive, Milan (ADM); CSAC – Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma (CSAC).



Fig. 1. Archizoom's *Superonda* interpreted by some members of the collective and their friends in the garden of Villa Strozzi in Florence, 1967 (Photo: Dario Bartolini, Courtesy Centro Studi Poltronova Archive)

Archizoom's view—to a rational organisation of the processes of production and an exploitation of technological resources. Brevetti Bernè, Facis – GFT, Fiorucci, Maglificio Morgan, S.F.E.T. and Solberg were the clothing manufacturers and fashion brands that realised, funded and promoted dressing design, something that was therefore conceived for industrialisation, sale and consumption. If this aspect leads to a reconsideration of the thesis that the handicrafts were a distinctive characteristic of Italian Radical design (Rossi 2013, 2015), it also allows us to grasp the critical and practical dimension of dressing design, which offered the Florentine group an opportunity for reflection on the relationship between production and consumption and more in general for a re-examination of the culture of design.

From Superarchitecture to the Super-consumer of Fashion

Archizoom and Superstudio's first public appearance in 1966 with the exhibition *Superarchitettura* was at once a declaration of intent and an analysis of the context in which architecture and design were operating in those

years. In 1966 the Archizoom group (from 1969 known as Archizoom Associati) was formed by Andrea Branzi, Gilberto Corretti, Paolo Deganello and Massimo Morozzi, who were joined the following year by Dario Bartolini and Lucia Morozzi. The exhibition in Pistoia also marked the official birth of the Florentine group Superstudio, set up by Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, who would be joined in the years to come by Roberto Magris, Gian Piero Frassinelli, Alessandro Magris and Alessandro Poli. The poster of the exhibition showed a large wave rising from a podium with steps on which were written: "Superarchitecture is the architecture of superproduction, superconsumption, the superinducement to superconsumption, the supermarket, superman, and super petrol".

A reassessment of the discipline of architecture and the use of design as a form of critical agency were at the core of the theoretical and design efforts of Archizoom, as they were of other Italian Radical collectives. In the background lay the crisis in the normative principles of functionalism that did not appear capable of dealing with the social and cultural changes underway. In particular, a new generation of designers was beginning to explore the discipline as a means of analysis and demystification of bourgeois and mass society. Sharing in the spirit of youth protest and the counterculture, they opened up even further to take on board different stimuli and languages, such as those of American Pop Art, which had arrived in Italy with the Venice Biennale of 1964, and the ones coming from theories on the media, investigated also in Italy in essays that attracted a great deal of attention, including Umberto Eco's *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964).

In this sense, the prefix "super" was used by Archizoom and Superstudio as a hyperbolic way of reflecting the effects of the "economic miracle" and the pervasiveness of the models of consumption to which ever broader strata of Italian society were exposed in those years. Accepting the logic of consumption was a strategy that made it possible to demolish it, through irony.

In open opposition to the convenience of Italian design in the 1950s and 1960s, which offered the consumer an efficient product and one whose possibilities of use were established in the design phase, the exhibition *Superarchitettura* recognised and represented a rupture in the relationship between people and objects, a gap that could be filled by encouraging the involvement of the user. This aspect is evident in the *Superonda* sofa (Poltronova, 1967), which consisted of a polyurethane mattress cut into two complementary undulating parts and upholstered in shiny leatherette. Combined in whatever way the user chose, these two elements were able to accommodate the body in relaxed and sensual postures, as was clear from the photos illustrating Sottsass's article in *Domus* (1967, 38–39), in which the members of Archizoom staged a performative demonstration of the *Superonda*'s use.



Fig. 2. Archizoom Associati, *trucco*, make-up act, 1968 (Courtesy Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive, Impruneta, Florence)

The body and its performativity were themes investigated by Archizoom in these years in other projects too. Significant in this connection is the *trucchi* series (Archizoom 1968), acts of make-up with which Archizoom explored the expressive possibilities of the body in a manner that came close to body art. It is also worth mentioning the "mitres for couples", ironic interlocking hats able to reflect moments of interaction between partners that were made for the double wedding held on May 10, 1969 at which the sisters Lucia and Nicoletta Morozzi married Dario Bartolini and Andrea Branzi respectively. These would later be described as "the first

experiments in the design of 'super-objects' for clothing" (Archizoom 1972, 56).

The aforementioned projects can be considered steps on the path towards the first critical reflections on fashion, made by Archizoom following the exhibition in Pistoia in the "Relazione moda", drawn up on January 3, 1967 (ADM). In this never published typescript, the Florentine collective used fashion to outline the "figure of the super-consumer": fashion was seen as an expression of the new "industry of formal models capable of leading to the complete behaviour of the consumer". Archizoom wrote:

> Among the industries of behaviour the most legible is fashion, which together with the pop music industry, owing to the enormous area of contact they have with the market, are among the means best suited to exemplify the content of an induced ideology […]. The marked culturalisation of particular sectors, like that of fashion, constitutes a symptomatic test. It is in fact in this climate that experimental fashion was born, not just coming up with a new morphology, but proposing new times of consumption globally through the use of a technology developed for the sector. […] Fashion is already beginning to emerge from the Sala Bianca in search of a less abstract setting and finding a series of stimulating connections with the reality to which it refers at the moment of its launch on the market ([Archizoom] 1967).

The recognition of the outdated character of the shows staged in the Sala Bianca of Palazzo Pitti in Florence, the city that since 1951 had earned itself the name of capital of Italian fashion in the eyes of the world, reveals the lucidity with which Archizoom grasped, from its external position, the changes that in those years were coming into focus in the Florentine context. In 1966 the role of Florence itself was challenged by the transfer to Rome of the shows of high fashion, a sector in which the event in Florence had invested in terms of communication from the beginning. From that moment on, Florence remained the point of reference for the sectors classified as *maglieria di alta moda* (high-fashion knitwear) and *alta moda pronta* (ready-made high fashion), alongside other industrially produced lines defined as *prêt-à-porter di alta moda*. The directive of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana came up with this last definition in 1967 to lump together the proposals made both by fashion houses that produced ready-made clothing (*alta moda pronta*) and by industries that produced original collections, i.e. ones not derived from creations of high fashion ("La Camera nazionale" 1967). The change that occurred in Florence in those years did not concern solely the type of clothing presented in the shows. The retention of the term *alta moda* ("high fashion") in the names of all these market sectors seems to reflect an effort on the part of the organisation to bring the cultural concept of fashion up to date and to open up to mass production.

Another aspect to consider in this period is the progressive loss of interest in high fashion's exclusive forms of dress, together with the demand for a more imaginative and varied style of clothing coming from youth culture. It was in fact at the end of the 1960s that the young began to develop freer, more fragmented and even contradictory patterns of consumption and practices of dress.

Beyond Fashion: Dressing Design

As was made clear in the "Relazione moda", fashion for Archizoom was from the outset a target of criticism, as an expression of induced value. At the same time, however, it offered an "enormous area of contact" with the market, and therefore with consumers: a channel through which it was possible to intervene in order to inspire new modes of behaviour. In fact the ultimate aim of the experiments that the collective carried out around clothing was to propose not a new fashion collection but a new way of using that clothing, one that would allow everyone to construct an identity of their own.

Focusing on the technologies and production capacities of the clothing industry in relation to the fragmentation of the market, Archizoom applied the logic of industrial design to the design of clothing. This happened at the beginning of the 1970s when they presented the project they called *Dressing Design*, a system of clothing made up of just two garments—bodysuit and overalls—customisable through the use of accessories. The theoretical and graphic formulation of this project and its dissemination through magazines of fashion—*L'Uomo Vogue*—and of architecture and design—*in* and *Casabella*—allow us to grasp the complexity of

intentions and reflections associated with it, offering in addition an original interpretation of the collective's transition from the phase of superarchitecture to anti-design.

The *Dressing Design* project was developed in parallel with that of the *No-Stop City* (1970–71) and coincided with a phase in which Archizoom was embarking on a more radical questioning of design culture. As the historian of architecture Roberto Gargiani has pointed out (2007, 210), it represented the "apotheosis of anti-design" and was able to generate a habitat no longer dependent on accommodation and housing.

The continuous and homogeneous plane of *No-Stop City* is recalled graphically in two illustrations in a comic-strip style with the respective titles "Nearest Habitat System – dressing design by Archizoom Associates" (c. 1970, ABF) and "Dressing Design" (1970–72, ABF). These in turn were based on the models of a series of unisex bodysuits depicted in a group of sixteen drawings made around 1970 (CSAC). In particular, the title of the first illustration reflects the architectural nature of dressing design and the concept of clothing as the prime "habitat" of the body, while the comic strips in both illustrations show the possibilities offered by the combination of bodysuit and overalls.

The multifaceted dynamism of the fashion industry, which, according to Archizooom, "presents characteristics symptomatic of processes that in the future are going to transform many sectors of the industry linked to custom and costume" (Archizoom Associati, c. 1970–72), made it look like an experimental laboratory willing to put the *Dressing Design* project into actual production. It was that very dynamism of industrial production, especially of the small and medium-sized enterprises which already formed the basic fabric of the Italian economy, that made it possible to rapidly "connect" the project with "reality"—to use Archizoom's words.

As early as 1970 the collective had embarked on a collaboration that would last for three years with Brevetti Bernè, a manufacturer of corsetry based in San Daniele del Friuli, for the production of bodysuits made of Lycra and ciré in various colours (correspondence between Archizoom and Brevetti Bernè 1970–74, ABF). Subsequently, the manufacture of the overalls

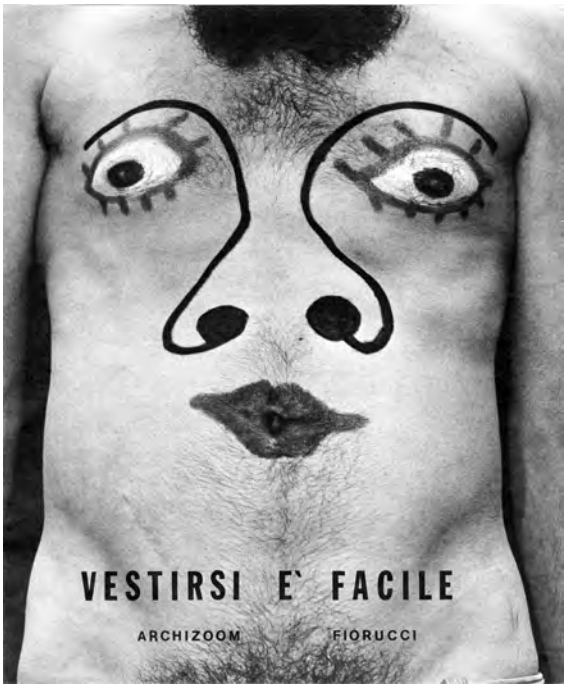


Fig. 3. Archizoom Associati, *Vestirsi è facile: Archizoom Fiorucci*, 1972, poster for MareModa Capri (Courtesy CSAC – Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma)

was entrusted to Maglificio Morgan of Busto Arsizio (correspondence between Archizoom and Maglificio Morgan 1972, ABF). They were made from acrylic jersey, produced by S.F.E.T. of Como (correspondence between Archizoom and S.F.E.T. 1972–73, ABF) again to a design by Archizoom (four drawings 1971, CSAC).

In the summer of 1972, *Dressing Design* was presented in *L'Uomo Vogue*, accompanied by Archizoom's declaration: "Dressing is easy, for elegance is dead". On this occasion, the collective made the performative nature of its proposal clear: "it is not a collection of models to be worn passively and still less one of uniforms with which to regiment society: they are in and of themselves fairly shapeless objects that require a continual invention of one's own attire" (V. A. 1972, 72).

The possible combinations of what they refer to as "objects"—bodysuits and overalls—are shown in the photographic feature realized ad hoc by Oliviero Toscani, who portrayed the members of the collective, along with friends and the model Donna Jordan, wearing this system of minimal clothing that, as has been said, lent itself to extensive customisation through

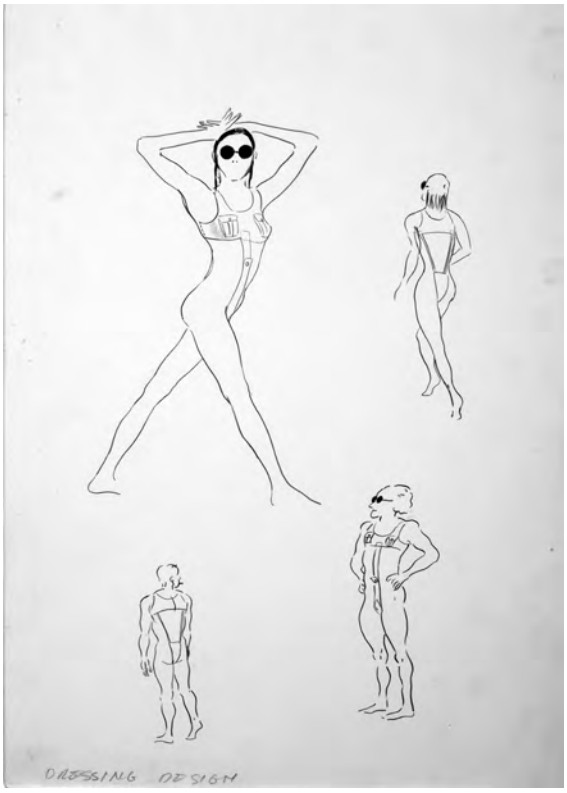


Fig. 4. Archizoom Associati, *Dressing Design*, c. 1970 (Courtesy CSAC – Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma)

the use of accessories. The feature was set in a white cubicle that again recalled the alienating spaces of *No-Stop City*.

Right from the beginning, the article placed Archizoom in the realm of anti-design, taking advantage of the international exposure the collective had received as a result of its participation in the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, staged at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the same year. However, the article also functioned as a platform for the promotion of *Dressing Design* as an explicitly commercial product. In fact, the last of its six pages carried the statement that "in October, you will find Archizoom's clothes at Fiorucci" (V. A. 1972, 73).

And in fact, the place that chose to take up Archizoom's eccentric proposal was the store opened in Milan's Galleria Passarella in 1967 by Elio Fiorucci, who—as Andrea Branzi recalled on more than one occasion—"had been the only person to buy a *Superonda*" (Branzi 2014, 134). Fiorucci, in contrast to the other boutiques that in those years had become the channel in Italy for the reception and distribution of youth fashions from all over the world, would quickly turn into a "phenomenon of contemporary popular culture" (Malossi 1987, 67), displaying an openness to avant-garde research not only in fashion, but also in music, art and design. It was in fact under the aegis of Fiorucci that Archizoom presented *Dressing Design* in September 1972 on the catwalks of MareModa Capri, the social event that for around a decade from 1967 onwards hosted experimental fashion proposals as a form of entertainment, with the aim of relaunching tourism on the island of Capri.

Dressing Design, once it had become a product, aroused perplexity in intellectual circles because it was considered to have lost the edge of avant-garde research (Santini 1972, 65) and compromised itself with the market ("Mostre a Trieste" 1973).

Besides, as Simona Segre Reinach has already pointed out (2005), in the 1970s the stigmatisation of fashion on the part of intellectuals was still rooted in the view of capitalist society proposed by the School of Frankfurt. At the same time, the significance that the phenomenon of fashion was gradually acquiring in the historical and social context of those years made it an almost obligatory field of inquiry. This attitude was reflected in the monographic issue that the magazine *in* devoted to the theme "Fashion and Society" in November–December 1972. Coordinated by Gillo Dorfles, the issue contains an invaluable anthology of writings by militant intellectuals, artists, architects and designers from Italy and abroad, chiefly from the Radical current. In contrast to Dorfles's view that the representative capacity of clothing predominated over its utilitarian function, the Archizoom and Superstudio groups looked in their contributions at the function of clothing from the perspective of the relationship between its designer and its user in a period of widespread avant-garde research, open to experimentalism and to new relations with industry.

This was the perspective adopted by Archizoom in particular in the article entitled "Dressing Design" (1972). Favouring a theoretical discourse on fashion, the group entrusted the presentation of the system of clothing to images alone, setting the dimension of its use in

a real context (the station of Santa Maria Novella in Florence). In this article, the problem immediately identified by the collective was the conflict that had emerged in those years in the manufacture of clothing between a rigid system of industrial design, i.e. based that is on criteria of limitless mass production and homogeneity of the market and consumers, and the spontaneity of the actual fashion market with its mix of different styles of dress. Putting the technical and industrial factors of clothing production on a sound basis therefore became the strategy of dressing design, which on this occasion was presented as a "methodology" and, as such, an alternative to the approach of the *stilista*. In fact Archizoom argued that "*stilisti*, 'outsiders' to the world of industry and its logic, create clothes that have nothing to do with the more advanced technologies that the level of production could achieve" (Archizoom 1972, 58). The typescript "Proposal for a programme of design of a 'rational system' of clothing", written in the same years but never published, provides another clue to understanding the criticism made of the *stilista*'s practice of design. In it Archizoom writes: "The styling of fashion, precisely because the most significant figure in that sector, tends to solve problems in an exclusively visual manner, without looking at the whole set of relations that bind the product to processes of production, consumption, and behaviour" (Archizoom Associati, c. 1970–72).[3]

The antagonism displayed by Archizoom towards *stilisti*, regarded as being impervious to the logic of industrial production and an understanding of forms of consumption, reflects the ambivalence of the term, which at that time was beginning to circulate in the culture of Italian fashion with a very different meaning. The Radical collective was evidently attacking a practice of production and the figure responsible for it by using the words "styling" and *stilista* in the sense they had at the time in the realm of industrial design, where they were linked to activities concerned exclusively with the formal aspects of the product, divorced from the technical ones of function and fabrication. This sense and its negative connotation were shared by Dorfles and by Pierpaolo Saporito in the monographic issue of *in*. The figure of the *stilista* that was emerging in Italian fashion at the end of the 1960s, set to enjoy enormous international success in the decades to come, assigning to the word the meaning in which it is used in Italy today, is very distant from the one evoked by Archizoom. In the years in which the collective worked on dressing design, the *stilista* was bringing about a transformation of the Italian clothing industry that would allow it to respond to growing diversity of styles that the language of fashion had begun to embrace. It was in this period that the phenomenon of *stilismo* ushered in an industrial production of clothing in which the ideational part took on a decisive role, covering everything from the design of the fabrics to the choices made for promotion of the image (see among others Degl'Innocenti and Morini 2024).

In any case, setting aside the lexical ambiguity, the statement made by Archizoom at the end of its contribution to *in* magazine confirms the intention of the collective to continue its collaboration, already underway by this time, with the clothing industry.

> Experimentation with dressing design, its techniques, its role, etc., was one of the many things that could be done seriously: industry's mistake would be to see dressing design simply as a cultural front line, one on which only intellectuals and artists were fighting, and the error on the part of the designers was to make them believe this to be the case (Archizoom Associati 1972, 58).

In concrete terms, it is precisely against the background of the changes that were taking place in the Italian clothing industry at the end of the 1960s in response to the demand for something new that the interest shown by Brevetti Bernè and Maglificio Morgan in Archizoom's experimental proposals should be viewed. A survey conducted by the Ente Italiano Moda in 1968 at 300 sales outlets around the country had shown that young consumers (under twenty-four), and female ones in particular, were highly sensitive to the allures of fashion. In this situation, the flexibility of the small companies paid off as it

3. The term "styling of fashion" (*styling di moda* in Italian) refers here to the practitioner who deals with styling, i.e. the *stilista*.

allowed them to tackle an extremely dynamic and increasingly fragmented market and to effectively unite ready-to-wear garment and image, i.e. psychological, cultural and aesthetic values (Paris 2006, 355).

It was in *Casabella*, another magazine open to the experiments of the radical designers, that in January 1973 Archizoom described dressing design as "a rational planning activity for the production of clothing systems", a service offered to the clothing industry "in that it does not possess a planning doctrine of its own" and that functioned as "a sort of giant tailor's workshop which produces an artisanal product in an industrial manner" (Archizoom Associati 1973, 22). In this article, blue jeans were identified as an example of the industrial production of items open to independent interpretation by people on the basis of their own practical needs and taste: born as an article of workwear and then adopted by the counterculture of the youth as an expression of a less formal mode of conduct, jeans provided a "neutral base" on which it was possible to develop an endless series of individual inventions. In fact it was on this occasion that the collective defined its proposal of dressing design as an "open structure" (Archizoom Associati 1973, 22).

It was on these premises that Archizoom based the content of two short films shown at the 15th Milan Triennale (1973).

All Dreams Are Desires: Dressing Is Easy!

The slogan "Dressing is easy" expresses the end result of the theoretical and design approach taken by Archizoom. The group had carried on with the process of formal resetting prefigured by *No-Stop City*, investigating the concept of neutral in the project for an exhibition entitled *The Use of the Neutral Surface* (never realised) and to an even fuller extent in the "grey environment" presented in the "Environments" section of the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at the Museum of Modern Art (Gargiani 2007, 260–65). With this environment that had no formal connotations and was filled only by the voice of a little girl, Archizoom asserted their renunciation of the configuration of living space, entrusting it instead to "people's" imagination because, they declared: "To live is easy".

If, as Gargiani observes (2007, 262), "To live is easy" is the slogan with which Archizoom encouraged the appropriation of places by their users, the concept of neutrality applied to the industrial design of clothing provided the margin of freedom that allowed people to take possession of their image through the action of "dressing".

The central role that Archizoom saw dressing design as playing in the reassessment of the culture of design was confirmed at the 15th Triennale in Milan (September 20 – November 20, 1973), where they presented two short films made especially for the *International Exhibition of Industrial Design*, curated by Ettore Sottsass and coordinated by Andrea Branzi: *Come è fatto il cappotto di Gogol* and *Vestirsi è facile – Dressing Is Easy* (CSAC).

The two short films were conceived as stories to be read in sequence and offered the collective further opportunities to enter into collaborations with the clothing industry. Facis, a historical menswear brand belonging to the GFT (Gruppo Finanziario Tessile), sponsored the making of *Come è fatto il cappotto di Gogol*, and Solberg, a manufacturer of leisurewear based in Milan, commenced production of some of the garments presented in *Vestirsi è facile*.

In the first video, Archizoom identified alternative models of clothing to tailored ones: the sari, the traditional women's garment of the Indian subcontinent considered exemplary for its total liberation from anthropometric measurements (consisting as it does of a length of fabric that is shaped by being draped over the body), and blue jeans, already indicated as a "neutral base", arising from mass production, which lent itself to interpretation. Archizoom used these examples to draw attention to the bad habit to which they considered the industrial production of clothing to be prone, that of the replication of artisanal methods of tailoring and manufacturing on an industrial scale (repeating what they had declared in *Casabella* in January of that same year of 1973). The industrially made jacket emulating the "bespoke" one was the epitome of this contradiction. From this premise followed the exemplary setting of the film, the Facis factory at Settimo Torinese, which had allowed Archizoom



Fig. 5. Archizoom Associati, Dario Bartolini and Susan Contini Shapiro wearing the *Dressing Design* clothing system at Santa Maria Novella station in Florence, c. 1972 (Courtesy CSAC – Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma)

to observe the production processes of a large clothing manufacturer.

The second film, *Vestirsi è facile*, much of which was an animation, had a soundtrack of nothing but the noise of textile machinery. What was illustrated here was the method of construction of a "system of clothing" made up of geometric and shapeless garments that—like the sari—acquired a form only when worn. In 1974, the collective illustrated this process of clothing construction in the pages of *Casabella* as well, indicating that the first fundamental step "is to consider the fabric and the cloth to be like a continuous ribbon of unvarying width, and not an indefinite surface from which portions are haphazardly cut out" (Archizoom Associati 1974, 45). In *Vestirsi è facile*, the cutting of a sartorial character, whose limitations had already been pointed out in the first film, is replaced by the act of folding the end of the roll of cloth at an angle of forty-five degrees. The resulting square becomes the basic unit for the construction of the clothes, to be stitched together with flat seams and no waste of material, while laces, pieces of Velcro and buttons allow the garments to be adapted to different builds, thereby solving the problem of sizes.

The instructions for making the clothes were contained in a box (ABF)—along with needle, coloured thread, scissors and lengths of cloth—made by Dario Bartolini especially for the film, as were the clothes (ABF and CSAC), hand-sewn by Lucia Bartolini out of traditional Tuscan fabrics. The box was presented to all intents and purposes as a kit for assembly of the clothes at home and might suggest that Archizoom's proposal was founded on the American idea of do-it-yourself, widespread at the time in Italy too. In reality, the brief collaboration with the clothing manufacturer Solberg, begun in the July of 1973, that would lead to the creation of an "after-ski collection" which remained at the prototype stage, demonstrated unequivocally Archizoom's intention to go on applying the results of this research to industrial production and establish a dialogue with the clothing industry (correspondence between Archizoom and Solberg 1973–74, ABF). It was in the Italian edition of *Vogue* that the collective declared it

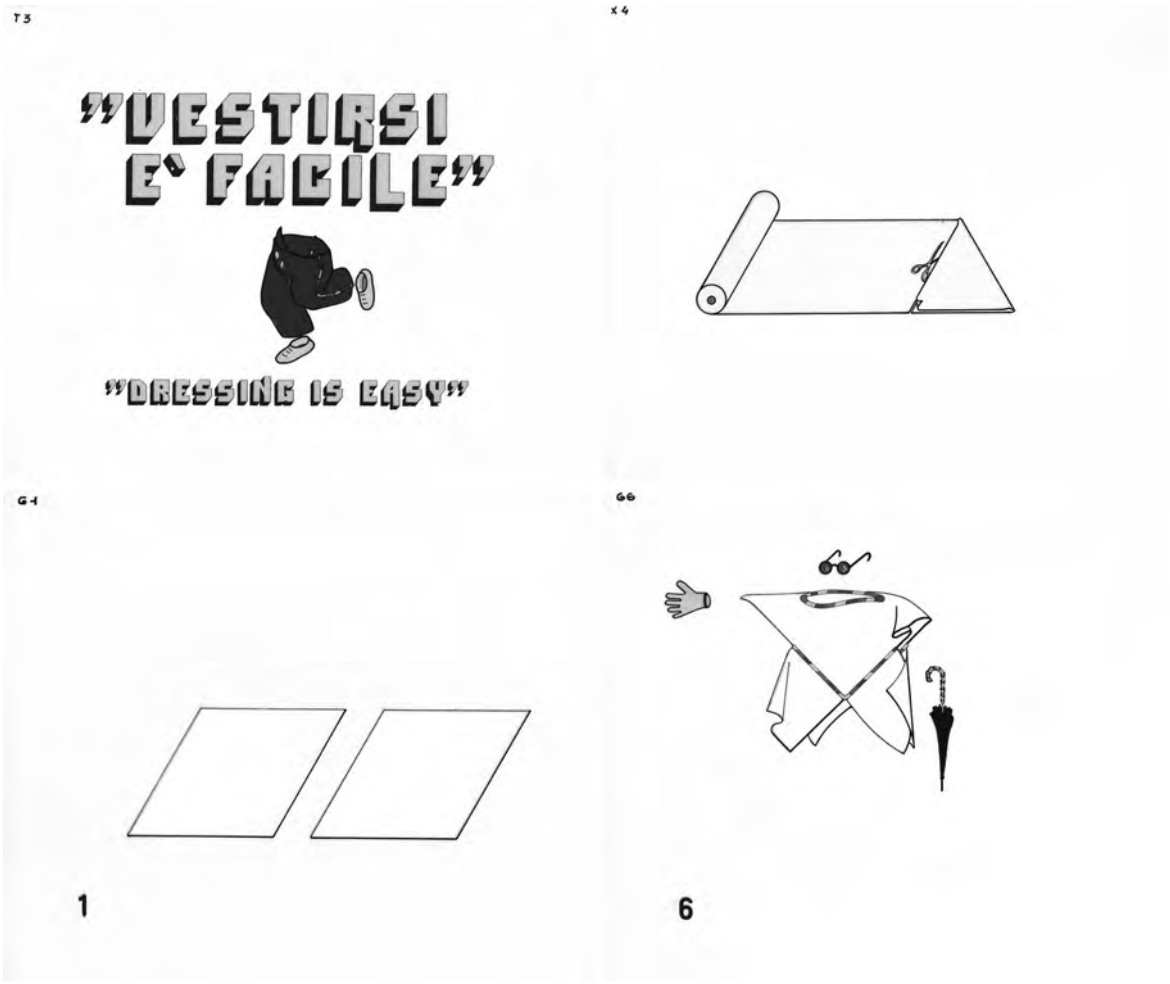


Fig. 6. Archizoom Associati, *Vestirsi è facile*, 1973, animated sequence from the film (Courtesy CSAC – Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione, University of Parma)

wanted to continue in this direction, developing "a more rational technique for construction of clothing that will eschew the logic of change every three or four months: we want to create clothes based on the same concept as jeans, which have no seasons or time and like jeans can be worn in all sorts of ways, even in combination with traditional items of clothing" (Sisto 1973).

In the two films and their statements to the press, Archizoom focused on a situation in the Italian clothing industry in which they saw at once a difficulty and great potential. Andrea Branzi, acting as spokesman of the group, declared that:

> The interest in the industrial production of clothing, on our part, stems from the fact that this sector of the market has undergone a very profound modification of its structure in recent years, and the phenomena that have emerged as a consequence are going to affect all markets linked to modes of behaviour and usage in the future. The difficulty in which the large-scale clothing industry finds itself today is a new phenomenon in history, and consists in the fact that, for the first time in a market the logic of production has come into open conflict with the logic of consumption. […] In this situation industry has to revise its conception of the "industrial product", seeking to modify it in order to avoid a direct clash with the market. In other words it has to start thinking of the industrial product as a service that is not a substitute for individual creativity, but on the contrary stimulates and fosters it (Branzi 1973, 24).

In this declaration Archizoom showed they had understood the crisis that had overtaken the Italian clothing industry at the beginning of the 1970s; a crisis that did not just affect manufacturers on a large scale. To overcome the difficul-

ties caused by the slowdown in consumption, due to the lack of new and attractive proposals, and by high levels of conflict on the shop floor, entrepreneurs in these years developed a different model for the organisation of production, based on decentralisation, and aimed at an upgrading of the product (Paris 2006, 500–03). Archizoom's dressing design proposal was fully in tune with this objective, and the clothing sector, which was being reshaped as a result of the fragmentation of the market, offered the collective an opportunity to reassess the culture of the industrial product in its entirety. As Branzi put it, the collective thought that its perspective could be extended to all "markets linked to modes of behaviour and usage". In doing this, they felt themselves to be operating fully within the realm of design, although in keeping with a new conception of the discipline, because, in Branzi's words again:

> we have always striven to overcome the limitations of the cultural tradition of our profession, without fearing to venture into fields that architects have always shied away from or spurned… But the importance, perhaps the newest significance, is that for the first time design is emerging from its traditional channel, which is that of architecture, to become a method of analysis valid in every sector of human communication (Branzi 1973, 24).

The group would have no direct opportunity to put what was announced in these words to the test. At the end of 1973, the collective was dissolved. While Corretti and Dario and Lucia Bartolini stayed in Florence, Branzi, Morozzi and Deganello moved to Milan.

The consultancy work that Branzi and Morozzi carried out between 1973 and 1978 for the Centro Design Montefibre—a forecasting centre based in Milan focused on textiles for fashion and design production—provided them the opportunity to apply principles from their clothing research to industrial design (Fava 2022). Shifting the focus from individual consumer products to a systemic industrial approach that enhanced the aesthetic and perceptual possibilities of materials, this project reflected both the theoretical stance and lucid realism that had informed their dressing design experience.



Fig. 7. Archizoom Associati, outfit from the "after-ski collection" for Solberg, c. 1973 (Courtesy Dario and Lucia Bartolini Archive, Impruneta, Florence)

In conclusion, it can be argued that for Archizoom, the Italian fashion system served as a lens for reading changes in the production-consumption relationship. By crossing disciplinary boundaries, these radical designers ventured into clothing and fashion as a platform to envision an alternative design research strategy: one not aimed at solving issues of reproducibility but at establishing dialectical relationships between users and objects.

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Furniture Station as Design Cultural Heritage: Assembling a Community Space and a Museum

Annette Svaneklink Jakobsen

Abstract

The Danish community project Furniture Station in the town of Tarm aims to revitalise the design cultural heritage of a former local chair factory by creating a combined community space and furniture museum. Furniture Station evolves through the relationships between its multiple participants and elements and illustrates how exchanges between disciplines and other "territories" can challenge ideas of fixed identities in affirmative ways and create new meanings, material expressions and transformations in design culture. The story of the former chair factory is also the story of the rise and fall of the Danish Consumers Cooperative Society's furniture production from 1942 to 1980 and Furniture Station aims to strengthen the local community by creating a shared space for public and private activities, alongside a museum dedicated to the furniture production. Initiated by residents, the project builds on a desire to retain local qualities of the town's past and counter a sense of ongoing decline. The study draws on the author's visits to Furniture Station, conversations and correspondence with participants, as well as an examination of literary and visual sources. By integrating perspectives from design history, critical heritage studies and assemblage theory, it explores the dynamic interrelations of the heterogeneous elements that together constitute Furniture Station.

Introduction: From the Chair Factory to the Furniture Station

In February 2017, a local newspaper in West Jutland, Denmark, reported that a working group consisting of five representatives—one each from Tarm local council, the local Art Forum 6880, the city council, the regional history collection and the Ringkøbing-Skjern Museum (now Ringkøbing Fjord Museer)—had decided in a meeting to move ahead with plans to establish a furniture museum in the town's abandoned railway station ("Første ideer til et møbelmuseum er samlet" 2017). The meeting took place in the former Tarm Chair and Furniture Factory, commonly known as the Chair Factory, a few months before it was demolished. This marked the beginning of what would become the Furniture Station project.

The initiative was a reaction to two factors that affected the town simultaneously. First, the owner of the factory buildings and land was given permission to demolish the factory. Since furniture production stopped in 2008, the buildings had only been used as storage facilities by a new owner, in contrast to its former role as a well-regarded site for Danish designer furniture. The second factor lay just across the street from the Chair Factory, where the railway station—a typical Danish station building from the late 19th century—and a neighbouring warehouse had been left unattended and unused for years. With boarded-up windows, graffiti on the walls and holes in the roof, it gave a bleak impression to passengers alighting from the train in Tarm—a small town that had previously expanded around the reputation and local culture connected to its furniture production and its place within the Danish railway network. The working group behind Furniture Station anticipated that the demolition of the former Chair Factory would increase this sense of life disappearing from the town centre and make it a less attractive option for potential newcomers to Tarm.

As a contemporary Danish community project, Furniture Station seeks to revitalise the local

design cultural heritage rooted in past furniture production. This chapter examines the development of Furniture Station as a project and a material space—a dynamic process that is forming along lines that intersect and affect each other. These can tentatively be described as: community-building and local participation; network-building that engages actors involved in the original design, production and distribution of the Chair Factory's furniture; and funding that supports the site's spatial and cultural potential and involves advice and spatial design solutions provided by professional architects as part of the funding package. Through the development of a combined community centre and museum space, the Furniture Station project is concerned with how the now demolished Chair Factory can continue to create cultural and social meaning by transforming the social, local and cultural heritage into a shared resource for the present and future.

The chapter examines the ongoing development of Furniture Station as an assembling process and as a design cultural heritage assemblage. Rooted in local design practices and cultural memory, the project emerges from a collective desire to transform the shared sense of material abandonment and concerns about the town's future into hope and agency for the participants and for the town.

The study draws on the author's visits to Furniture Station, conversations and correspondence with participants, as well as an examination of literary and visual sources. By integrating perspectives from design history, critical heritage studies and assemblage theory, it explores the dynamic interrelations of the heterogeneous elements that together shape the experience of heritage and constitute Furniture Station—elements such as collection practices, social gatherings, places, collaborators, materials, objects, funding policies and discourses. This approach allows for a reflection on how the drive and initiative behind the creation of this new community are influenced by the diverse participants and components involved. Through this lens, the study seeks to understand how the transformation of a Danish design culture is assembled and shaped within this community project.

FDB Furniture and Tarm

The vision of establishing Furniture Station as a combination of a community space and a furniture museum is inseparable from narratives, local memories and cultural meanings associated with the Chair Factory. In local newspaper articles, funding applications and approvals, event advertisements and other community activities, Furniture Station is repeatedly presented in relation to the local furniture production of the past. The idea of creating a museum is described as a way to give this design heritage a new and revitalised meaning (Furniture Station n.d.).

The period between 1947 and 1980 marks the Tarm Chair Factory's most significant contribution to the Danish design cultural landscape. In those years, the factory was owned by FDB, an abbreviation of *Fællesforeningen for Danmarks Brugsforeninger* (the Danish Consumers Cooperative Society). In this period, the factory produced furniture designed by well-known Danish designers such as Børge Mogensen, Poul Volther, Jørgen Bækmark, Hans J. Wegner and Folke Pålsson (Hansen 2014; Fabricius 1995).

Yet the factory's local significance is also embedded in other ways. It played an important role in local industrial development throughout the 20th century and employed generations of residents from when the factory was founded in 1896 as "Påbøl med flere Plantagers Møbelfabrik", later to be renamed "Tarm Stole- og Møbelfabrik" in the 1930s (Fabricius 1996). This close connection between the local community, the factory and the design world represented by FDB Furniture—a department within the cooperative formed in 1942—is reflected in the vision behind Furniture Station.

However, FDB's role in shaping Danish design culture was not simply a consequence of the mix between local production facilities and well-known designers. The meaning of FDB is more profound in Danish culture: the development of FDB Furniture was part of an overall strategy to pursue the cooperative's social agenda.

The Danish Consumers Cooperative Society (FDB) was founded in 1896. In line with the broader Danish cooperative movement at the time, it was formed around ideals of a strong

community as an important condition for human well-being, combined with a vision of a shared social responsibility for alleviating poverty and heightening cultural consciousness as part of Danish democratic life (Korsager 2016). As a national purchasing community, FDB set out to secure reasonable prices for groceries and other products for the benefit of all customers in its member-owned stores. Over time, the cooperative expanded its role as a wholesaler, building storage and office facilities throughout the country and founding several factories that would make it possible to produce goods independently. In the early years, the established factories in Denmark included a coffee roastery (1897), a tobacco factory (1901) and factories producing soap, rope (1904) and margarine (1913) (Jensen 2016).

As FDB evolved, so did its ambitions. It expanded its cultural role to educate Danes about good taste and aesthetics in their everyday lives. This dimension was supported by marketing materials, including posters, advertisements and product packaging, as well as by developing new manuals for standardising the interior design of the shops. This modern and functional approach involved collaborations with artists and architects, such as the esteemed Danish architect and planner Steen Eiler Rasmussen, who served as a consultant for FDB from 1941 to 1949 (Hansen 2014).

Design and business historians have highlighted FDB's growing focus on taste and the aesthetics of everyday life as central to its development from the 1930s onwards into a brand strongly associated with design and art (Mordhorst 2016; Korsager 2016). An important part of this development was the founding of an architectural office in 1929, which, according to design historian Per H. Hansen, reflected FDB's ambition to expand to "more and more areas of life, from manufacturing to retail and interior design" (2014, 59).

In 1942, FDB Furniture was established as a distinct department within the cooperative, and the designer Børge Mogensen was appointed head of the design studio. Even before this, it had been possible to buy furniture through FDB, and some of it was produced at the Tarm factory, with which the cooperative had collaborated since 1900 (Fabricius 1996; Hansen 2014). However, Mogensen was now given the responsibility for developing a new and more modern furniture programme. As Hansen notes (2014, 129), at that time FDB had "almost 2000 shops spread across the country and […] almost 400,000 members […]". The furniture programme would benefit from this reach, and, as Hansen points out, "[it] was the best opportunity for modern architects so far to engage a diverse group of consumers". To put this into context, Denmark's population in 1942 was approximately 3.88 million (Statistics Denmark. n.d.), which illustrates the cooperative's popularity. It was also during this period, in 1947, that FDB purchased Tarm Stole- og Møbelfabrik.

Børge Mogensen served as head of the design studio until 1950. He was succeeded by Poul Volther, who held the position until 1955, after which Eyvind A. Johansson took over until 1958. Jørgen Bækmark became the last head of the design studio, from 1958 to 1968. All four—Mogensen, Volther, Johansson and Bækmark—contributed furniture designs to FDB, as did Folke Pålsson, the Swedish architect appointed as director of the FDB factory in Tarm from 1950. According to sales figures published in FDB's member magazine *Samvirke* in 1975, the best-selling FDB furniture at that time had been designed in the 1940s and 1950s by Pålsson, Mogensen, Volther and Hans J. Wegner (Hansen 2014, 146–47). In 1968, the design studio was shut down, and in 1980, after some years of declining sales, FDB sold the factory in Tarm. From 1980 to its demolition in 2017–2018, the factory had different owners, among them Kvist Industries (Fabricius 1996).

Furniture Station: A Community Space and a Furniture Museum

Furniture Station is being developed to strengthen the local community by creating a shared space for public and private activities, alongside a museum dedicated to the town's long and culturally significant period of furniture production. As community space, the social character and function is associated with the Danish idea of a *forsamlingshus* (Furniture Station n.d.), a village hall used for different community ac-



Fig. 1. The newly restored warehouse building is seen on the left of the image. The railway station building is situated next to the warehouse. As part of the restoration and transformation process, a new passage between the buildings will be developed (© Furniture Station)

tivities as well as private gatherings, often on a rental basis.

Furniture Station is situated in the former railway station and the adjacent warehouse building, which was previously used to transport FDB furniture (Figs. 1–2). The project acquired formal ownership of the railway station and warehouse buildings in 2018, and since then a core group of five to seven residents in Tarm has initiated several local events and workdays in and around the buildings. The workdays have mainly been centred around the maintenance and restoration of the railway station and the warehouse, while events and activities include initiatives such as street food days, Christmas and Halloween celebrations and public talks.

Some events focus more specifically on the Chair Factory's history, such as when Jakob Volther, son of the designer Poul Volther, visits to speak about his father's work for FDB Furniture and the Chair Factory. Furniture Station mainly uses Facebook and Instagram to share invitations to workdays, events and other possibilities for participation. Thus, the project has not waited for some specified state of completion before inviting participants to join the process but has taken an active role in creating activities in and around the station and warehouse buildings in their existing condition. This meant that from the beginning the workdays were dedicated to repairing, painting and furnishing the space. While this was needed to be able to use the buildings immediately, it became clear that the state of the buildings required more in-depth restoration and development. This development was dependent on funding, an important factor in the development process, which I will return to later.

Furniture that was produced at the Chair Factory has been donated to the project by private individuals and public institutions, and some of the chairs and tables have been used in



Fig. 2. The photo was taken during the interior restoration of the warehouse in 2023. The warehouse was previously used when chairs were shipped out in the country by freight train, a situation which is illustrated in the large photograph placed in the background, owned by Furniture Station (Photo: © The Author)

the preliminary furnishings of the interior as it has developed. This process of creating the first versions of the interior is perhaps best characterised by its elements of bricolage, a concept Ezio Manzini (2019) connects to the everyday practices of individual and collective design for social innovation. Manzini is interested in how "people's well-being is based on their design capability—on their freedom to design how to live", and he suggests a change in focus from "the availability of material goods to what they enable us to do" (2019, 48). He sees people's design capability not as a form of expertise, but as a combination of capabilities which are common to humans, such as critical sense, creativity and imagination, an ability to analyse and a practical skill in making the most of available resources (Manzini 2019, 38). Taking inspiration from the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Manzini identifies the bricoleur as someone who "sets himself an objective that he keeps open and uses the objects he finds to determine how to achieve it (and therefore also its final shape and form)" (2019, 49–50). In ways not unlike the practices at Furniture Station, the bricoleur "approximates his results by reassembling preexistent objects, which he identifies, decontextualizes and reinterprets, modifying their meaning and some of the details" (2019, 50). Manzini notes that this rhythm of *decontextualisation*, *reinterpretation* and *modification* can be applied at all scales. It is also applied at all scales in Tarm, from the reinterpretation of the material traces of the factory and its local significance, the modification of the railway station and warehouse and their functions and spatial aesthetics to the reinterpretation of decontextualised furniture from private homes and public institutions, now reterritorialised within the new spaces.

In 2013, the COOP organisation, formerly known as FDB, decided to relaunch selected furniture from the former FDB design studio, in-

cluding the *J46* chair, designed by Volther. This was done in collaboration with the previously mentioned Kvist Industries, which had acquired the legal rights to some of the FDB furniture designs when it bought the Chair Factory (Hansen 2014, 233). Today, the furniture is still produced and distributed under the Danish name FDB Møbler (n.d.). A commercial presentation video of the relaunched chairs was recently filmed in the old warehouse at Furniture Station, and on this occasion, the company donated some newly produced chairs to the project, thereby becoming part of the bricolage.

As mentioned earlier, a representative from Ringkøbing-Skjern Museum was present at the meeting that took place in 2017 at the abandoned factory. The museum, which is now called Ringkøbing Fjord Museer, is an institutional partner in the plans for the Furniture Station museum and holds a collection of drawings, scale models and other materials from the Chair Factory. Designers' drawings, prototypes and other items and accounts of the furniture production have been preserved by the museum—some of them saved only shortly before the factory buildings were demolished. Volther's scale models of furniture are in his family's possession but will also be included in the museum at Furniture Station. In addition, a chair sculpture inspired by Volther's chairs, made by the Danish artist Anders Bonnesen, was donated to the project by Volther's son (Figs. 3–4).

All these different pieces of furniture, the network of contacts, the people who donate items and the different narratives brought into the Furniture Station project by the objects, materials and people combine to shape the direction of the project. They collectively approximate, to use Manzini's term, a materiality that establishes an atmosphere in the space.

Furniture Station is a project initiated by local residents with the ambition to maintain and develop the heritage of furniture production as part of the future of the town. However, the amount of funding required to realise this ambition has influenced the project's design visions and introduced a significant element of professional design expertise. In 2021, Furniture Station was granted the large sum of 4.5 million Danish kroner from the influential Danish



Fig. 3. A chair sculpture by the Danish artist Anders Bonnesen (Photo: © The Author)

philanthropic association Realdania through programmes that support place-based development driven by committed residents and a living building culture. Additional funding has also been provided by other foundations. The large donation from Realdania in particular has had a significant influence, as it comes with contractual requirements that require a certain professionalisation within the project.

In 2022, Furniture Station agreed with Realdania to collaborate with a young Copenhagen-based architecture firm, Johansen Skovsted Arkitekter (JSA), on the architectural and interior re-design of the station building. JSA were chosen because of their previous experience with architectural design in the local area. JSA's first projects as young architects—three Skjern river pump stations completed in 2015—were widely recognised and short-listed for the prestigious Mies van der Rohe Award. In 2017, the firm also designed a series of works for the Tipperne Bird Sanctuary in the Ringkøbing-Skjern municipality as part of Realdania's "Place Matters" programme.

Furniture Station's buildings were officially inaugurated in the summer of 2025. After several years of work, the restoration of the ware-



Fig. 4. A selection of Furniture Station's old and new chairs of the type *J46*, designed by Poul Volther (Photo: © The Author)

house and the former station building has been completed and the two buildings have been connected by a new intermediate building, designed and developed in collaboration with JSA, ensuring accessibility for all to both the warehouse and the station building. The next step in the process is the realisation of the furniture museum in Furniture Station.

Critical Heritage Perspectives

On the official inauguration in 2025, a representative from Realdania emphasised that Furniture Station is an excellent example of how local, voluntary efforts can preserve an existing cultural heritage while also giving it a new role in the community (Realdania 2025). As demonstrated in the preceding sections, the core of Furniture Station lies in the meanings, actions, affects and material expressions that are created or transformed through relationships between multiple participants and material elements—and the memories and discourses that maintain a design cultural significance to the Chair Factory. Thus, while it builds on shared understandings of an existing cultural heritage, as stated by Realdania, it is important to ask how Furniture Station is itself part of shaping such understandings. To address this, the following section examines the agency and assemblage of Furniture Station from a critical heritage perspective with particular emphasis on the entangled relations between the social and the material.

Recent research into the relationships between design and heritage highlights the need for continued analysis to better understand how the two fields intersect culturally, conceptually and politically. According to design historian Grace Lees-Maffei, "[f]ocusing on the intersection of design and heritage complicates the idea of the designer as a product of modernity and the process of professionalization in productive ways. Many instances of heritage design involve co-design with communities" (Lees-Maffei 2022, 3). We have already seen, with reference to Manzini, how the design capabilities of the Furniture Station participants are activated in

the process of approximating, reassembling, reinterpreting and modifying. And the collaboration with JSA, initiated by Realdania, exemplifies what Lees-Maffei refers to as the designer (in this case the architect) who co-designs with communities, in the context of Realdania. Lees-Maffei (2022, 5) suggests that heritage studies and design history can benefit from each other's methods and approaches when it comes to a diversification of the disciplines and, furthermore, from the shared interest in discourses as mediators of meaning. Neither design history nor heritage studies focus solely on the material design or object itself.

Lees-Maffei highlights the potential for design history to learn from the Critical Heritage Studies (CHS), which, in the words of Rodney Harrison (2018, 1369), recognise the roles of material things but "in the complex set of relationships in which human and non-human agents, heritage objects, places and practices are bound together in contemporary worlds".

While developing this material and ontological approach to heritage, Harrison (2018, 1369) points out the importance of bringing "the affective qualities of heritage 'things' and their attendant performativity more squarely into the critical heritage studies arena". This perspective sharpens a critique of authorised heritage discourse (AHD). The critique is concerned with the "concrete ways in which power is caught up and exercised through the exhibition and management of museums and heritage sites, a concern that has emerged as central to the interdisciplinary field of critical heritage studies" (Harrison 2018, 1368). To attend more fully to the affective, agential and material qualities of heritage objects and places, CHS engages with theoretical perspectives, which, according to Harrison, can help shed light on the heterogeneity of "'heritage assemblages' […] like museums and heritage sites and the varied and dispersed ways in which they function" (2018, 1370).

Laurajane Smith—a founding member of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies in 2012—offers a slightly different perspective on the role of materiality within CHS. In her own words, she "attempts to disprivilege materiality" and seeks to "re-theorise heritage as having elements of performance and practice" (Smith 2021, 21, 25) drawing particularly on Judith Butler's idea of performativity. Arguing that all heritage is, in principle, intangible, Smith clarifies that she is "simply stating that heritage is something that is *done* and that objects, places, sites, buildings and other 'stuff' are props that help us accomplish that 'doing'" (Smith 2021, 26).

As previously shown, the story of the Chair Factory is also the story of the rise and fall of FDB's furniture production in Tarm. The initiation of Furniture Station builds on a desire to retain some local qualities of the past in the present, amid a perceived risk of further decline of the town. Harrison observes that heritage is "generally defined against a background of (actual or metaphorical) protest over the potential loss, cessation or erasure of something that is perceived to be of value". In this respect, "heritage has often been defined in the context of some sort of *threat* to objects, places or practices that are perceived to hold a form of collective value" (Harrison 2013, 27).

An example of what Harrison terms "unofficial heritage" (2013), the local and cultural values that Furniture Station builds on are not protected or recognised by official authorities or legislation. The term unofficial heritage refers to "a broad range of practices that are represented using the language of heritage" and "may manifest in the rather conventional form of buildings or objects that have significance to individuals or communities", or "in less tangible ways as sets of social practices that surround more tangible forms of both official and unofficial heritage" (Harrison 2013, 15). In this context, Harrison emphasises that the difference between what is considered official and unofficial heritage does not necessarily depend on the inherent qualities of an object, place or practice, but is merely a question of definition and regulations. The development of a museum as part of Furniture Station is still ongoing and the extent of the collaboration with Ringkøbing Fjord Museer remains officially unknown. Nevertheless, the concept of a 'museum' within Furniture Station clearly marks a point of intersection with the discourses and practices of official heritage.

Critical heritage studies (CHS) resist the "universalizing agendas and principles" (Ster-

ling and Harrison 2019, 26) of large, official heritage institutions and authorised heritage discourse (AHD). Instead, they are committed to cultural diversity and diverse ways of life, seeking to "encourage a greater awareness of alternative modes of engaging with the past in the present to create more equitable futures" (Sterling and Harrison 2019, 26). This supports Lees-Maffei's (2022) argument that design and heritage can mutually benefit from each other's approaches—particularly given that the material-discursive perspective within CHS emphasises the roles of material things, spaces, places, designers, communities and other participants in collaboratively shaping the experiential forms of heritage. As Harrison (2018, 1379) states, focusing solely on discourse in heritage—such as through documents and official statements—is "not helpful in accounting for the diverse ways in which heritage objects, places, and practices […] are *themselves* active players in assembling presents, in composing worlds, and in designing futures".

An Assemblage

As outlined above, critical heritage studies (CHS) are concerned with the performative, affective, discursive, social, agential and material dimensions of heritage practices, objects and places. Among the theoretical perspectives that have gained increasing significance within recent CHS scholarship, Harrison (2018) identifies *heritage assemblages*, which focus on the "objects, people, places, practices, pronouncements, bureaucratic apparatuses—that are brought together" (2018, 1370). Considering the heterogeneity of elements and modes of agency at work in Furniture Station, this section approaches the project through the theoretical lens of *assemblage* (*agencement*) and reflects on how the drive and initiative behind the creation of this new community are shaped by the diverse participants and components involved. Harrison employs the concept of assemblage with reference to Gilles Deleuze and the various scholars who have subsequently interpreted the term. Some key elements drawn from the types of heritage assemblages outlined by Harrison include an emphasis on sets of relations and processes that shape routes to, conceptions of, and modes of entry into, heritage. Additionally, these assemblages involve the distribution of agency across the interrelations between human and non-human actors (Harrison 2018, 1376).

The following discussion further explores the characteristics of an assemblage. As defined by Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage is an arrangement—a "holding together of heterogeneous elements" (2004, 357). Philosopher Rosi Braidotti expands on this by characterising assemblages as shaped by the relations and exchanges that "flow across and displace the binaries" (Braidotti 2019, 33). Grounded in posthumanist and cultural theory, Braidotti's work on new materialism proposes alternative ways of understanding agency and difference beyond dualities, oppositions and established categories (Braidotti 1991, 264–65).

Whereas traditional notions of difference rely on pregiven identities or universal categories and often imply abstract hierarchies and power structures, new materialist thinking challenges such categories—including dualisms such as body/mind and the categorical divide between human and non-human. Drawing on monistic ontologies developed by Spinoza and Deleuze, Braidotti's formulation of new materialism considers difference as qualities of the same composite being. Thus, difference is not understood as oppositional or binary, but as modification, variation, affect and becoming. This is also central to the ontology of assemblages.

Ian Buchanan (2020, 113), writing on Deleuzian assemblage theory, warns against misreading assemblages as merely "something assembled from miscellaneous things" or as "ad hoc groupings". He clarifies that "it is not the items or elements in the assemblage that is decisive; it is the underlying principles of selection and arrangement that matter" (Buchanan 2020, 117). This emphasis aligns with Braidotti's focus on what occurs *in-between*—in the relations and exchanges that constitute the assemblage. The holding together is what we can regard as the *territorialising* movements of an assemblage. At the same time, an assemblage is inherently dynamic: it also involves *deterritorialising* movements and elements, which will *reterritorialise* into new assemblages, creating an "innovative opening of the territory" onto something else,

while functioning as "components of passage or relay" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 358).

Such processes can be observed in the development of Furniture Station. The funding from Realdania opens the community-driven project towards a professionalised architectural *territory*, introducing formal architectural aesthetics and expertise into the assemblage. At the same time, the museum institution engages in exchanges of practice and knowledge with the project's initiators, with designers' families and with other participants—particularly around the collection of design-historical material. In both cases, we see a dynamic exchange between actors and practices that reflects what Lees-Maffei identifies: that intersections between disciplines complicate fixed identities in productive ways.

Braidotti further explores the political potential of *we* as a collective assemblage and affirmative voice, which "entails the overthrowing of negativity through the recasting of the oppositional, resisting self ('I would prefer not to') into a collective assemblage ('we')" (Braidotti 2019, 21). She envisions this *we* as "non-human agents, technologically-mediated elements, earth-others (land, waters, plants, animals) and non-human inorganic agents (plastic, wires, information highways, algorithms, etc.)" (2019, 21). Braidotti (2000) also identifies memory as a vector of deterritorialisation—with the capacity to destabilise fixed identities and open up new forms of becoming. This perspective invites us to consider how memory plays a role in assembling Furniture Station, generating new and meaningful relations between the local community, the town, the buildings and the legacy of FDB.

Conclusion

The central question of this chapter has been: What does it require to realise the visions of Furniture Station and transform a local design identity into a design cultural heritage project that combines a community space and a furniture museum?

As demonstrated throughout the study, the Furniture Station project was initiated in response to a collective affect—worries about the future of the town, the material neglect of buildings and the physical traces of an extinct but once-thriving culture of furniture production. While it can be argued that the working group which initiated the Furniture Station project acted upon this affect, it is obvious that the project is related to larger agendas with relevance beyond the local scale. In particular, Furniture Station aligns with the objectives of the Danish philanthropic association Realdania, which supports strengthening communities through place-based potentials and the revitalisation of the built environment.

The funding that supports Furniture Station is shaped by various public interests and policy discourses, each of which have material consequences for how the project is developed and realised. The collaboration with Realdania and the architects JSA, who were assigned to the project, has brought in professional expertise and influenced the project's aesthetic and functional direction. This collaboration has affected the materiality and form of the architectural transformation, introducing ideas and solutions that may not have emerged from the original residents' initiative. Additionally, Furniture Station is deeply invested in revitalising the design history and culture of the town, an ambition that aligns with the contemporary "retro" design trend, as seen in the relaunching of some of the FDB designs. Simultaneously, local residents continue to engage in a variety of events and activities that aim to strengthen local culture and community. Studying Furniture Station through an assemblage perspective, as this chapter has done, shows the critical importance of understanding how participants and heterogeneous elements collaboratively produce changes and exchanges. In other words, it underscores how these elements—both material and discursive—form relationships and create new openings and possibilities within the project.

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Biographies

Joachim Allouche, PhD in Design History from the University of Southern Denmark (SDU), is Head of Modern Times at the Museum of Southeast Denmark.

Alba Cappellieri, PhD, is a Full Professor and Head of Jewellery & Fashion Accessories Design at the Politecnico di Milano and Director of the International Masters in Fashion Tech and Jewellery and Accessories Design. She is a curator and author of international exhibitions and publications and she founded and directed the Museum of Jewellery in Vicenza. A specialist in the field of luxury, she conducts research and develops branding strategies for international luxury groups such as Chanel, Richemont, LVMH and Kering.

Maddalena Dalla Mura, PhD in Design Sciences, is Associate Professor at the Iuav University of Venice. Her research interests concern the history of design and graphic design, with a focus on historiography and design mediation. Her recent publications include the chapter on Italy (with Carlo Vinti) in the third volume of *World History of Design*, edited by Rebecca Houze and Sylvia Margolin (Bloomsbury). Since 2021 she has been president of the AIS/Design – Associazione Italiana Storici del Design.

Toke Riis Ebbesen, PhD in Design Studies, is an independent design historian and former Associate Professor at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). In addition to his academic career, he has worked as a project manager and entrepreneur in media, culture and publishing. His research focuses on design communication, design and cultural history, adopting a humanities-based approach at the intersection of design objects, their representation in media and their interactions within broader cultural and historical contexts.

Kjetil Fallan is Professor of Design History at the University of Oslo. His most recent books are *Ecological by Design: A History from Scandinavia* (MIT Press, 2022); *The Culture of Nature in the History of Design* (Routledge, 2019); and, co-edited with Anders V. Munch and Christina Zetterlund, *Nordic Design Cultures in Transformation, 1960-1980: Revolt and Resilience* (Routledge, 2023). Fallan serves on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Design History*.

Elena Fava, PhD in Art History, teaches at the Iuav University of Venice and at the University of Parma. Her research, based on the critical analysis of archives, focuses on the intersections between the fashion industry 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, as well as the monograph *Vestire contro: il dressing design di Archizoom* (2018).

Denise Hagströmer, PhD (RCA), is an Oslo-based Swedish-American design historian, appointed Senior Curator at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Norway, in 2013. She curated the modern design collection display for the new National Museum which opened in 2022. She also co-curated the *Scandinavian Design and the United States 1890–1980* exhibition, a collaboration with LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), Milwaukee Art Museum and National Museum, Stockholm (2022–23). She is a board member of the Nordic Forum for Design History and ICOM DESIGN.

Annette Svaneklink Jakobsen is Associate Professor in Design Studies and part of the Design Culture research programme at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). Her research examines the relationalities of encounters, especially how the spatial, material and discursive elements of design culture and architecture affect human engagement.

Rita Marcangelo is a gallery director, curator and jewellery specialist. She has directed Alternatives Gallery since 1997 and co-founded AGC in 2004, serving as chair until 2010. Since 2010, she has curated the Cominelli Foundation's Permanent Collection of Contemporary Jewellery. She is also regularly invited to serve as a juror and speaker in the field of contemporary jewellery.

Anders V. Munch is Professor of Design Culture at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU). Recent books are *The Gesamtkunstwerk in Design and Architecture* (Aarhus University Press, 2021); *Design Culture: Objects and Approaches* (Bloomsbury, 2019), co-edited with Guy Julier, Mads Nygaard Folkmann, Hans-Christian Jensen and Niels Peter Skou; and *Nordic Design Cultures in Transformation, 1960-1980: Revolt and Resilience* (Routledge, 2023), co-edited with Kjetil Fallan and Christina Zetterlund. Munch is the Danish representative in the Nordic Forum for Design History.

Beatrice Rossato, PhD in Design, studied Fashion Design at the Politecnico di Milano, at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York and at Aalto University. Specialised in Embodied Digital Fashion, she collaborates with the Politecnico di Milano. She also works as a freelance designer in art direction, branding for jewellery, and exhibitions. Since 2020, she has been an adjunct professor at the POLI.design Master's programmes, and has taught in degree courses at the Politecnico di Milano and at the Iuav University of Venice.

Astrid Skjerven is Professor Emerita of Design Theory at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her special fields of interest are Nordic design from a global perspective, everyday aesthetics and the relation between culture and sustainability. She is the editor of *Design for a Sustainable Culture* (2017), *Transnational Discourses in Nordic Design* (2024) and *Mediating Sustainability in the Consumer Society* (2025). She is currently working on an article on postmodern fashion design in Norway.

Niels Peter Skou is Associate Professor in Design Studies at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU), Kolding. He takes part in the SDU research programme in Design Culture and is co-editor of *Design Culture: Objects and Approaches* (Bloomsbury 2019). His research explores historical and analytical approaches to Scandinavian design culture with a focus on conceptions of democracy and nature as well as cultural heritage and the use of history. At present, he is investigating landscape imaginaries in the tension between the mediation of Scandinavian landscapes and the transition of the landscape due to climate mitigation.