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National College of Art and Design

Craft Design, Metals

Philippe Starck

AN EXPLORATION INTO REAL REASON
WHY PHILIPPE STARCK DESIGNS

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complementary Studies in Candidacy For a Degree of Bachelor of Design
in Craft Design Metals 1995.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Eddie Murphy, Gemma Brady and all the staff of the library in the National College of Art and Design and to extend these thanks also to the staff of the library in Trinity College Dublin for there assistance in my research for this thesis. I am most grateful however for the great help received from Joe Mc Donnell who assisted me in putting this paper together.

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INTRODUCTION:

Originally, when I set out to write this thesis, I was attracted to the charm of Starck's work and I was planning to approach the subject of his designs from a purely aesthetic point of view. These plans gradually disintegrated as my research sank deeper into the complicated web of Starck's contradictions. From one article to another, his ideas change or he nullified his concepts with other designs he produced. Because of the chaotic nature of the subject, he has proven almost impossible to pin down. It is also quite difficult to find hard facts about Starck due to the casual nature of magazine journalism, from which the majority of the information has been extracted.

I have to state, before going further, that this study does not in any way propose to cover the complete works of Philippe Starck. Instead I have tried to evaluate his most important or inovative work and have included a detailed list of commissions and projects which can be found at the back of the thesis.

Chapter one is divided into two sections, one dealing with his birth and childhood which gives an idea of the type of environment in which Starck developed up to his teens. The second section deals with his schooling, adolescence and entry into art college. Chapter two starts in the post-1968 Parisian chaos of ideas in which Starck's concepts thrived to the extent of being commissioned to design a number of nightclubs.

Chapter three then deals with his most prolific decade to date, the eighties, which is subsequently broken into two sections. The first section deals with the work he did in the early part of this period, in particular the *Elysee Palace* and *Cafe Costas* assignments. The second section concentrates on the latter half, and in particular on his Japanese architectural commissions.

Chapter four covers the change in Starck's approach to design due to the death of his wife. Later on in the second section I put forward a few essential questions, whose answers help to clarify Starck's approach to design and the future. In the following chapter, the conclusion, I put forward the positive and negative perceptions of certain design critics and contemporary designers on Starck's work. This is followed by a commentary in the words of Starck himself, stating that his true occupation is not one of a designer but that of a political agitator who uses design as a medium of expressing his ideas and getting involved in the lives of others. (Beritoni, 1994, p.19)

CHAPTER ONE:

Starck's Birth and Childhood

Philippe Starck was born in Paris on the 18th of January 1949. As a boy he was already an enthusiastic draughtsman, probably inspired by his father who worked as an air craft designer. Young Philippe would have had a lot of contact with his fathers business and as a child he would have crawled amongst piles of blueprints for wings and tail sections.¹

As he says himself...

My father had a stock aeroplane (light aircraft) factory, and when I was growing up, my bed was under his drawing table. Every day I would watch him working on his designs for his aeroplanes. I guess I learned by osmosis what the elegance of line is, the importance of materials, and the meaning of the economy of lightness. In my family, creation was a way of life and to earn your lunch you had to have an idea every morning. That's really the basis of my work today.

(Honingsbaum, 1990, p.8)

When asked about his father and where he came from, he replied...

I don't know I think he was first an astronaut, and then a German theologian and after that he was a cabinet maker before becoming a mundane decorator in Paris. I don't know all the details.

(Colin, 1991, p.20)

His father was someone he never knew very much about because he stopped speaking to him at the age of ten. He died in 1985 and between the age of ten and thirty he had never spoken to him, "I hope I was right, the punishment was very heavy on my father."² Starck later commented.

The only thing I inherited from my father was his post-World War II, European infatuation with American cultural colonisation.

¹(Honingsbaum, 1990, p.8)

²(Colin, 1991, p.20)

My father really was an American in Paris. He used to wear a stetson, which at the time was quite unusual, but this probably had something to do with the fact that he was a friend of Walt Disney. He wasn't terribly rich but he went to the United States and used to bring us back the latest gadgets and toys. He used to read only publications written in English such as *Readers Digest* and issues of *Popular Science*. So he was a man who liked new technology, especially in the area of photography and cinematography.
(Colin, 1991,p.20)

These books of American propaganda, as Starck refers to them, were about one idea; happiness and success by technological inventions which was the current vogue.

I continued after I left him, with my collection of *Popular Science* and *Methane Popular* magazines, as did he. Inside these magazines there were amazing things... From my father I learnt the idea that research is something which we have to do in our life, a kind of obligation. We must be inventive, its our mission. For him it was better to make a creative mistake rather than to stay in good taste and not advance. These things made an impression on me. This is part of my heritage, always be creative, and always want creation, but I am like this maybe less than my father. He used to look for real solutions. Me, I try to find some. I have found some already, but less maybe because its less easy today.

My father lived this every day, he lived with patent and he lived with copyright. My father used to feel terrible if he went through a day without an idea. To him taste and culture meant little, what was really important was action especially that of making planes. My fathers planes were renowned to be the best performance planes around. They were like the Ferrari's of the air. They were always in advance of their time with new solutions and famous for looking smart. Everybody was talking about the design of the Starck planes.

There again the only smart notion I took from this was that of economy. A plane is based on economy whether it be an economy of weight or shape. When we look at my furniture, I think we find the same curve, the same preoccupation with economy and in fact the non-judgement of shape. I really had the sense of the lines tension. More and more we realise that a curve sketch on a connection between two sketched curves, is more interesting than a rigid right angle. This is a relationship with the human body which I like to capture. I take a real pleasure to draw nice curves.

When I said I was sleeping under the drawing table of my father, in fact, I was sleeping face to face with it. Every morning I got up I would be faced with is drawings. As my room was in his office, I saw lots of material and prototypes like pieces of aluminium or wood worked to perfection. I am also like my father in that I like to party very much.

(Colin, 1991,p.20)

Even at an early age he showed an interest in the way people lived. When he was the age of ten he spent a lot of time imagining how a family of two three people could live in a minimum amount of space. A friend of his mother, an astute Albigensian bishop, saw that the young boy had talent in this area and predicted that he would become some sort of decorator, and since then his fate was sealed³ .

Starck's Education

Starck's academic career consisted in a Parisian private school education run by the Jesuits, from which he was regularly cautioned. He hated school with a passion and spent many years designing a torture chamber for one of his teachers. He later commented, "It was very well done, with traps and a tank for collecting all the blood."⁴

When outside of school, which seemed to be most of the time, he spent his childhood in a self imposed isolation which was quite extreme.

I was alone, always alone, from the age of thirteen to sixteen, I spent my life in the forest, on my own, sitting on a bench. And from the age of sixteen to nineteen, I didn't venture out of my bedroom.

(Eshun,1993, p.106)

³ (Boissiere, 1991, p.12)

⁴ (Honigsbaum, 1990,p.5)

I was unsociable. I tried for a while, then I gave up ... All the earthly abnormalities were about me. I was very interested in sensory perception and the environment. I used to work the entire day, for days on end, on the ways of perceiving the house rather than those living in it, or that sort of thing... I used to build prototypes for furniture with gelatins and pastes inside them. I used to drive around the woods on my moped, I was on my own all day long... In those days I used to design underground military bases, of the *Guns of Naverone* variety, very sophisticated chambers of torture, elevators... On the whole I can't really say I enjoyed myself. I might as well say it was a permanent state of nightmare, of total neurosis.

(Bertoni, 1994, p.13)

When asked, were his parents ever worried about him? He replied, "No, I was always very quiet, making these small complicated little sketches all the time, and no one paid much attention to me."⁵

After he had finished school in 1968, he enrolled in the Ecole Comando, the leading architectural design school in Paris, but yet again he hardly ever attended classes, "while my pals were playing at school, I would be in my car in the forests around Paris with my drawing pad."⁶

Starck admits that design has had a special role to play for him.

When I was younger, the girls that pleased me would have nothing to do with me. 'Starck, he is ugly; Starck, he is a monster,' I couldn't understand it - I was clean and well dressed, but absolutely outside of society.

(Eshun, 1993, p.107)

Starck saw design as a vehicle in which he could turn himself into a celebrity, to win friends and influence people.⁷

⁵ (Bertoni, 1994, p.13)

⁶ (Honigsbaum, 1990,p.5)

⁷ (Eshun, 1993, p.107)

After his parents split up, he went to live with his mother. Her approach to furniture and design was, as she put it, "I'd rather have nothing than bullshit"⁸. And for seven years, young Philippe slept in a sleeping bag on a camping mattress in the corner of an immense room.

The floor was parquet and I used to move around all night like a worm, you could see the trail in the dust. Then one day we moved to another house and there was a revolution; we had a carpet. I was able to do away with the mattress and eventually the sleeping bag as well. I used to buy a lot of newspapers and magazines. In the evening I would burrow into the stack of them near the wall and cover myself in paper and go to sleep. That went on until I was twenty...

So I never had any furniture, but I must admit I was fairly happy that way... I think this may be the reason for my choosing to work with furniture - the fact that I had to reinvent everything myself. Another factor is that my father comes from a family of inventors. I too felt obliged to invent something that was missing. This is why I play the clown designing objects - I don't just do furniture but anything that people can relate to. It's a way of filling the empty space around me. This puts me in a category which is neither cultural or aesthetic, but emotional; my design is a kind of dialogue between me and society. I am very sensitive to subtle currents of unexpected desires and needs, and these form the basis of my design.

(Design Review, 1993, p.6)

⁸ (Honigsbaum, 1990,p.5)

CHAPTER TWO:

Starck in the Seventies

The Seventies for Starck was not a very high profile decade and very little is known about what he was doing. We can gather from what has been written about him during this period that he was a very languid character as he confesses himself to be. He spent most of his time during this period of his life nightclubbing and having a good time, but he also developed some ideas and attitudes towards life by getting more involved in science fiction and in particular the writings of Philip K. Dick. The seventies also being a period of modernisation for the French people after the fall from power of de Gaulle and the rising of the new forward looking President Gorges Pompidou would have had an encouraging effect on any progressive designer.

In 1970 Starck was working on a few designs of chairs for the Moilier company but later got involved in 1971 with the Parisian fashion designer Pierre Cardin whom at that stage was at the height of his career. Cardin appointed him as artistic director of his company and had Starck working on a few projects for designing more chairs. These chairs and other furniture were generally made of materials like polyurthane and leather. By 1972 he was making some inflatable balloons which had neon lights attached to them, some transparent and others with silver metallic finishes. These balloons can also be seen in the early films made of the *Velvet Underground* filmed by Andy Warhol at his factory in the late

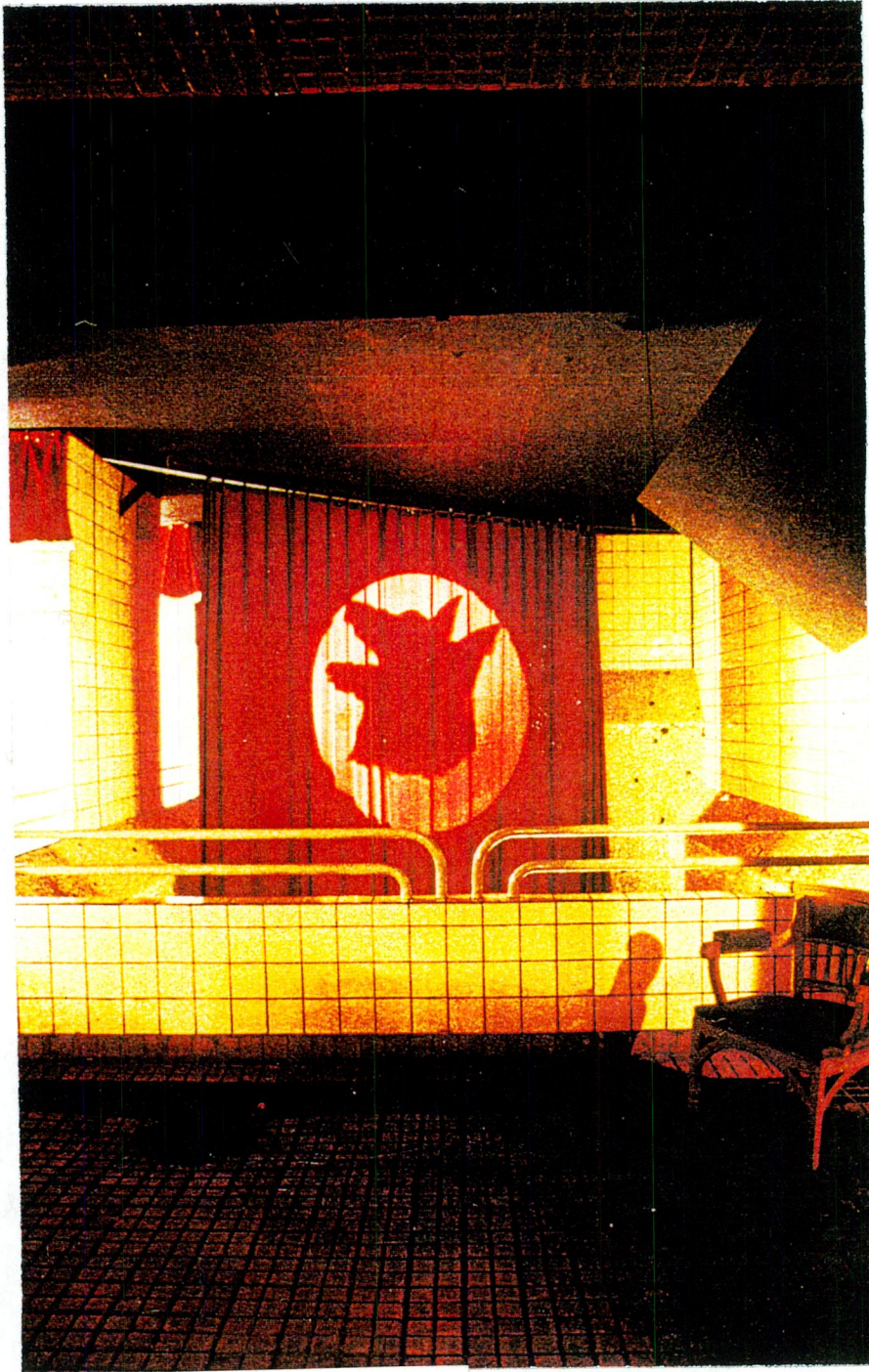


fig.1 Les Bains Douches

sixties, so they may not be totally original to Starck. Whether they are original or not, we can see from an early stage that he was experimenting with avant guard ideas for design. Some of these designs he had sent off to Italy as proposed furniture and prototypes only to be refused, but in years to come, were produced with enormous success. Among these designs was the *Joe Miller chair*.

A year later in 1973, through his nightclub connections Starck was commissioned to design the new *Chalet Du Lac* nightclub in Paris and another one called *La Bain Bleue* also in Paris in 1976. The whole nightclub culture was imported to France from the US at this time to coincide with the new liberated society which the young people of France were experiencing during this post-1968 period. Starck was obviously the perfect man for the job because he was engrossed in the siber-punk culture which was emerging in the nightclub underground scene. Being so in touch with the ideas of the age, he could create an environment which would be sympathetic to the concerns of that time and people.

One of the most famous and liked of his chairs, *Dr Bloodmoney* was designed a year later in 1977. This chair along with many other items of Starck furniture were named after characters from the books of Philip K. Dick. The *Societa UBIK* was founded during this year, the sign for which is still affixed to the door of Starck's Parisian office (which was named also as a tribute to one of Philip K. Dick's most famous novels). Also during this year he designed two sets of shelf units, one called *John Ild* and the other named *Mac Gee*. Before the end of the year he had left

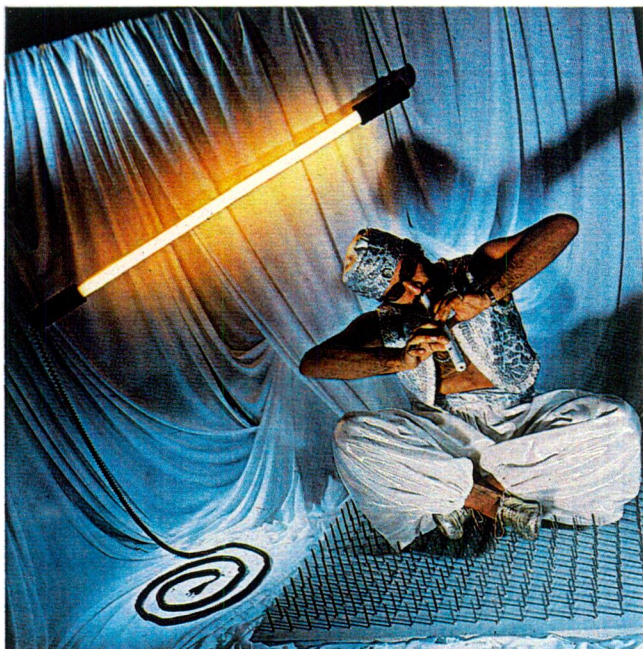


fig.2 Easylight

France to go on his World Tour. When asked about the World Tour, he commented...

...I've no interest whatsoever in learning about foreign countries, the interest lies within living outside our own codes, our own contexts, living the experience of a cultural deprivation from which one emerges destroyed or an adult. Its not about encountering other designers either. The principal activity lies in observing the rubbish tips, visiting S&M bars exploring the most secluded aspects of life.

(Beritoni, 1990, p.13)

When he arrived back in 1978, he started working on his nightclub designs again. This time it was for *Les Bains Douches* nightclub and later the *Centre Ville* restaurant, both of which are situated in Paris. The *Les Bains Douches* nightclub was a readaptation of a building previously used as public baths and is one of the first tasks Starck undertook as an interior designer. Starck explains this project as the task of conveying...

...a Parisian place under the Soviet yoke. I put soviet writing on the walls. Portraits of Stalin were hung on the walls. A red flag was dripped in a pool of blood, onto which was projected the the outline of a Doberman in reference to the figure of Stalin.

(Beritoni, 1990, p.49)

By 1979 he had founded his *Starck Products* company which by the following year had collapsed. Between these two years he had produced some interesting furniture including the *Easylight* which consists of a florescent bulb which can be plugged into an electrical socket anywhere.

Within the written works of Philip K. Dick, Starck has found an affinity with his own sensibilities, namely the all pervasive confidence in human progress. As Dick says...

...its not brutal instinct which keeps us in a constant state of restlessness and dissatisfaction... I'll tell you what it is; Its mans most noble purpose... the need to perfect himself... of finding new things, of covering new spaces, of having new experiences. To

break from the monotony, to go ahead, to progress, to move...
(Beritoni, 1990, p.14)

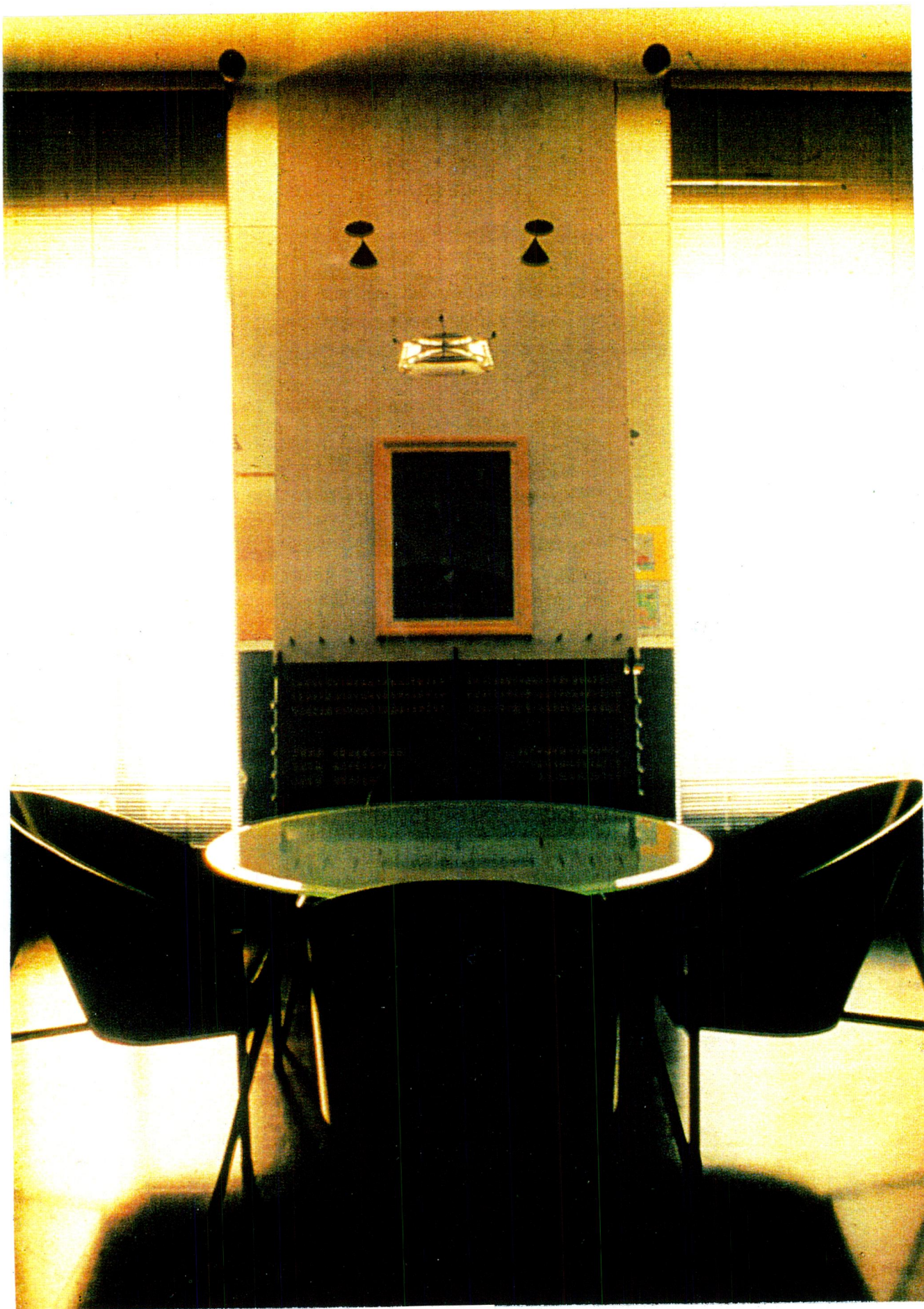


fig.3 L'Elysee, Presidential Apartments

CHAPTER THREE:

Starck in the Early Eighties

After the comparatively lax period of the seventies, Starck hit the eighties with a bang. Between 1982 and 1983 that he had been judged worthy among four other fortunate designers to redesign the interior of the private section of the *Elysee Palace*, for the French Prime Minister at the time, Francois Mitterrand. This in retrospect was probably the most important commission of his whole career due to the fact that from this single assignment he had gained enormous respect among the French establishment. This compared dramatically with his previous situation of only being recognised and appreciated by the somewhat limited audience of the Parisian subculture and nightclub goers.

In this commission he was asked by President Mitterrand to renovate three rooms in the offices of the *Elysee Palace* and Danielle Mitterrand, France's first lady, had him furnish her bedroom in the Palace private quarters. Design critic Sir Terence Conran humorously points to a British comparison "Just imaging Mrs Thatcher asking Richard Rogers to design Denis and her bedroom in Downing Street."⁹ When the French media got wind of this news ,they flung into a fray of scandal.

I was the bad boy of architecture, I was the nightclub designer who hung around Hells Angles in a motorcycle gang. Nobody could believe that the President of France had become involved with a man like me. It was very very scandalous...

(Rawthorn, 1989, p.26)

⁹ (Conran,1989, p.47)



fig.4 L'Elysee, Presidential Apartments and the Richard III chair

He also comments about this project in another interview...

I was very happy to be asked to design the Presidents office in the *Elysee Palace* because I agreed with Mitterrand's politics. Mitterrand is very intelligent, humorous, sophisticated. He's my most important fan.

(Rawthorn, 1989, p.26)

When Danielle Mitterrand, asked for a bedroom desk, Starck says he could have made her "an impeccable ebony desk encrusted with mother-of-pearl, delivered in two months and costing the French government two hundred thousand francs."¹⁰ Instead he designed metal desk components which went into the *3 Suisses* catalogue.

...for thirteen hundred francs, anyone can have the same desk as the president's wife. I like the thought of bringing together the presidents wife and the farmers wife via a piece of furniture. That's the kind of subversive lateral action my work is all about.

(Grauman, 1989, p.90)

Since this venture, Starck career has become increasingly influential, designs and prototypes dating back to the seventies were progressively being put into production by *Carte Blanche VIA, Disform, Baleri, 3 Suisses, OX, Driade* ...with a peak of about sixty objects in production in the space of three years.

It is quite significant that the Presidential offices offered a prime spot for the prototype of the *Richard III* club armchair, made in aluminium and embossed in a helicopter factory and covered in Hermes leather, the richest and the most opulent. The resulting environment is described by Starck as...

...an austere place - sophisticated lights, grey granite and black marble, pumice stones, drapes and counter-weights - so that a banal gesture becomes theatrical.

(Bertoni, 1994, p.50)

¹⁰ (Conran, 1989, p.47)



fig.5 Cafe Costas

The idea behind the *Richard III* chair is described by Starck as a dialectical exercise on bourgeoisie topology, "bourgeoisie on the front , but when you turn it around, it's empty; there's a hypocritical side to it I like."¹¹ In this we can see an interesting combination of the clients intelligent self-irony and Starck's incisive criticism of power and institutions.

A year after the furore over the the *Elysee* endeavour came the opening of the *Cafe Costas* (1984) which was an instant success. The cafe was designed by Starck to unsettle the public with its interior features which included a huge clock, reading the wrong time, stationed at the top of central majestic stairs. It also features a wall sized waterfall behind the urinal in the men's room.

All the symbols left by Starck in the *Cafe Costas* are those of the tensions, 'the spleen' that dominated the eighties. This partly explains the extraordinary success of this place, which has become the focus of an international clientele which has obviously recognised itself in this suspended dimension - comments design critic Franco Bertoni.

(Bertoni,1994, p.50)

It was the combination of both of these projects, the *Elysee Palace* and the *Cafe Costas* that brought him such wide recognition, being hailed by the press. One of the most successful features of the *Cafe Costas* is its three legged chairs which were put into mass production and sold very well. By 1990 over 400,000 editions had been sold of the *Cafe Costas Chair* as it came to be known. Starck, later commenting about the chairs, said, "The cafe has about five hundred chairs. If you remove one leg from each chair, that's five hundred less chances of the waiters tripping

¹¹ (Bertoni,1994, p.50)



fig.6 Cafe Costas and stairs

up and falling on their faces.”¹²

Starck managed to get the commission to do the *Cafe Costas* by the fact that the owner of the cafe saw his curved back chair with spinky-metal legs at the *Galerie VIA* in Paris, and was so impressed that he took him on to redesign the whole interior of his restaurant which resulted in himself and the cafe becoming famous almost over night.

Commenting on the philosophical use of the staircase in the *Cafe Costas*, Starck says...

The staircase is very important to me, because I never do anything gratuitous. I never spend a franc or a gram of energy doing something that could be defined as stylistic or decorative. I do nothing else but satisfy requirements; I'm required to go from one level to the next, therefore I need a staircase. Then I take the staircase and... almost make it the central element, because it is an element I am interested in, because the staircase is, typically, symbolically and functionally a scene, a theatrical scene. It's always been like that, in magazines... everywhere. You go up a staircase, you descend a staircase... it's a scene by definition, and I'm interested in dealing with theatrical scenes to place people in another reality and make them live another moment in time. I make staircases which are theatre scenes, where people are given value, where, people can be stars, as Warhol used to say.

I'm simply told toilets are needed, and I will make magnificent toilets; I'm told to go from one level to the next, and I will make the most incredible staircase; I'm told, I don't know... a cash register is needed, and I will make a symbolic, semantic till, that signifies something. At the same time, if in the washroom they need a hand dryer, it will become something else.

(Bertoni, 1994, p.21)

¹² (Grauman, 1989, p.91)

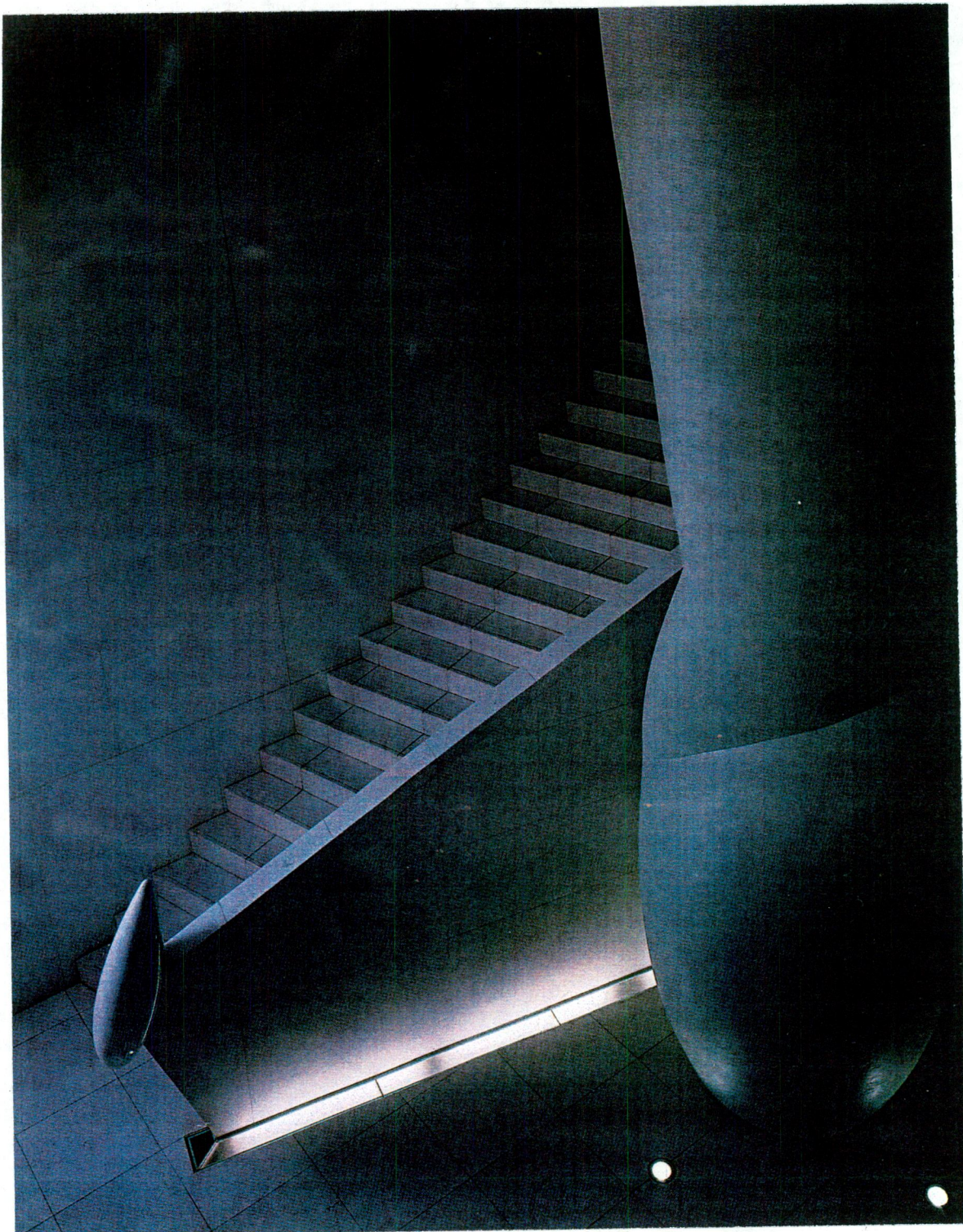


fig.8 Asahi stairs

Starck in the Late Eighties

The following years were extremely productive, filled with commission after commission. However in my view - it is at the end of the 80's that he produces his most important work when he went back to Japan in 1989 to design two of his most interesting architectural works to date, that of the *Asahi* beer headquarters and the *Nani Nani* office building, both of which are situated in Tokyo.

The Asahi building also known as '*La Flamme*' which means the flame, was commissioned to celebrate the company's centenary. The huge golden object which crowns the building, the symbol of the company's new energy and power is 42 meters long and weighs 360 tonnes is made of steel and was fashioned in the port city of Kobe, in western Japan. The sections were then welded together on the roof. The cost of the symbol and the making of a building strong enough to support it pushed the budget up to an amazing five billion yen, which is equivalent to £20 million. The building underneath is made of black granite dotted with portholes which is mounted on a flight of black glass steps which are illuminated from the inside. The interior space of the restaurant is designed on two levels, connected by a sweeping staircase.¹³ It was shortly after the completion of this building that he decided to avoid getting involved with interior design. Design critic, for *Vogue*, Nonie Niesewand comments, "Interior design interests Starck less and less. He looks now to industrial designs which are less subject to fashion with its

¹³ (Popham, 1990, p.40)

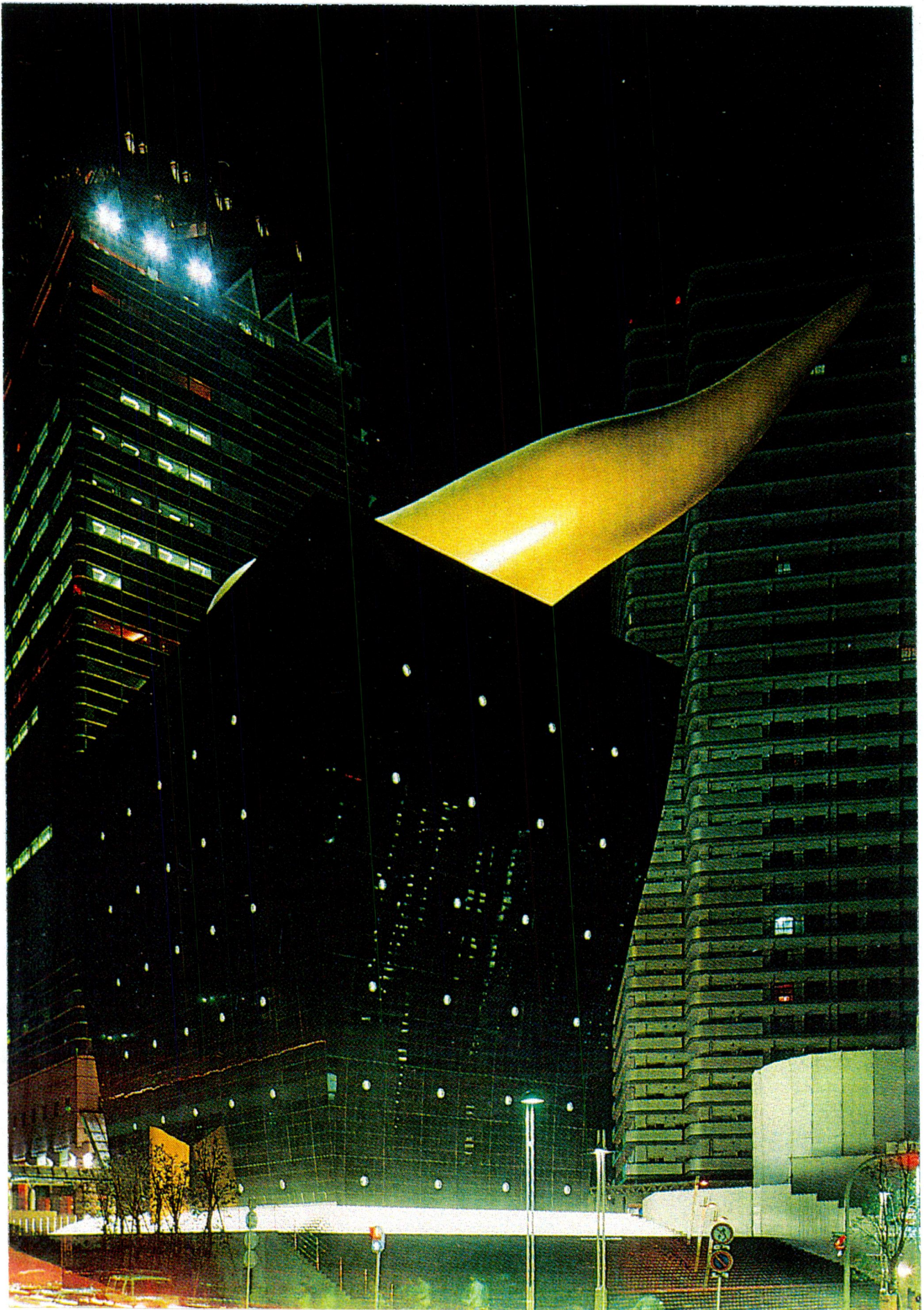


fig.7 Asahi 'La Flamme'

short consumer life.”¹⁴

One's first impressions of a building of such confidence are expressed by *Blueprint* columnist Peter Popham:

You get a first sight of the extraordinary structure as you climb out of the subway station; the symbolic rooftop flame - which arguably looks more like a sperm or a whale - is so large that it takes a while to credit the evidence of your eyes. It is entirely preposterous; so gratuitous, no self respecting architect could have conceived it and only someone as imprudent and intuitive as Starck would have produced it.

(Popham, 1990, p.43)

The *Nani Nani* building could be said to have the same impact as the *Asahi* headquarters but both have their own distinct personalities. The former is a structure which owes something to the designs of Gaudi and Mendelsohn, Gaudi from his reptilian-like roofing of the Calvet and Battlo houses, and the Mendelsohn from the Einstein Tower in Potsdam. The word '*Nani Nani*' means the unnameable, that which cannot be named. It is the Japanese word cried out when a person sees a ghost.

The *Nani Nani* building is worthy of its name; it is a biomorphic 'monster' in bronze, with green oxide bronze trickling down its sides a building that issues from the depths of Japanese subconscious fears. - Starck .

(Bertoni, 1994, p.118)

It is interesting to note that Starck was responsible only for the exterior and was quite happy to leave all the other details to his Japanese partner, which, apparently is just the way the Japanese like it.

It is amusing also to think Starck never seriously trained as an architect, but of all the famous foreigners putting up buildings in Japan - Richard Rogers, Norman Foster, Aldo Rossi and Renzo Piano among them - it is Starck who has made the biggest impact, stamping his persona distinctly

¹⁴ (Niesewand, 1989, p.36)

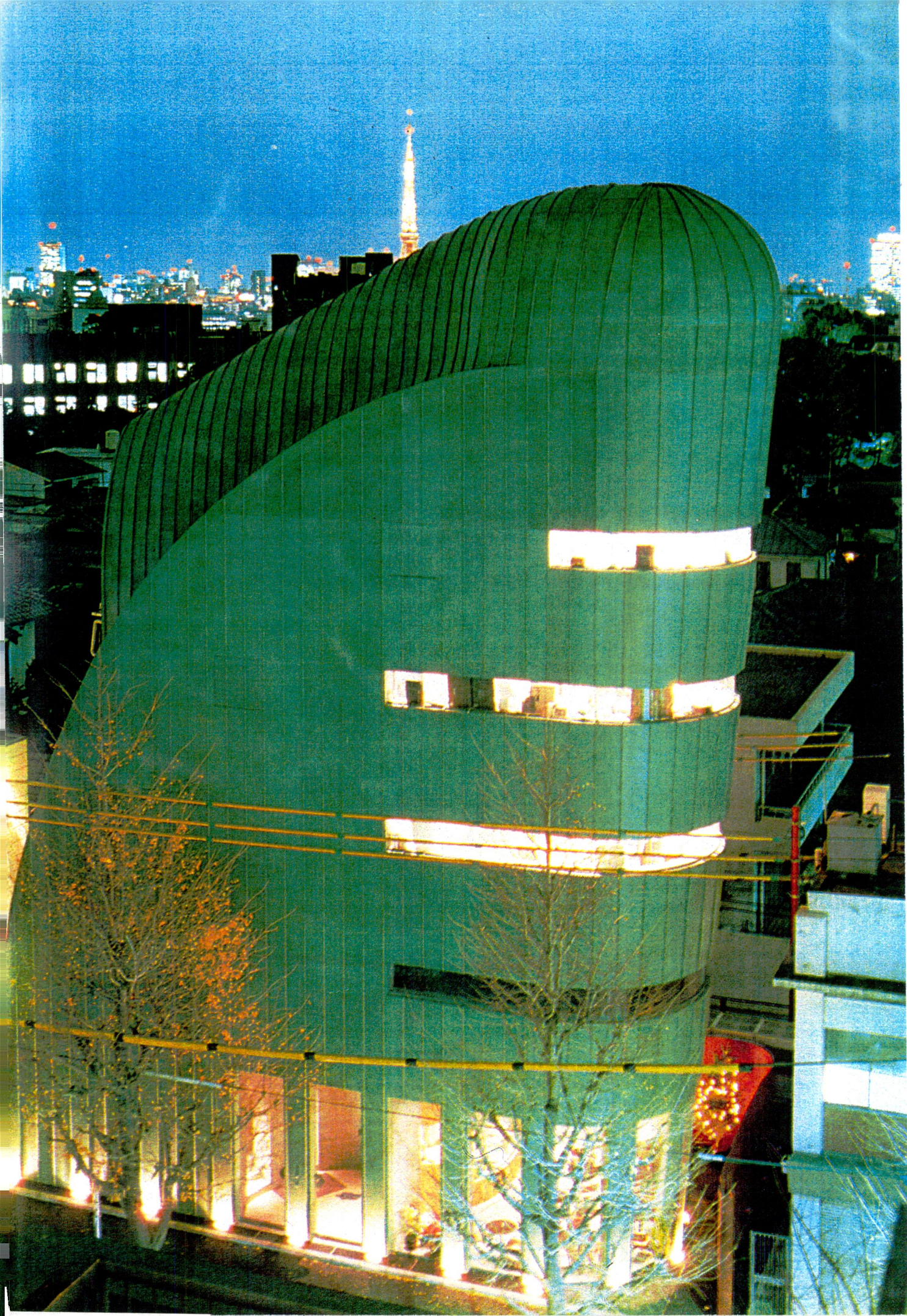


fig.9 Nani Nani

on the Tokyo skyline. Popham continues...

This is fitting, because it is not really architects or architecture that Japan requires from the foreigners building there, but exotic gestures. And the ones that produce the best are those who, uninhabited by the compulsion to remain true to a corpus of work created in more aesthetically rigorous conditions back home, give the punters what they want; gigantic imagery, building-sized accessories, reckless flashes of inspiration.

(Popham, 1990,p.42)

Where architecture is concerned, he only likes monsters, among which he includes the pyramids and the Eiffel Tower and his dream city would be a 'conglomeration of out-of-scale objects, full of energy and vitality.'

(Boissiere, 1991, p.25)

The *Asahi* has its own geometric character while the *Nani Nani* is very much a zoomorphic structure. Both buildings have Starck's distinct childlike perspective which as well as animating the form also, as he says in his own words, 'breath life into' the inanimate object which he see's as one of his primary objectives as a designer.

When he had completed his work in Japan, he went back to Europe where his next project was to be in Italy where he designed the *Salone Coppola* on the Corso Garabaldi in Milan for the hairstylist Coppola. While in Italy he was also working on some designs for Alberto Alessi which resulted in a collection of classic products including his famous *Juicy Salif* lemon squeezer and his infamous *Hot Bertaa* kettle. The former- a tall, three-legged structure of undeniable charm - was, and still is a great seller for the Alessi company. This is probably due to its flirtatious form which owes a lot to the aeronautical designs of his father and to the tripodal monsters common to science fiction features such as *War of the*

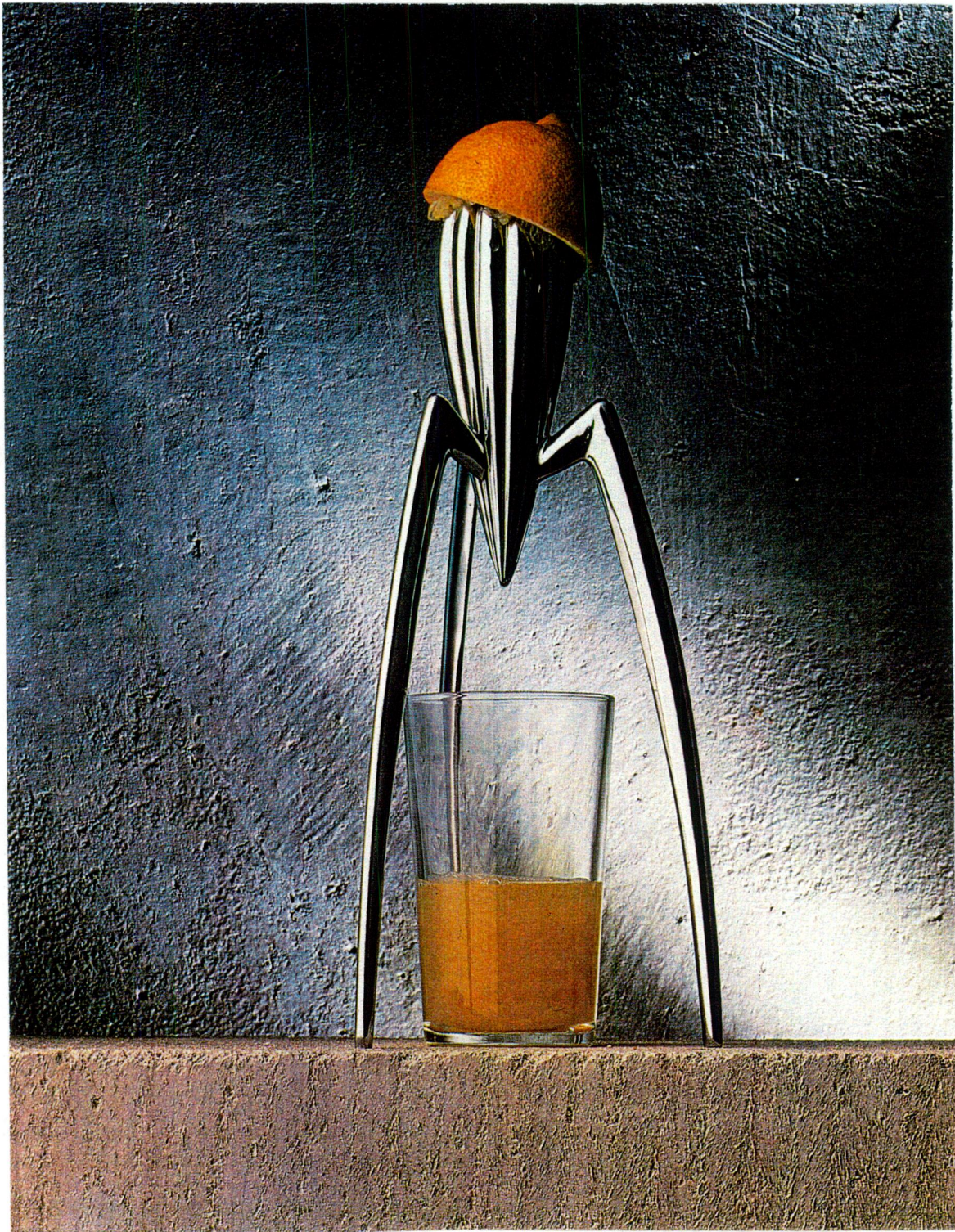


fig.10 Juicy Salif

Worlds. Sir Terence Conran, designer and chairman of the British Design Museum comments that...

I own one of the lemon squeezers - they've got great humour. It is a pleasure to watch the juice drip into the glass. The problem is that if you get too vigorous, the juice tends to squirt all over your stomach.

(Sweet, 1993, p.25)

The *Hot Bertaa* kettle is one of his most controversial products to date and in an article in the *Design* magazine, columnist Carl Gardner asked a varied group of people to use the kettle for a week to see how it coped with the day-to-day reality of brewing up. The consequential comment from designer David Volleymers was...

On the few occasions I used the kettle, I found it impossible to use - I used it only twice and I scalded my hand both times. I felt I'd been totally let down - the manufacturer has a responsibility to sell usable products.

I object to it been sold as a functional object - I don't think it is. I couldn't believe how hot the handle got or how far you had to tip it to get the water out...I think it's immoral to be selling it as a kettle.

(Gardner, 1993, p.26)

Other observations from Ian Rink of Habitat UK were that he

...liked it from an aesthetic point of view. But it wouldn't fit under my tap, you can't tell when you have filled it... It's beautiful but from a functional point of view, its not much use - if you can't put water into it simply, it defeats the purpose of the exercise. You can't take one factor, beauty, in isolation. Such comments would have come out in any of our product selection sessions and we wouldn't sell it.

(Gardner, 1993, p.26)

It is quite amusing to think that...

Starck nevertheless believes that a designer's first obligation is utility. He denounces the members of Italy's post-modern Memphis group for their function-be-damned insistence on the supremacy of form.

(Seibert, 1988, p.57)

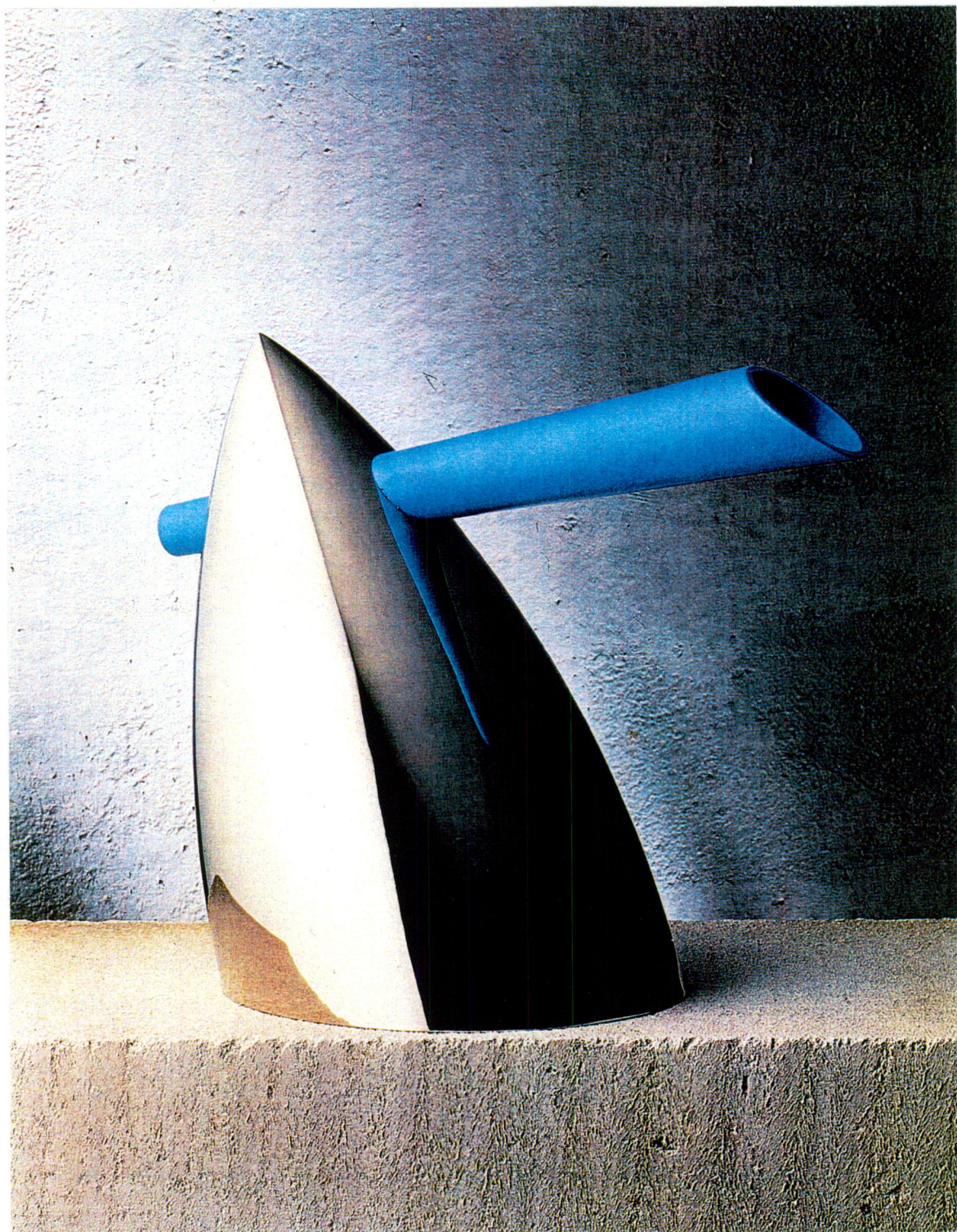


fig.11 Hot Bertaa

I suppose that is the difference between the the Italians and the British.

It was in 1992 that Starck produced what in his opinion is his most successful design to date, the *Toothbrush* for the French pharmaceutical company Fluocaril-Goupil. This toothbrush is so seductive solely for it's beauty as a design object and it is the cheapest Starck product around at £10 each.

He espouses the aesthetic ideas of the Bauhaus; insisting that good design should be available to everyone. not just the elite. 'Everybody should have access to good products. The way to work is to get the best and give it to everyone. I call it 'democratic high fashion'...Yet most of the things he designs are so expensive that only the very wealthy can afford them.

(Rawthorn, 1989, p.26)

With this toothbrush, like any other of his industrial designs, furniture or architecture, he has managed to animate the object to such an extent that it takes on a life of it's own. He gives them an energy and a vitality that transforms them into actors on a stage. This theatrical theme reoccurs throughout his work. It can also be seen as a complete exercise in style. Here we see Starck, in the words of design critic Manolo de Giorgi, "moving metaphorically from the <low> plane of personal hygiene to some ,<higher>, more generically <cultural> sphere,"¹⁵ and by doing so, gives the toothbrush a dignity which it never had. A dignity which belongs more to an item like a pen rather than a mundane object such as a toothbrush.

Even though it did take him over three year to perfect this deliciously crafted toothbrush which must have been inspired by Brancusi's sculpture

¹⁵ (De Giorgi, 1992, p.58)



fig.12 Toothbrush

with its handle shape echoing that of Brancusi's *Bird in Space* piece from 1919. He managed to overlook some serious ecological taboos such as the fact that it took a total of four different plastics which is four times the material used to produce a brush which has an average life span of three months. Suzette Sherman, design critic, comments...

The blatant eco-insensitivity of this toothbrush speaks of a greater issue than that of the current intent of design. Why can't Starck design a toothbrush just as tasty, yet devoid of 80's excess? Even high profile designers should be held accountable for materials, recyclability and ecology.

(Sherman, 1993, p.18)

This is quite a harsh thing to say about man who sees himself as an ecological designer and who later proves himself to be so. It has to be said all the same, even though as he says himself, "It is the single thing I've made which has brought the most pleasure to the most people."¹⁶

¹⁶ (Eshun, 1993, p.113)



fig.13 House in a Box

CHAPTER FOUR:

Starck's Change in Approach to Design

There is a dramatic change in Starck's approach to design shortly later and it had a lot to do with the death of his wife Brigitte from cancer in 1992. This forced him to pause and think. The loss was both a personal and professional one, because she was also his partner in business, and ran the studio for him. The grief of losing someone so close after being together for 25 years, the last three or four of which she was ill, proved very heavy. "A nightmare," he recalls "I was sure I would never work again. And the surprise was I could."¹⁷ Without seeming heartless about her loss, he insists that his work has improved since her passing. "I have made mistakes, I have paid more than everybody. And I am richer in that in that way than before. It's terrible to say, but I'm definitively better than before."¹⁸

Shortly later Starck embarked on a new project, the *Prefabricated House*. This work defines a new landmark in the development of his work. The first example of his latest pursuit, one would expect to follow his past design philosophy. To be perhaps a whimsical futuristic container for all his designer objects. But what you are confronted with however is an idyllically romanticised dwelling set among birch trees.

Although it may sound conventional, it certainly is not. Starck was

¹⁷ (Eshun, 1993, p.113)

¹⁸ *ibid*

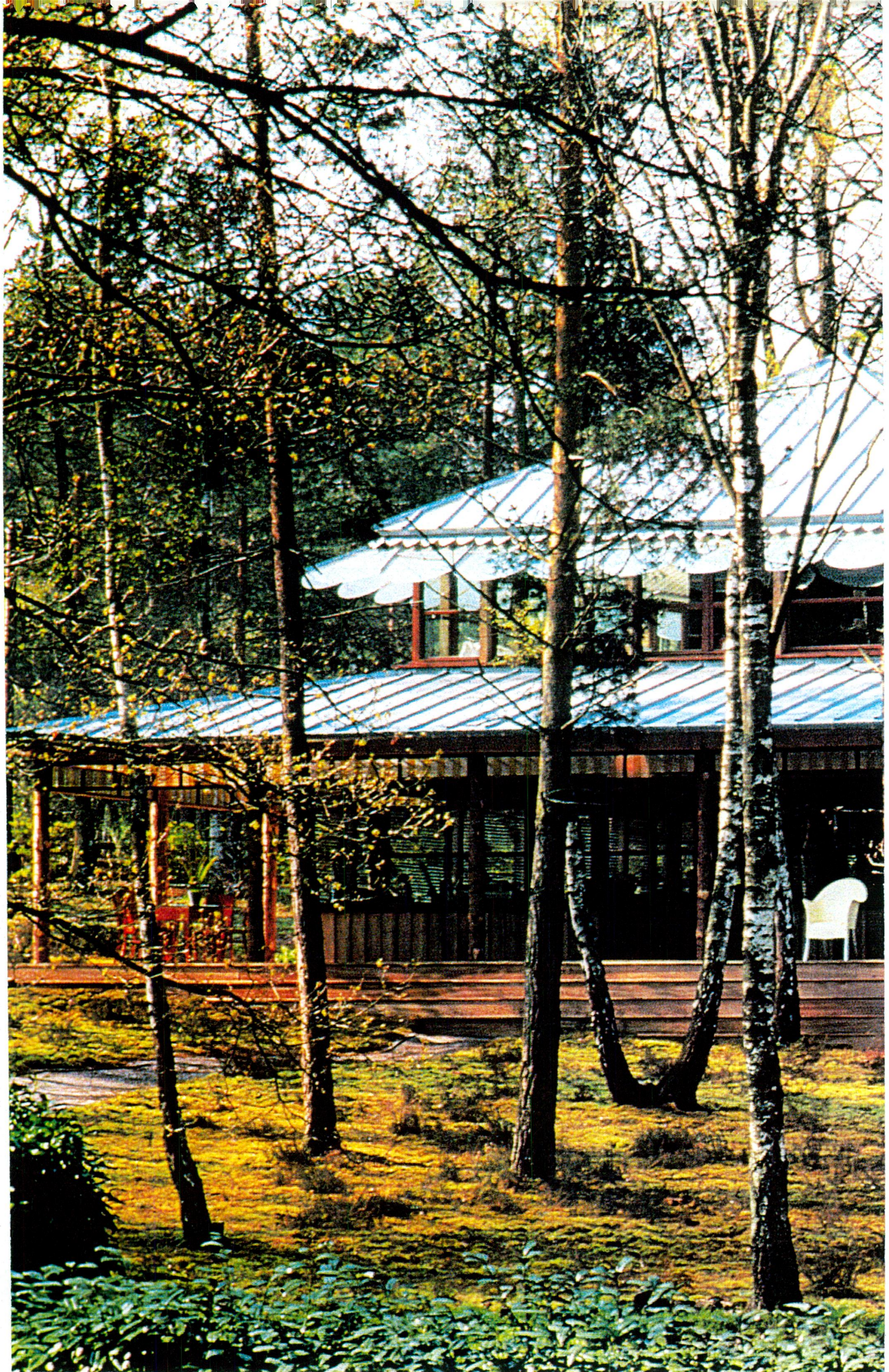


fig.14 House outside a Box

commissioned to design it by *3 Suisses*, the French mail order giant, to be sold through its catalogue that autumn of 1993. It is a house in a box. For £600, buyers will receive a wooden case which contains plans for versions of the house, with or without the veranda, a video narrated by Starck showing the stages of construction, a construction handbook, and a blank book in which buyers can record their own progress. There is also a hammer- to symbolise personal involvement, says Starck¹⁹ - and a little French flag to stick in the roof of the finished article.

One could say the house is almost anti-Starck, as he says himself...

It is not a house made to show off the talent of the architect or the wealth of the owner; it's measure of success is the happiness of the people who live there.

(Withers, 1994, p.46)

He also describes it as house without culture...

It must be non-architecture, a house that has not been designed, that has come out of the collective unconscious but is rich in possibilities. Some see a Chinese house, another a Californian house. Each sees their own house.

(Withers, 1994, p.46)

A year later and he started producing some new eco-designs. Among these are the *Jim Nature* TV set design and the *Louis 20* chair. The *Jim Nature* TV set was designed as Starck was appointed to oversee the industrial design image of the ailing French owned consumer electronics-to-computer group, *Thomson*.. His appointment was a last-gasp strategy to come up with products that consumers will want to buy, by injecting Starck's design inventiveness. The result was three different TV sets that are being sold under the Thomson owned brand names. The most

¹⁹ (Withers, 1994, p.46)

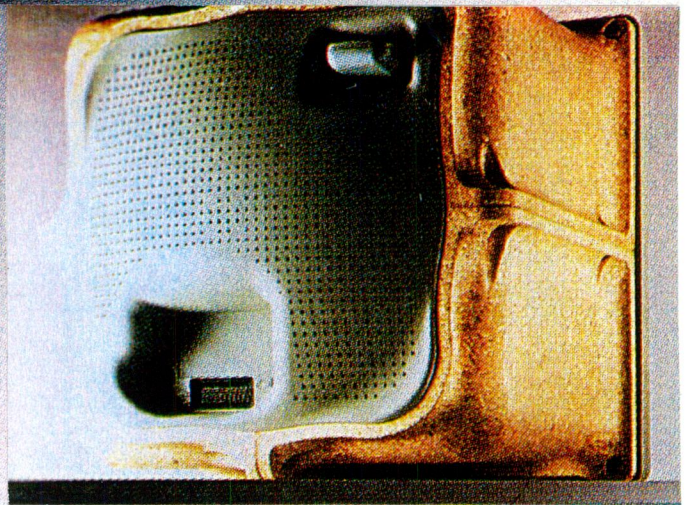
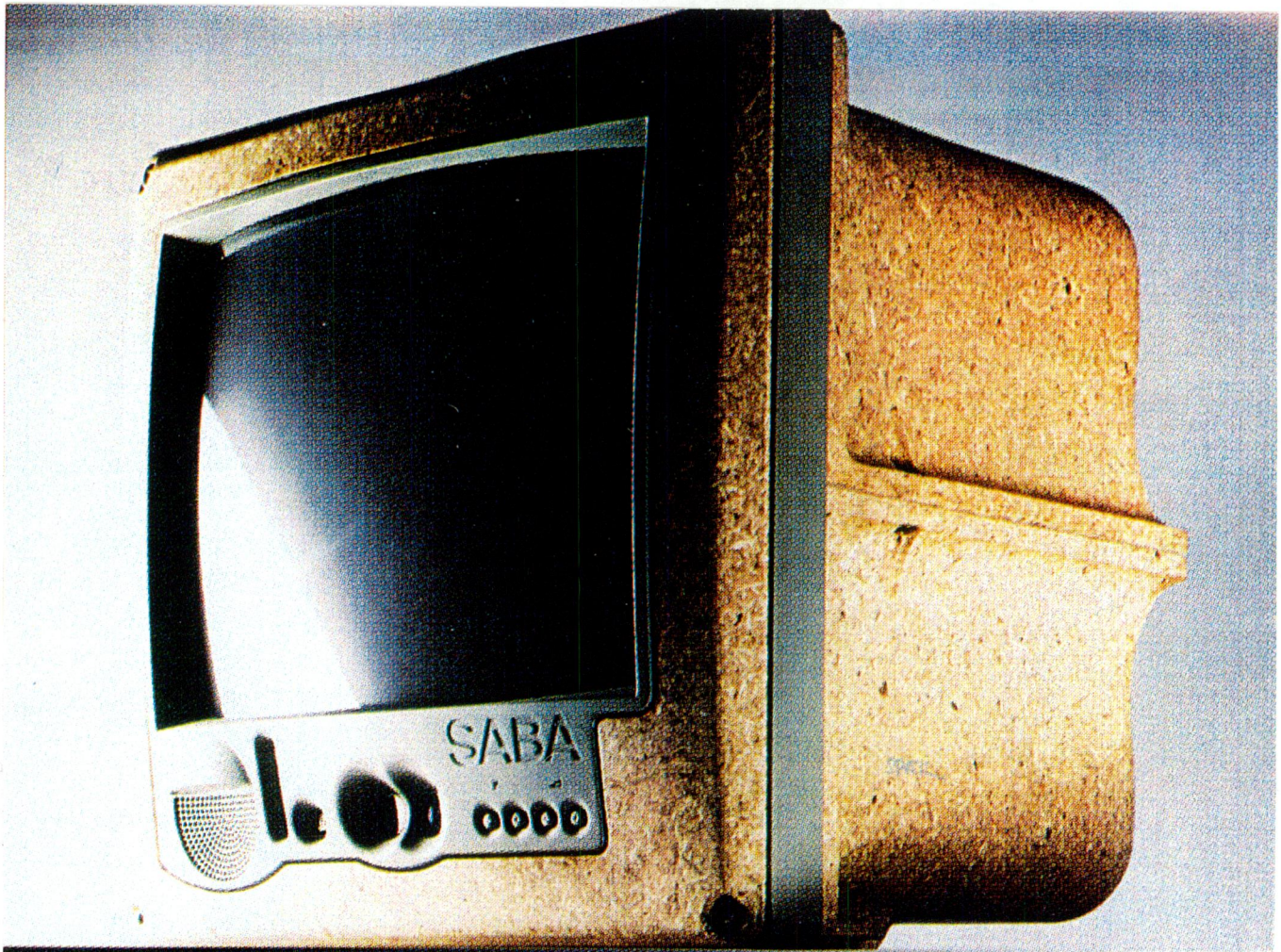


fig.15 Jim Nature TV Set

striking is from the Saba brand. Starck calls it the *Jim Nature* TV set, and it combines a plastic frame for the screen and controls with a moulded wood chip casting. It is this mixture of high- and low-tech, of the precious and the cheap which I think is extremely interesting in that it is a theme that is recurring throughout the body of his work. What I am talking about is this abrasion of pre-concieved notions which we have looked at in the *Richard III* chair and the toothbrush.

The *Louis 20 Chair*, is also designed and constructed in the interest of the environmental issues of the 90's in that it is composed of only two homogeneous materials (polypropylene and aluminium) which are perfectly separable and recyclable. Starck declares, "We have to get rid of that American notion that plastic is a cheap substitute for better things."²⁰ The French company *Vitra* gave Starck a formidable brief for this new chair. It had to be multi purpose, lightweight, stackable, reasonably priced and suitable for high volume production. A design critic for *I.D.* magazine comments...

Jurors were impressed with the chair's integrity noting that 'there's real invention here. It's not only another object designed to court media attention.' They also welcomed the choice of materials. This is the first chair ever designed to use blow-mould polypropylene, a process that traps significant quantities of air to ensure the material stays warm to the touch in the winter and cool in the summer.

(*I.D.* 1994, p.159)

²⁰ (Grauman, 1989, p.90)



fig.16 Louis 20

Starck's Approach to Design and the Future

From looking at the work and reading the views of Philippe Starck, one can gain an idea of what motivates this individual to design. It is deeply ingrained in his persona that he must design, but what are his influences? What is his work about? How does he go about doing it? Also questions need to be asked about his plans for the future of design and society in general, such as where does he see the future of design heading? And how does he see this happening? These are the questions I hope to answer in this chapter.

What are Starck's influences?

As I have mentioned previously, Starck's main influence is science fiction and in particular the writings of Philip K. Dick, who was a very popular science fiction writer in the United States during the 50's and who was later black-listed as a communist subversive. Dick would be better known by this generation as the author of the book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, upon which Ridley Scott based his film *Blade Runner*. He has developed throughout his production, from *The Man in The High Castle* to *The Simulacra*, from *Dr Bloodmoney*, or *How he Got Along After the Bomb* to *Ubik*, what C. Pagetti in his introduction to *The Simulacra*, called...

an apocalyptic and hallucinated viewpoint, grotesque and anti-realistic, profoundly nourished by elements of mass culture, critical towards its conformist expressions, nonetheless openly



fig.17 Olympic Flame

contaminated by it's own techniques.

(Bertoni, 1994, p.15)

One can see this influence in Starck, in the way he approaches his design especially in the nineties. An example of which would be in his shared fascination in the links between the organic and the inorganic. A theme which he explores in many of his designs, from his archnoid juice squeezer and other assorted items to furniture whose curves and bulges echo the human form. He also dreams of 'internalising' design by creating products that fully merge with the human body. An example of which is his long-standing pet project of producing an inch-wide computer that rests under the skin of the forearm. Starck anticipates that...

In the future, we don't need people working, we don't need people thinking. To think well, you shouldn't be in the office, but where you are at your best. Like on the beach naked because you like swimming, the sea, the sun. With such a computer, you will have access to all the knowledge, communications and intelligence in the world. You will be your own god, you will be naked and powerful, beautiful and intelligent. That is the target I have.

(Eshun, 1993, p.113)

This ambition to redesign life can also be seen in his experiments on his oyster farm, where he cultivates the shellfish within tight pens. After five years or so, the result is perfectly square oysters. "I am the doctor Mingle of design," he laughs.²¹

²¹ (Eshun, 1993, p.113)

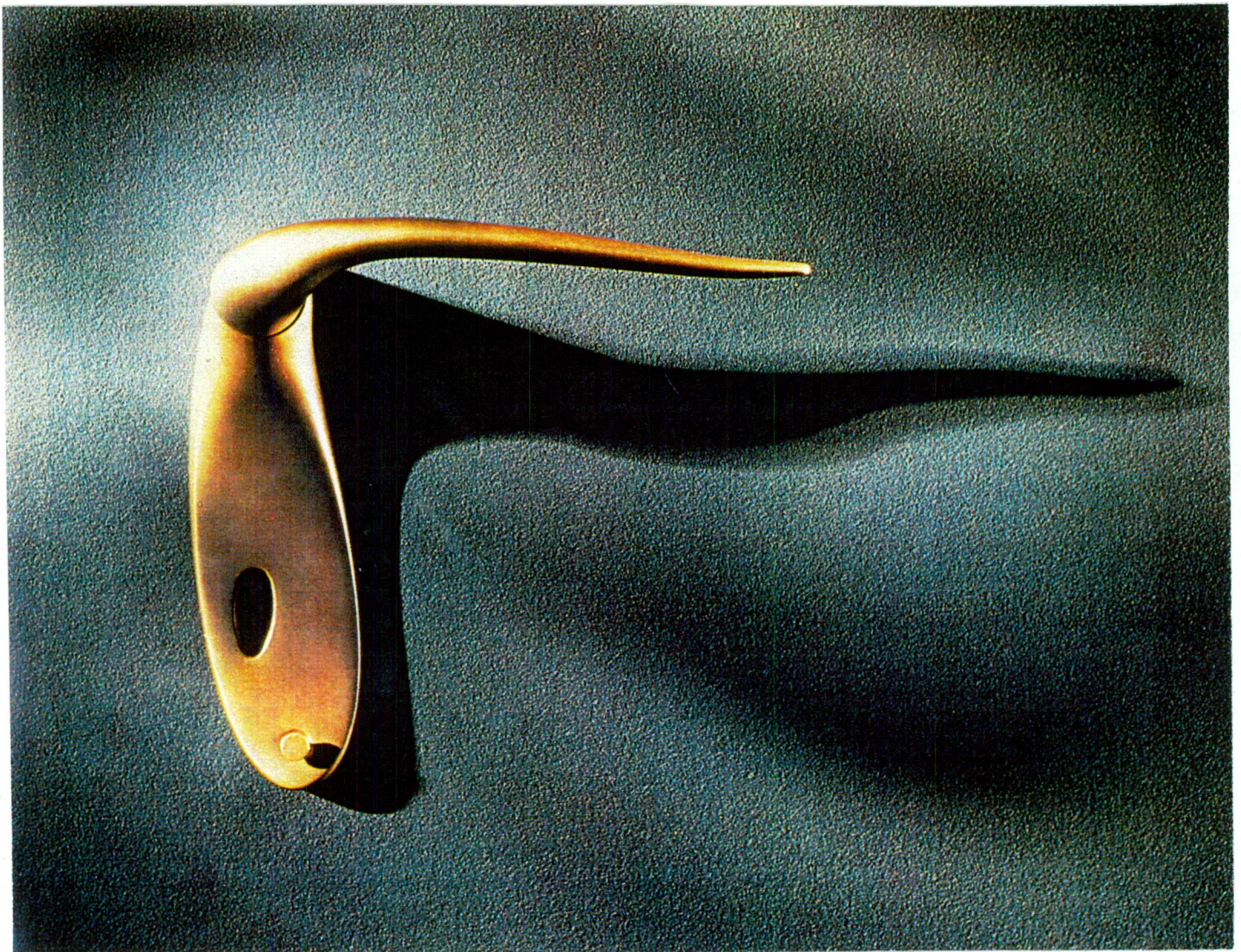


fig.18 Door Handle



Fig.19 Computer disk drive

What is Starck's work about?

It's a very ambitious thing for me to try to reveal but from my research I think I may have enough information to clarify a certain amount. The theme which dominates his work is the idea that 'less is more,' that if you are to design an object it would be best to include only the essential elements and dispense of any superfluous decoration. This is a theme which he has derived from the influence of the Bauhaus and modernist design. But Starck has managed to inject Latin flair into the Germanic clinicality of the latter with fantastic results in which we can experience the best of both worlds. A good example of this successful combination would be his *Door Handle* prototype (1991).

His work is also about playing god as a designer, as I have mentioned earlier. This he manages to do through 'breathing life into' the inanimate objects he designs and this is managed, visually, through the use of tense curves and biomorphic features. This can be seen quite clearly in his design of a computer disk drive (1991) or the handle design on his attache case (1990). Another idea he likes to get across in his work is that of designing things that have "less to see and more to feel"²². What he means by that is that a piece should have more 'soul', "I want to design objects like friendly animals."²³ says Starck, which brings out peoples feelings rather than having masses of objects which say nothing but simply exist and clutter up our space.

²² (Eshun, 1993, p.113)

²³ (Grauman, 1989, p.91)

How does he go about doing it?

Starck describes in his own words how he works,

I absorb the data, I slowly think about it (you could even say I don't think about it, that's closer to the truth) and at a certain time I'm alerted, I'd say by my 'biology' rather than my brain, that my project is ready.

I then know its ready but I don't know what it is. At this point, always by myself, I take a pencil and a piece of paper, as usual, and draw the project; fifteen minutes for the first idea, one hour to finalise it, and three hours (one afternoon) to go into details and to finalise everything. In general, after three hours and three sheets of A4, everything is done, it's all there; interiors, exteriors, sometimes the furnishings the communication of the product, the name, even the different ideas around it. Then you could say I am no longer involved in it.

After that, my team takes over and makes nice drawings simply by enlarging my sketches on the photocopier...My team then goes into the reality of things, that is to say that they really design the detail of the hinges,etc...It's a team that is very close to me, which has been working with me for ten years. It's a very small tribe...there are only two people... We elaborate, we discuss designs that we liked, or that are important...(anything else) seems useless to us, when everything can be resolved in a couple of minutes, because we work on the evidence of things.

So unlike those who bring hundreds of sheets of notes with them to explain how they reached a solution, when we haven't found a solution (and it happens once or twice a year), we say; 'We haven't found it. We haven't found a solution, give us another week or two'. But when we arrive it's really with the bare essentials; we are not paper or prototype salesmen. When the work of the team is finished (and it is the conceptual work, never the realisation), only then do we pass it on to a good studio which will take care of the actual realisation.

We completely separate the conception of the design from it's execution; it's not the same job, it shouldn't even have the same name.

(Bertoni, 1994, p.25)

Where does he see the future of design heading?

Starck sees the future of design in the concept of dematerialisation until he anticipates the disappearance of today's urban, metropolitan, territorial and infrastructural settings. As in the Dicks novel *Autofac*, he sees underground production centres as self-regulated, self-designed and self-reproducing. Communications will take place exclusively via satellite and that since there will be such great communications possibilities, it will make it unnecessary for physical movement, so that one's home could also be one's place of work. He perceives a world as a global village where the environment will fade in the distance and be replaced with buildings in which everything happens. All these buildings will be introverted, because all functions will take place inside their interiors, and from one interior to another.²⁴

In the area of the design of the work place, he predicts a total change which we can see happening already. That is that he says...

...everything is getting more and more mechanised, there are fewer and fewer workers in the factories, there is no more reason to have windows, no more reason to have air, no more cause for the building to get dirty.

(Bertoni, 1994, p.28)

He also predicts the realisation of a catalogue system, in which the interior of these environments can be decorated at the touch of a button.

I would be a producer of backdrops, composed in computer disks, which can be inserted into a machine to make the decor appear in the background. We will live inside them, thanks to interactive and virtual reality.

(Bertoni, 1994, p.28)

²⁴ (Bertoni, 1994, p.27)

How does he see this happening?

All these advances in the technology of design are, as he sees, going to be realised through the the use of modern science. He places all his hope in this progress because he strongly believes that this is his soul purpose in life, to advance in the area of technology and science as far as humanly possible. As one can see, he bases a lot of this optimism on the progress one can see so far. The growing importance of the computer in every day life, the breakdown of the dividing line between fact and fiction through the medium of interactive and virtual reality and the huge development in the area of telecommunications.

CONCLUSION:

What is Starck's Purpose?

Having delved into some of the more important aspects of the work of this designer, I would like to divide his career into two categories. The first of which will contain some of the things he has succeeded in achieving and the second, some of the things he has failed to accomplish.

Starting with the first category, I would like to include his success in reflecting the concerns of his time, whether it be the seventies, eighties or nineties. "He's one of the best to understand the time passing" Gerard Miallet of *Societe OX*, comments.²⁵ The seventies, through his work on the nightclub designs he represented the new wave, sub-culture. In the eighties it was the look of his *Elysee Palace* work and the *Cafe Costas* that mirrored the interests of that period by its use of pastel colour and tense atmosphere of cold isolation. And it was in the nineties that he indicated his concern for the environment through pieces like the *Louis 20* chair and the *Jim Nature* TV set design. It is questionable whether he actually is concerned about the issues of the time, because some of his work and in particular the latter TV set design almost have a 'tongue-in-cheek' element which caricatures the concern it is expressing.

Starck also manages to express his political views using the same approach. The best example of which is the *Richard III* chair. It is this

²⁵ (Rombourgh, 1993, p.17)

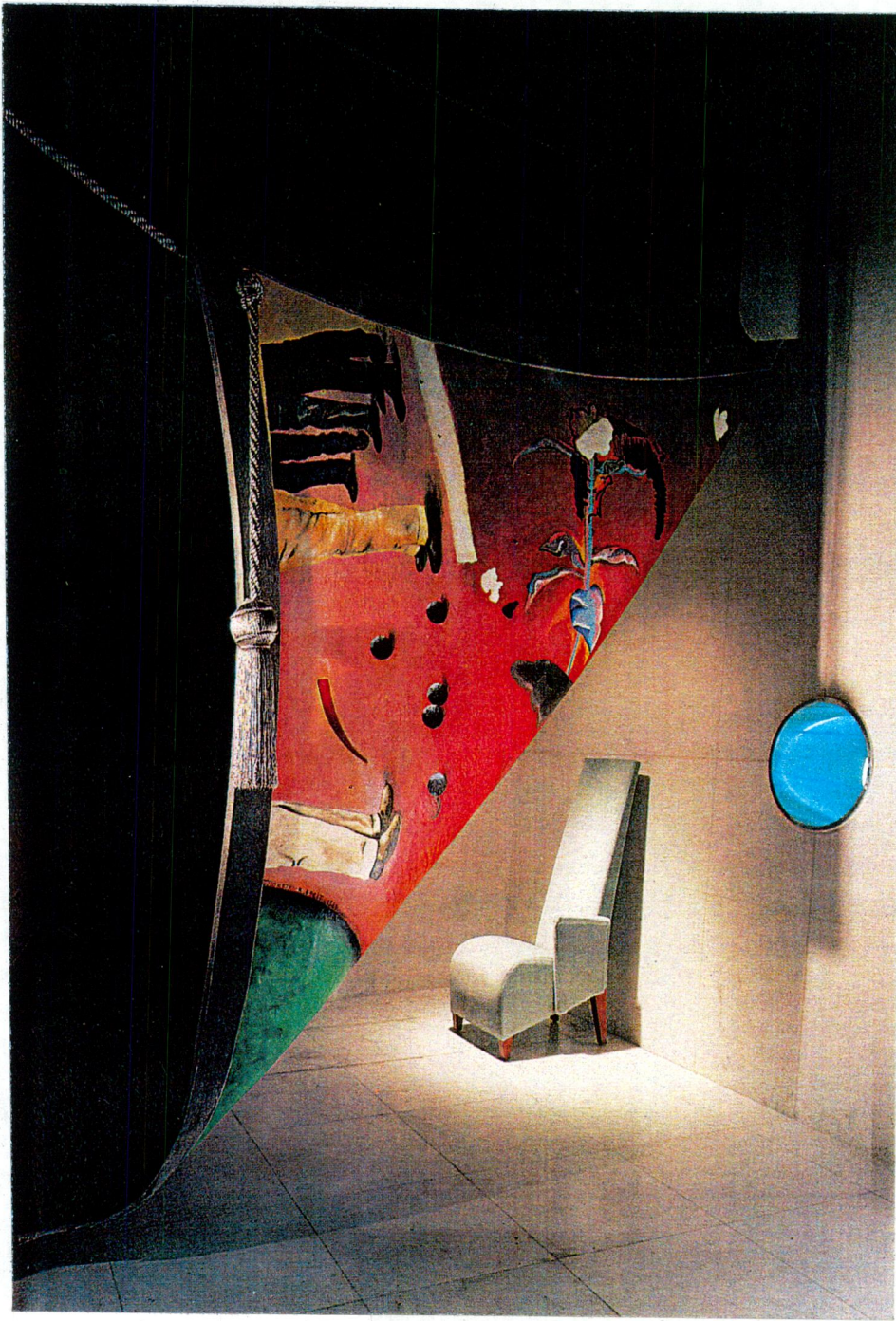


fig.20 Asahi interior

humour and vitality that makes his work stand out among his contemporaries. This vitality is expressed through his extraordinary talent of animating forms which take on a life of their own, even though they are only static objects. This talent of giving value to objects is central to his work, which he also succeeds in applying to people through his architecture and interior design. This he achieves through his use of theatrical imagery.

Starck has to be credited for his sensational approach to his Japanese architectural commissions which clearly express an outstandingly dynamic talent which he is not afraid to express. This dynamism has influenced many designers as one can read in an article on new French design in the *Abitare* magazine that "There are disciples of Starck just about everywhere now,"²⁶ This influence stems from a reputation that he has received through his talent of designing "a quality product, good for the brand name and whose success is assured in advance."²⁷

As for those things he sought to achieve and never did, there are his not-so-successful attempts at marrying form with function such as the lemon squeezer and the notorious *Hot Bertaa* kettle of which I have mentioned earlier. This effort of combining these two essential elements was not always sufficient either in his interior design commissions, in particular that of the *Royalton Hotel* bedrooms in which style was clearly dominating over comfort.

²⁶ (*Abitare*, 1992, Pg42)

²⁷ (Boissiere, 1991, p. 6)



fig.21 Dr. Glob

I don't think it would be entirely honest of me to be critical of designs of which I have not got first hand experience of, so what I propose to do is list some negative reactions from those who should know, his contemporary designers.

Starting with furniture designer Tom Dixon and his reaction. "The *Cafe Costas* is really banal. It wasn't ever a big winner and it looks really dated now."²⁸ The design director for *Louis Vuitton*, Françoise Jollant-kneebone dislikes the lemon squeezer. "I don't like the design and on top of that, it does not work."²⁹ Nick Dine, furniture designer loathes Starck's *Dr Glob* plastic chair. "It looks really hideous and when you sit on it a piece of metal sticks in your back."³⁰ Graphic designer, Tony Arefin argues "I defended everything he did until the *Miss Sissi* lamp. It's an unnecessary object."³¹

When Alberto Alessi, chief executive of the Italian company *Alessi* was asked for his opinion on what was Starck's worst design, he replied "There is nothing that I dislike enough to single out."³² Sir Terence Conran's reply to the same question was more critical, "The chairs in the *Cafe Costas* are so impractical. I've seen people tip out of them and thought 'Oh Philippe you should have done something about that'."³³ But the most critical of all his contemporaries is none but himself. He replied that he dislikes among the things he has designed, "Everything. I always

²⁸ (Rawthorn, 1993, p.27)

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

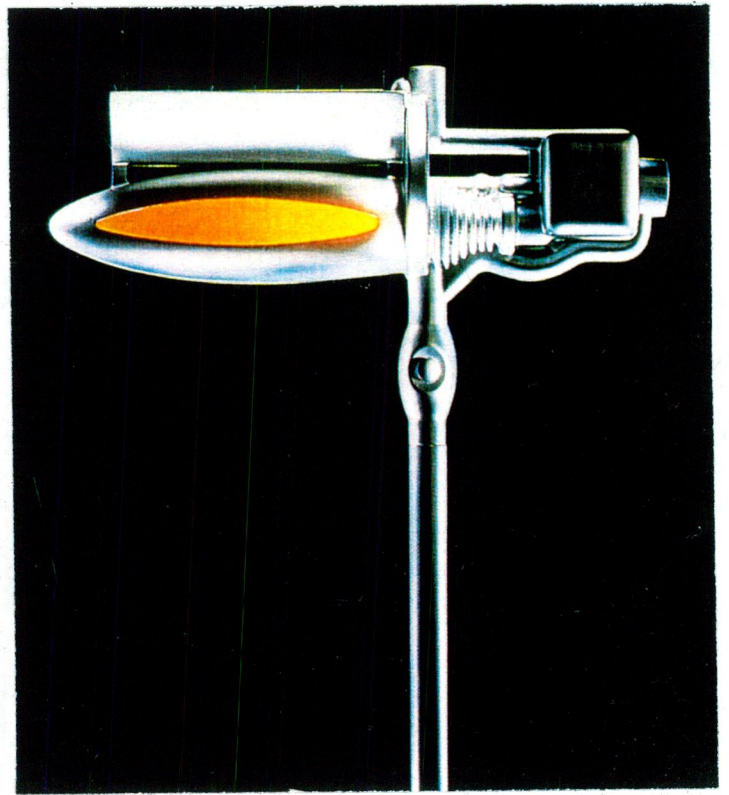
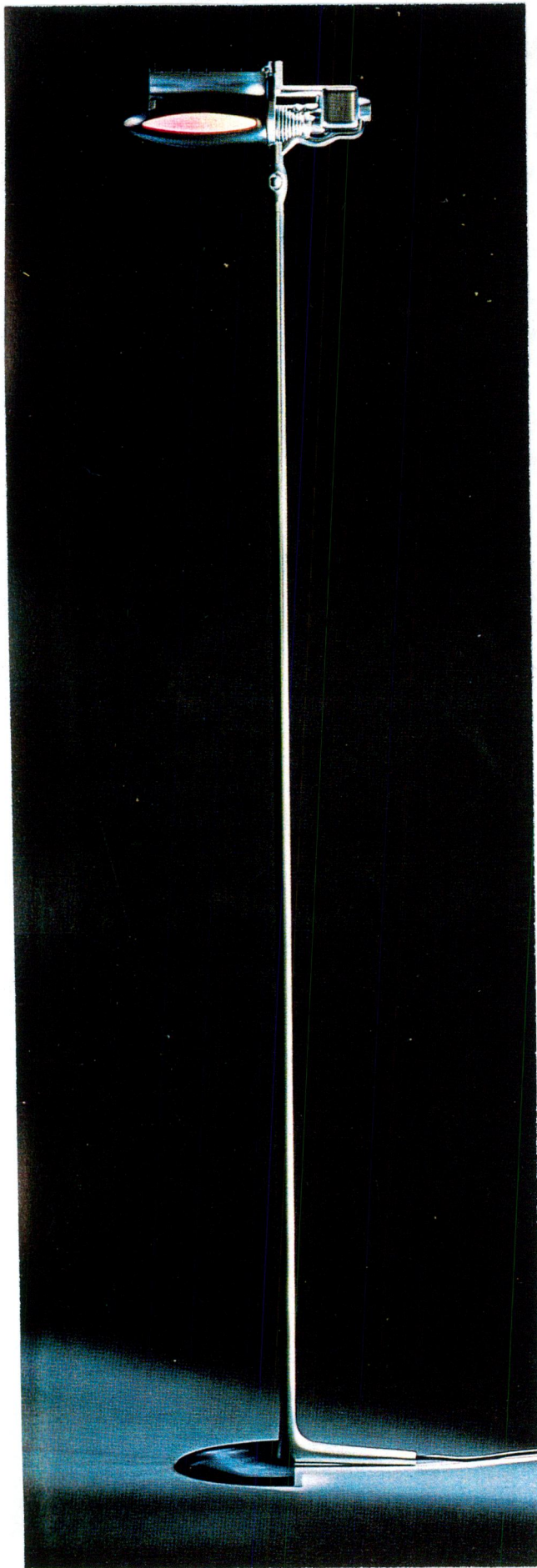


fig.22 Dr. Life

dream about the next project and always hope I will improve.”³⁴

Here we can see quite clearly that Starck’s astonishingly prolific achievements clearly outweigh those of his failure. This should not and does not bother him, because as he says in his own words, about his fathers attitude to design earlier on in this thesis, “ For him it was better to make a creative mistake rather than to stay in good taste and not advance.”³⁵

One can conclude from the evidence I have put forward that Philippe Starck is a lot more than just simply a designer. And I feel that for me to say definitively what his true occupation or purpose in life is would be somewhat arrogant. So I have chosen to let the man himself conclude this discourse in his own words.

...I’m not a designer. I’m not an architect. I’m not a specialist... I’m not specialised in anything, which means I am specialised in everything. As are...the majority of people. And I want to get into other people’s shoes. I’ve designed hotels, toothbrushes, lamps, chairs, tables, every kind of object. But the product in itself doesn't mean anything. As far as I’m concerned, it’s just an excuse to get involved with something else, in what life could be, for example... To sum it all up, I consider myself to be a political agitator, who uses design and architecture... This is my real occupation.

(Bertoni,1994, p.9)

³⁴ (Rawthorn,1993, p.27)

³⁵ (Colin,1991 ,p. 18)

COMMISSIONS & PROJECTS :

- 1968: Inflatable houses, Quasar (France).
Francesca Spanish Chair, (France).
- 1969: Artistic director for *Pierre Cardin* , (France)
- 1970: Mobiler Collection , [chairs] (France).
- 1971: Project chair for *Pierre Cardin*, (France).
- 1972: Inflatable neon lamps, (France).
Joe Miller Chair, (France).
- 1973: Chalet Du Lac , nightclub, Paris, (France).
- 1976: La Bain Bleue, nightclub, Paris, (France).
- 1977: Dr Bloodmoney [chair], (France).
John IId and Mac Gee [shelves], (France).
- 1977-1978:" World Tour".
- 1978: Les Bains-Douches , nightclub, Paris, (France).
Centre Ville , restaurant , Paris,(France).
- 1979: He founded the "Starck Product" company, (France).
Easy Light, (France).
- 1979-1980: Stanton Mick, Mr Von Vogelsang and Ella Rucinter [chairs], (France).
- 1982: Complete furniture collection, Disform, (Spain).
Miss Doran chair won the 1982 Via Carte Blanche award (France).
- 1982-1983: Elysee Palace, (France).
Richard III Chair, (France).
- 1984: Cafe Costas,. (France).
Cafe Costas Chair, (France).
Appointment to artistic director of *OX* for *3 Suisses*, (France).
La Villette, interior design for a science museum, (France)
Furniture prototype, Habitat, (Britain).
- 1985: Office furniture, Ministry for Culture (France).
Elysee Editions, carpet design, (France).
Par du la Villett, winner of international competition for outdoor

- furniture design 1985, (France).
- Complete Collection , Driade, (Italy).
- Bathroom range, Rapsel (Italy).
- Manin Restaurant, Tokyo, (Japan) .
- Complete furniture collection, Idee/ 78/90 (Japan).
- Collection, Casatac / 87 (Japan).
- Pasta design, Pensani, (France).
- Mineral water bottle design, Vittel, (France).
- Project for a Multipurpose Room, Paris, (France).
- Project for Cartier Golden Bridge, Cartier Foundation, Paris (France).
- Musee des Monuments Francais, Paris (France).
- 1986: Project for the Mercedes Benz Headquarters, Paris (France).
- Manin Restaurant, Tokyo (Japan).
- Cutlery, Sasaci, (Japan)
- 1987: Le Moulin a Vent, Starck's first house, Paris (France).
- La Cigale, Programe 3, theatre and TV studio design, Paris (France).
- Lamonlt, private house, Paris (France) .
- Beneteau, boat design 193 (France).
- Tableware, Sasaki 1987 (Japan).
- Competition entry for the Tokyo Opera House, (in collaboration with Jean Nouvel) Tokyo (Japan).
- Virgin Records, head office, Paris (France).
- La Cigale Concert Hall, Paris (France).
- Project for the 'Moon Dog' House, Tokyo (Japan).
- 1988: Cafe Mystique, Tokyo (Japan).
- Der Wang, International communications centre, Amsterdam (Holland).
- Vidalence, private house (France).
- Knife factory, Laguiole (France).
- Collection, Kartel, (Italy).
- Light design , Flos, (Italy).

- Furniture for hairdressing salons, L'Oreal, (France).
Collection of various objects, OWO, (France).
Royalton Hotel, New York (USA).
Crystal Design, Durm, (France).
Ara, table lamp, Flos, (Italy).
- 1989: Nani Nani, office building, Tokyo (Japan)
Asahi, Asahi bear headquarters, (Japan).
Hot Bertaa, Alessi, (Italy).
Disk Drive, Electronique, (France).
Chair, OX, (France).
LucifairLight, Flos, (Italy).
Solone Coppola, Milan, (Italy).
Clock, Spirale, (Italy).
- 1990: Teatriz Restaurant, Madrid (Spain).
French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, project (Italy).
'Le Baron Vert', Office Building, Osaka, (Japan)
Paramount Hotel, New York, (USA).
- 1991: Project for the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Paris (France).
Groningen Museum of Modern Art, Project, (Netherlands)
Hugo Boss Boutique, Paris, (France).
'La rue Starck', Paris, (France).
Starck's Second House, Project, Paris, (France).
The Angle, Project, Antwerp, (Belgium).
Armchair and pouffe, Royalton collection. Aleph-driade, (Italy).
Day bed, Royalton collection, Aleph-driade, (Italy).
Two-seater sofa with armrests, Royalton collection, Aleph-driade, (Italy).
High-Glob, Stacking chair, Kartel, (Italy).
Super Glob, stacking chair, Kartel, (Italy).
Miss Paramount, Idee, (Japan).
Plastic Bottle, Vittel, (France)
- 1992: 747 and 6 Cubes, Project, Venice, California, (USA).
Lio Comun Chair, OX, (France).

Door Handle, FSB, Brakel, (Germany).

Toar, Project for two buildings, Paris, (France).

Elements for Street Furniture, Project, Paris, (France).

Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Project, Paris, (France).

Collander, Alessi, (Italy).

Toothbrush, Fluocaril-Goupil, (France).

1993: Control Tower, project, Bordeaux-Mérignac Airport, (France).

Prefabricated House for '3 Suisses', Paris (France).

Light, Flos, (Italy).

1994: Jim Nature, TV set design, Thomson, (France).

Louis 20 Chair, Vitra, (France).

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