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"THE END OF AN ERA!"

*Memphis - A Study on the Sources of Memphis,
and its influence on Contemporary design.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express his appreciation to those who assisted in the preparation of this work. To:

To : *Ettore Sottsass Jnr..*

" *I am a designer and, want to design things, what else would I do ? Go fishing??*
(ref. (1.0))

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CHAPTER

(1)

Introduction

Throughout the history of design, many innovative styles have matured while others fade away into the darkness to be forgotten for ever. However there are times when styles once forgotten are revived with such delight and intrigue as if brand new.

Memphis, founded in 1981 by Ettore Sottsass jnr. accomplished just such a revival. Up until this time modern design, in the form of high tech during the seventies remained supreme.

The Bauhaus rule of command of form and function, not only prevailed in Italy, but also in such countries as the United States. Furniture produced at this particular time (1920's and 30's) was both profitable in terms of production, and due to its aesthetic appearance was christened modern: cool, spare, clean-lined, and totally devoid of either pattern or ornamentation. The use of colour was very limited with neutral being the primary colour used. In terms of materials used, the furniture designs of Bauhaus members Marcel Breuer and Mies Van der Roche in tubular steel and black leather, for instance, epitomize the modern movement. Apart from its visual appearance, this furniture was functional. By the mid Sixties questions were being asked about the validity of this movement, despite the puritanical nature and serious quality that epitomised the style.

Such questioning began in 1962 with an architect named Robert Venturi of the United States. A questioning which began with his "gentle manifesto" of 1962, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. "I am for messy vitality over obvious unity", he wrote in that influential book. "I include the non sequitur and proclaim the duality". (ref. (10.0)). Later on Venturi along with his colleagues - Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, voiced their dissatisfaction (in learning from Las Vegas 1972), with current trends in style, in other words the

status quo of contemporary design. In doing so they called for a full reevaluation of architectural ambiguity and ornamentation, protesting strongly against the hard - edged unornamented buildings and by implications furniture that epitomised the modern style.

Nonetheless by the mid 60's modernism was considered the most suitable style for the post - war world. As its status grew, other styles from the past, especially those of the early 20th century for example the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau etc. soon began to lose their prevalence. It could be said that such a loss of style occurred amidst the devastation of World War 1. Handicrafts were seen as a thing of the past. This was due primarily to the mood that prevailed following the war, a time for forgetting the past and looking to the future - a future embodied by industry and mass production, the very ideals that the Arts and Crafts designers had opposed. The public required something new as rational , uncluttered and as pure as life would become in Europe after the "war to end all wars".

The answer to this requirement, Modern design was subsequently developed by institutes such as the Bauhaus in the late 20's and early 30's and by Le Corbusier in France, De Stijl in Holland and so on. Unlike the decorative styles that epitomised pre-war 1914, Modern design on the other hand was spare and geometrical. Function and the technologies of mass production determined form. Reference to past styles, to symbolism and ornamentation were omitted. Modern design was an absolute fresh start in and of itself.

Following World War 2 the modern style still held its own. Even the victorious United States felt that a style change was in order to celebrate it becoming the most powerful nation on earth. Modern was subsequently adopted as the new international design aesthetic. Evolution of modernism in the U.S. matured in various forms - that of standardisation of components to facilitate mass production, streamlining,

Corporate identity etc.

Despite the fact that Italy lost the war, designers there felt that a change was necessary for of course different reasons from those held in the United States. A sexier and softer Modernism was adopted by Italy, providing the formula according to which simple rational designs could be created for what post-war Italy hoped would be a simpler, more rational time - a yearning similar to that which gave rise to modern design in the first place. Opposed to the stark, monumental "Mussolini Modern", Italy's designers and architects turned for inspiration to Modernism's more "organic", less hard edged side, as epitomised by the 1930's Streamline Modern style, the Americans Charles and Ray Eames and the sculpture of Englishman Henry Moore. While the United States was busily erecting skyscrapers, Italian designers turned their attention instead to furniture design.

Throughout the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies modern design developed apace both in Italy and the United States.

Following the post-war communications boom, the West rediscovered the East and in the 1960's, especially, embraced it. The modern glass and steel aesthetic continued to enjoy prestige in large Western cities as did the contoured Italian look. But neither were about to erase the rich Eastern and African design - traditions that the hippies and black liberationists were exploring along with other non-Western ways of living. Nor would that rigid aesthetic have made much sense to those who experimented with mind expanding 'acid' and saw that there was more to existence than the rational grid that Western capitalists civilizations had laid over it.

However by the mid-Seventies such reevaluations of life had soon run out of steam, so to speak. Modernism both in Europe and the United States remained unchallenged as the leading design philosophy of the world. Revolutionary in the 20's Modern design was now big business. Large corporations bought it and even larger industries produced and subsequently

many used it to finish their homes. It is understandable then why many designers continued to design it: To these people "flower power" was irrelevant, with their interests primarily concerned with current inflation, cost efficient mass production, which of course in turn ruled all thinking in the design field throughout the 70's. Even its leading role in the home furnishings field remained uncontested.

Just as the American Robert Venturi and his associates had called for a richer, more complex and symbolic architecture in the 60's : in Italy an architect working also as a designer, artist and craftsman took an interest in the prospects of enriching objects rather than making them simpler, purer and functional. The person in question was Ettore Sottsass jnr.. While working as an Industrial designer for Olivetti, Sottsass began exploring other areas of design. One such experimentation was that of oriental mysticism, inspired by his various visits to the East. This in turn led to the creation of symbolic, decorative and outrageously playful art works, ranging from plastics and furniture to tapestries and jewellery.

From the mid - seventies onwards Sottsass's interest lay in design areas well outside the modern domain: Eastern and Third World traditions, the pop style of suburbia and the arts and crafts inspired European decorative designs of the early 20th century. This constellation of interests, already apparent by the mid - Seventies, led to the ultimate creation of Memphis in 1981.

Sottsass' dissatisfaction with modern design was not unique to him alone. During the 60's many Milanese designers and architects, better known as the 'Radicals' or anti-design movement, took a series of experiments into other fields of design in an attempt to undo the status quo. However by the early 70's, such a craze for novelty had died down. But all was not lost, with the founding of Studio Alchymia in Milan in the late 70's by Alessandro Guerriero. The name Alchymia, derived from the Arab, is synonymous with the supernatural - the art of

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Sources of Memphis

*'Look
I fill this
sacred pipe with
bark from the red willow,
but, before we smoke, let us see
how it is made and what it means,
this eagle's feather represents the
thoughts of men and how they should
soar high like the eagle".*

*Black Elk
(Ref. (2.0)).*

trying to turn other metals into gold!

This alternative to modernism termed " Il Nuovo Design " was to lay the foundation for the evolution of Memphis 'The New International Style'.

The name Memphis is said to have been inspired by Bob Dylan's "Stuck outside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again", a record supposedly playing on the stereo one night late in 1980, while plans were being made for the new design venture. How appropriate a name, as it alludes to both the ancient capital of Egypt and the birthplace of Elvis Presley - a juxtaposition of ancient and exotic and the contemporary and the banal that was to prove a chief characteristic of Memphis style.

As its name would suggest, eclecticism (from many sources) is the key to Memphis's approach to design. Indeed the roots of Memphis stem from such sources as primitive culture to Art Nouveau to modernism to pop culture and so on.

2.1 The Arts and Crafts movement (1880 - 1920)

'The movement passing under the name of "Arts and Crafts" may be defined to constitute a movement to bring all the activities of the human spirit under the influence of one idea, the idea that life is creation'.

(T.J. Sanderson, 1900)
(Ref. (3.0)).

The Arts and Crafts movement was initiated as an ideological reaction to the effects of industrialisation in the 19th century. Inspired by the craft guilds of the middle ages, the Arts and Crafts movement came of age with the formation of its own guilds and Craft societies, Emulating the guilds of the middle ages, the Arts and Crafts movement aimed to encourage high

standards of design and craftsmanship and further to educate people into a greater awareness of all the visual arts in particular the decorative arts. A philosophy manifested by means of lectures, meetings, demonstrations, discussions ...

Almost 100 years later, a comparable philosophy was initiated by Studio Alchymia the precursor to Memphis.

The professed aim of the Arts and Crafts movement of providing artistically designed goods affordable by all was reiterated in the ideals of Memphis design. This anti-elitist stance in the name of social brotherhood was never fully realised in that both the Arts and Crafts movement and Memphis pieces cost a lot of money.

Many have written off Memphis as yet another Arts and Crafts revival - a view heightened by the fact that all pieces produced were hand crafted. Despite this belief, all Memphis products except blown glass are designed for industrial production. As Branzi so wonderfully states:

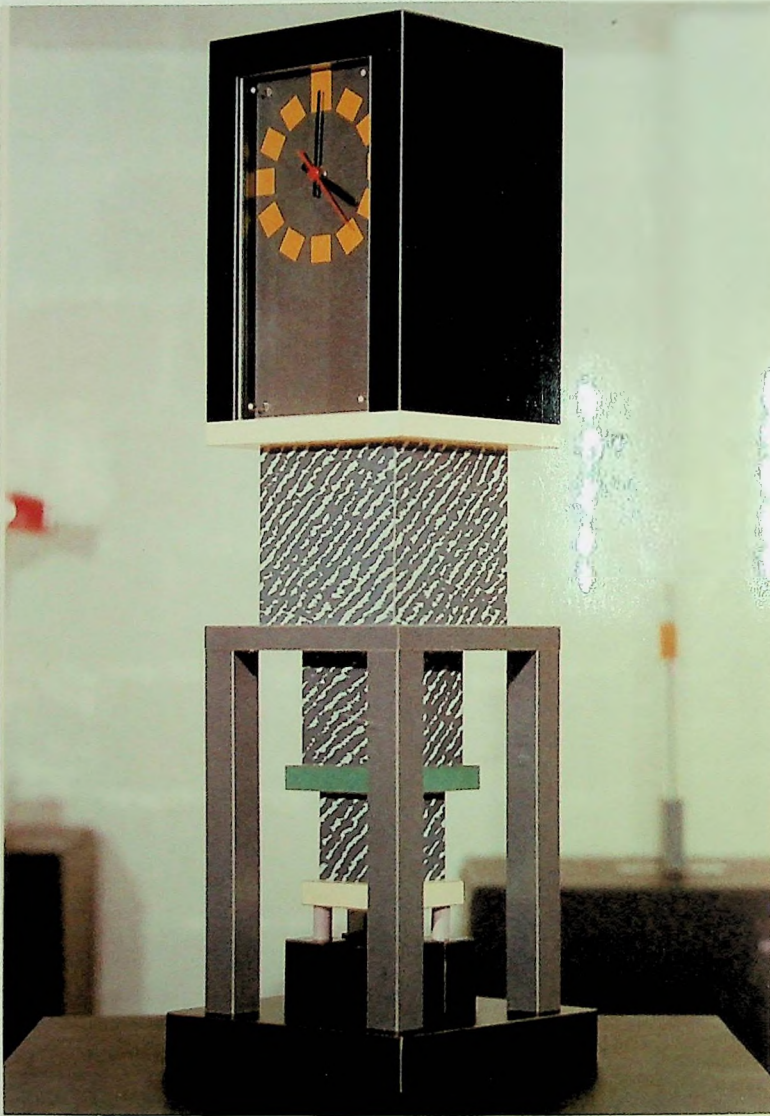
'Memphis utilizes the building technologies of both industry and Craft (the difference is irrelevant) with the aim of sparking new experiences capable of renewing language; and thats all!'

(ref. (4.0)).

In other words Memphis makes use of the most agile and flexible structures available on the market.

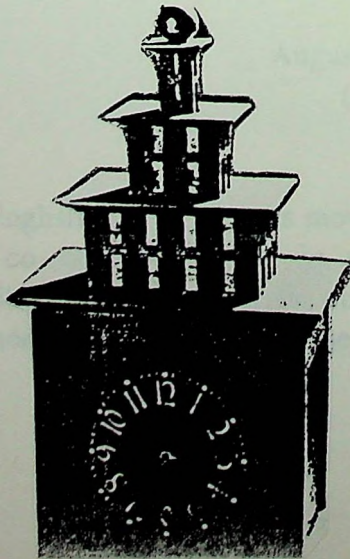
The Memphis belief that structure and decoration are one thing, in that decoration should never be purposely constructed, was an ideal manifested earlier by Morris and others of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Other comparisons are evident in the manifestation of the Arts and Crafts movements aims, such as the achievement of simplicity and honesty (not necessarily the same in effect) in Design - one being that of respecting the nature of the material (not making one material imitate another). The search for a means to embody the natural unity between form, function and decoration was an ideal common to both groups.



(fig. (2.1.1))

(fig.(2.1.2))



Overall the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement was more of a theoretical manifestation than a practical one. In terms of practicality, the products produced by the Arts and Crafts movement differed from those of Memphis in that the former made use of forms and shapes which were often simple, and handmade of linear or sometimes organic shapes. Colour, decoration and natural materials were used sparingly. On the other hand Memphis designs are a juxtaposition of unlikely elements, busy patterns, myriad colours from pastels to psychedelic pink epitomise this movement. A wide variety of materials are also embraced such as plastic laminates, marble, veneers, lacquer, Formica etc.

In terms of design structure, there is evidence to contradict this belief. In Memphis designer George Sowden's "Metropole clock" from the 1982 collection. (fig (2.1.1)). The three tier box-shaped elements on the bottom of the clock are comparable with those on the top half of Voysey's clock of 1906. (fig (2.1.2)).

2.2 Art Nouveau (1890 - 1905).

*We stand at the threshold of a altogether new art,
an art with forms which mean or represent nothing,
yet which can stimulate our souls as deeply as the
tunes of music have been able to '*

August Endell c: 1900
(ref. (5.0)).

Like the English Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau emerged as a co-ordinating force in design. The former movement contributed immensely to the Art Nouveau concept of a unity and harmony across the various fine arts and crafts media



(fig.(2.2.1))

and to the formulation of new aesthetic values. However while the Arts and Crafts movement aimed at honest simplicity and good craftsmanship, Art Nouveau on the other hand aimed at a sophisticated elegance, often tinged with a fanciful decadence.

In its pursuit of alternative forms of art and decoration, Art Nouveau did not solely dwell on the past but embraced new and 'modern' concepts, one being the use of symbolism.

Another revolutionary concept of Art Nouveau designers, was that unlike their Arts and Crafts counterparts, who stressed the importance of handcraftmanship and the use of simple and traditional materials, they on the other hand appreciated the benefits of mass-production and other technical advantages.

In the design of Art Nouveau pieces, the use of the 'whiplash' line - was utilised as a symbolic means to convey vitality, emotion and even mysticism into the lives of those that acquired such pieces. This concept borrowed almost ten decades later by Memphis and particularly used in the design of their glass wares, where the juxtaposition of colour, and curvilinear shapes set the mind a-drift, to dream of other lands, of fantasy and times gone by. An example is Ettore Sottsass' "Sirio" (fig. (2.2.1)) - so delicately scaled that the squiggly handles of the vase take on a vulnerable quality, which makes one want to touch the piece, as gently as one would a small, exotic bird.

The use of asymmetry in Art Nouveau pieces is yet another example of a prominent design aspect reiterated by Memphis.

The Modern Movement

The beginning of the 20th Century was epitomised by a gradual reassessment of the prevailing critical attitude towards the machine. The emphasis on hadcraftmanship was soon to lose its prevalence, to be replaced by the machine, as the dominant production process.

The 'Whiplash' curves of Art Nouveau gradually faded into the dark, giving way to a much simpler more geometric utopia - the 'Machine Aesthetic'.

Mies Van de Rohe's Pavilion for the Barcelona exhibition of 1929 is seen by many as the temple of Modernism, and the chairs of hard-buffed steel its thrones. This is perhaps the most perfected statement of the Bauhaus belief in total design, in which no detail is too peripheral or mundane for the attention of the designer. Nevertheless, it also encapsulates much of the irony of modernism for the materials were rare, costly and handcrafted and despite the Modernists' avowed commitment to socialistic ideals, it was a far remove from popular taste or indeed pocket. A more pragmatic response to the modern world could be seen in the work of the Industrial design studios in America. Harley Earl and others were deliberately using design as a tool to promote sales and were exploiting the imagery of science in the styling of consumer products.

Meanwhile the need for decoration, luxury and fantasy was satisfied by Art Deco, to be seen as its most exuberant at the 1925 Paris exhibition and by subsequent neo-romantic, neo-baroque and surrealistic tendencies.

The Machine Aesthetic

"Thanks to the Machine, to the identification of what is typical, to the process of selection, to the establishment of a standard, a new style will assert itself:"

Le Corbusier (1924)
(ref. (6.0)).

The age of the machine had arrived, embracing not only the artistic theories of contemporary painting - Cubism, Picasso and the like, but also the ideals of mass production and standardisation. The impact of this was two fold: To facilitate mass production - Items were reduced to their basic components. In relation to decorative inspiration - motifs represented metaphors for the wheel, piston rod and other mechanical elements.

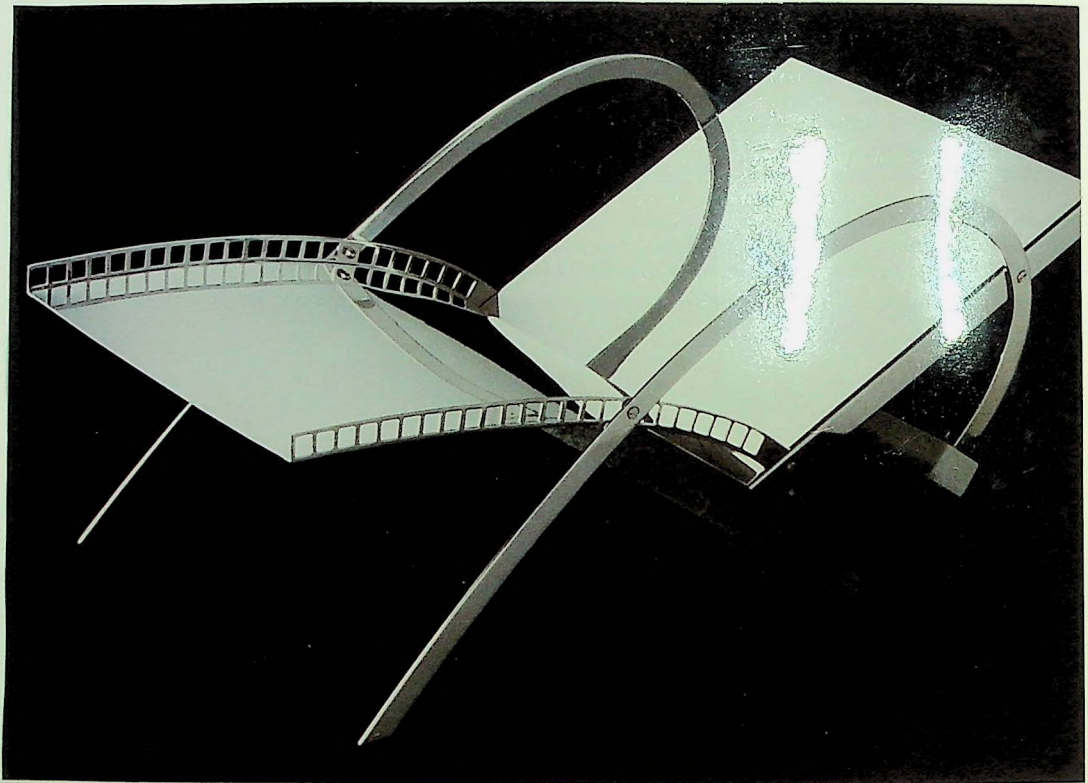
2.3 German Werkbund

The German Werkbund, set up in 1907, marked the beginning of this country's attempt to extend craft into industrial design and in doing so, evolve a new simple aesthetic for its products.

Inspiration was initially formulated by the functional aspects of the Arts and Crafts movement - the principles of practical planning, progression, initiating a simple aesthetic which seemed appropriate for this age. Another principle borrowed was that of educating the designer and the public, to appreciate the new design philosophy by means of lectures, exhibitions and other dictatorial means.

The main significance of the Werkbund lies with its members - Peter Behrens (regarded as one of the pioneers of the modern movement). Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer (in their introduction of new materials such as steel and glass).

Walter Gropius, who eventually became one of Germany's leading spokesmen on design and architecture, was totally motivated by the machine. However it wasn't until a few years later at the Bauhaus that his ideals were put into full perspective. There are interesting comparisons between the doctrines laid down by the latter and those of Memphis's creator Ettore Sottsass jnr., thus proving that although Memphis strives to broaden design vocabulary it has never fully succeeded in losing links with



(fig.(2.4.1))

the powerful and influential Modern movement.

2.4 Wiener Werkstatte

Austria's contribution to the transition from Art Nouveau to the adoption of the machine aesthetic, came in the form of the Wiener Werkstatte. This, however, was manifested more as a theoretical concept rather than a practical one, in that, although the Werkstatte design aesthetic embraced many of the motifs which epitomised the Modern movement in their use of simple geometry e.g. grid motifs (borrowed from Japanese design - inspired by Wright a decade earlier) and rectilinear shapes, their products remained individualised exclusive objects, as a result never reaching the mass Austrian population.

The Wiener Werkstatte favoured the use of rich materials and hand-crafting, as opposed to standardisation and mass production. Parallels with this may be seen in many Memphis pieces. The 'Bering Fruitbowl' (fig (2.4.1)) designed by Matteo Thun, featuring in the 1982 Memphis collection is manufactured out of marble and silver. It defies mass-production concerns for marketability and the bottom line, through the use of expensive and elitist materials. The use of pierced squares along the border was a favourite motif, incorporated by the Wiener Werkstatte into a variety of their products, especially in their chair designs, and in textile design - where geometric shapes were turned into decorative motifs.

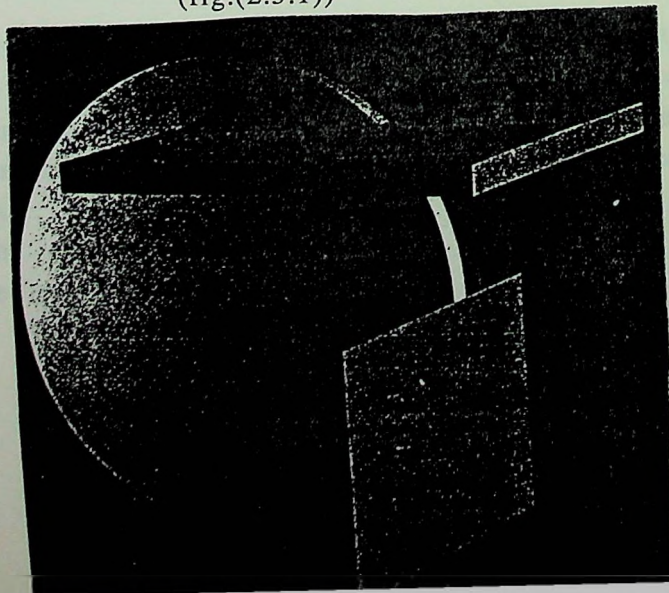
2.5 De Stijl.

The Dutch group De Stijl made an important contribution to the repertoire of Modernism. In fact it was one of the first places that the Modern movement took on any special significance due to Holland's neutrality throughout the war.

De Stijl has often been dubbed 'Elementaism' due to its use



(fig.(2.5.1))



(fig.(2.5.2))

of minimal visual elements - horizontal and vertical lines and basic colours. Combined, these elements constitute the essential vocabulary of the language through which the De Stijl artists set out to communicate universal truths.

One of the best examples of the use of 'Elementaism' in design is that of Gerrit Rietveld's red/blue chair of 1917. By adopting the idea of construction determining external form as a primary metaphor in his designs, Rietveld was extending the theory of the functionalists into a poetic device and codifying the machine aesthetic into a visual language with its own intrinsic vocabulary. This was a form of language that was to dominate the style of much avant - garde architecture and design in the next few decades.

The use of language codification to relate a message was adopted by Sottsass of Memphis. In his attempt to translate physical messages to the body (that of light, shadow, colour, warmth, roundness etc.) he utilised a kind of Morse code of sensory seductions.

The influence of De Stijl on Memphis can be seen in comparing Rietveld's "End table" and Memphis designer Michele De Lucchi's "Continental table". On examination there is little variation except in the layout of the individual pieces. Use of elementaism is apparent in both designs. (fig. (2.5.1)) and (2.5.2).

2.6 Russian Constructivism.

Russian Constructivism evolved around the same time as Dutch De Stijl, developing a comparable aesthetic, based once again upon the idea of the machine as a primary influence. However unlike De Stijl, this movement's design events after the revolution of 1917, evolved from the political changes that took place in that country.

The idea of 'construction' was fundamental to the designs of men like Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian fashion and theatre



(fig.(2.6.1))

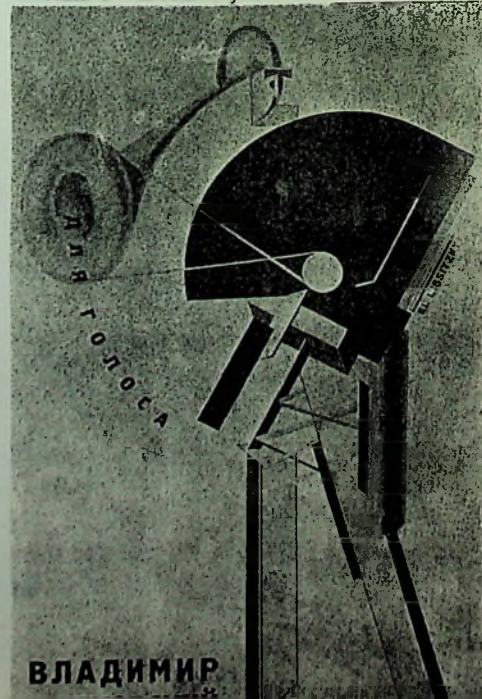
designers of the day. They all worked for the now 'proletariat' creating an environment that was modern, efficient and functional. Comparable with De Stijl, influences came from the Cubists and Futurists. However in Russia more dynamism was incorporated into the design, due to the widespread usage of the diagonal.

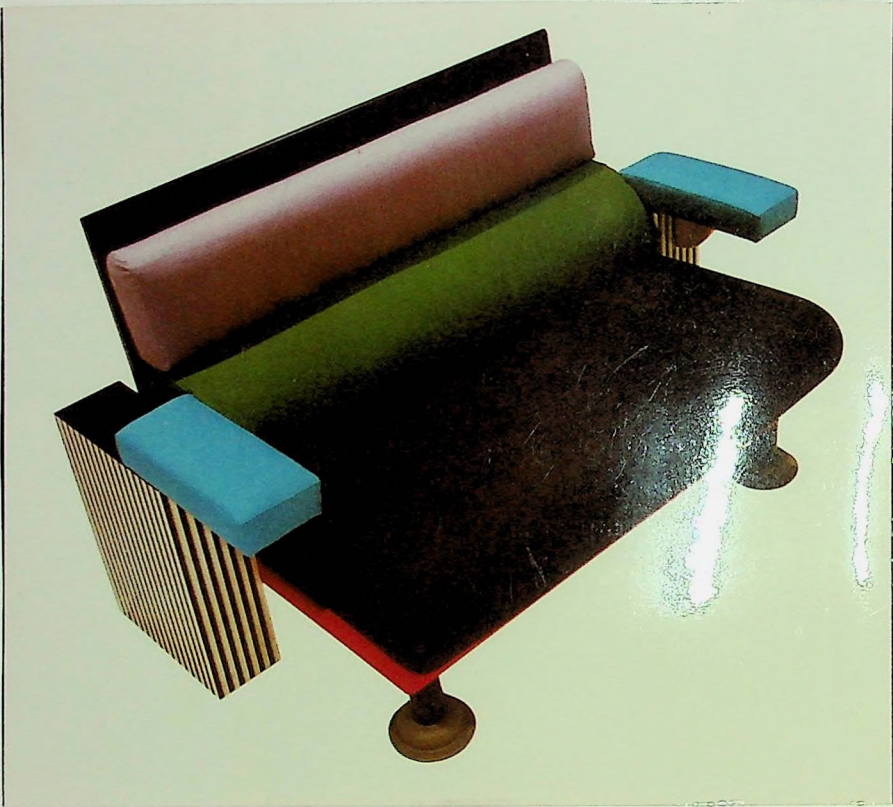
'Suprematism', initiated by Malevich in the 1920's, evolved as a counterstyle to Constructivism. Both styles favoured an abstract, dynamic aesthetic, seeking to translate the 'spirit' of the machine age into practical forms for everyday life.

Through their adoption of Constructivism, designers such as Rodchenko, began to explore other fields of design, notably those of graphic design, and typography in a distinctive style which emerged in Russia at this particular time.

The influence of Russian Constructivism on Memphis designers and their subsequent designs has been minimal. However its influence can clearly be seen in the pattern incorporated into Cannon Sterling's choice line created by Richard Kitchen for Memphis. (fig. (2.6.1)). The pattern used in these Memphis - like sheets, is reminiscent of New Wave Graphics, which in turn recall the graphics of Russian Constructivism. In El Lissitzky's, title page 'for the voice' (fig.(2.6.2)), comparable elements used by Richard Kitchen, are apparent - circles, triangles etc.

Fig. 2.6.2





(fig.(2.7.1))

(fig.(2.7.2))



2.7 Le Corbusier

The concept of the machine aesthetic was central to Le Corbusier's contribution to modern style.

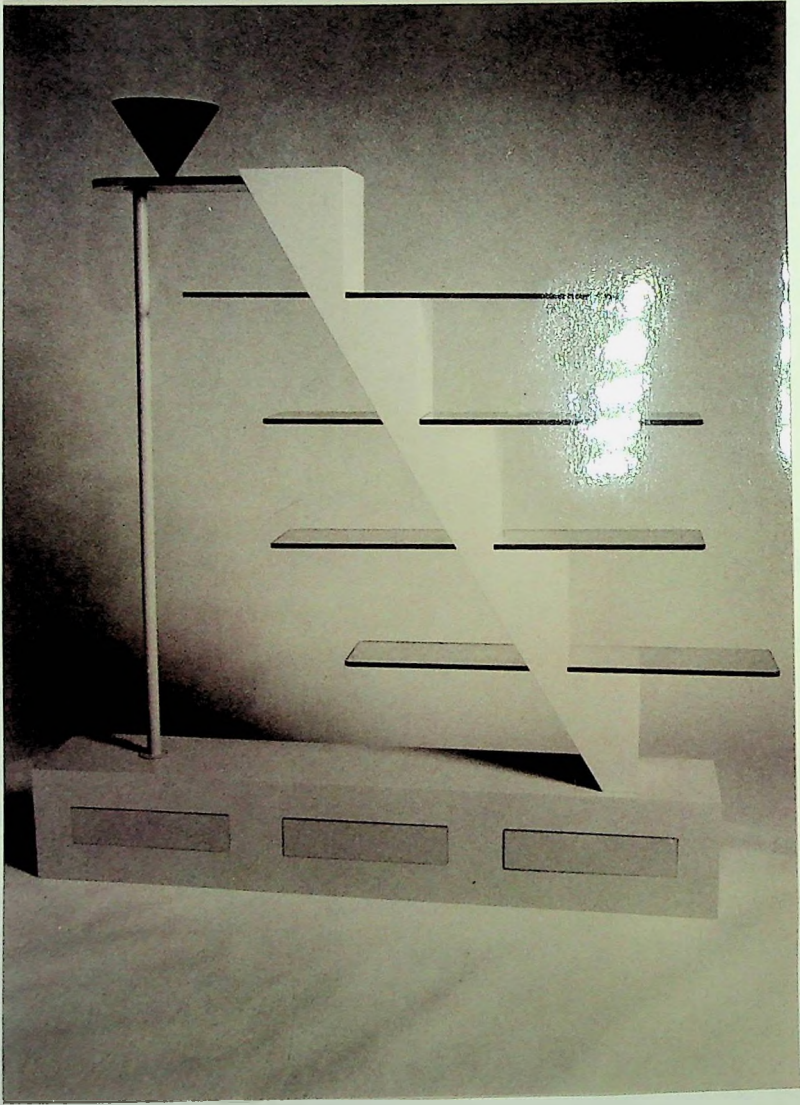
As well as being an architect, Le Corbusier devoted much of his energies to furniture design. Although clearly devoted to the machine and its accompanying concerns with mass-production, such as standardization of components, he is, however, best remembered for his furniture, designed as independent entities. Some of the best examples include a chaise - longue, an armchair, and a dining - chair, all of which are manufactured out of tubular steel and black leather. They have since become classics of the Modern style.

Such furniture design strengthens the belief that the adoption of the machine aesthetic in French Modern style occurred on a metaphorical rather than a literal level. Comparable developments can also be found in the style of other countries, especially in Holland. Even though both of these countries were democratic in the belief of their ideals, the Modern movement remained an exclusive style patronized by a wealthy, fashion - conscious clientele.

Although Memphis has consciously tried to rebel against Modern design, its 'Lido sofa' designed by Michele de Lucchi (fig. (2.7.1)) has a lot in common with the two Le Corbusier chairs ~ (mainly a structural comparison) as shown in (fig. (2.7.2)).

2.8 The Bauhaus

In 1919, the Bauhaus was opened in Weimer. The now familiar accusation that they adopted the machine as an idea rather than as a reality can be leveled at the achievement of this German design school. The Bauhaus designs remained essentially craft



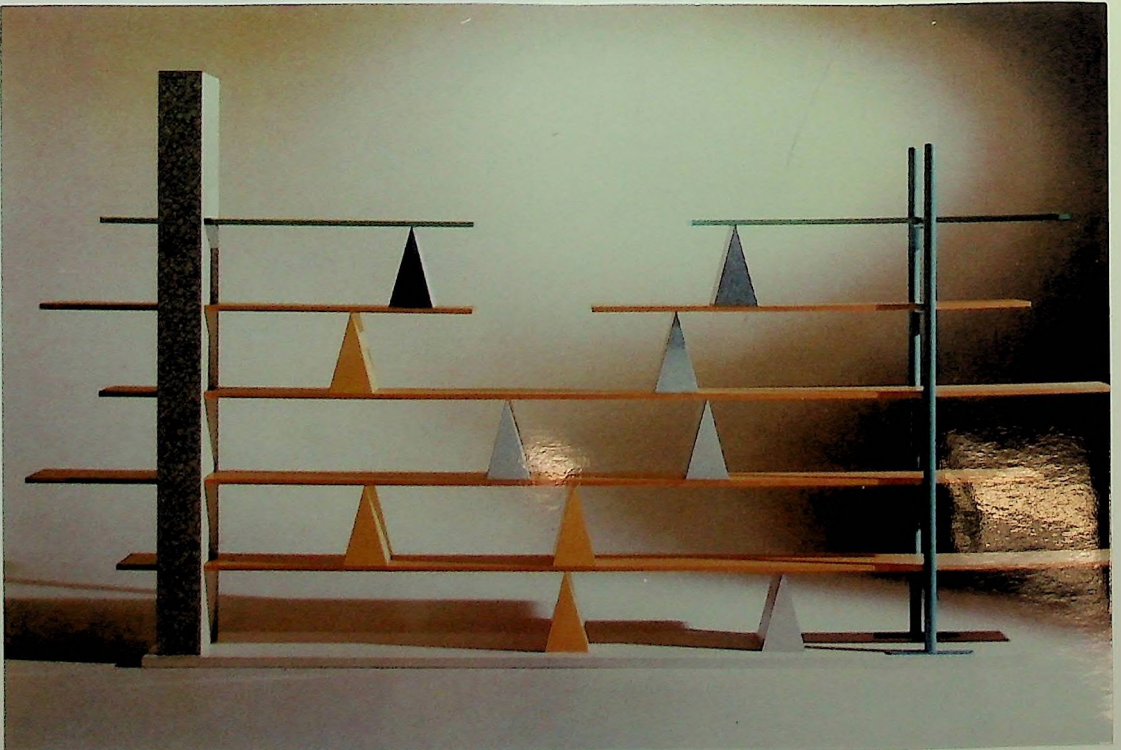
(fig.(2.8.2))

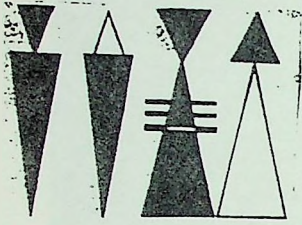
based. Although Memphis was essentially craft based, all its pieces were designed for industrial production. Theoretically the Bauhaus did at least succeed in bridging the gap between craft and industry, both through workshop experience and in the principle of basic design - that of learning from scratch: a principle inspired by the principals of interchangeability and standardisation, laid down by mass production e.g. breakdown to basic units. This principal was subsequently combined with the Morris - inspired notion of 'truth to materials' to form the basis of Bauhaus teaching.

Functional theory, in that form should follow function (a manifestation initiated by Louis Sullivan of Chiago) remained a consistent baseline with Bauhaus thinking, a theory very much in conflict with those held by Memphis.

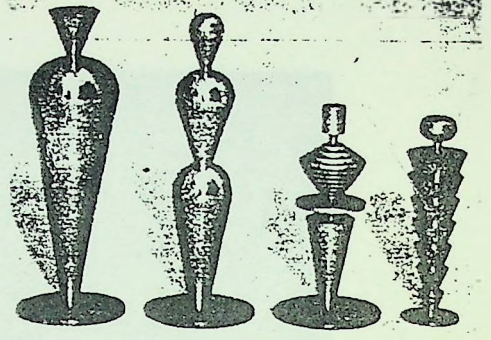
The Bauhaus has however had a considerable influence on Memphis design. There is a suggestion of Bauhaus overtones in Memphis's use of asymmetry in a host of designs. Examples are Andrea Branzi's "Gritti" bookcase (fig. (2.8.1)), Andrea Branzi's, "Libera"bookcase (fig. (2.8.2)) .

Fig. 2.8.1





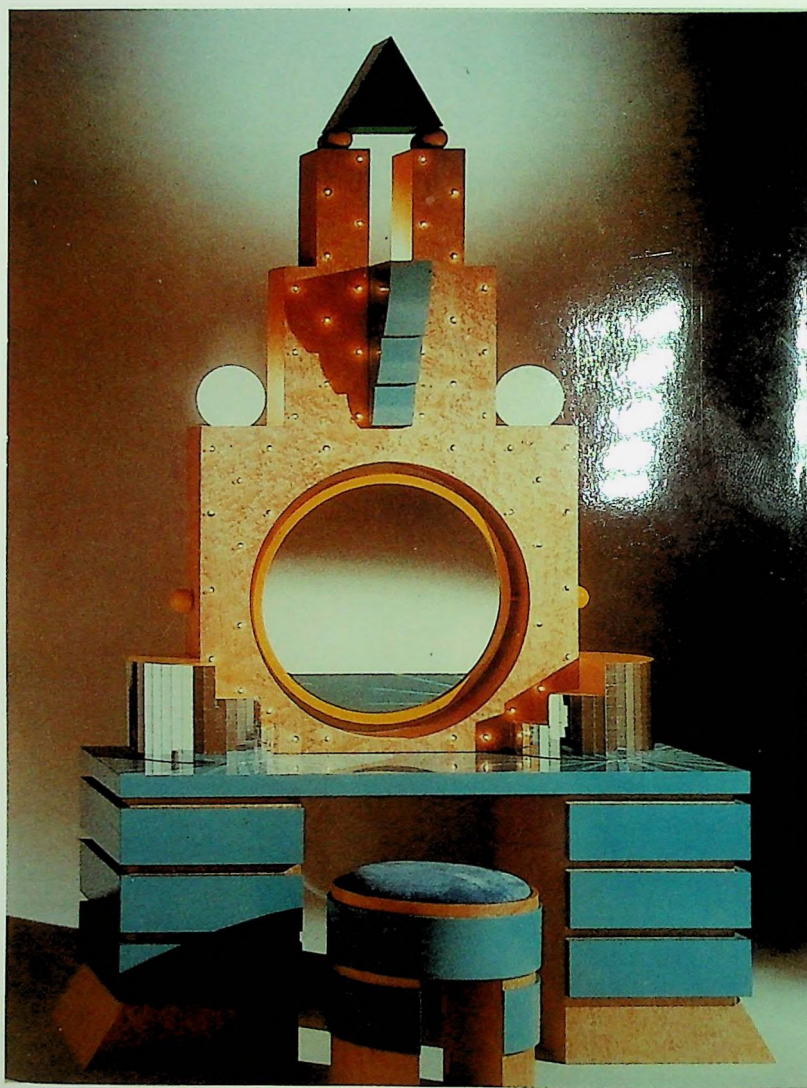
(fig.(2.8.5))



(fig.(2.8.6))

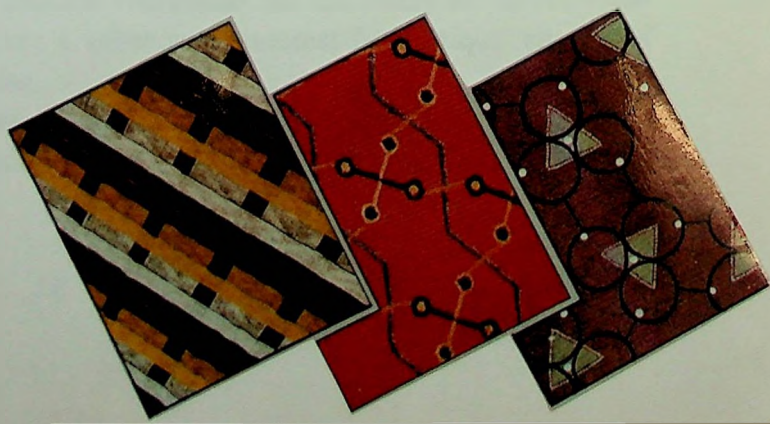


(fig.(2.8.4))



(fig.(2.9.1))

(fig.(3.0.3))



Other evidence to suggest comparisons between the work of the Bauhaus and Memphis - especially Andre Branzi, can be seen by examining the works of Bauhaus painters Oskar Schlemmer and Kadinsky. If one closely observes both mens work ~ the 'dancer', 1922 (fig. (2.8.4)) and 'picture' at an exhibition (fig.(2.8.5)) , comparable forms have been incorporated into the design of Andrea Branzi's ornaments (fig.(.8.6)).

2.9 Art Deco (1925 - 1939)

'Modern simplicity are rich and Sumptuous, we are Quakers whose severely cut clothes are made of damask and cloth of silver'.

(Aldous Huxley 1930)
(ref. (7.0)).

Art Deco, the follow up to Art Nouveau, is basically composed of two distinct styles - that of the 1920's where inspiration initially came in the form of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, which had been performing in Paris since 1909. The second style, evolving after 1930, reflects the modernist approach of Le Corbusier and disciples.

The complexity of Art Deco's roots, stems from the variety of influences that shaped this style. The mood of Twenties Art Deco was one of outrageous and brilliant "jazzy" patterns, taking inspiration from sources such as the Ballet Russes, the fierce and exotic colours of Fauvism, "Negro" and 'primitive art', American jazz culture, Aztec and Red Indian motifs.

Other influence included the embracement of the Wiener Werkstatte, the Munich Werkbund, the discovery of Tutur's tomb in 1923 - arousing a subsequent interest for 'antique' shades of gold and turquoise.

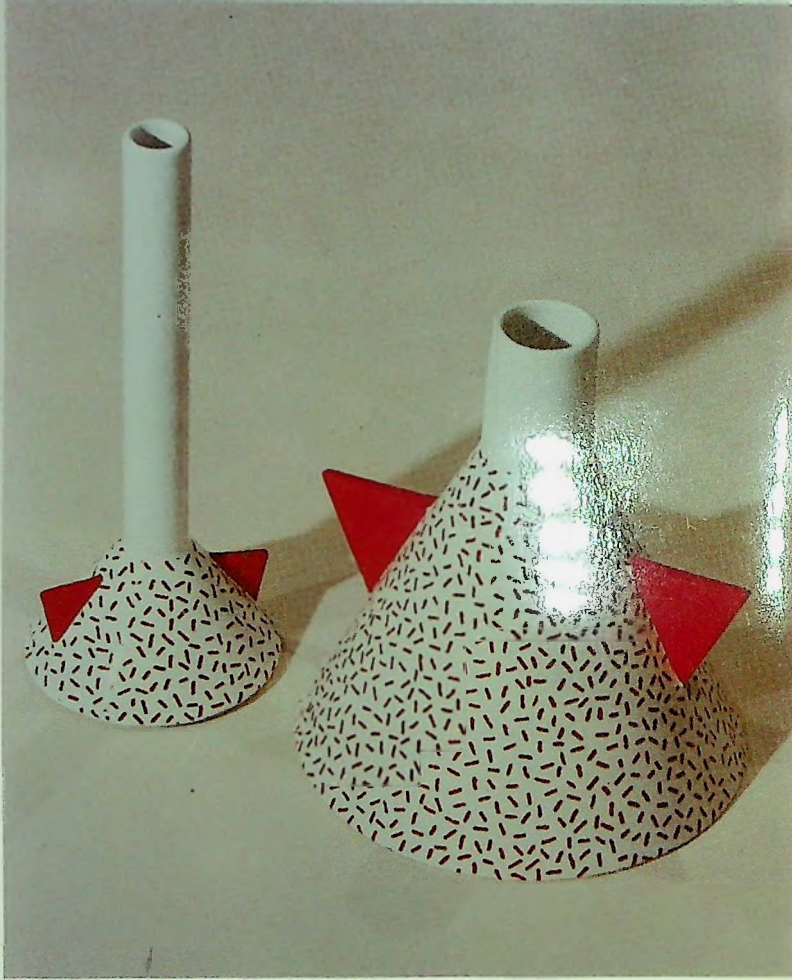
Even following Art Deco's progression into the streamlined metallic modernism of the 1930's the use of bright colours was



(fig.(2.9.2))

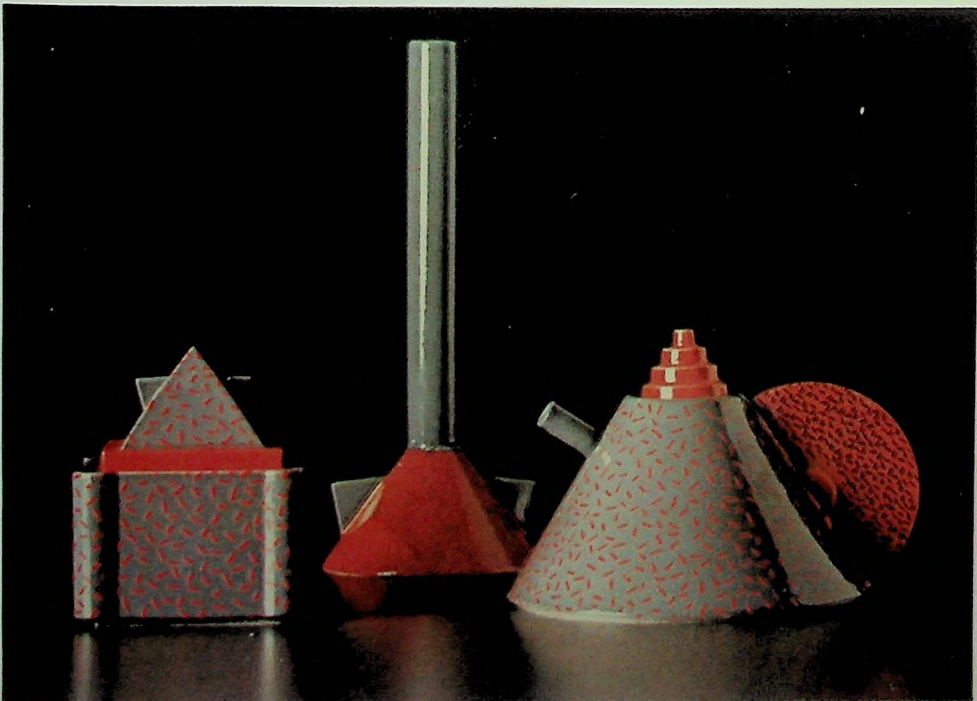
(fig.(2.9.6))





(fig. (2.9.3))

(fig. (2.9.4))



CHAPTER

(3)

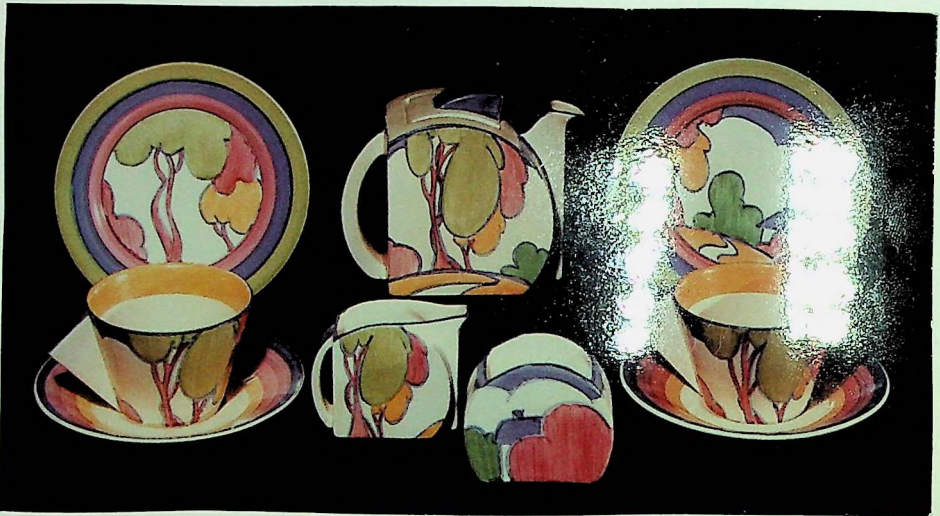


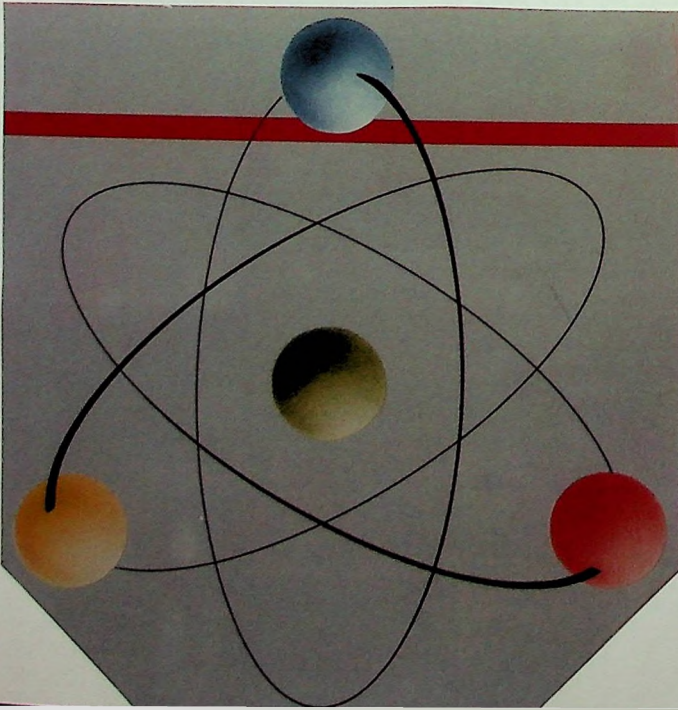
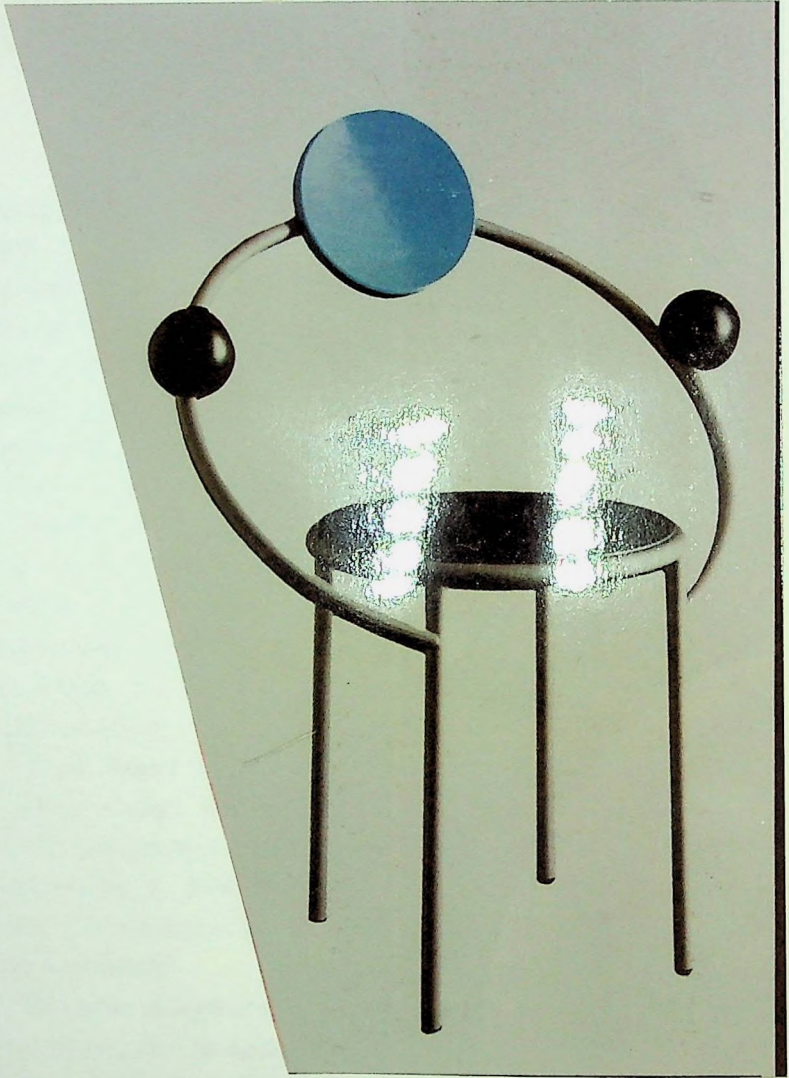
Fig. 2.9.5

3.0 The Age of Streamlining (1935 - 1950)

'Just as surely as the artists of the 14th Century are remembered by their cathedrals, so will those of the 20th Century be remembered for their factories and the product of these factories.'

By the mid 1930's the professional designer had had a significant influence on the many new products that affected the way the majority of people in the Industrialized world lived and worked. Increasingly 'style - conscious' goods began to penetrate the mass market and to alter the life styles of a vast number of people. Such a dramatic change was related to the economic, social and technological changes that took place throughout this period. An increase in wealth in turn caused an increase in

(fig.(3.0.1))



(fig.(3.0.2))

manufacturing output. Other important factors included the exploration of new materials, in particular the new metals (and their alloys) and plastics.

Two distinct cultures emerged at this particular time - that of the kitchen, and that of the living - room. The former was futuristic, pro-technology style that refused to look back over its shoulder. The latter was steeped in traditional values and ideas about comfort. They shared, however, a commitment to the democratic ideal. Design was now no longer the preserve of an exclusive few, but was now available to almost anyone who wanted it. The office more than any mass environment was completely revolutionised - streamlined typewriters and so on. Like the domestic arena, the office of the late 30's bore little resemblance to its predecessor of a decade earlier.

It was the United States between the years 1935 and 1955, that led the way where design was concerned, due primarily to America's advancement in technology, administration and wealth. In their attempt to develop a new design aesthetic to depict the age that was in it, the United States turned their attention to a style suitably dubbed 'Streamlining'.

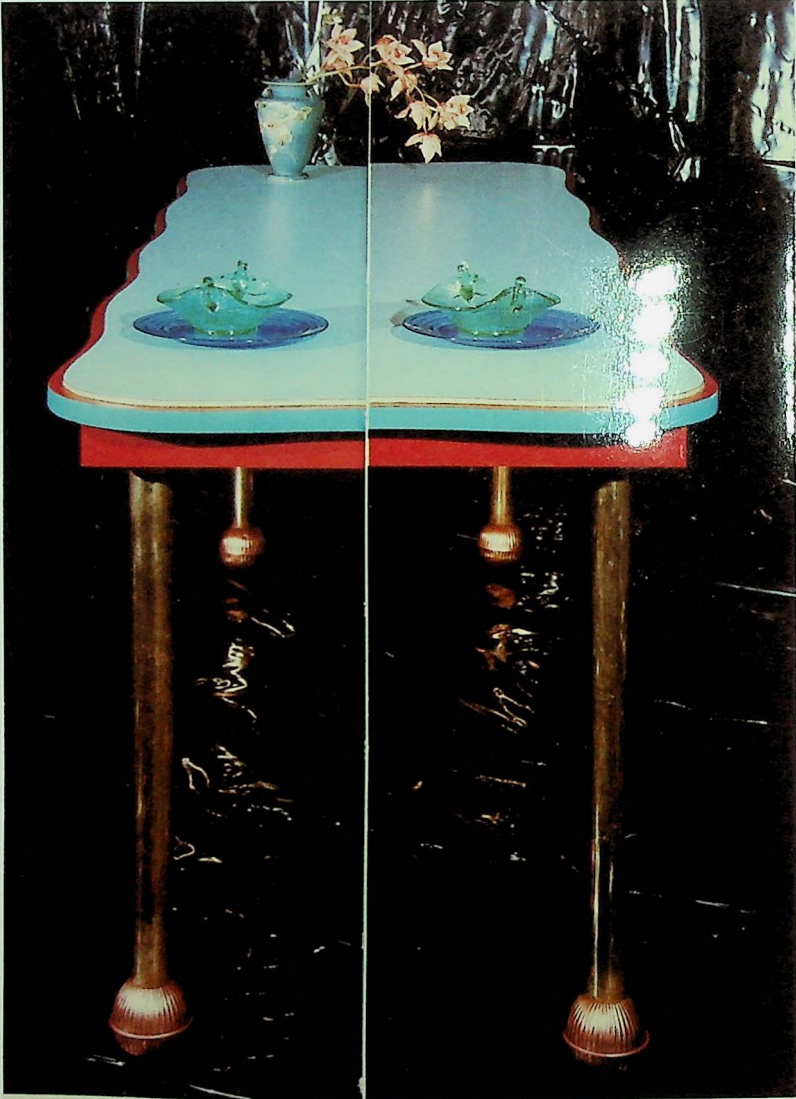
The birth of this new design concept, not only embraced the present but also the future, and in doing so took full advantage of cheap mass production available at the time.

A number of countries either defected or deflated after the 1939-45 world wars were soon to follow in the footsteps of the United States in adopting 'Streamlining', however their intentions were quite different from their American Counter-parts, in that they saw it as a means for reasserting themselves back into the world market.

The "Streamlined" form can be viewed as an example of functional designs, in its attempt at providing forms that serve continuous activities with the least effort and the fewest stoppages. However it contrasts with the angular geometric forms, which epitomised the Futurist. "Streamlined" forms are characterised by



(fig.(3.0.4))



(fig.(3.0.5))

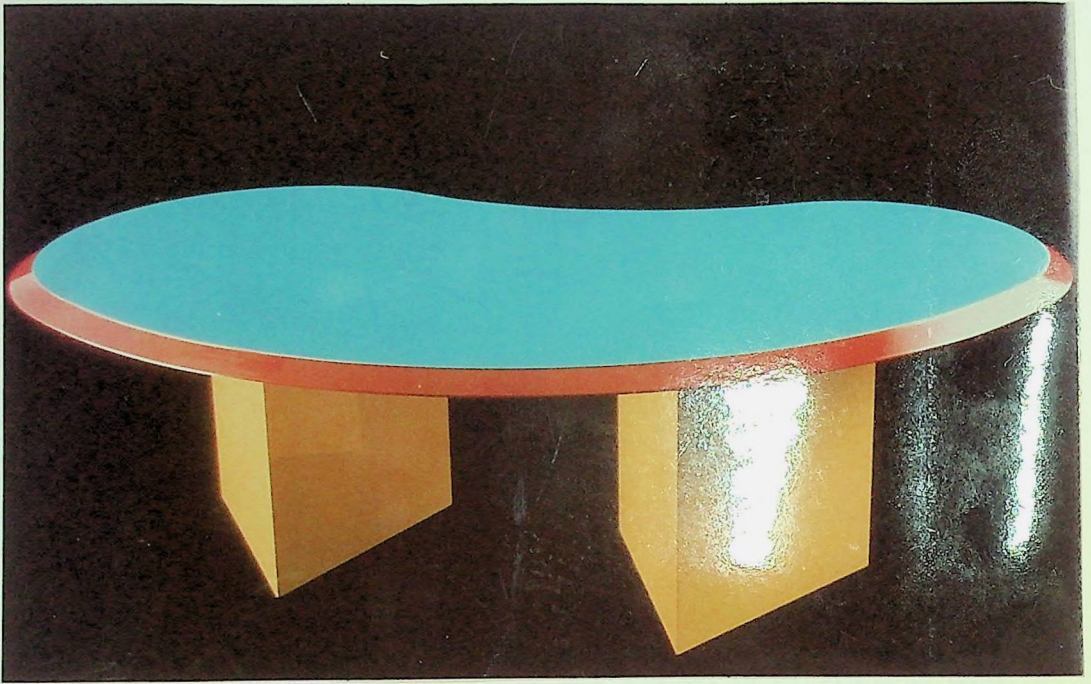
smooth and rounded surfaces, low horizontal profiles. All forms adhere to the principles of absorption - the merging of one subform into another with transitioned curves and those of the elimination of extraneous details. The development of this new and dynamic functionalism evolved from scientific principles - research into hydrodynamics and aerodynamics, resulted in the incorporation of these elements into the design of vehicles, kitchen, office equipment etc.

Memphis designs embrace many of "Streamlining's" associated principals, especially those related to the atomic structure Memphis designer. De Lucchic's 'first chair' (fig. (3.0.1)) resembles a space age inspired chair. By examining the elements that make-up the chair, an analogy can be made between the elements incorporated with the idea of the basic atomic structure. (fig. (3.0.2)). An interesting aspect arises here, even though most Memphis pieces cost a lot of money and belong to the avant - garde, this particular chair is inexpensive compared to others and can be produced in large quantities. Therefore we can conclude that not only were "Streamlining" design elements borrowed by Memphis, but so also were their ideals in relation to mass manufacture and marketability.

Other inspirations for "Streamliners" included the molecular structure of crystals as observed under the microscope. Such an interest gave great impetus to innovation especially in pattern designs for fabrics. The molecular structure of boric acid crystals and quartz, inspired these fabric motifs (fig.(3.0.3)). (This period was also marked by the development of new fabrics). Comparable interests in the molecular structure as seen under the microscopes in Memphis designer Ettore Sottsass's "Bacterio" drawings for HPL print laminate 1978 (fig. (3.0.4)). Other Streamlining influence on Memphis designers, include American designer/architect Viscas Meilus, table for Memphis. This colourful table brings to mind earlier American pieces - particularly mass-produced "Modern" metal porch furniture of

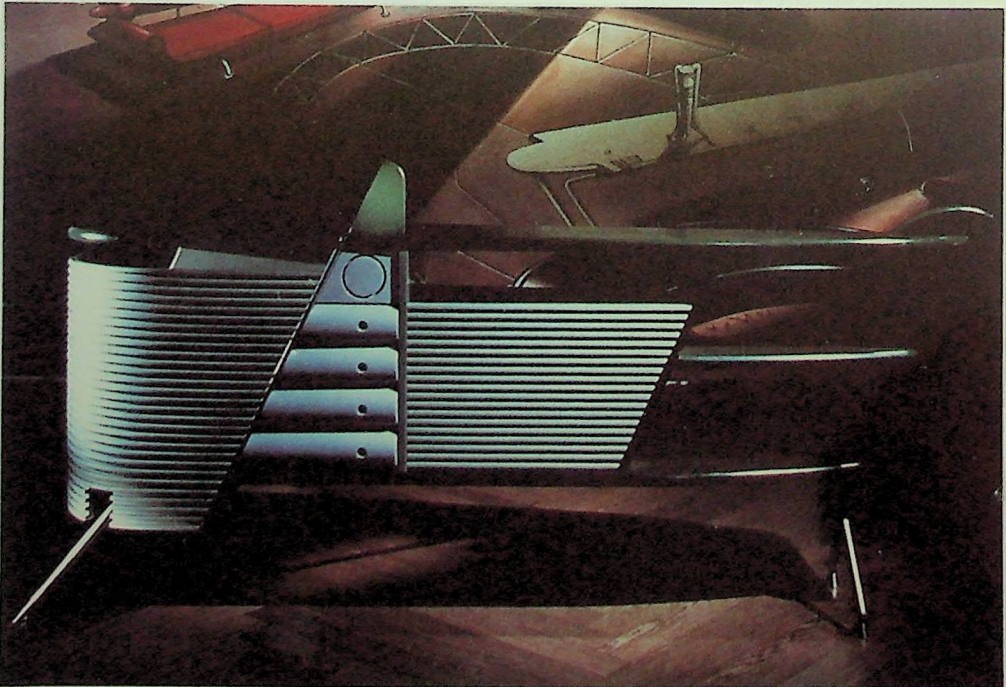


(fig.(3.0.6))



(fig.(3.0.7))

(fig.(3.0.8))



the 30's and 40's (fig. (3.0.5)).

Martine Bedini's "Regent" armchair from the 1983 Memphis collection manufactured out of metal, briar and lacquered wood, its bent legs recall the bent chrome-tubing of 40's kitchen furniture (fig. (3.0.6)).

Memphis table "Madonna" designed for the 1984 collection (fig. (3.0.7)) , uses the ideas of the kidney-shaped swimming pool, that staple of Miami hotel architecture of the 50's.

Such a design epitomises a much freer, more sculptured and organic inspiration of 1950's "streamlining" - where furniture produced took on various unusual shapes such as carving chairs, kidney-shaped tables etc.

This period was indeed associated with a yearning for experimentation, so much so that a series of experiments with material technology resulted - for example chairs combining moulded ply seats with steel - rod legs, ply-wood chairs with 2 - 3 dimensional curves, aluminium, glass (from vitrolite to Tuf-flex), plastics such as Bakelite, acetate etc. Many of these concepts have been borrowed by Memphis designers.

Even in 1987 Memphis pieces adopted elements of "Streamlining" design for example in Massino Iso Ghini's "The Twilight Zone" (1987) - one may be pardoned for exclaiming 'My God' - Is it a boat? Is it a plane? Is it a spacecraft? No - its is simply a Memphis sideboard, playing on Fifties Kitsch, sci-fy and early American automative styling. (fig. (3.0.8))

3.1 Pop Culture (1955 - 1975)

*'Ill be a great day when furniture and cutlery
design, to name but two, Swing like the
Supremes.*

(Michael Wolf, 1964)
(ref. (9.0)).



(fig.(3.1.2))

(fig.(3.1.3))



America's contribution to the post-war world in terms of design, was in fact two-fold: One being the professional structure for the practise of Industrial design, and the other being the exploitation of mass culture.

One of the most important aspects of American culture imported into Europe in the late 50's was that of the teenager. This new youth market was enjoying the luxury of disposable income and its style consciousness nurtured and exploited by designers and manufacturers was the cornerstone of consumerism

Due to the establishment of new wealthier markets at the end of the 50's, the concept of a mass style was replaced by one of mass styles.

This period also saw the ending of the monolithic pre-war design philosophy of functionalism, replaced instead by a much more eclectic open-ended approach towards design style.

In 1956 Pop was born. It was an ethic which positively encouraged designers to exploit vulgarity, brashness, bright and exotic colours; in short it encouraged the glorification of the gaudy, the transient and the superficial aspects of a consumer society. It was the style of post-war suburbia.

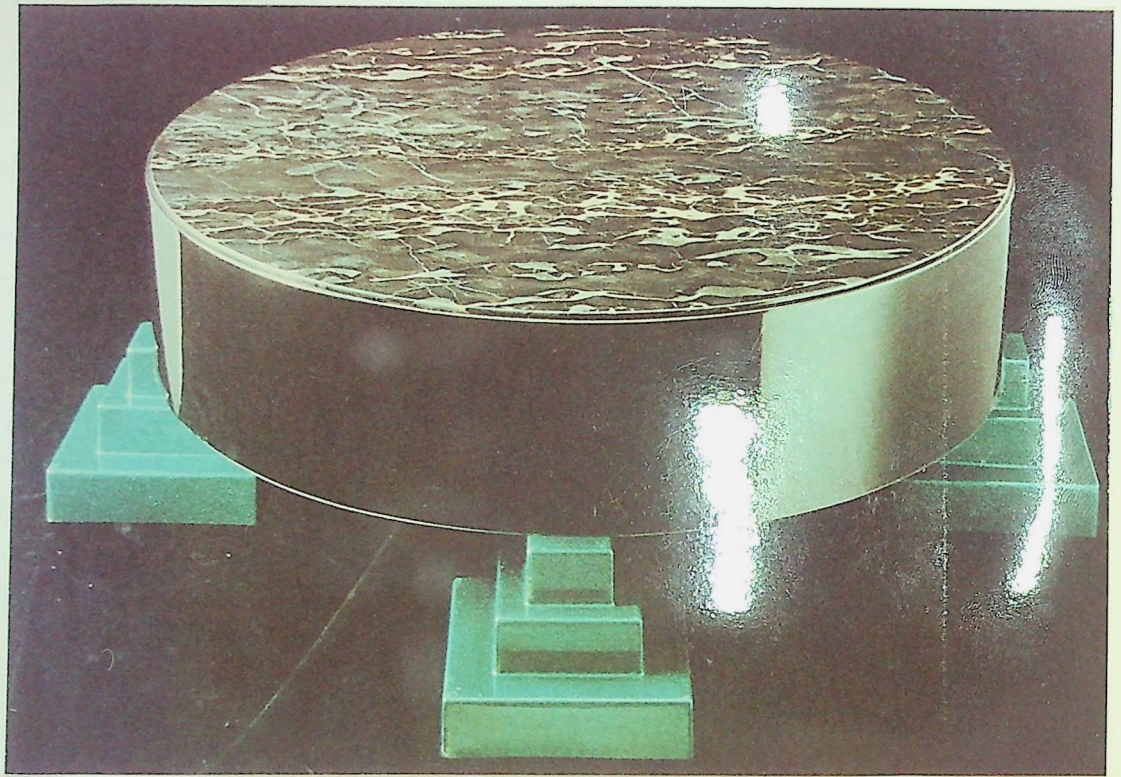
There are many comparisons between Pop and Memphis, the most important being their mutual use of eclectism. The idea of the integration of the various arts and also the arts with life itself, is an integral aspect of both groups. In their attempts to seek an alternative solution to the mundane and established views about design, they both reacted with a style based on the fun aspects of life.

Sottsass jnr., the founder of Memphis, was clearly influenced by the concept of pop culture, as he saw it as a means for the liberation of design.

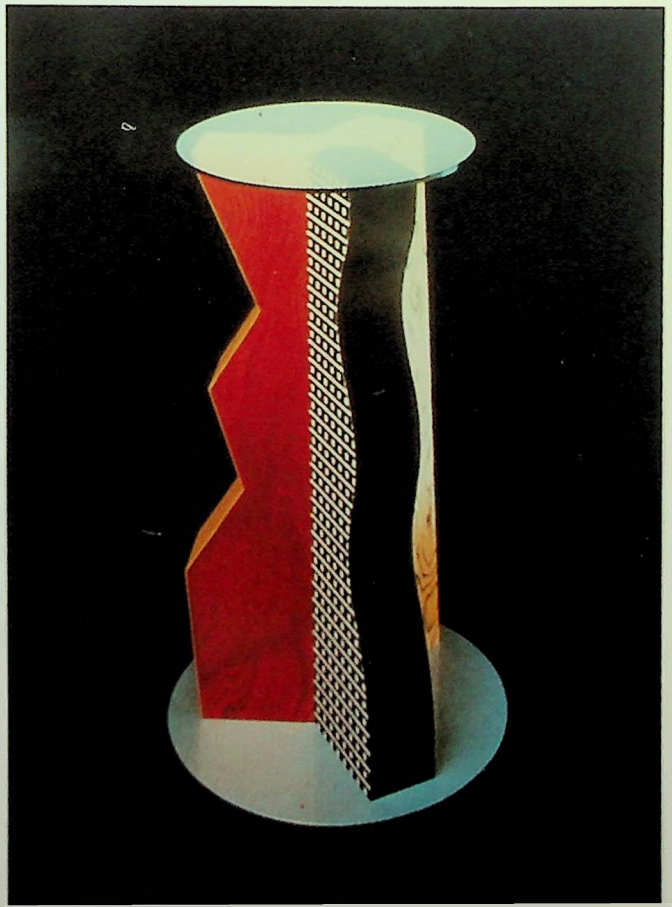
"Madonna" designed for Memphis and included in the 1984 collection, reveals a parody of the forms and colours of pop architecture. As previously mentioned, this table inspired by the kidney - shaped swimming pool of Miami Hotel architecture of



(fig.(3.1.4))



(fig.(3.2.1))



(fig.(3.2.3))

the fifties, thus emphasising the eclectic aspects of Memphis design (fig (3.1.1)).

Other influences of Pop culture may be seen in "Fugi" (fig. (3.1.2)) included in the Memphis 1981 collection. The finish is reminiscent of the sort of spray - painted graffiti (the essence of Suburbia) that decorates subway trains in New York city.

In Aldo Cibic's designs - the "Cabbage", "pepper", and "Radish" teapot, cup and sugarbowl for the 1985 Memphis collection, the shapes - amoeboid, jagged, skewed quadrilaterals (or fragments thereof), and dark-like triangles - are reminiscent of Fifties roadside graphics and pop furniture. (fig. (3.1.3)).

Bridget Riley's famous striped and zig-zag patterns have clearly been a factor in De Lucchi's drawing for hi fi's 1980. (fig. (3.1.4)).

3.2 Primitive Culture.

Primitive culture has had a considerable impact on Memphis designers, especially Sottsass and Nathalie du Pasquier.

A common motif used by Sottsass in many of his works is that associated with the Aztecs, (a primitive and ancient South American tribe) the plinth. This is exemplified in particular by his "Pak lane table" (fig. (3.2.1)) manufactured out of fibreglass and marble - a juxtaposition of expensive and inexpensive material.

The "Casablanca" sideboard from 1984 Memphis collection (fig. (3.2.2)) designed by Sottsass is manufactured out of wood and covered with a sort of loud weirdly patterned plastic that first put Memphis on the map. The sideboard bears a great resemblance to a totem figure, yet again exemplifying primitive South American culture. Sottsass's "Ivory" (fig. (3.2.3)) boasts African sculptural shapes. Its pedestal is made of wood covered with plastic laminate and wood veneer.

Typical Memphis patterns are those designed by Nathalie du Pasquier. Her hard aggressive acid patterns, her harsh sharp flat

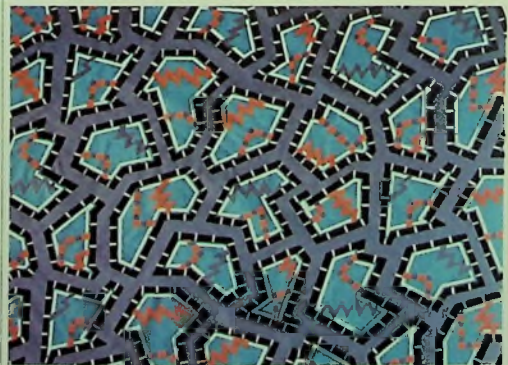


(fig.(3.2.2))



(fig.(3.2.5))

(fig.(3.2.4))



colours, her broad black angular marks make no compromise, Her patterns embrace African culture, Cubism, futurism, Art Deco, Japanese comics and even science fiction.

Throughout her design career Du Pasquier has been particularly influenced by primitive art, especially African minimalist art, not only because of its associated primitism but also due to its extremely expressive forms. Her patterns depicted in (fig. (3.2.4)) are strongly influenced by African tribal dress, appropriately termed 'Kena', 'Gabon', 'Zaire' and 'Zambia'.

Nathalie du Pasquier alludes to the day glo hues of the Sixties, the spiky motifs seen on some of the 1920's Wiener Werkstatte fabrics and again to African fabric patterns in the pencil case she designed in 1983 for Fiorucci (fig. (3.2.5)). By bringing together diverse influences in a single piece, Memphis designers attempted to suggest something about the nature of our world, where so much information is available simultaneously.

3.3 Oriental Culture

In its search for a new design direction, Memphis has looked to Egyptian, Japanese and Oriental culture. It is not surprising then that much Memphis work bears this influence.

Overtones of Japanese culture are evident in Japanese Memphis designer Masanori Umeda's "Tawaraya" - the straw mats in this design are comparable with traditional Tatami straw mats (fig. (3.3.1)).

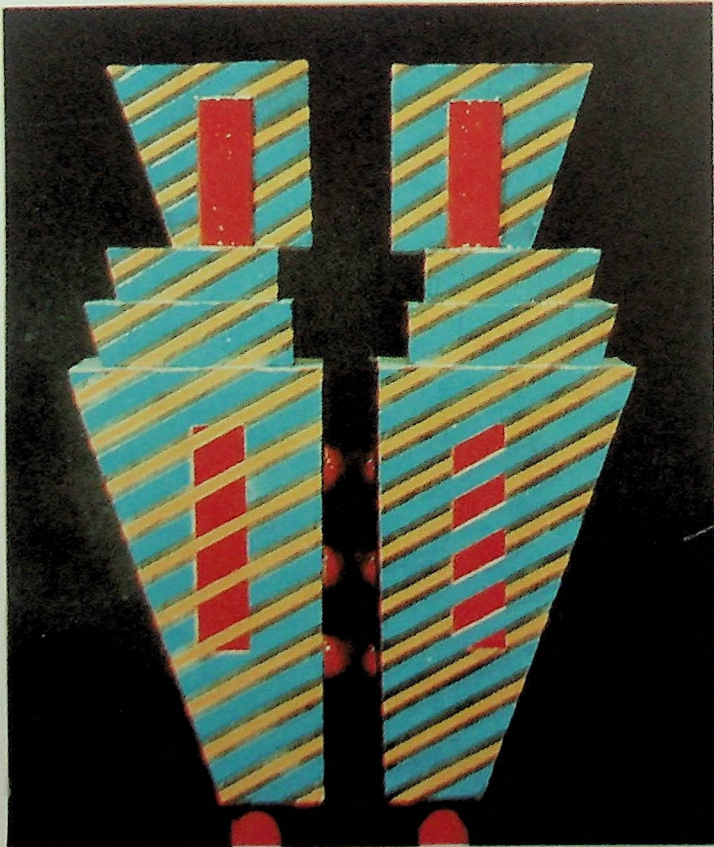
In the 1920's during the reign of Art Deco; following the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb, a great interest in Egyptian culture resulted. This in turn led to a stressing of geometric interplay and dramatic colour contrasts in design. Memphis resembles this with its hard edged geometric forms and vibrantly coloured decoration.

The influence of Egyptian culture is evident in Bruce Lenore's "Magic" (fig. (3.3.2)) containing loud hues reminiscent



(fig.(3.3.1))

(fig. (3.3.2))



CHAPTER

(4)

4.1. Introduction to Design

Particular attention is given to the design of the book cover, which is a key element of the book's identity. The design of the cover is a key element of the book's identity. The design of the cover is a key element of the book's identity. The design of the cover is a key element of the book's identity.

Throughout the book, the design of the book cover is a key element of the book's identity. The design of the book cover is a key element of the book's identity. The design of the book cover is a key element of the book's identity.

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of many Memphis design. Its mirroring shapes can easily be imagined as two ancient Egyptian Pharaohs conversing about arcane matters. (The parameters of Memphis style logic could easily include a conversation between for example Akhnaten and his son King Tut, - who could actually never have had an adult conversation together!)

4.0 Modernism to High-Tech

Parallel to the explosion of Pop and seemingly impervious to it, was the steady revival from the mid-50's of Modernism in a renewed version of its original ,pre-war rectilinear mode . So at the same time that the New Generation of Modernist was discussing the concepts of absolution and good design, Pop Art was busily nurturing the needs of a new culture based on the superficial and the ephemeral.

Modernism since its pioneer days, had changed considerably, in that it now represented an educated cosmopolitan modernity.

An alternative design movement dubbed 'Radical design', 'Anti-Design' was also taking shape around this time. Born in 1960 it was set up as an antidote to the status Quo that was inextricably linked with capitalism and conspicuous consumption. Its design philosophy was very much in contrast to the prevailing mood, in its more enviromental, humanistic approach to design and its embracement of the notion of popular taste as an essential element.

Ettore Sottsass jnr. - the founder of Memphis and one of the main protege's of Studio Alchymia was the Father figure of this movement.

Dissatisfied with current trends in design, Sottsass turned his attention to American and British Pop Art and Culture and to other sources such as Indian mysticism and primitive culture, in his search for a new design aesthetic.

Through these sources Sottsass was provided with an alternative definition of design - the object itself, he envisaged as visual symbols which were integrated into the culture which created them but which allowed their users freedom of operation at the same time.

The 'Radicals' were united in their embracement of the concept of 'bad taste' and Stylistic revivalism as crucial ways of by passing the techno-chic aesthetic, that epitomised contemporary Italian design. They even went as far as figuring out a means that would enable them to work outside the mediation of the mass manufacturing industry, such was the disillusionment of this movement. This unrelenting Utopian nature of radical design proved in the end its undoing and by the early 70's most of its exponents had faded from view .

Since the abandonment of Utopian pretentions the Modern movement, since its distractions of the late 70's, has come to represent a somewhat "elitist" approach to design, blending intellectual vigour and concern with style.

Modernism has since evolved as a new style born as a curious off-shoot of functionalism - "High tech".

(4.1) Post - Radicalism

Although the early Seventies saw the demise of the radicals, however by the late Seventies, another alternative to Modernism "Il Nouvo Design", came into existence - Studio Alchymia.

Studio Alchymia

The Fifties had a special significance for the Italian design community. In those days design ment more than materialism. For a society recovering from the devastation of war and Fascism, Industrial design represented nothing less than the rebirth of a culture and hope for the future.

The apparently nostalgic work of the group of designers

associated with the avant-garde Milanese Studio Alchymia was not therefore; just one more exercise in revivalism. Its references to the popular styling and mass imagery of the post-war years was intended to rekindle the optimism and energy that inspired Italian Culture at that time and to renew the debate about the relationship between design and society.

Studio Alchymia, founded in 1976 by Alessandro Guerriero, was therefore set up as a centre for the manufacture and marketing of innovative design.

Dubbed post-radical this movement quickly attracted into its ranks members of the late 1960's radical groups, among them Ettore Sottsass jnr.. This second radical movement in Italian design began to raise a number of fundamental questions, in relation to contemporary design, which up until then had only been hinted at by the Sixties radicals. In the Bauhaus 1 series (first exhibition of Studio Alchymia) of 1979 and the Bauhaus 11 series of 1980, Mendini the spokesperson for Alchymia, along with fellow members, explored the aesthetic possibilities of the mass environment, exploiting the decorative potential of its imagery.

The products produced at Studio Alchymia may assimilate to simple exercises in "Kitsch", but beneath the surface they were based on principles that go far beyond the bandwagon known as post-Modernism. Most of the designers that were involved, notably Alessandro Mendini, Ettore Sottsass jnr. and Andrea Branzi, are old hands at this anti-rationalist game.

Indeed designs created in Studio Alchymia were unusual to say the least and quite unexpected. Their interpretation of furniture and other article forms were at once exuberant and arbitrary. Unlike Modern design, epitomised by neutral as the primary colour utilised, Studio Alchymias colour ranges were on the other hand audacious in the use of glitter bluesto pastel shades. Their choice of building materials was just as audacious, particularly in the use of laminated plastic. The incorporation of

abstracted patterns on the surface of plastic laminates, in bizarre sofas, bookcases and tables to mention but a few, owe their origins to the Banal object from the 1950's and the fine art sources.

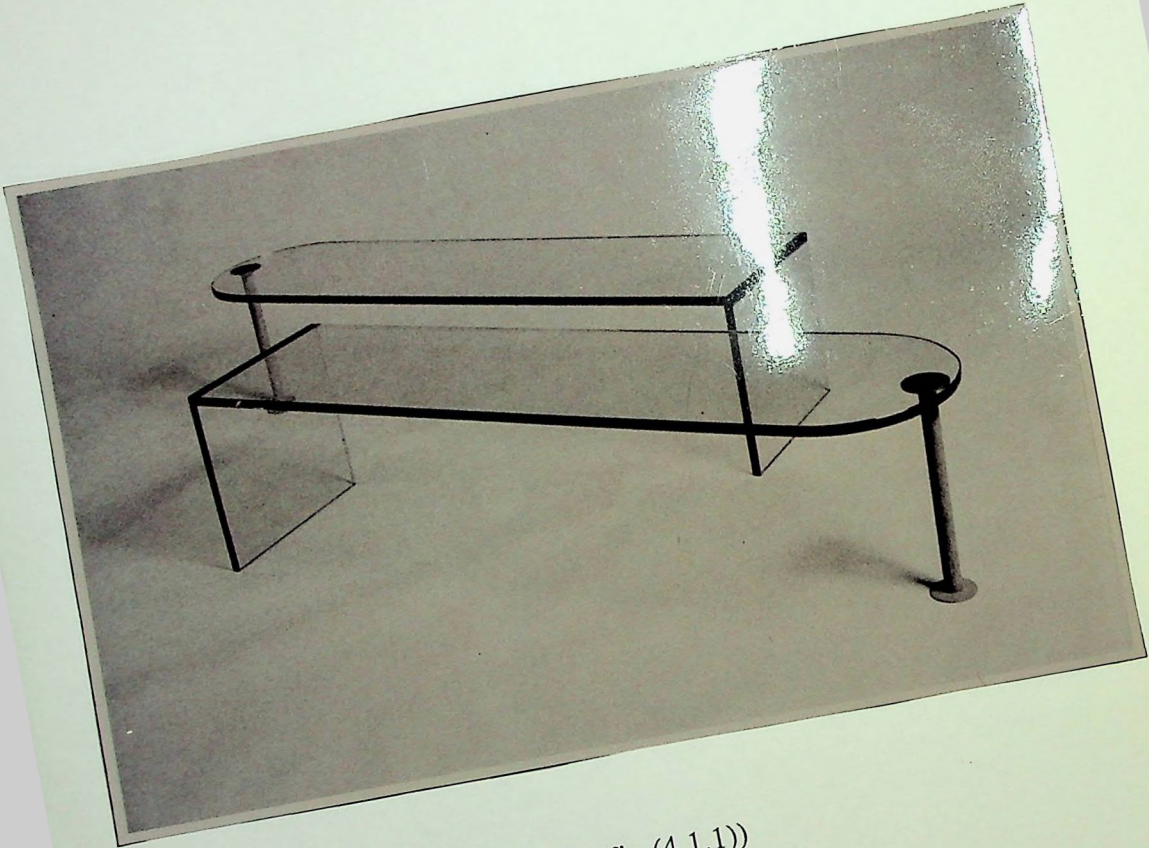
Despite its revolutionary concepts in relation to design, Bauhaus elements have been borrowed, as seen in Andea Branzi's "Centrale table" (fig. (4.1.1)). The use of semi-circles in this design is a feature of Bauhaus design philosophy.

Studio Alchymia's strikingly individualistic pieces are very similar to the decorative designs that depict the early 20th century - handcrafted and produced in very small quantities. This constitutes a reaction to the limitations and repetitiveness of mass production associated with Modern design (which they sought to challenge) as well as to Studio Alchymia's impatience with questions of marketability and ergonomics.

In addition to their revolutionary ideals concerning design, comparable with the revivalist trial of thought of the 60's, Studio Alchymia participated strongly with Left wing politics and subsequently issued numerous manifestos stating their aims.

Studio Alchymia's attempts at reviving the possibility of an alternative design movement in Italy were summarised by their leading spokesman Andea Branzi in the 1981 issue of the Italian magazine Modo, in which he stated the aims of Il Nuovo Design:

- (1.0) Putting behind the myth of the "unity" of a project and concentrating on a free discontinuity of parts with respect to the whole.
- (2.0) The search for a new linguistic expressive quality as a possible solution to the enigma of design as a possible new meaning.
- (3.0) Recycling all possible idioms now in circulation within the experience of our lives.



(fig.(4.1.1))

CHAPTER

(5)

(4.0) Recuperating decoration and colour as signs of freedom and nobility of creative invention.

(5.0) Going beyond ergonomic limits and concentrating on an effective relationship between man and his things.

(ref. (10.0))

A ridge in design thinking was taking shape in Studio Alchymia towards the end of the Seventies. Mendini and Sotsass's clashing ideas in relation to design (Mendini can be seen in relation to his pessimism about the ability of an object to change society and Sotsass's overwhelming commitment and the importance of creation as a social force, initiated a philosophical schism between Studio Alchymias members.

Sotsass dissatisfied with current trends, broke ranks with this group.

All was not lost as amidst the gasp of astonishment yet another alternative design movement was at hand. Dubbed the 'New International Style' - Memphis - founded by Ettore Sotsass, was set up in Milan in 1981.

(5.0) Enter Memphis

'Every journalist reacted by saying that the furniture we designed was bad taste. I think its super taste. It is Buckingham Palace that is bad taste. Memphis relates to the actual world, we are quoting the present and the future'.

(Ettore Sotsass jnr. on the launch of Memphis group in1981.)

(ref. (11.0)).

Branzi's stated aims in relation to Studio Alchymia still pertain to what eventually become Memphis. However unlike the essentially fringe - ornamented Studio Alchymia, which numbers many of the same designers among its members, Memphis was bidding for the mainstream. It had a glossy city - centre shop, a network of international distributors and not inconsiderable financial resources.

The furniture and lamps that epitomised Memphis's first collection were exceptional to say the least, The similar works of Studio Acchymia had been acknowledged but its reception was muted compared to the uproar Memphis created. The name Memphis conjures up the nature of its style that of eclecticism.

"A name mentioned in numerous songs Memphis Tenese birthplace of W.C. Hardy, father of the blues, of Elvis Presley, father of Rock n' Roll, Memphis ancient capital of Egypt and site of the great temple of the god Ptah, artist among the gods, he who creates works of Art". (ref. (12.0)) A juxtaposition of high and low culture that was to prove a chief characteristic of Memphis style!

Memphis is a combination of Sottsass's fascination for ancient civilization with his commitment to contemporary 'pop' culture. It is for him a calculated two fingers to Milanese good taste.

Presented by a group of international designers - contributions come not only from Italy but also from such countries as Japan, United States, United Kingdom and Spain - the objects designed for Memphis were characterised by vivid colours and decoration, combined with a concern for function and a use of industrial material.

Although various designers were involved in Memphis the various pieces boast a considerable degree of stylistic unity due primarily to a collective spirit within the organisation, where designers influenced one another and in turn led to little power

struggle.

Inspiration for the Memphis designer came in the form of sources at the margin of mainstream Western design - early 20th century decorative design, Suburbia pop, Eastern and third world traditions - simply for the sake of creating beautiful intriguing furniture and objects that are a pleasure to live with. Memphis designers not only see their work as mere objects, but also as political statements, a challenge to perceived notions of design. Indeed Memphis design statements are in part a political one, a criticism of social hierarchies and the power structures on which these hierarchies rely.

A vision of a better world has a concrete visual equivalent in Memphis furniture. The desire to do away with hierarchies (better/worse) is reflected in Memphis's use of materials - a mixture of high and low class elements e.g. a single item of furniture may feature a juxtaposition of materials each bearing a contradicting cultural connotation - an unusual and expensive wood combined with cheap plastic laminate.

Yet another anti-hierarchy gesture involves setting up a contradiction between a material and an environment. So to speak, traditionally a 'living room' signifies status and wealth, as does an expensive material such as marble. Memphis however sees this perceived notion differently, in that they subject the living rooms accepted connotation(s) by filling it with furniture, whose loud hues, ridiculous asymmetrical forms and funky materials connote the opposite of status.

Therefore Memphis furniture is non-intellectual 'positive proposition' as opposed from critical and intentional to be included in any interior regardless of style.

Probably the greatest contribution and most important innovation of Memphis to the turn of style that changed the face of contemporary furniture, has been the use of plain and patterned plastic laminates. To Memphis plastic laminates are a symbol of the mass urban scene, a symbol of Suburbia, for others however

they are more of a metaphor for vulgarity, poverty and bad taste, Therefore it follows that such a material is excluded from public areas which aspire to a certain degree of 'elegance' resturants, nite clubs etc. Memphis in accordance with its anti hirarchi stance will turn this situtation upside down, even going as far as introducing the plastic into the living room (the status symbol room).

Plastic laminates besides opening up new perspectives in furniture design, paved the way for a series of reflections, reviews and research into the theme of materials, their quality, their subsequent combination possibilities, their semantic and cultural change.

As a result of this, materials are now being read, chosen and used not only as tools or supports of design (although important) but as active protagonists privileged vechicles of sensory communication.

The Memphis designers have expermented with materials in two senses' developing and using aseptic, freedom giving materials that have as yet not been consumed by institutionalized cultures and combining them with pieces of cultivated materials 'to see if something else may be achieved'. To Sottsass this is a phenonema that very often repeats itself in history, for instance when barbarios with their 'non cultivate' invade civilized zones.

Other aseptic materials apart from plain and patterned laminates developed at Memphis include printed glass, zinc - plated and textured sheet metals etc. In the Memphis context such materials lose their 'high-tech' connotations as they are never quoted as technological symbols but simply as textures, colours, glitter etc. Memphis designers have even revitalized cultivated traditional and familiar materials e.g. using marble in various forms, foreign to its recognisable usuage, or taken out of context through combination with aluminum, figreglass etc.

The free and easy use of cheap and expensive, rough and smooth materials, tend in the end to turn a piece of Memphis

furniture into a complex system of communication. Assimilating a small metaphorical novel!

Prior to Memphis, colour in furniture did not exist, with a few exceptions, colour only came into play as a detail of mother-of-pearl, ivory or bronze inlays.

Colour in Memphis is never purposely added, as with decoration it is born with the design, forming an integral part of the structure.

Colour is a matter of linguistics to be used not as an ideological vehicle, but like the use of materials, as a metaphor of communication.

Memphis colour is comic - strip colour (De Lucchi) (Bendini), plastic colour (Peter Shire). It is washed out, cheap goache colour (Zanini), ridiculous colour (Sottsass), third world colour (du Pasquier). Memphis in relation to colour follow no fixed pattern or rigid guidelines, it is simply a 'changing shade of existence'.

Sottsass along with his fellow designers in Memphis pursue neither a style nor an ideology, instead they adopt a very simple principle - that of the perception of the world through the senses. By doing this, then one can use the senses to communicate information of all kinds, therefore the idea of Memphis is to make design into a sophisticated conscious instrument of communication. The adoption of sensuality destroys ideology, it is anarchical private, it takes account of consumerism and consumption, it is not moralistic, it opens up new avenues.

Although Memphis seeks to undermine the concept of good taste especially that of Milanese, it nevertheless depended entirely on that Milanese sense of style which it mocks for its realisation and its audience. Without the money of this design conscious establishment financing Memphis would have been impossible and its opening night would have only existed in Sottsass's mind.

For all the wild claims that some of Memphis's publicity makes, and the dizzying prices it is charging, many of its designs

especially in the early years were distinctly less than sensational. Often shoddily made, crudely conceived, with its wit tending to be of the most basic kind. Despite this Memphis had a power that extended far beyond Milan. It is and was a manifesto from people who appeared to know where they were going in the midst of a confused and directionless period for design. It offered simple answers, a seductive style and a sense of purpose. Nothing could be more irresistible.

And yet the whole movement was based on some high ambiguous propositions. The intention is to cast off the conventions of modernism, yet the imagery draws strongly on 'Fifties', in fact on nostalgia. Again Memphis is aiming at a species of alternative design using what it claims are industrial production methods, yet the quantities in which it produces its goods depend on craft techniques. Another paradox arises here due to the fact that even when objects are manufactured from inexpensive materials such as plastic laminates, they cost a lot of money and this signifies a certain status. The nearest analogy to Memphis is perhaps, fashion designer Zandra Rhodes in her punk phase producing street fashions complete with rips and safety pins, but charging prices that only the despised bourgeoisie can afford.

Although the prices of Memphis pieces are dropping due to the large scale production of certain Memphis pieces, the clientele that actually buy Memphis, do so for all the wrong reasons, for example by having a piece of Memphis in the home, people believe that it says something about their status in society, it is the "in thing" to have, as it signifies to them an element of elitism. Because it is outrageously different from what came before, it has become the fashion amongst the bourgeoisie. Even the manufacturers that produce Memphis and their imitations, do so only because there is money in it!

Memphis is more intellectual than commercial. It was never meant to connote elitism, although if it was't thought so by the

clientele, Memphis would never have survived.

Generally when people buy a piece of furniture, they do so for reasons of comfort, functional, aesthetics an so on, factors that we have been born with and thus has shaped our lives. Then when one views a Memphis piece, one automatically sees its impractical implications, - the bookcase that could hold about a third as much as a far less expensive piece of equal size bought at your local furniture shop, or the chair that is anything but comfortable, therefore discouraging potential buyers. But too much has been made of the impracticality of Memphis pieces. We may be obliged to change our lives in accordance with the pieces. This is not so outrageous, for Memphis designs are never intentionally or cruelly inconvenient nor gratuitously contrary to our exceptions of what furniture should be. Rather they ask us to look more closely at how we live in rooms and how we interact with the objects in them. For instance, just as sexual fantasies and dreaming answer our need for wish-fulfillment that the waking world cannot always provide, some of Memphis lamps may answer not our need for practical lighting but a psychological need for a glow with something magical an inexplicable about it: In relation to the bookcase that stores practically nothing and the uncomfortable chair, these pieces are asking us, in relation to the bookcase why we own as much as we do, and for the chair, why should we be comfortable in a world that changes so fast and barely gives us time to sit down and relax. This aspect of Memphis that challenges us to question the way we live, is perhaps the most important of all. We like to imagine in this very confused world, that somethings will never change, lamps, tables, chairs - objects that we associate with our earliest memories of home. But Memphis designers want to cure us of our nostalgic yearnings for that perfect little world we so often want to return to when confronted with the 'messy reality' outside. Because we are unable as "yet" to travel back in time, such yearnings are impossible to fulfill. In offering us their furniture to live with,

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they are giving us a chance to live lives of our own, not rooted in childhood. This challenge is not an easy one to meet. But as Sottsass admits, "Memphis furniture is very intense, and ... it can only live with very intense people: Self-sufficient because I am thinking of envolved people as people who know how to run their lives properly in society without having themselves protected by any institution, even a cultural one". Therefore it is up to each one of us to decide whether we are intense enough to undertake the reevaluations Memphis demands. (ref. (13.0))

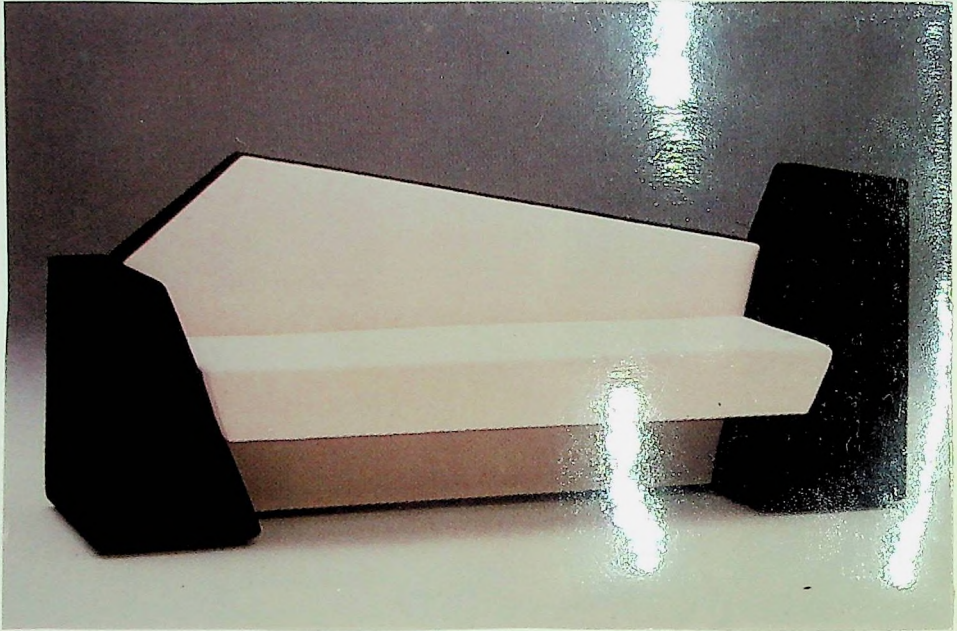
Memphis in its 8 years of existence has succeeded, unwittingly though, to transform subversive avant garde into high fashion, this subsequent chic version of post modernism has had a consideravle influence on contemporary style and that of future styles to come.

6.0 The influence of Memphis design

It has only been in the last few years (since 1985), that manufacturers have dared to produce the type of avant - garde design Memphis / Milano presented to the world.

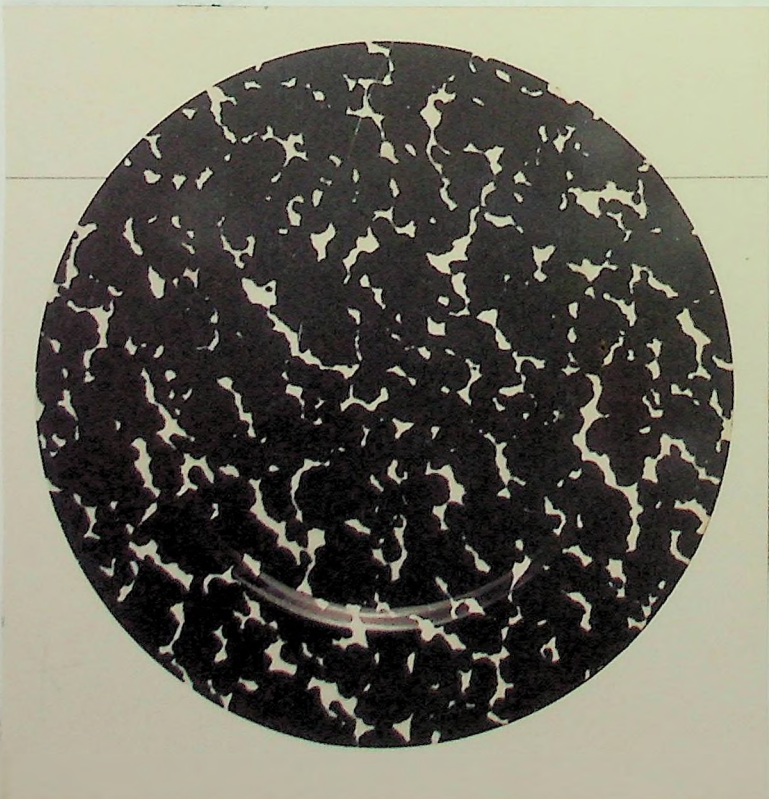
Trend setting Bloomingdales and other chic department stores in America are now selling Memphis accessories and wearables, along with a host of supposedly comparable knock - offs.

Although one should imagine that Memphis designers would be intrigued by its popularity, in the respect that its products are constantly immulated, however they acknowledge the fact, that this homegrown version of Memphis are primarily as a result of a misinterpretation of what this movement is all about. Most immitations are under the impression that there is an actual 'Memphis Style'. As Ettore Sottsass jnr. has selected 'Memphis seeks not to forge a single coherent style, but to expand the visual vocabulary of contemporary design by introducing elements into it that are drawn from both todays suburban vernacular and



(fig.(6.0.1))

(fig.(6.0.2))



ancient / or exotic ritualistic artefacts. (ref. (1.)).

Such a misinterpretation of Memphis is characteristic of American manufacturers. The most easily assimilated motifs employed by Memphis form the basis of constant repetitions by American manufacturers. By freezing and altering such quaint motifs - squiggly lines, bright colours to name but a few, they have succeeded in dampening the exciting ideas that set Memphis off and running in the first place. They have in one respect trivialised and simplified the concept of Memphis. With a few exceptions they have along with the media turned Memphis into one more dumb new look!

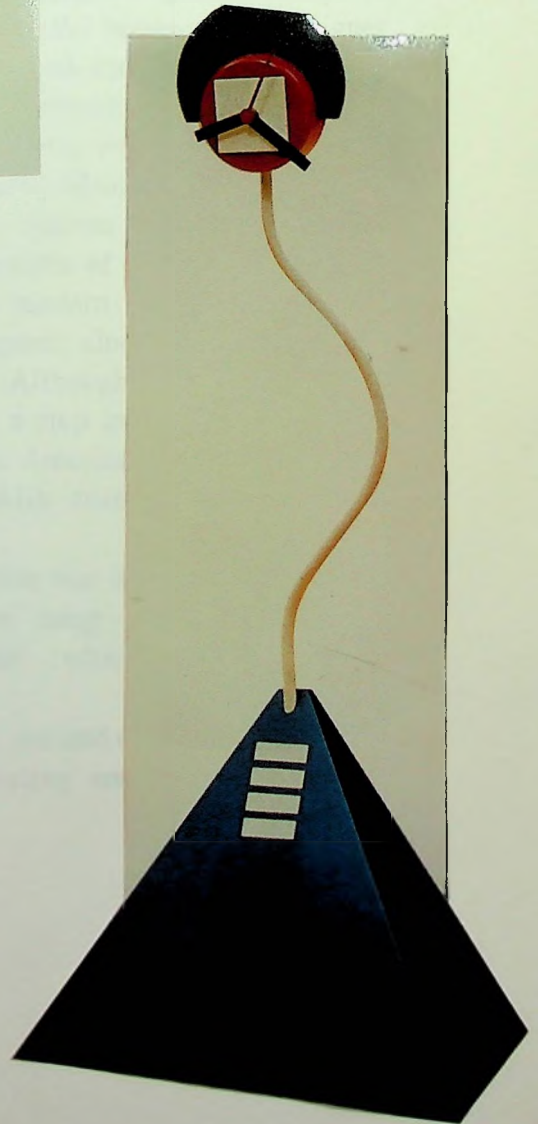
One of the most interesting aspects of Memphis in relation to contemporary design is that it has succeeded in altering the course of the designer / manufacturer relationship, in that instead of the manufacturer solely determining what is to be produced. Memphis on the other hand has arrived at a situation, where they can persuade manufacturers to let 'creative - type designs' - imaginative and bubbly be mass produced. However this turn of events has taken an ironic twist in the United States manufactures of Memphis-style goods, in that it is not the designer that determines what is produced, but rather the rising sales charts attesting to Memphis marketability.

What with all the publicity that Memphis generates, it is not surprising then that industry capitalizes on it. There is no risk involved in turning our vaguely Memphis - like designs - the public "love it", so much so that one can speak of a form of cross - fertilization between Memphis and fashion (especially street and new wave fashion). It has even suggested that fashion sparked off Memphis in the first place. Evidence of this alludes to pieces designed by Michele de Lucchi, he even claims to have gotten a tremendous impetus out of the crowd of 'punks' he saw in London's Trafalgar Square on New Years Eve 1980-81.

If fashion such as New Wave, initially inspired Memphis, then Memphis now inspires not only the designs of contemporary



(fig.(6.0.3))



jewellery and accessories, but also furniture.

The appeal of Memphis design has not solely been confined to Italy, but has been incorporated into the design of a host of countries. One such country inspired by Memphis is Denmark. - In this 1986 couch from Erik Jergerson, a Memphis - like sense of fun and flamboyency is depicted. (fig. (6.0.1)). Even as far away as Australia the presence of Memphis has been felt.

The American architect Robert Venturi more than any other designer outside the Memphis / Milano domain - that being the group itself, has been clearly influenced by the concept of Memphis design. There are great parallel between this designer and Sottsass, in that both are interested and influenced by Pop Culture. Venturi's creation of this notebook - like - pattern (fig. (6.0.2)) buffet plate for Swid Powel - note widely available is one of the more popular designs inspired by Memphis.

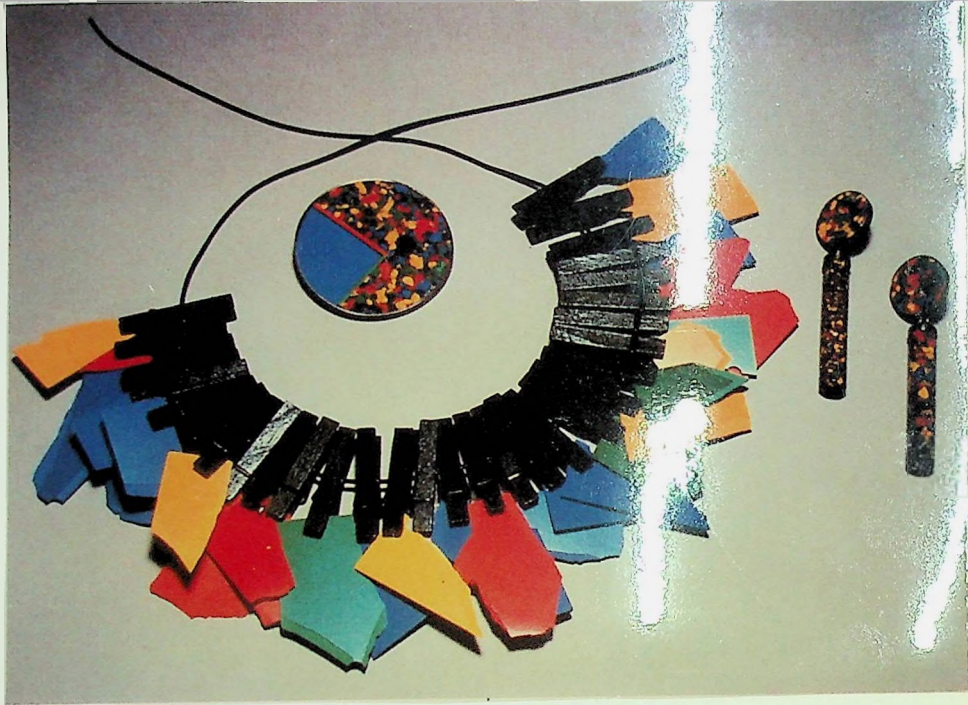
Irving Harper and George Nelson - the latter, one of Memphis' earliest, if gentlest, employer of Sottsass in the mid-50's and an important name in modern American design - designed these two Memphis inspired clocks for the Howard Miller Clock Co. (fig. (6.0.3)). Although not as refined as Memphis' own designs, these are a step in the right direction, given the timidity of most large American home furnishings manufacturers to experiment with true-to-form Memphis patterns.

There is no doubt that Memphis was in Rich Wassermann's mind when designing this "Beehive" lamp - particularly with its deco - and 1950's - derived forms - when he designed it for Design 111 (fig. (6.0.4)).

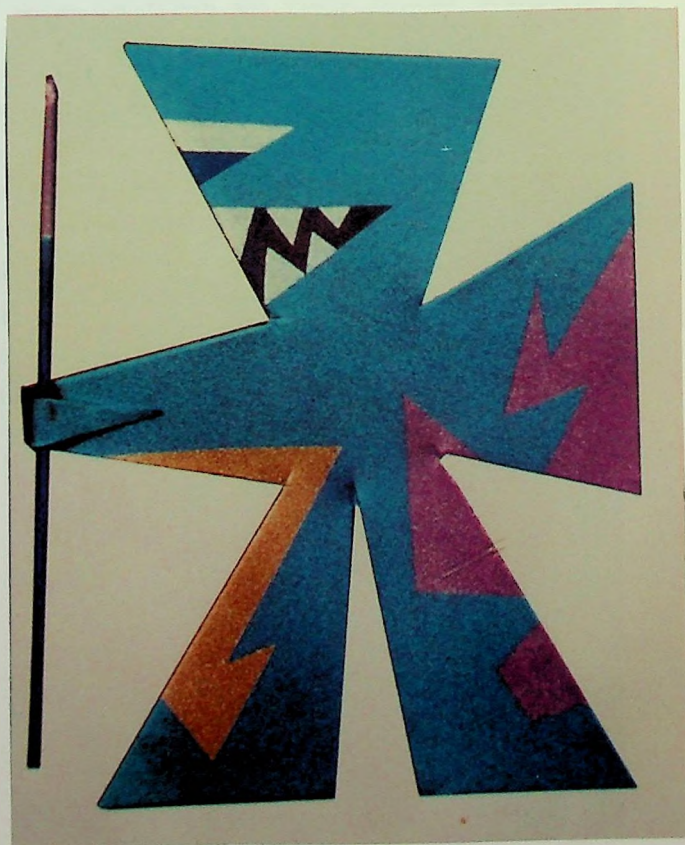
This tribal inspired necklace, pin and earrings manufactured from Colorcore Formica and Sterling are very much in the Memphis mood, (fig.(6.0.5))



(fig.(6.0.3))



(fig.(6.0.5))



(fig.(6.0.6))

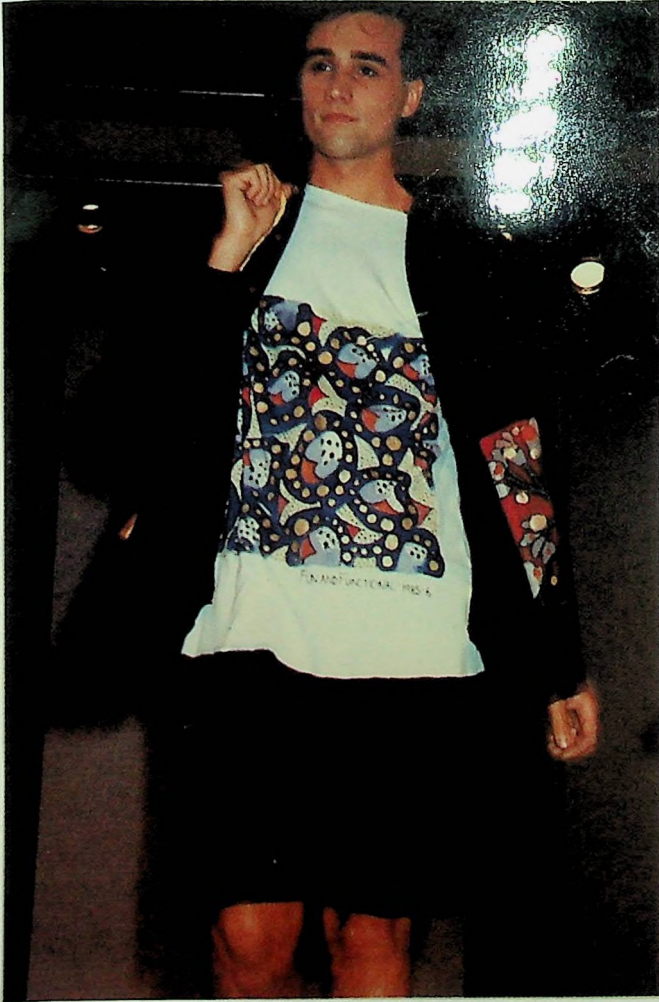
Jewellery designer Vernon Reeds "Spaztec" warrior pin manufactured out of titanium (fig. (6.0.6)). like some Memphis pieces, it is a witty reminder of the sort of creatures one encounters on the screens of todays electronic games seen in arcades.

The incorporation of Memphis design into clothes is evident, for example in this mans - tee shirt, the pattern used alludes to those designed by Nathalia du Pasquier (fig. (6.0.7)). Other Memphis patterns (many of them derived from those which adorn African garments) are increasingly been incorporated into the design of Western clothes - like those worn by the model in (fig. (6.0.8)). In (fig. (6.0.9)) this garment, the pattern used assimilates Memphis plastic laminates.

Although this Sony cassette unit (fig.(6.1.0)), is nowhere as outlandish as Memphis' electronic pieces. However the use of bright red suggests that the Italian Design movement is having a noticable effect on mass-marketed items. Other even wilder hues have shown up on recently produced Sony items.

The Memphis influence on other Italian designers is unmistakable. Designers Salvati and Tresoldi's "Miamina" chair, with its splashy colours and vivid pattern, shares a similarly light hearted sensibility. This chairs more practical aspects, however - the fact that it is foldable, for instance suggests that functionality, the strong point of Modern Design need not be sacrificed for the sake of decorativeness.

This aspiration to emulate Memphis design has in recent years subsided. The question then must be asked was this interest just a passing plane - will it last as long as Memphis exists or is it here to stay?



(fig.(6.0.7))

(fig.(6.0.8))



(fig.(6.0.9))





(fig.(6.1.0))

(fig.(6.1.1))



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Conclusion

The busy patterns, myriad colours and the combination of unlikely elements in Memphis design mirror the hyperactivity and unpredictability of the global village in this electronic age. Even within a single item of furniture, the elements may evoke various parts of the world - a chair's fabric may recall West African patterns, its form reminiscent of American 1940's streamline style, and its colour resembling those of Italians "sorbeiti". Although that same piece may bring to mind the wonder of electronics- a kind of combination of past and present. Indeed Memphis belongs to the electronic world just as the functional belonged to the machine. Memphis is well attuned to the spirit of these times - and how appropriate the calm, cool modern design that it seeks to displace.

The excesses of Memphis' bright colour and dense patterns bespeak a darker side of today's world. Although Memphis designers respond to the dizzy dazzling, absurd to muchness as a cause for laughter, at the same time they felt depressed about the unstable world within which we live where fashion changes constantly and rapidly, where right and wrong, true and false are becoming increasingly difficult to tell apart. Memphis designs' responses are expressed visually in the pieces themselves - lending them their special poignance. Memphis unlike modernism does not offer a rational utopian answer to solve the world woes, indeed Memphis accepted the world as a pretty woeful place and a pretty funny one at that.

The appeal of Memphis has been widespread its presence has been felt not only in the Italian design domain, but also in a host of countries.

Memphis represented through its designs a significant reaction to the status quo of design in a confused world. Its search for novelty through the use of bizarre colours and materials and combinations, conjured up, not only a reaction to current trends in design, but also caused us to question the way we live. However

it was this constant search for novelty that in 1986, caused a distrust of the avant - garde as ephemeral and too gimmicky which led, to sadly a sobering of style. A new concentration on quality and a bumper crop of reproduction design classics were now the new interest of the design world.

Memphis, with a thousand imitators and a style that had lost most of its subversive power, took a drastic step in 1988, and disbanded altogether signifying the 'end of an era'.

But then again maybe it is not the end of an era, a style to be forgotten forever - for design(s), once forgotten have a tendency to keep cropping up from time to time influencing and shaping subsequent design - In one sense isn't design just a bowl of 'Polycultural Salad'?

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