THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

RADICAL DESIGN IN ITALY

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INTRODUCTION

Italian design is renowned internationally for producing visually sophisticated and culturally meaningful products. Its stylish mass produced products of electrical appliances, furniture, office equipment, cars and fashion have earned Italy this reputation. In no other country, except America has design been so strongly significant.

In achieving this reputation Italy has evolved a unique approach towards the theory, the aesthetic and the practice of design which depends minimally on models borrowed from elsewhere. From the outset Italian design has been continually researching and renewing its philosophy of design. The success of Memphis in 1981 and the emergence of the 'New Design' aesthetic have reclaimed Italy's position as the home of design. It offered an alternative to mainstream Italian formalism. But Memphis and the 'New Design' aesthetic didn't just appear overnight; it was the culmination of research and experimentation which began in the late 1960's and which was known as Radical Design. The Radical movement sought a new kind of design aimed at the creation of a more habitable human environment.

CHAPTER 1

THE ITALIAN MIRACLE AND THE ITALIAN LINE'

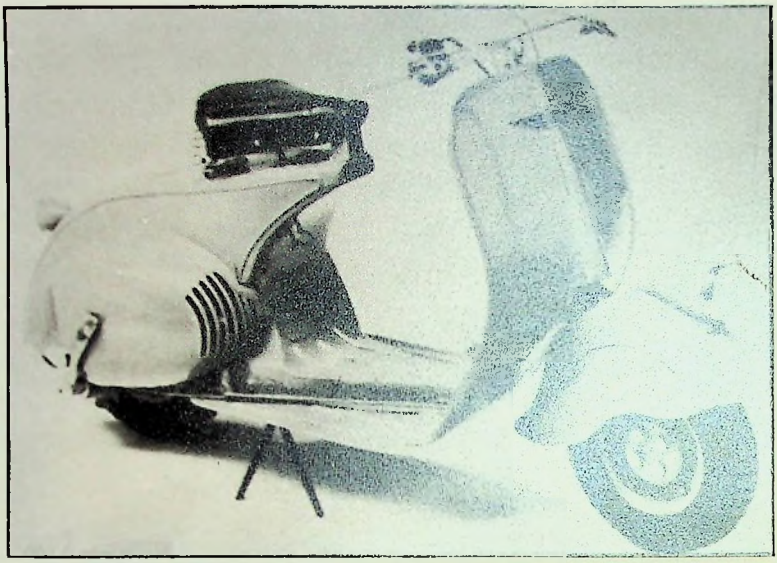
- reconstruction and design

Italy by the mid 1940's had been completely devastated by World War II, both physically and morally. To help reconstruct Italy, massive aid was received from America under the Marshall Aid scheme. It was this financial help which was crucial to the rapid reconstruction and development of Italian Industry.

The early post-war period was characterized by hardship, but it was still an exciting time with a new democratic society evolving and hope in the future. America was to be a major influence and inspiration for Italy in the early post-war years. By 1949 pre-war industrial production levels were re-established, producing products for the home market initially and then an export-led product boom followed. The government played a major role in promoting this rapid economic recovery by creating the infrastructure within which the economy could grow. It was able to supply firms with cheap steel and petrochemicals which were essential for economic growth and offered grants to certain areas of industry. America supplied the technology and the funds required to re-establish Italian industry. This economic rebirth was also to embrace culture, as Ernesto N. Rogers the editor of Domus magazine wrote at the time: 'It is a question of forming a taste, a technique, a morality, all in terms of the same function. It is a question of building a society'.1

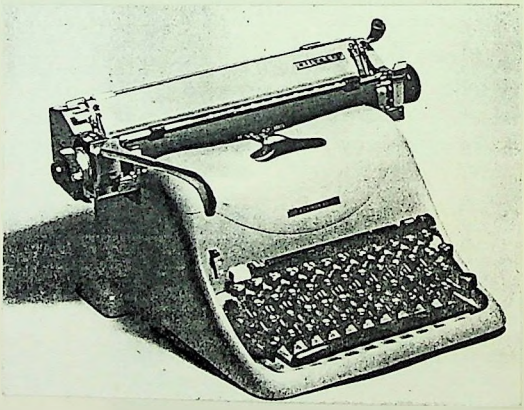
For the designer there was an important role, to assist in the economic development and to show that design had a role to play in society. The American model of design, which was consumer orientated, was used as the guide for the Italian post-war design movement. Italian designers adopted, the American concept of 'Streamlining' which can be seen in many of their products of the early post-war period. The Italian version of 'Streamlining' favoured a less aggressive and elaborate aesthetic to a more utilitarian appearance for their products. This particular aesthetic style can be seen in such products as Piaggio's 'Vespa' (fig. 1) motor scooter designed by Corradino D'Ascanio in 1946; Olivetti's 'Lexicon 80' (fig. 2) typewriter, designed by Marcello Nizzoli in 1948; Gio Ponti's espresso (fig. 3) coffee-machine for La Pavoni of 1949 and Pininfarina's 'Cisitalia' (fig. 4) motor car of 1951.

While American influence was at the roots of the Italian post-war design movement, it had soon developed its own unique style and became known as 'The Italian Line'. The phrase that characterized Italian design of the late 1940's and early 1950's was 'utility plus beauty'. Influences of the fine art, particularly organic sculpture, became an predominant feature of design during this period. This sculptural aesthetic was most notably applied to furniture, which made an enormous impression internationally. The most extreme expressive examples of

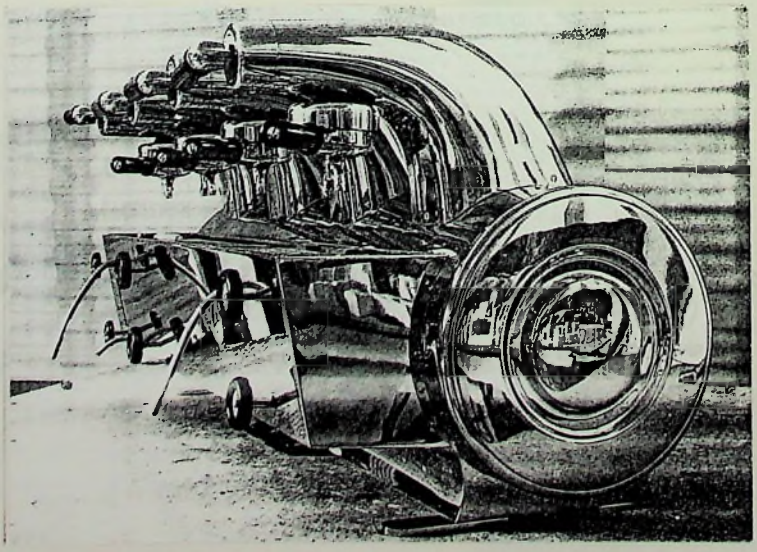


(fig.1) Vespa by Corradino D'Ascanio

(fig 2) Lexicon 80



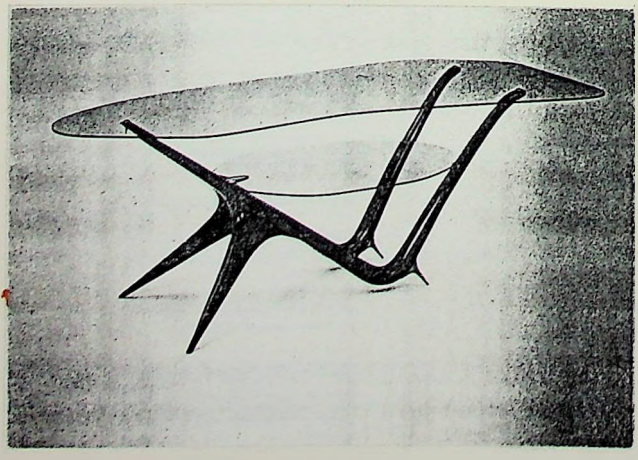
(fig 3) Expresso coffoe machine by Gio Ponti



(fig 4) Cisitalia motor car by Pininfaria

(fig 6) Sculptural chair

(fig 5) Glass table by Carlo Mollini



Italian furniture style were from a group of furniture designers working in Milan, among whom Carlo Mollini was the most important figure. Mollini created highly extravagant surreal furniture (fig. 5,6) in carved wood and moulded plywood. Italian furniture became a source of aesthetic inspiration in home furnishings and even began to challenge the dominance of Scandinavian design. By the mid-1950's Italian products had become renowned internationally for their excellent quality and aesthetic innovation. The period from 1945 to 1955 was one in which design and culture seemed genuinely to move hand in hand, both committed to the same ideal of democracy and optimism. Andrea Branzi described it later as a 'harmonious relationship between production and culture. In the following decade this design and cultural unity faded'.2

The years from 1958 to 1963 in Italy witnessed an economic boom and the emergence of its own consumer society, a period that is referred to as the 'Economic Miracle'. Design was also to undergo changes. It became an important means of market penetration. Italian merchandise combined second-hand technology with quality design, which was unequalled elsewhere. The 'Italian Line' became increasingly minimal, formal and sophisticated. Italian products became increasingly

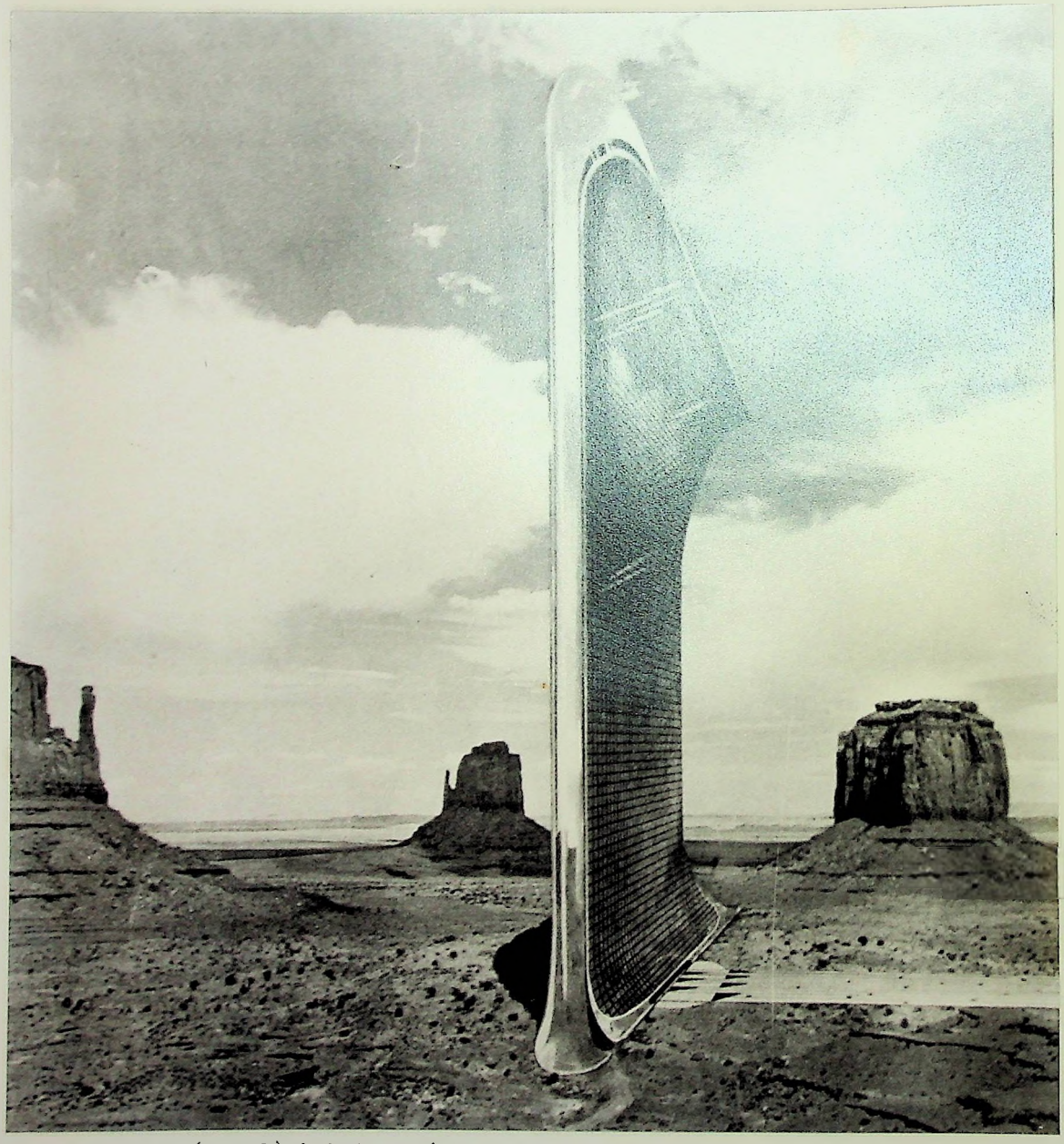
synonymous with the materialistic lifestyles of the affluent. Between 1955 and 1965, Italy created a highly persuasive neo-Modern aesthetic of consumption. The design theory 'Forma, Funziona, Bellezza' (Form, Function, Beauty) became highly influential on Italian design where beauty and pure functionality became one with form. This theory was totally formalistic in nature and didn't take into account socio-cultural aspects of design. The new emphasis on the Modern Movement aesthetic became the dominant characteristic of Italian design and remained so right into the 1970's.

The 'radical design' movement which emerged towards the end of the 1960's challenged the alliance of design with advanced capitalism and conspicuous consumption and questioned the philosophy of the Modern Movement. It sought a renewed definition of the social, cultural, and economic function of design.

CHAPTER II

'THE CRISIS OF THE OBJECT'

- The first phase of radical design



(fig 7) 'Wind Town' by Archizoom Associati

In the sixties a crisis of design evolved in Italy. It was not an economic crisis but a crisis of ideology. This crisis of design ideology was in many respects part of a larger crisis; that of Western cultural values, which were being questioned by the younger generation who had inherited the post-war society created by their parents. The fears and doubts held by this generation about their society were to be highlighted by the student unrest of these years.

Then during this period, primarily from the American avant-garde culture, the influences of oriental religions and communitarian thought began to grow. In this context an anti-industrial ideology developed with the idea of a return to the land. A general anti-consumption attitude prevailed primarily among the younger generation.

The sixties was also to be characterized by the emergence of Pop art. This evolved in the United States and came to its peak during the sixties. Pop had emerged as a direct result of the post-war consumer society in America and was imported into the rest of the Western World. It reflected popular culture of the time through music, images and shapes and was in stark contrast to the cool, spare, clean-lined and undecorated style of the established Modern Movement. This Movement had denied consumption any autonomous value, and it had never commented on aesthetic or fundamental values.

Italian design had built its reputation from the ideology and examples of the Modern Movement. Italian design had become known the world over as the ultimate in high-style status orientated consumer delight with its sleek slick modern furnishings and consumer products. Italian manufacturers were quick to realise in the early post-war years the importance of good design to help sell their goods world-wide and benefit the economy. During the years of reconstruction and development the economy had boomed. However by the early sixties the economic situation had deteriorated into a state of recession, influenced by numerous factors such as inflation and wage increases. The resulting repercussions led to a climate of general economic nervousness which ensued in renewed labour clashes. This tension was also the result of a broadened maturity and strengthening of the labour unions in Italy.

The small and medium industries were to solidify their already established links with design during the sixties. This resulted in the designer becoming a collaborator in many companies. The emphasis on design was to become more and more critical in Italian goods as they had failed to keep pace with the technological achievements of their Western counterparts. The reputation that Italy had earned for itself world-wide through modernity, sophistication and tastefulness in design had by the mid-sixties, become the means by which it fought to retain

its world economic position. The Modern Movement was to continue as the established design movement everywhere, but parallel to it developed Radical Design or as it was also known, 'Counter Design' or 'Anti-Design'. It was a reassessment of design by a small group of architect-designers which emerged in the late 1960's and was to continue into the 1970's. The movement was sustained by the system of exhibitions and sponsorship upon which they relied heavily to promote their radical cause and theories.

1964 was a particularly significant year for the culturel of design and for its influence on the emergence of radical design in Italy. It was the year in which the first student agitation began in the Architectural faculties. One of the main grievances of the students lay in the over supply of trained architects, making it harder for them to get work when they graduated. This was allied to a strong disillusionment with the older generation of designers and architects whom they believed had sold out to the twin forces of advanced capitalism and consumerism, and had lost their early pioneering spirit.

The influences of the supertechnological neo-avant-garde of the English group Archigram had been affirmed by this period. In 1964 at the Venice Biennale there was a large exhibition of American Pop artists. The XIII Triennale of 1964, an exhibition of design which occurs every three

years, represented an important turning point in Italian design and had an extensive indirect influence. Firstly, the theme of the XIII Triennale was that of 'leisure time' and represented a definite break with the theme of industrial design, which had dominated three of the last four exhibitions. Secondly, because a new generation now assumed the role of protagonist, comprised for the most part of the same group who had taken part in the 'New Designs of Italian Furniture' exhibition. Thirdly, because it brought up for discussion, and on an ideological and linguistic plane as well as on the plane of methodology and theory, many of the features that were to characterize Italian design in the ensuing period.

The XIII Triennale established the concept of the total man-made environment. Once this had been established, the designer could no longer design the object in isolation but it must be designed in relation to the total environment. In addition, the XIII Triennale initiated the discussion of environmental control. The man-made environment should be designed so that it could be controlled, and within this the single object could influence the total satisfactory environment as Vittora Gregotti noted:

> Nothing guarantees that the sum of a series of well designed objects produces a positive environment; overcrowding, poorly established relations, superimpositions or poverty of relations can, negate that which the objects affirms.2

This Triennale also brought into prominence the concept of consumption as a fundamental driving force within society and that this fact must be taken into account in the formalization of designing the man-made environment, criticizing at the same time its limits and the possibilities it allowed for future development.

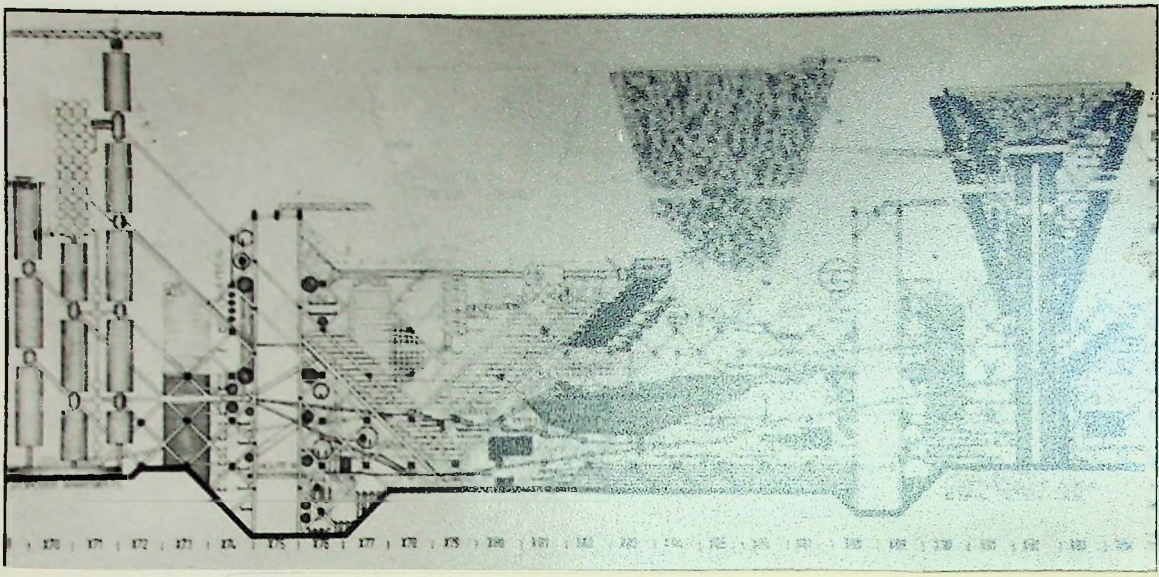
Finally, in 1964 the crisis of governmental planning of the centre-left coalition became manifest. Above all a new concept reached maturity in 1964 after a long and difficult debate conducted primarily by the Gruppo 63: a new concept of the relationship between ideology and language and a different evaluation of the possible contributions of the creative culture in the formation of alternative social images.

Thus began in 1964 a long anti-institutional exploration by a small group of architect-designers of one part of the culture of Italian design. There were, naturally, international influences which played a vital role. Acknowledgment must be given to: Pop art, English architectural group Archigram, the fantasy projects of Austrian Architect Hans Hollein and his anti-functionalist manifesto of 1962, the French group 'Utopie', the rediscovery of Kiesler, in addition to certain work of unconventional technologists such as Frei Otto and Buckminster Fuller. These were all influential on this particular Italian group whose work became known as radical design.

The English architectural group Archigram played a vital role in influencing the two most important radical Italian groups, Superstudio and Archizoom. Archigram's utopian graphic vision such as 'Plug in City' (fig. 8) of 1964 which incorporates the imagery of science fiction in envisaging a future city in which advanced technology had enabled flexibility and expendability to become the order of the day. The utopian graphic visions of Archigram, inspired projects by Archizoom Associati, such as 'No-Stop City' of 1970 and others such as 'Continuous Monument' (fig. 9) 1969 by Superstudio.

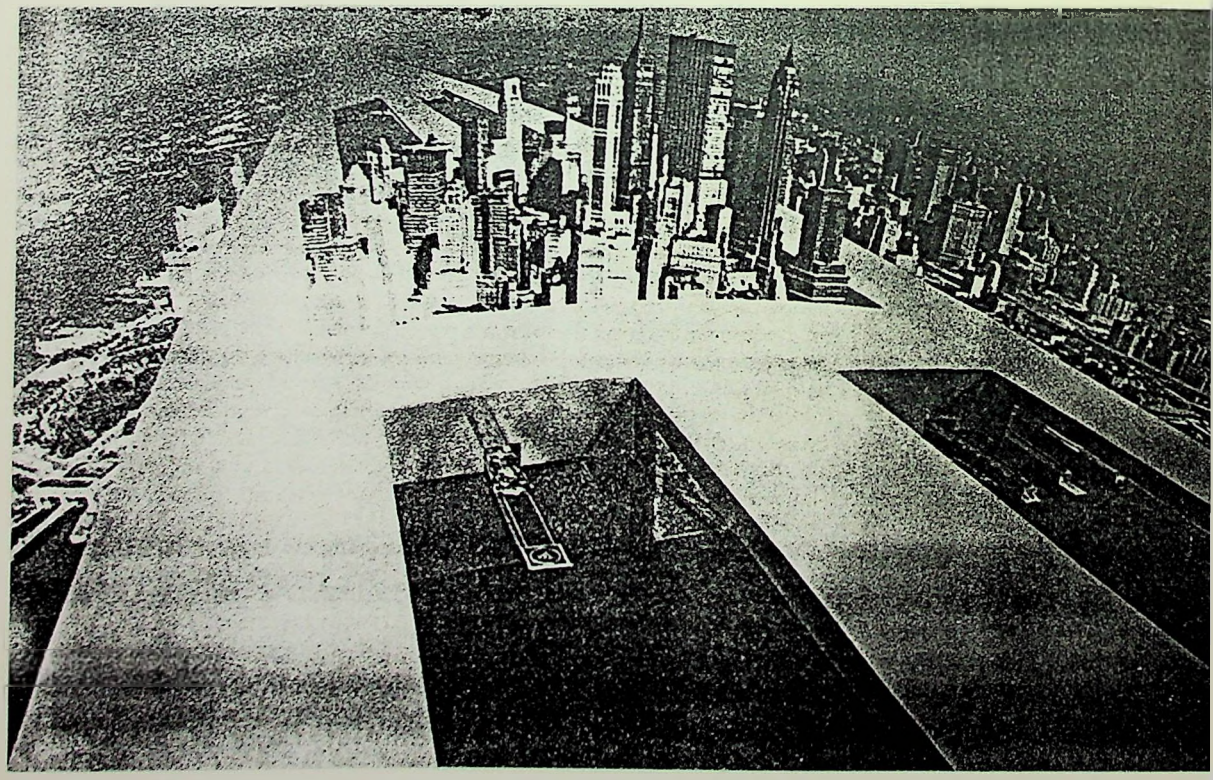
It was in Florence in 1966 that these two radical architectural groups, Superstudio and Archizoom Associati were formed. In the same year both groups mounted an exhibition called 'Superarchitecture' in Pistoia. The following year in Modena, a second exhibition also called 'Superarchitecture' was organised by both groups. The themes of these early projects ranged from references to the English group Archigram, to links with avant-garde politics, pop music and fashion. The 'Superarchitecture' exhibitions consisted of furnishings and architectural projects, all influenced by pop culture. The theme of a renewed culture and a widening of its perspective was underlined in the definition of the exhibition:

> Superarchitecture is the architecture of superproduction, of superconsumption, of superinducement to consumption, of the supermarket,



(fig 8) Plug in City by the English group Archigram

(fig 9) Continous Monument



> of Superman, of super-high-test gasoline. Superarchitecture accepts the logic of production and consumption and makes an effort to demystify it.2

Society had been transformed by industrialisation, urbanisation and information accessibility to such a degree that culture had become a mass culture where everything was conducted on a mass scale. This had led to changes occurring in society at this period, such as the arrival of mass production and mass consumption. There was a high level of awareness during this period that society was entering a new cultural era. Superarchitecture accepted this change and the logic behind it and set out to attempt to make this new culture comprehensible to society.

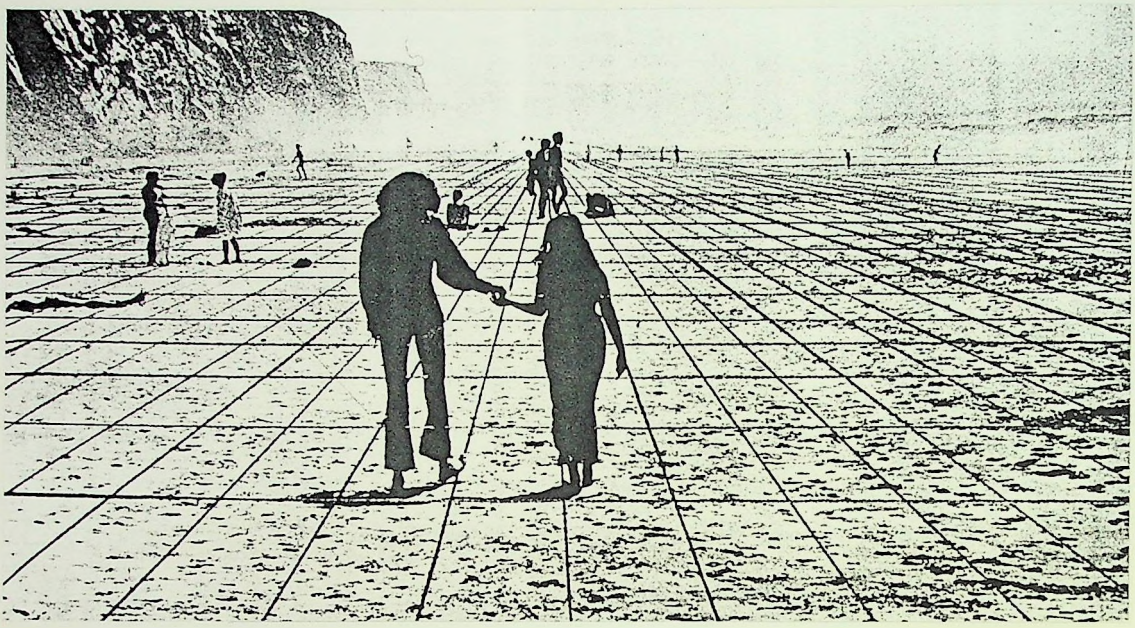
Superstudio's members consisted of Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro and Roberto Magris, Piero Frassinelli and Adolfo Natalini and they not only worked in the field of architecture but also in the field of interior and industrial design. The group worked on a series of real and utopian architectural design and film projects through the second half of the 1960's and into the 1970's. They used drawing and photomontages for architectural projects, such as 'Continuous Monuments' and 'Ideal Cities' to communicate their ideas of 'networks of energy and communications' and their theories of the 'neutral

surface'. Pessimistic about the possibility of politics being able to solve the social, cultural and ecological crises which they perceived to exist around them, they tried to answer the problem by reshaping the environment. Superstudio visualized a future environment as consisting of uniform grid-like structures of neutral spaces (fig. 10,11) which individuals inhabit without the necessity of production or consumption or the use of objects to support their existence.

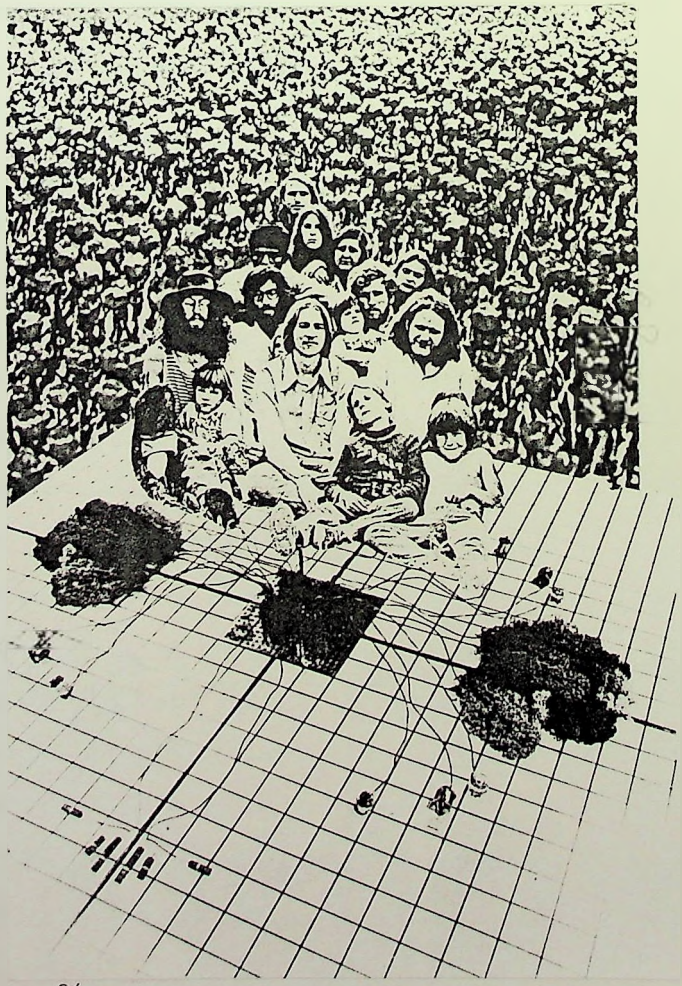
The basic necessary unit in their visualisation of a future environment represented a reduction of space to its inherent neutrality. This then opened up the possibility of the creation of a new set of values. As one critic explained in 1973:

> Superstudio is interested in what its members term 'evasion design' - as opposed to product design - which implies the eventual elimination of formalized design and a transition at some future time into its projected life without objects.3

Superstudio sought to change the way in which societies existed at that time through the use of architecture and design, and hoped that this would bring it closer to the utopian ideal. This approach is doubtful as it leaves behind other important aspects of society and culture which may not necessarily be beneficially influenced by changing the environment to what is perceived as the utopian version.

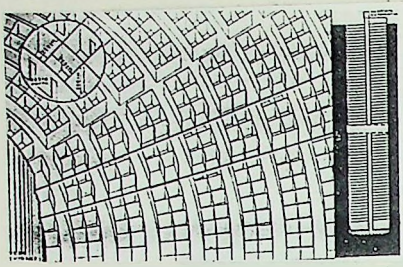


(fig 10,11) 'Neutral Surface' minimal grid system by Superstudio

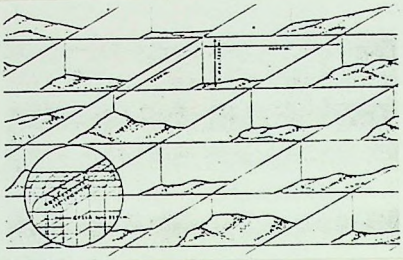


The concept of utopia that Superstudio and Archizoom envisaged was distinct from the purely formal utopia of Archigram and Japanese Metabolisms, which retained the idea of a machine civilization by proposing a mechanical architecture and metropolis. The concept which the Italian groups envisaged was a utopian system for the design of an environment which included the total living space and its artifacts, and was arrived at through an intellectual understanding of the ideal human environment. They ended up with a distinct understanding of an utopian concept which was over and above what they regarded as reality. This utopia did not put forward an different world from the existing one. Instead it represented the present one at a deeper and more advanced level of understanding.

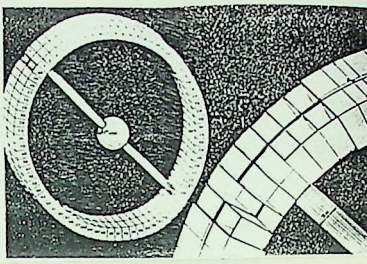
They identified many of the present day characteristics of the city-scape and exaggerated it to demonstrate that these characteristics would lead to a world of extremes and an unsuitable environment for humans. Superstudio's 'Twelve Imaginary Cities' (fig. 12-23) took many of the characteristics of the present day metropolis to radical extremes and developed each of these in isolation. This led to a world of absolute madness. This utopian vision of the city was a utopia of reverse-emphasis. It tended to explain the underlying logic of the structure of the existing metropolis. Such proposals were also to be perceived as a fundamental criticism of modern architecture through the presentation of an instantaneous glimpse of the nightmare of the future.



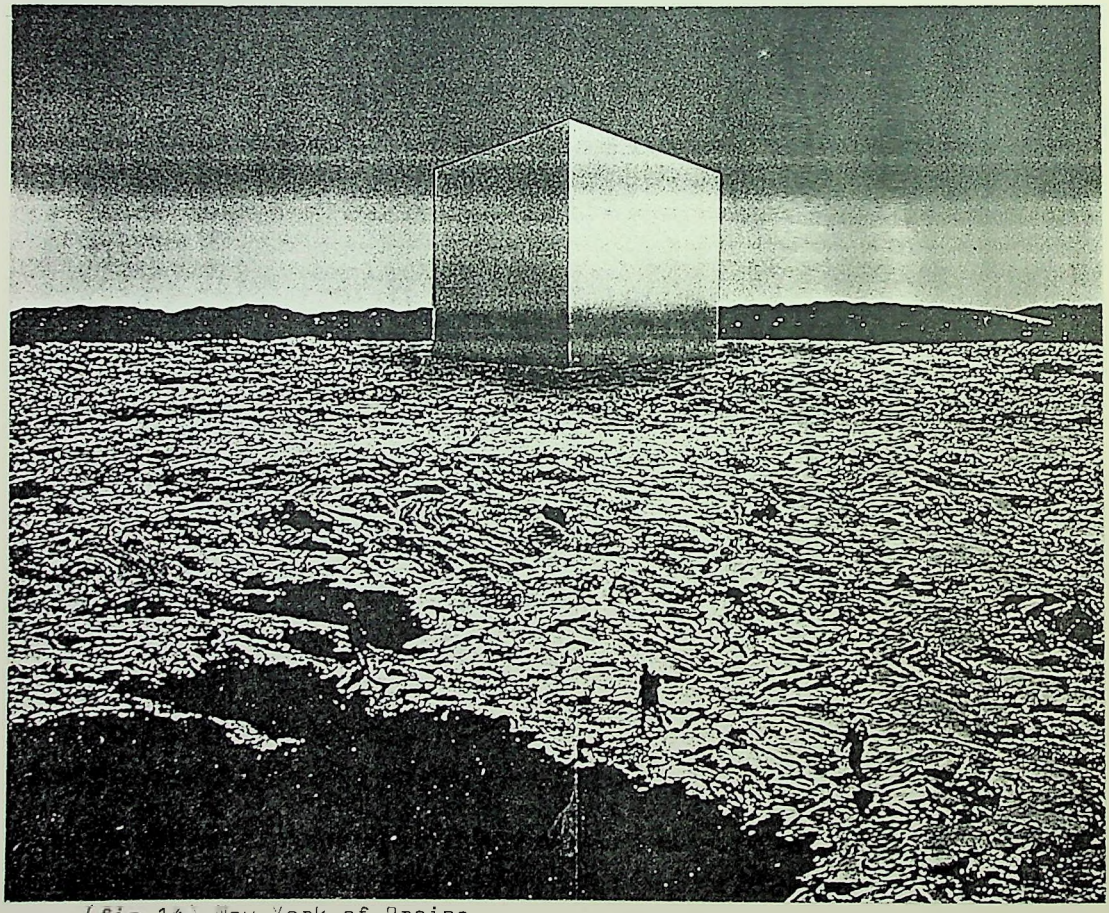
(fig 12) Superstudio's 'City 2000t' (from 'Twelve Imaginary Cities'), 1971



(fig 13) Winding Temporal City

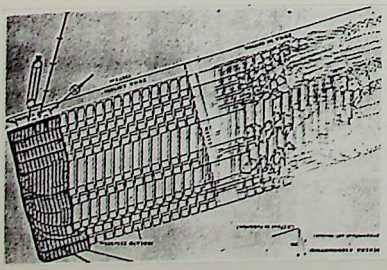


(fig 15) Spaceship City

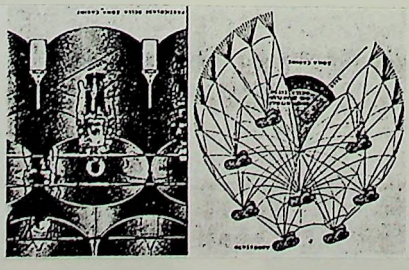


(fig 14) New York of Brains

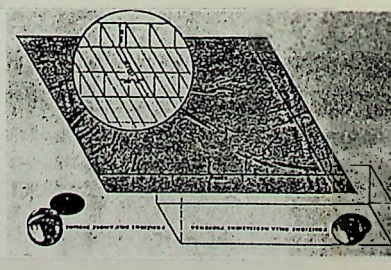
(fig 16) City of Hemispheres

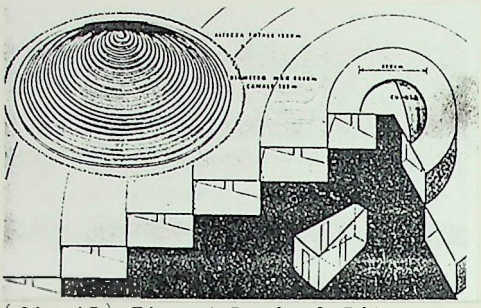


(fig 17) Barnum Jr's Magnificent and Fabulous City

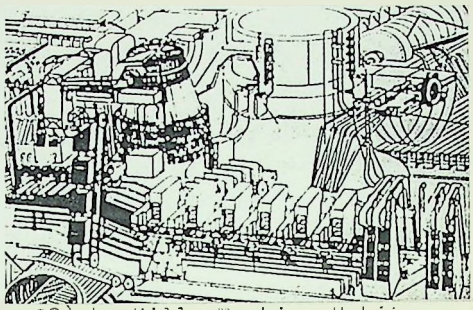


(fig 18) Continuous Production Strip City



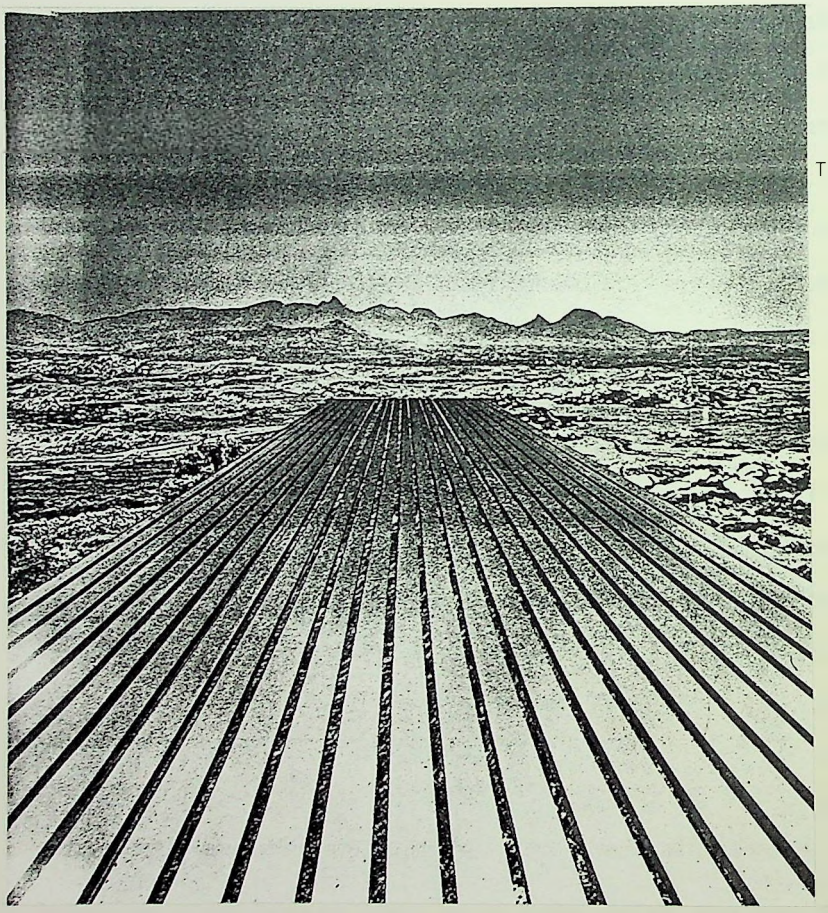


(fig 19) Tiered Conical City



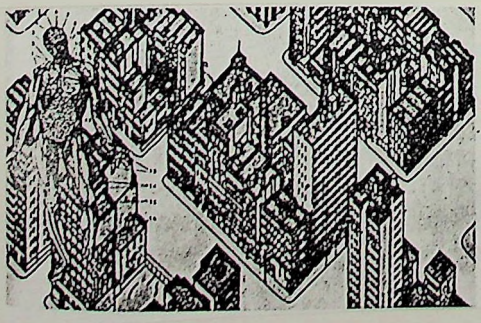
(fig 20) La Ville Machine Habitee

Twelve Ideal Cities

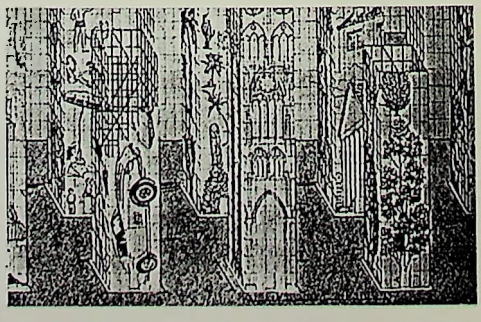


(fig 21) The City of Order

(fig 22) The City of Magnificent Houses

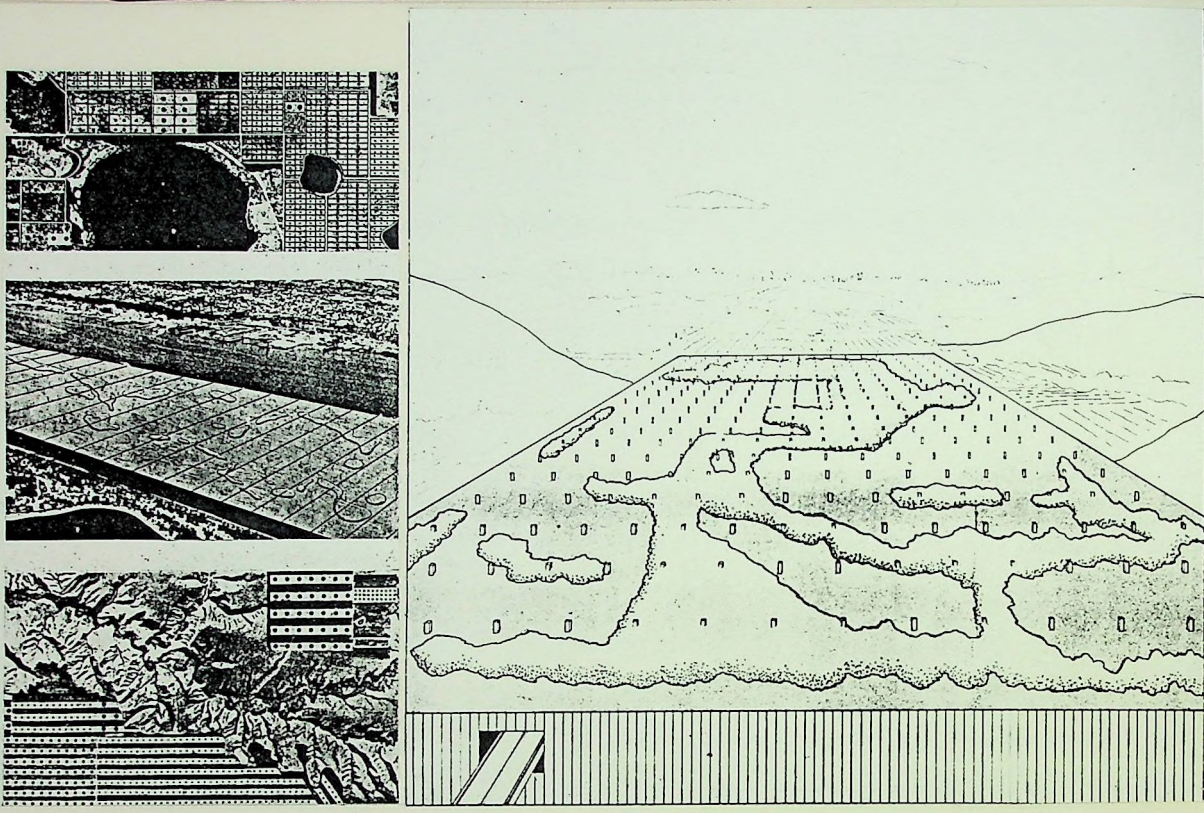


(fig 23) City of the Book

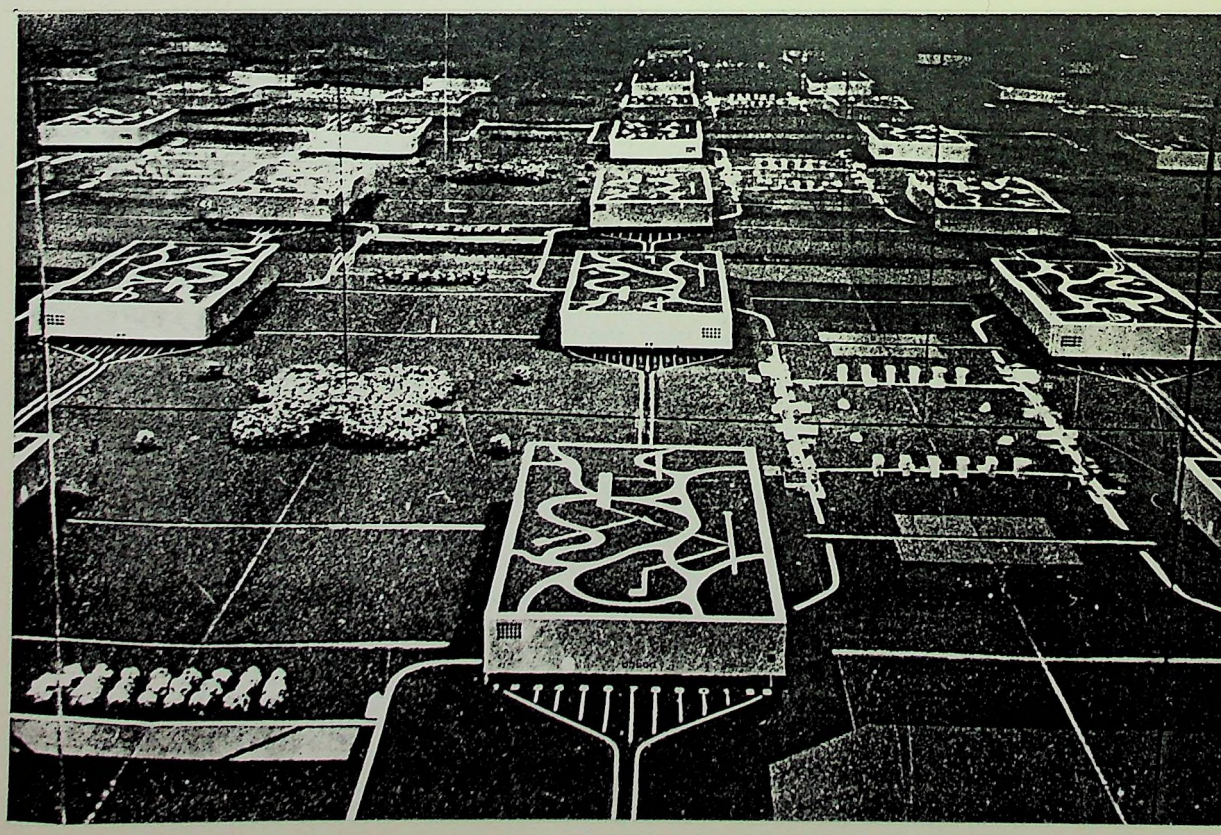


A similar study of architecture was undertaken at the same period by Archizoom Associati. This led to conclusions which were in keeping with the outcome of Superstudio's Twelve Imaginary Cities project. Research initiated by Archizoom in 1969 into the problems of housing and the city, led to the project for the 'No-Stop City' (fig. 24-28) - an utopian city theoretically finite but unbounded. This study was carried out in scientific terms on the existing concept of the metropolis and took the form of abstract theoretical and conjectural scientific hypotheses. Operating in scientific terms meant disposing of the current constraints existing in design, architecture and town planning. This was an important point in producing a valid scientific picture of a city and the objects it contained. By using the scientific process the city was broken down into mathematical terms and functions without the ideology and history of the city obscuring the task. The analysis methods used to discover the laws which governed the formation of a city and its subsequent development were comparable to the methods employed in the analysis of a chemical structure. This of course presupposes that such laws exist and can be identified and understood in scientific terms.

The most important development which they identified was the fact that the very concept of the city had undergone profound changes. The modern metropolis had ceased to be a place and had become an condition. Living in the city



(fig 24-28) No-stop City, homogeneous quarters by Archizoom



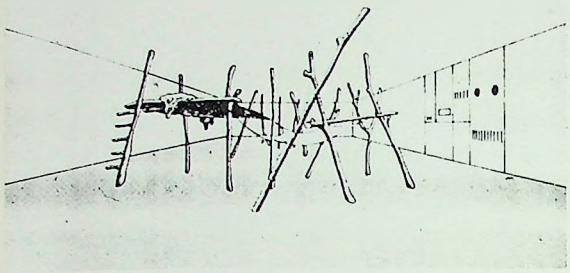
now meant adopting a particular mode of behaviour, comprising language, clothing and printed and electronically transmitted information. The city stretched as far as the influence of these modes of behaviour reached through physical and cultural means. In this way the city had become culturally predominant over the countryside, and in turn the countryside had become part of the extended reality of the metropolis. Once the countryside was integrated into the metropolis it adopted the pattern of consumption of the consumer market and society that the city had evolved into. As a result the merchandise which the city produced was distributed and consumed over a large hinterland. By its power to shape many of the properties of this merchandise, design had become a fundamentally important instrument which could influence the quality of life and the environment.

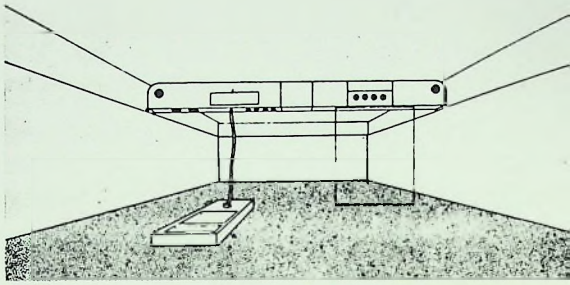
Within this framework of thought Archizoom Associati recognised that architecture hadn't adjusted to the reality of the expanded metropolis and to the concept of the market environment. In looking for a solution they had to go beyond architecture itself. By identifying the essential requirements of the city and ignoring the historical and cultural aspects, they arrived at a principle on which they perceived it to function. They sought to understand the metropolis as an utilitarian structure comprised of a collection of facilities and functions for living. In this context the function of the building was secondary in which it acted as a facade superimposed upon the facilities and functions for living.

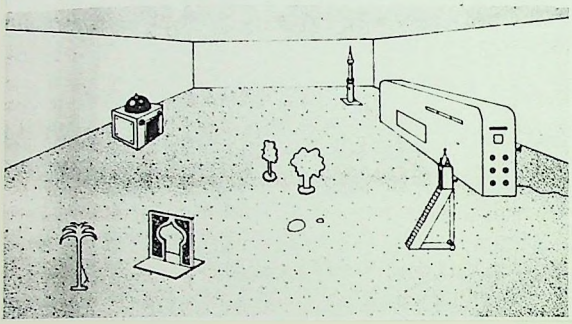
Their logical progression from this was to see urban space not as a group of architectural masses but as a hollow space filled with furniture.

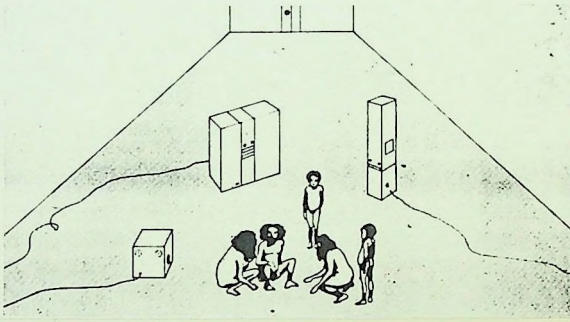
At this point they realised that the most complete expression in existence of their urban theory was the industrial logic of the factory and supermarket. The use of space within the factory or supermarket was optimal and potentially unlimited where functional requirements can be freely organised and altered to suit the necessary requirements. Within this structure an artificial environment existed without any interference or interaction. The facade of the building had no external image as it was purely a functional requirement of containment.

The No-Stop City (fig. 28-30) applied the principle of spatial organisation which was to be found in the factory and supermarket and took it further and applied it to every human environment to form a city. This resulted in a completely revolutionary urban end-product. By applying the principle of artificial lighting and ventilation on an urban scale, the No-Stop city avoided the fragmentation of property typical of traditional urban layout. The city had become a continuous residential structure, devoid of gaps and therefore of architectural images. By using a regular grid of lifts, the levels could be theoretically infinite with boundaries being of no concern. Accordingly, the function of living could be organised freely to meet the requirements necessary for the human environment. Andrea Branzi describe No-Stop City as:

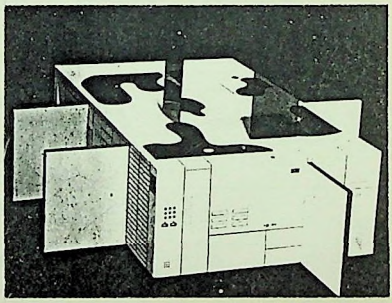




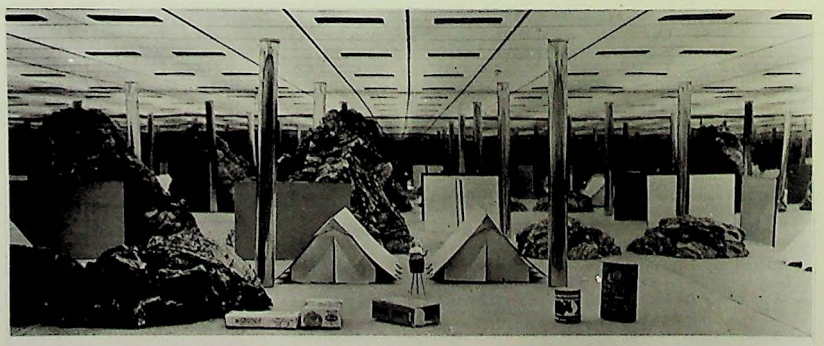


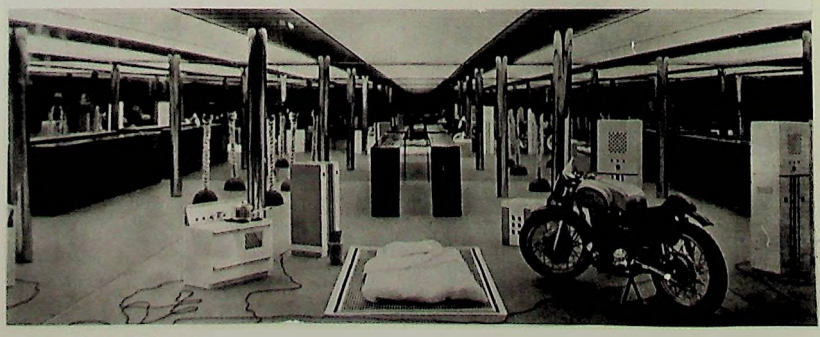


(fig 32-35) Residential car park



(fig 29-31) Internal Landscape

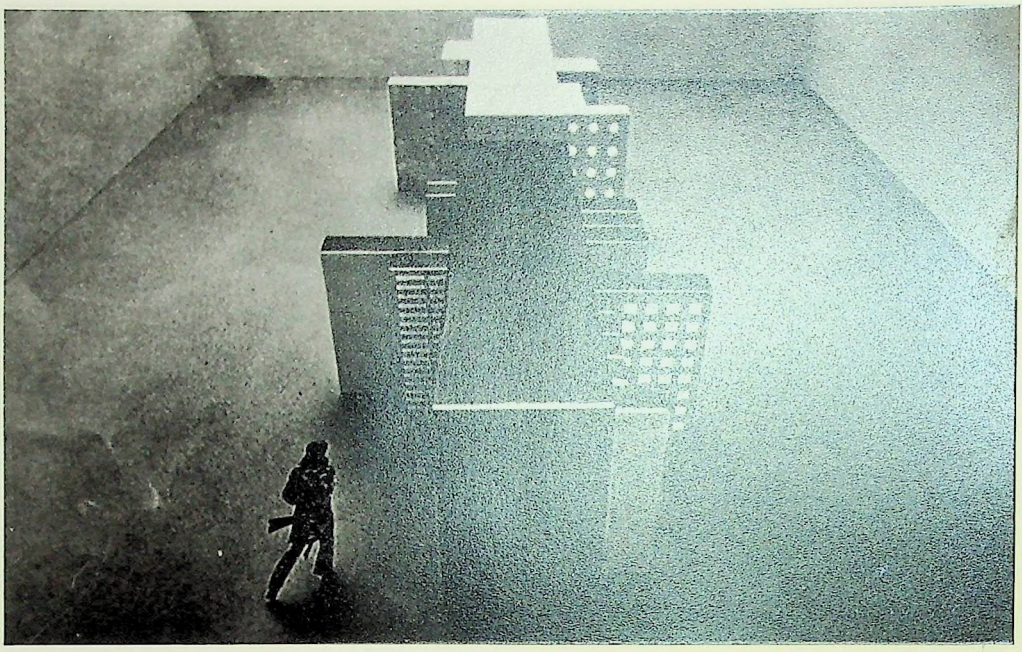




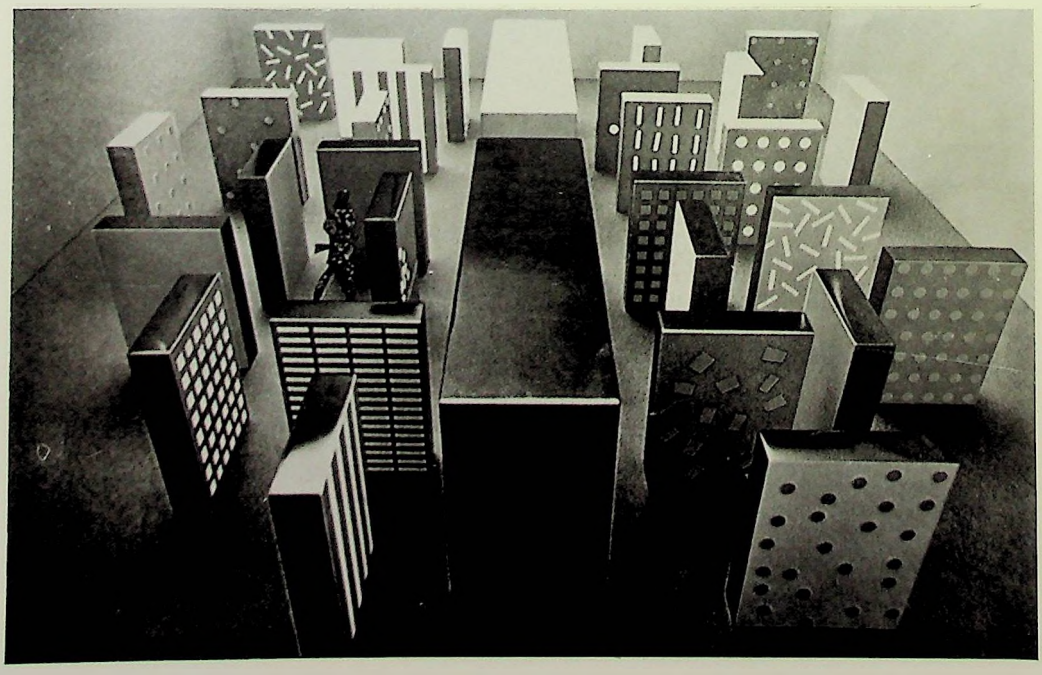
> In the No-Stop City homes are organised as residential parking lots (fig. 31-35) in which the user rents temporary space. The home ceases to be a fixed place and becomes space available for social mobility.4

No-Stop City had become the apex the of industrial integration. It was free from the problem of architectural form, which enabled it to become a neutral and utilitarian structure (fig. 36,37). It became a collection of beds, tables, chairs and cupboards; domestic furniture unified into one structure. Shops, theatres and schools no longer possessed a form of their own, but had become an homogenous part of a single collection of amenities. It had taken the Modern Movement, an architecture which was all function and represented the extreme consequences of the Movement's own theory i.e. form follows function. The skyscraper which had become the classical representation of the Modern Movement was theoretically part of the No-Stop City. The skyscraper is located on a small area of land, but potentially it could extend in all four horizontal directions as impartially as it does vertically.

Archizooms No-Stop City had been a theoretical exercise in which it took existing rational planning to extreme limits, similar to Superstudio's Twelve Imaginary Cities. These projects represented an important radical analysis



(fig 36,37)'The Neutral Surface', habitable cupboard, 1972

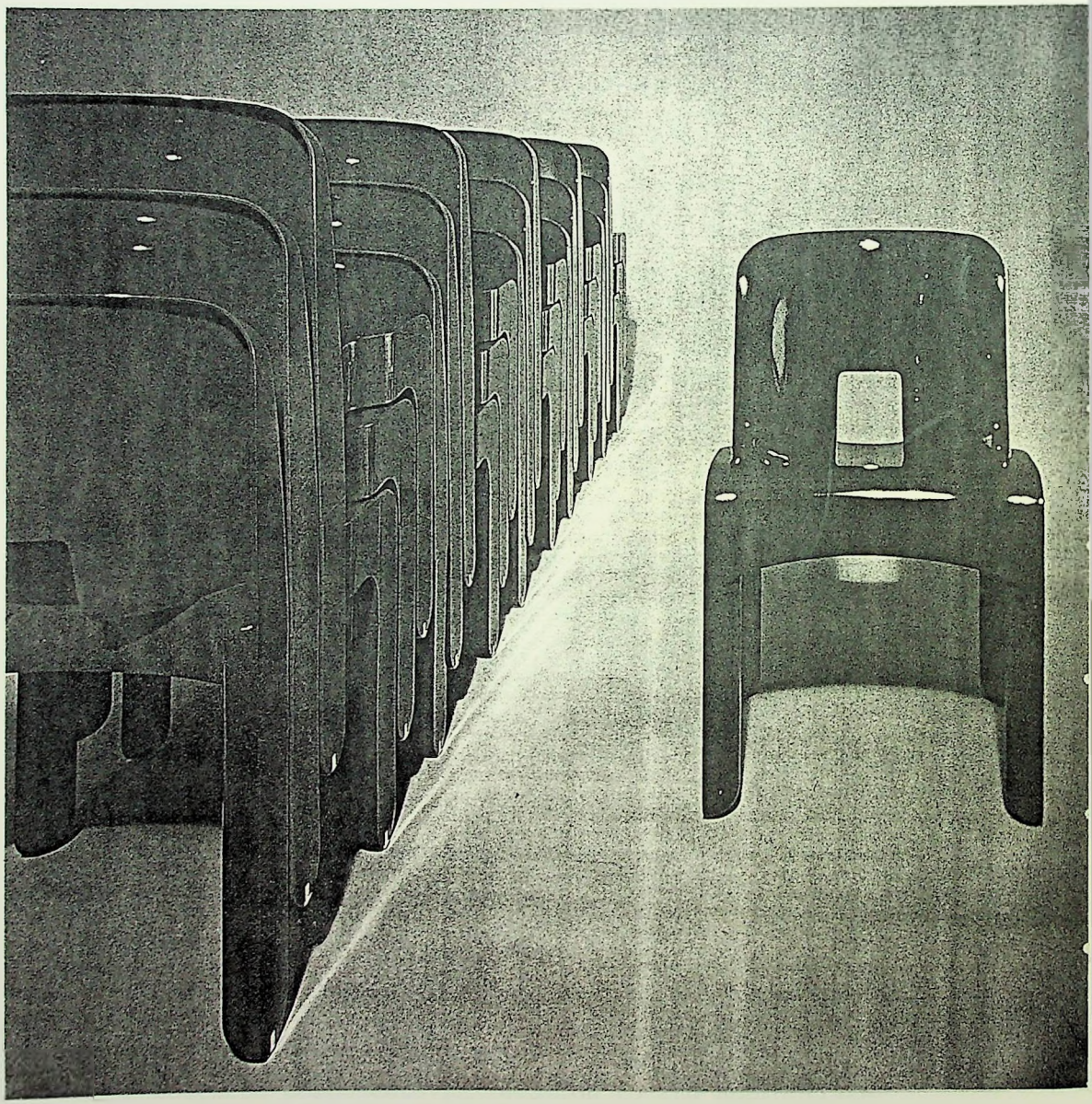


of architecture and design and criticism of the Modern Movement. Archizoom Associati wrote at the time: 'The ultimate aim of modern architecture is the elimination of architecture itself'.5 It was a period of intense questioning of the Modern Movement as it was perceived to represent inadequate solutions for architecture and modern society.

Toward the end of the 1960's and throughout the 1970's, radical groups and individuals played a major role in the design of objects, especially in an internal transformation of industrially produced furniture. Some such as Ettore Sottsass had been practicing industrial design for many years. Others such as the radical architectural groups saw it as a natural extension of architectural design and drifted into this field just as architects had previously done for years. Most of the radical architectural work had never left the drawing board and remained in a two dimensional form, whereas industrial design offered the opportunity of working in the three dimensional form. It was within the field of furnishings that they tended to concentrate, with a few pieces eventually being produced for the consumer market. Their open-mindedness in tackling the design and technological problems was to facilitate a substantial renewal of the industrial product, even in its conceptual terms.

Since the war, the objective of the designer and manufacturers, especially furniture manufacturers, was to produce the definitive product; an object that fulfilled a particular function once and for all. It was presumed that mass consumption had reduced the different individual market requirements, and now a product could be acceptable to all and suitable for any environment. This had pushed design research in the direction of extremely unitary and technically advanced objects, made out of a single material (plastic, wood, metal) and produced in a single colour. A good example of this was Joe Colombo's plastic chair (fig. 38) for children. It was very much characteristic of the dominant ideology of the sixties, which was to produce a moulded object, such as a chair or table, in one shot. The birth of thermoset plastics permitted such technical exploits, but it also required mass production and therefore mass consumption for it to be viable. The product made in a single moulding operation, of a single material and a single colour, was the ideal product for a sterotyped society of consumers.

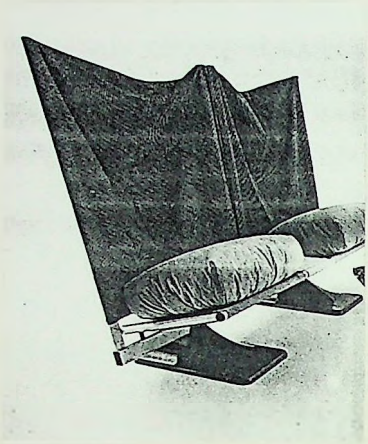
The cultural unity of the market was a constant assumption for design during the 1960's. It had been presupposed that the uniformity of design was because of the uniformity of the consumer society. This myth was eroded by the growth from 1968 onwards of widespread political and cultural conflict. Societies had evolved into a consumer society, but they still retained their cultural

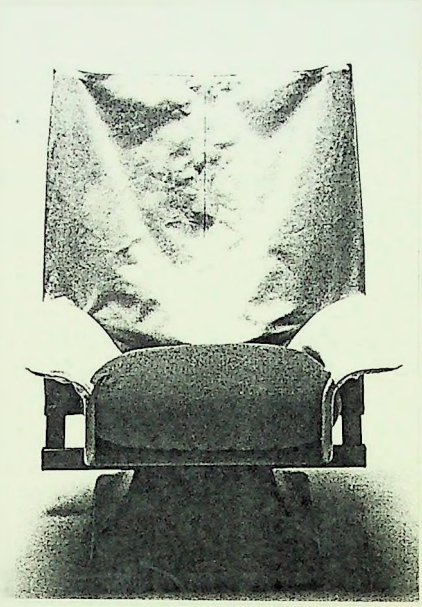


(fig 38) Plastic chair by Joe Colombo

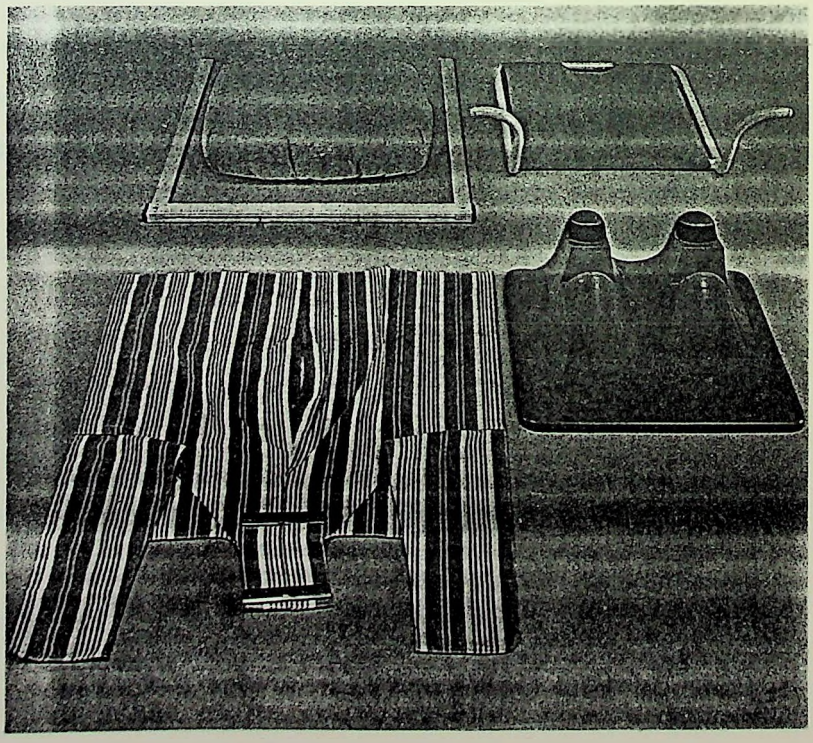
and social identity through such things as mode of conduct, tradition, religion and fashion, all of which cut through the social classes. The market consisted of many minor markets which were culturally and socially linked together. Charles Jencks an architectural-design historian, described this phenomenon as 'families' each distinguishable from each other by their individual culturel and referred to this as 'post-industrial society'.

Mass consumption during the 1960's had denied each of these minor markets their individual identity. This philosophy was part of the Modern Movement's approach to design which denied the consumer any cultural or social identity in the objects they purchased. As a result of the social and cultural unrest of the late 1960's, there was fragmentation of the consumer market into many smaller markets. A new approach to design would now be required to meet this new apparent reality. The Modern Movement was unable to provide a solution as it had relied on market unity and the principle of the functionally definitive object. Design was to be re-examined by the radical movement, by an analysis of the object into its structural components in relation to the appropriate technology required to form the individual parts. It also reassessed the functional and social application of the object.



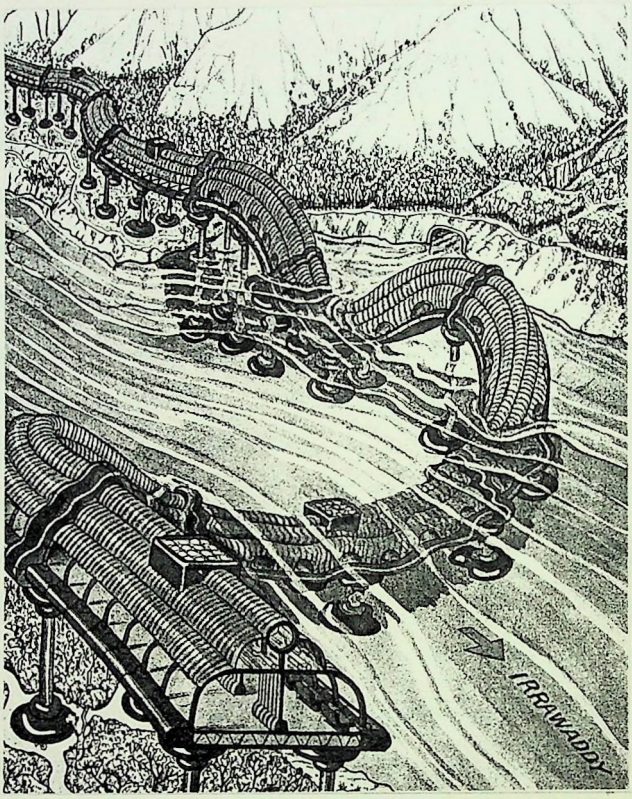


(fig 39-41) 'AEO' chair by Archizoom Associati



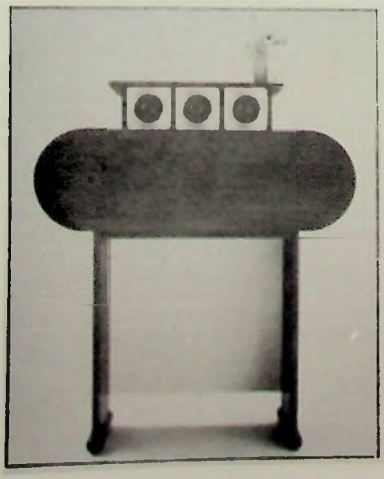
This new approach did not bring a new order to design but instead diversified design and offered a wider choice to the consumer through its ad hoc method of design. They envisaged a creative attitude on the part of the consumer and often set out to stimulate such an attitude through the eccentric appearance of the product. Archizooms 'AEO' chair (fig. 39,40,41) is a good example of this point by point strategy. The product is broken down into its structural components which are made with separate and specific technologies. The object achieves its unity only when it is assembled. Design would no longer presuppose any kind of market unity by offering a definitive product, but on the contrary offered a continual variety to serve a fragmented market.

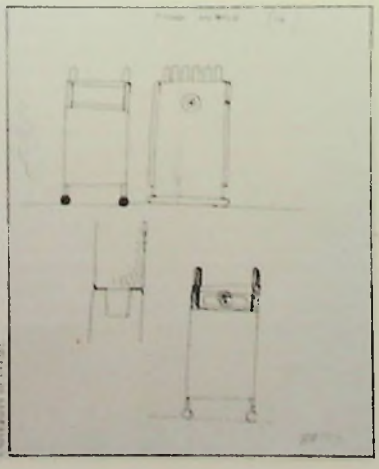
Sottsass was one of the first to explore radical design in that he applied much of the ideological ideas being discussed on design at that time, and integrated them into the design of artifacts. He had become heavily influenced by Pop art ever since his first visit to the United States in 1955. This influence can be seen in such artifacts as a set of furniture for Poltronova (fig. 42,43) designed in 1965, which was inspired by American Pop painters and signs taken from the urban environment; these pieces of furniture resemble traffic signals and other familiar urban objects. As early as 1961 Sottsass had visited India and became profoundly affected by Eastern cultures.



(fig. 44) The Planet as a Festival by Ettore Sottsass

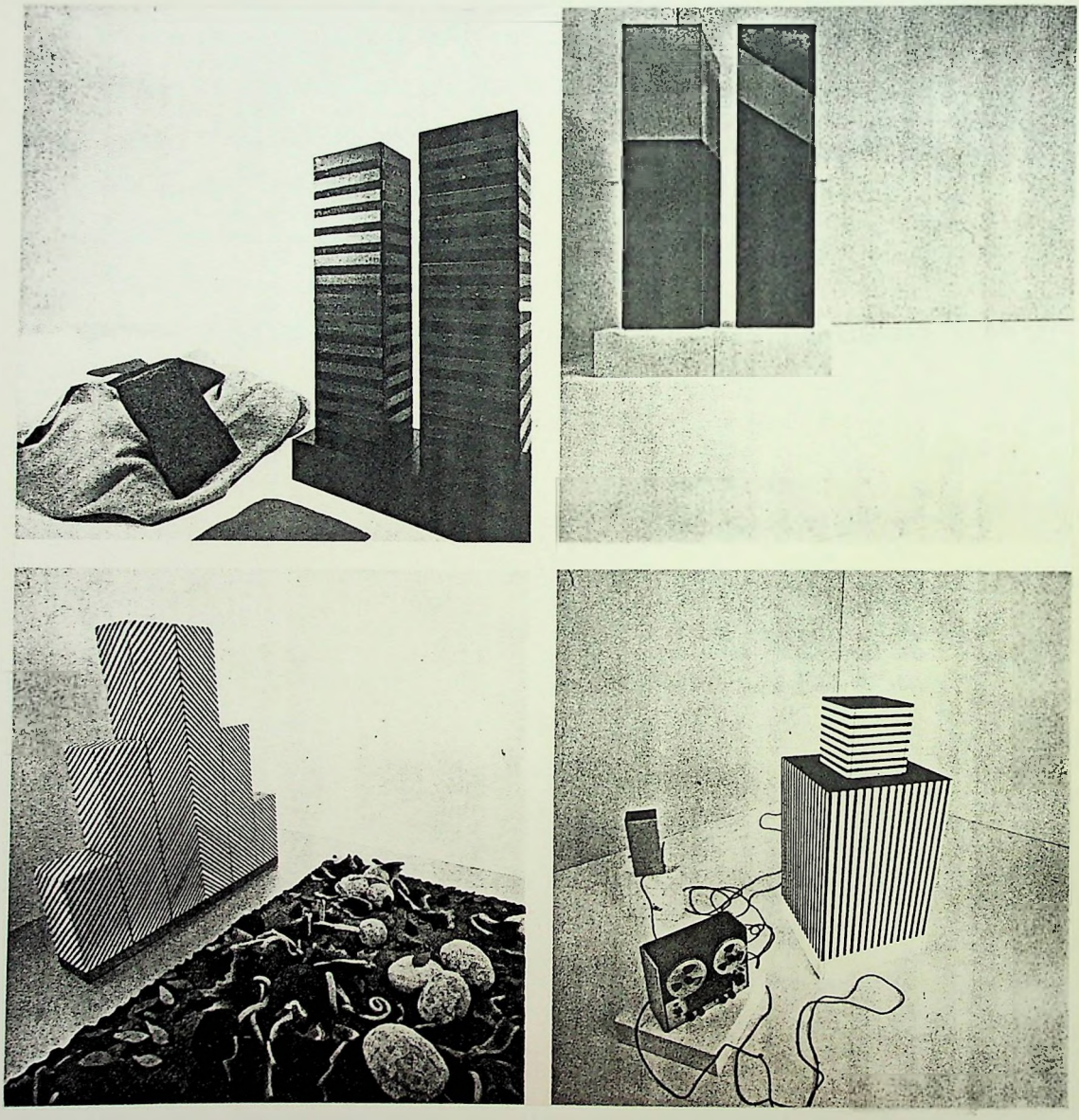
(fig. 42,43) Furniture for Poltronova by Ettore Sattsass





The tone of his work from 1966 onwards is intensely radical. He continued to create furniture, interiors, ceramics and jewellery, developing as he did so, ideas about the form and language of the objects that constitute an intrinsic part of the human landscape. At the same time he deepened his relationship with the Olivetti company whom he had worked for on a consultancy basis since the 1950's. He extended his work for them to include office furniture and office systems where he studied the relationship between objects and their users. His final preoccupation during these years was his return to architecture, not to real building, but to utopian visions of future cities and environments where all the problems in a man-made world were removed and man lived once more in touch with his senses and nature. This was very much the general attitude which prevailed at the time especially among the younger generation. The utopian visions came to the forefront in his series of lithographs of 1972 entitled 'The Planet as a Festival' (fig. 44) in which he envisaged a new environment where man and nature are united. It brought together many of his obsessions, favoured themes and motifs, among them the worlds of urban Pop culture and Eastern spiritualism.

In 1967 Domus published a range of furniture (Fig. 45-48) by Ettore Sottsass that resembled isolated menhirs standing in empty rooms. The objects undermined the traditional relationship between the room and its



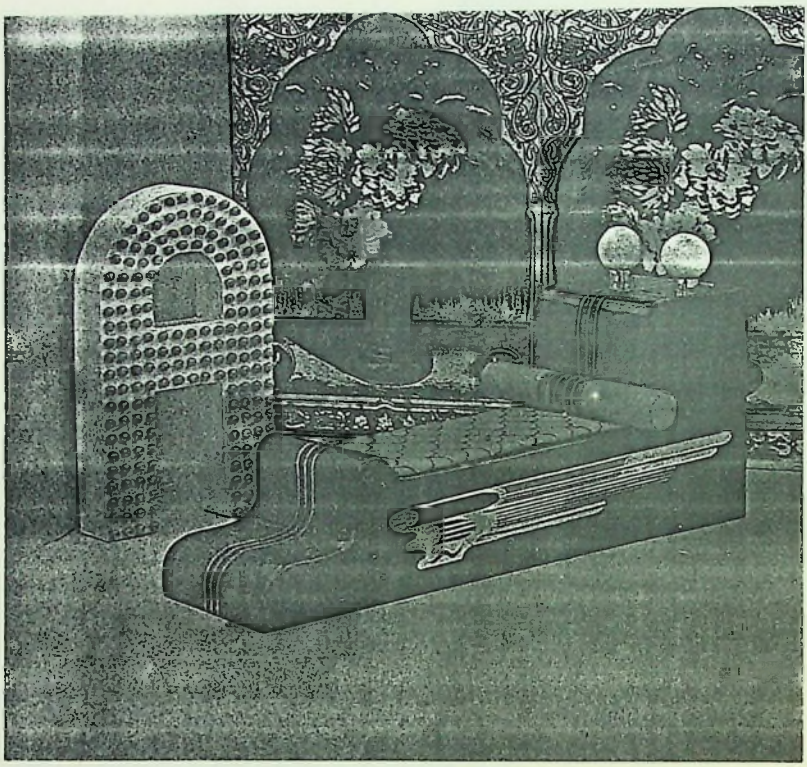
(fig. 45-48) Furniture: models of wardrobes by Ettore Sottsass

artifacts contained within it. Sottsass was interested in seeing if this would promote new types of behaviour in the home. This was an underlying theme which appears again and again, the question of whether design can influence human behaviour. Also in these pieces there are hints of Pop culture and Eastern mysticism. The use of colour and plastic laminates are elements which were to recur in his later work in the 1980's.

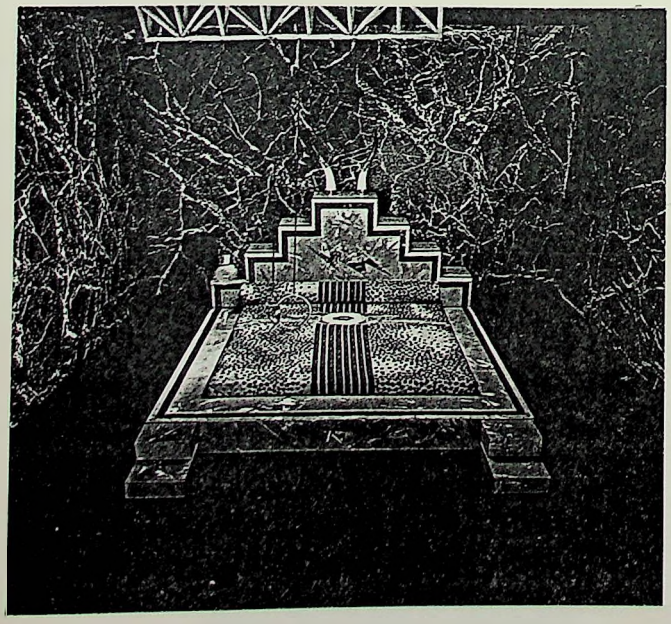
Archizoom Associati, following in the same path as Sottsass, soon afterwards designed 'dream beds' (Fig. 49-51) in 1967. They were part of a series of prototype designs which employed a number of key strategies in the Italian radical-designer movement. Included in the design of these monumental beds was the use of stylistic revivalism, in this case that of the thirties, combined with references to kitch, contemporary Pop culture and Eastern Islam. It also served as a critism of Italian formalism, exposing its flaws through these provocative experiments. Archizoom Associati wrote at the time in Domus:

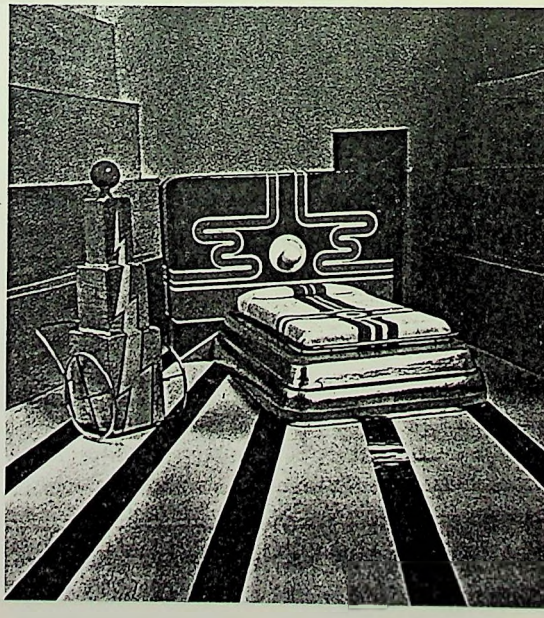
'We wish to bring into the house everything that has been left out: contrived banality intentional vulgarity, urban fittings biting dogs'.6

It was hoped that design projects like these would bring about a change in attitude to design. The 'Mies' armchair

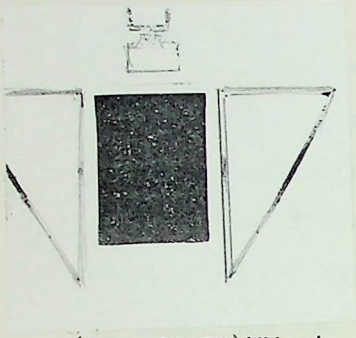


(fig. 49-50) Dream Beds by Archizoom Associati

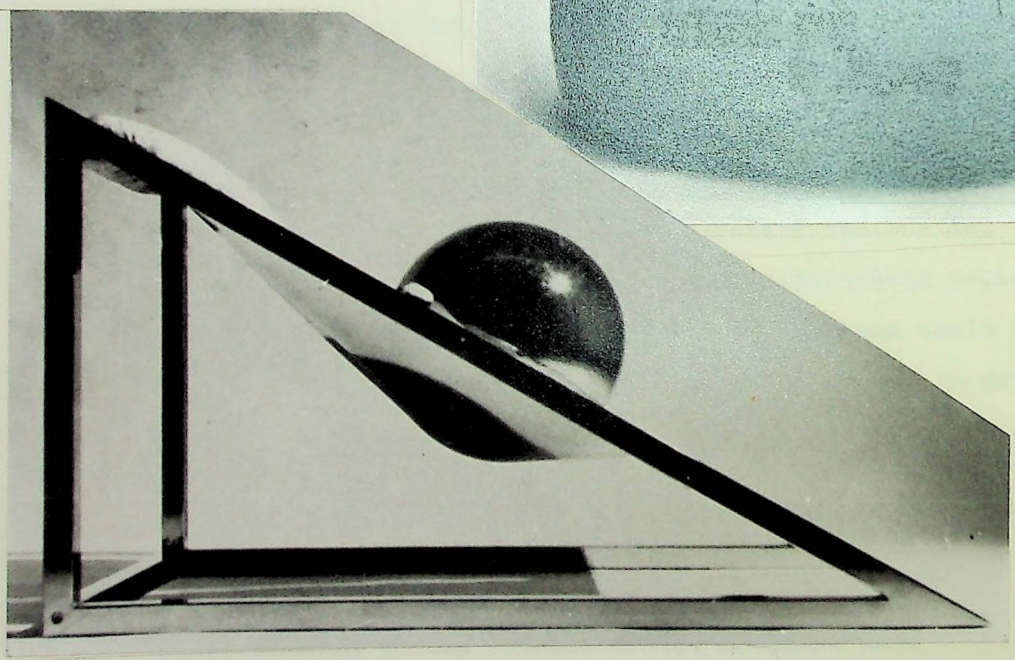




(fig. 54) 'Sacco'



(fig. 52,53)'Mies'



(fig. 55)'Sofa' by Gaetano Pesce

(Fig. 52,53) of 1969 with its elastic seat was a criticism of the inadequacies of the Modern aesthetic. This strange elastic chair made of a sheet of rubber held between two slats, was a comfortable counter proposal to the over-upholstered furniture of the times. They attempted to offer new variety to the consumer, but few radical designs from this period were ever produced for the mass market. Many of the designs were far too eccentric in appearance for the public's taste at that time. The 'Sacco' (Fig. 54) beanbag chair 1969 was one of the few successful designs to emerge from this period to be mass produced. Designed by Piero Gatti, Cesare Paolini and Franco Teodora, it was simply made of polyurethene pellets contained in leather or plastic sack. Its shape could be altered to suit any way of sitting and it remains to date a popular item because it offers flexibility and fun for the user. Products of this sort were to bring about a change in the way that furniture was conceived and built.

Other members of the radical design movement were individuals such as Ugo Le Pietra, Gianni Pettena, Riccardo Dalisi, Gaetano Pesce and groups such as the UFO group, Gruppo 85, Gruppo 9999 and Gruppo Strum and a number of lesser known designer architects who worked within this atmosphere of radicalism and experimentation.

Ugo La Pietra worked extensively in design, research, teaching and writing. His research focused not only on

practical problem of mass production and the uses of new materials, but also on theoretical problems regarding the morphology and social role of design. Gaetano Pesce is another interesting figure as he worked in this area entirely alone. The objects he produced such as a huge squashy sofa (Fig. 55), a giant angled lamp and a strange bookcase with uneven edges commented on the alienation between man and object. Pesce saw consumption as the greatest obstacle to design communication, so long as it was the only mediating factor.

Gruppo 9999 consisted of four Florentine artists with a special interest in research on the theatre as applied to architecture and the other arts. In 1968 they projected a 'Design Happening' on the Ponte Vecchio, and in the following year designed the interior of a discotheque in Florence in a fantastic, science-fiction style. They co-founded with Superstudio the separate school for expanded conceptual Architecture in 1971 and in the same year conducted seminars on Life, Death and Miracles of Architecture.

In 1972 a major exhibition of Italian design entitled 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape' was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was an ambitious exhibition which attempted to show developments in Italian design of the previous ten years as well as representing contemporary developments. For the latter aim the radical

Italian groups, Archizoom, Superstudio, Gruppo Strum, and individuals such as Ugo La Pietra, Gaetano Pesce, Zanuso, Bellini Aulenti, Sottsass, Rosselli and Joe Colombo were asked to create their own environments. The brief for this project was very specific and the results showed clearly the main preoccupations of the radical designers and their attempt to move away from the creation of isolated objects towards general environments. These utopian projects proposed a more flexible environment for the human habitat.

In the following year 1973, Global Tools, a counter school of architecture and design was founded. It was in Casabella, a specialist magazine which promoted the radical cause, that the announcement of the founding of this new school was made, which was described at the time as:

> A system of laboratories in Florence dedicated to promoting the study and use of natural technical materials and their relative behavioural characteristics. The object of Global Tools is to stimulate free development of individual creativity.7

The school set out to bring together the groups and individuals in Italy who represented the radical cause under a unified programme of research. It is doubtful though whether such a diverse range of creative forces could realistically be expected to identify a common objective for the group and to work cohesively to attain that objective.

However, it was on this idea that the group was to work for the next three years. In the process it carried along an entire younger generation of Italian designers and architects and even some critics and artists. Global Tools was set up as an avant-garde co-operative, a counter school of architecture and design encouraging creativity in free laboratories which they intended to set up not only in Florence but also in Milan, Rome, Naples and Padua. It prepared a large number of work programmes based on the themes of the body, construction, communication, survival and on theory. It only ever got to organise 'The Body', its first and only study seminar. By the time it broke up the movement had become largely ineffectual.

Global Tools had existed for about three years and ended in disillusionment after experiencing a total loss of direction. In 1975 Alessandro Mendini's editorship of Casabella also came to an end. The magazine had been a focal point and meeting place for all the radical groups for the previous four years. In the same year Archizoom Associati broke up, Superstudio became part of a university and the majority of the other groups disappeared; everybody went their own way.

By 1976 the radical movement had mostly disappeared, but a new phase of radicalism was to emerge from the debate that the original movement had initiated, and this was to be a major influence and a success not only in Italy but also on an international level.

CHAPTER III

THE 'NEW DESIGN'

- The second phase of Radical Design

The 1970's in Italy were characterized by a depressed economy and profound insecurity, culturally and socially. Italian design was also to undergo changes especially towards the end of the decade. The international cultural climate became increasingly aware of the growing irrelevance of the Modern Movement. Accordingly the need for a new aesthetic to replace it was felt. The search for a post-Modernist aesthetic became the main direction of italian design of the late 1970's and into the 1980's.

This new direction essentially carried on the debate that the radical design movement had initiated in the late 1960's. The proposals that radical design had put forward then were seen in the late 1970's as a valid alternative to the fading Modern Movement. The rational and definitive aesthetic of the Modern style for a pre-supposed unified culture was no longer acceptable to designers and society. A new approach which catered for the multiple choices of a fragmented society and culture, required a more flexible production system and a new design philosophy to accompany it. The result was the re-emergence of a new radicalism which continued the discussion and work of the original movement in attempting to satisfy the need for a new aesthetic.

This new phase of radical design was to concentrate for the most part on design alone, compared to the earlier phase of the 1960's which had concentrated on both architecture and design. The new phase was influenced by

much of the early radical experimentations and proposals and it was on these it built its foundations. Design was to be re-examined through a renewed interest in the handicrafts. This is a phenomenon which appears regularly in the history of design and architecture.

The modern handicrafts were considered as an area where traditional values were conserved. Handicrafts have dissociated themselves from the culture of design, producing goods, outside the mainstream consumer market, which were not influenced by changing modern styles and served an age-old human need. By and large modern handicrafts, especially furniture, had come to rely on reproduction of earlier styles. Such products have been shaped by tradition and are guaranteed to be purchased by the consumer, as mementoes of an age gone by. In this context even the Modern style is reproduced as a historical style. Examples such as Le Corbusier's 'Chaise Longue' are simply imitated for today's market. The artisan craftsman has for the most part relinquished his responsibility for research into new forms of merchandise and has handed this task to industry.

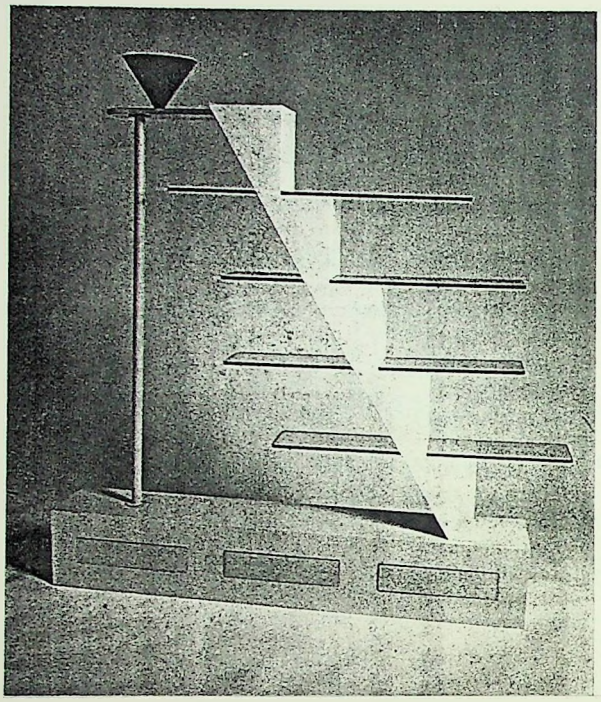
The changing role of the handicrafts away from research and design to mostly imitation led to a reassessment of the handicrafts. It was examined in the light of the experimental flexibility of a technological craftsmanship. Because of the flexible work system of the craftsman and the fact that the production runs are usually small this

gave the craftsman complete control over the materials used and over the design. It offered the craftsman the opportunity to alter the design at any time even during production, or to change the materials as required. This enabled a greater scope for experimentation and variation which opened the way to new designs that would have been impossible for mass production to create due to the rigidity of its technical and manufacturing structure. The new use of the handicrafts was not an alternative to the artisan style but as a major instrument for experimentation in design. It was this technological experimentation of the handicrafts which was to be instrumental in the renewal of the culture of design towards the end of the 1970's. This renewed approach to the handicrafts became known as the 'new handicrafts'.

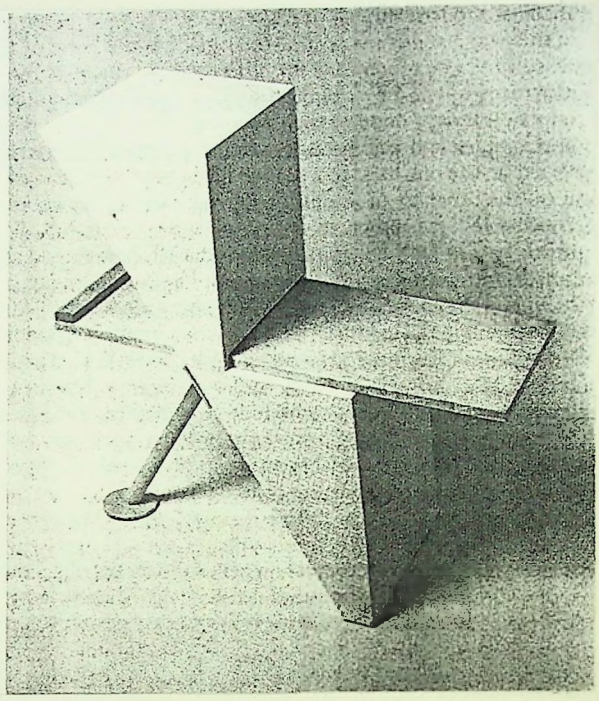
The new handicrafts was used to produce a small production run or for unique pieces. It was not to be viewed as an alternative to mass production, but as a possible pre-production stage instead. Therefore the place of the new handicrafts is not in opposition, but alongside or before mass production. However no concessions in the design of the new handicraft would be made for future possibilities of mass production. In practicable terms it meant that handicrafted prototypes of potential mass runs would require substantial modification if they were ever to go into mass production.

Studio Alchymia was the first group to explore the new radicalism and also in that it attempted to utilize the new handicrafts as an experimental instrument to produce new designs. The studio was established in 1976 by the Architect Alessendro Guerriero. He approached a group of designers, offering to exhibit their work in his gallery. The idea was that the gallery would exhibit designs on a regular basis, rather like the exhibiting of clothes in the fashion world. Studio Alchymia attracted into its group leading radical designers of he late 1960's, including Alessandro Mendini who had been editor of the Casabella magazine in the hayday of the early radical movement. By the late 1970's he was editor of both Domus, a leading design magazine in Italy and the more avant-garde Modo magazine. Other designers Guerriero approached to exhibit design work included Ettore Sottsass, Andrea Branzi - late of Archizoom Associati, the UFO group, Trix and Robert Haussmann. The younger generation of radical designers were represented by Daniele Puppa, Michele De Lucchi and Paola Navona. The unifying factor for this group was that they were all committed to design which was outside mainstream Italian formalism.

Studio Alchymia's first two exhibitions, ironically named Bauhaus 1 and Bauhaus 2, were presented in 1979 and 1980 respectively. The exhibition consisted of prototypes and models of lamps, tables, sofas, chairs, storage pieces and objects of unknown function (Fig. 56-59) all produced

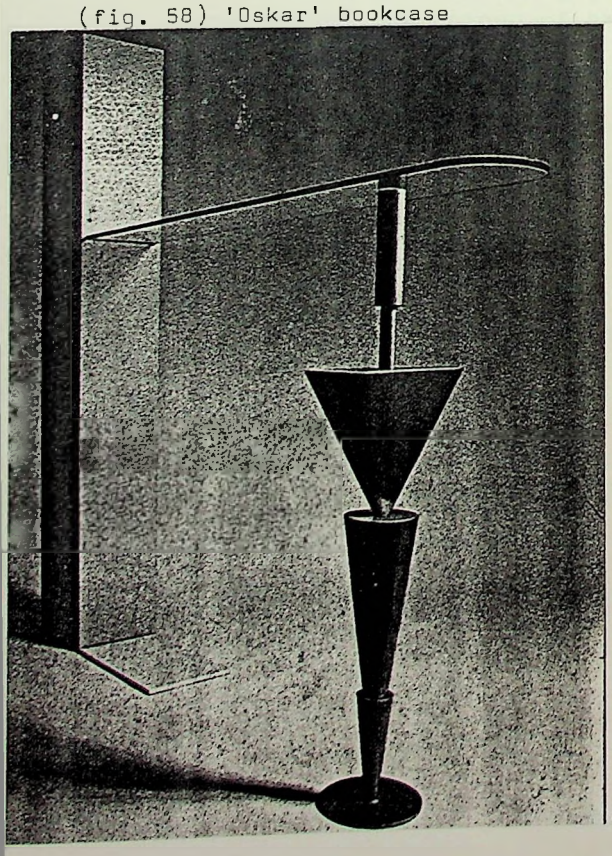


(fig. 56) 'A Libera' bookcase



(fig. 57) 'Ginger' chair

(fig. 58) 'Oskar' bookcase



(fig. 59) 'High Chair'

using the methods of the new handicrafts. Many of the design themes were preoccupied with kitch, stylistic revivalism, fine art imagery, imagery of 1950's, mass productability and critical statements of the Modern Movement. Many of these themes had been previously employed by the radical designers of the late 1960's. The designs were highly decorated using bizarre surface patterns and eccentric shapes to communicate a new aesthetic. Plastic laminates were used extensively, especially by Sottsass who had used them previously in the 1960's. He described laminates as a material with no culture which were inspired by mosaic floors of public conveniences in the underground stations. The design of the artifacts and the use of materials owed much to the experimental technique of the new handicrafts. Produced as one-offs or as small production runs they were not tailored for mass production. Most significantly, the collection was a renewed effort to integrate design with culture and everyday society. The work of Studio Alchymia was to point towards a new direction for design, which was by the early 1980's known as the 'New Design'.

The Alchymia group had been instrumental in bringing together first and second generation radical designers and had revitalized radical design. It played an important role in the gathering and exchanging of ideas that were to result in the development of the 'New Design'. In

addition to this, it participated in left wing politics and produced numerous manifestos stating their case. In the 1981 issue of Modo, and Italian design magazine, Andrea Branzi established the aims of the 'New Design'

1. Putting behind the myth of the unity of a project and concentrating on a free discontinuity of parts with respect to the whole.
2. The search for a new linguistic "expressive" quality as a possible solution to the enigma of design and as a possible new meaning.
3. Recycling all possible idioms now in circulation within the experience of our lives.
4. Recuperating decoration and colour as signs of freedom and nobility of creative invention.
5. Going beyond economic limits and concentrating on an effective relationship between man and his things.1

Although Studio Alchymia had made numerous achievements it remained an elitist and intellectualized group, pessimistic in its attitude to design. This pessimistic outlook was mainly influenced by Alessandro Mendini who had become the spokesperson for the group. He maintained a critical and pessimistic attitude to design believing it was unable to change society or do anything other than merely reflect on its internal contradictions and inequalities.

Ettore Sottsass who was deeply committed to creativity as a social force, became disillusioned with the pessimistic attitude of the group. Towards the end of 1980, Sottsass dropped out of Alchymia for good. He was in turn to launch his own collection of radical design in 1981 during the Milan Furniture Fair. This exhibition was also to

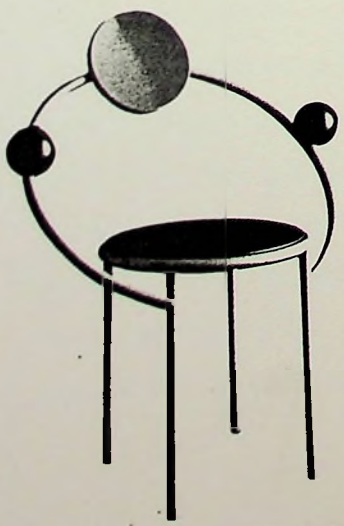
include work of other designers such as Michele De Lucchi, Marco Zenini, Aldo Cibis, Martine Bedin, Matheo Thun, George J. Sowden and Nathalie Du Pasquier, and was also assisted by international architects - the Austrian Hans Hollein, the American Michael Graves, the Japanese Arata Isozki and the Spaniard Javier Marisal. The Italian group above founded the organisation named Memphis, which was to rock the foundations of the Design world. It was named Memphis for several reasons:

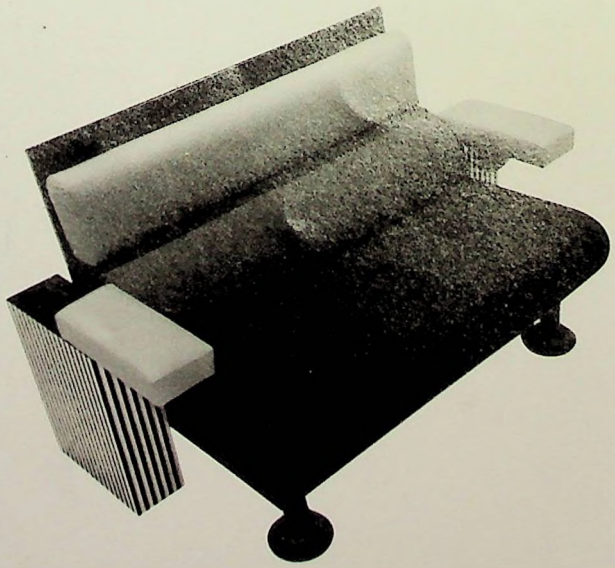
> A name mentioned in numerous songs.....Memphis Tennessee, birthplace of W.C. Hardy, father of the blues, of Elvis Presley, father of rock 'n' roll. Memphis, ancient capital of Egypt and site of the great temple of the god Ptah, artist among the Gods, "he who creates works of art".2

The objects which Memphis produced, incorporated striking colours, decoration and themes of communication combined with function and the use of industrial materials. The handmade prototypes (Fig. 60-62) were not to be viewed as craft but as potential mass produced artifacts should there be consumer demand. Memphis became the design success story of the 1980's owing much to its less intellectual attitude and its more optimistic approach to design. The publicity Memphis created internationally brought Italian design into the limelight once again. This time the emphasis was on radical design rather than the mainstream Italian formalism. Italy was now to play a leading role in the post-modernist movement.

(fig. 60-62) Furniture by Memphis

MEMPHIS





The 'New Design' as it was still known, was to be well received abroad, especially in the U.S.A., Japan and Europe. Now for the first time radical designers were being commissioned at home and from abroad to design for mass production. This not only included artifacts, but also fashion, graphics and advertising. Memphis was to spread its sphere of influence to all sections of design culture. International designers joined the group to experience the Italian 'New Design' at first hand. Manufacturers became increasingly receptive to the changing international attitude to design and commissioned many of the members of Memphis to produce designs. Even the most conservative area of domestic electrical applicances began to respond to the new aesthetic. Memphis had succeeded not only in providing a new philosophy but also in applying it to everyday design.

By the mid 1980's Italy was once again the centre for the design world. The re-emergence of radical design, and the international success of Memphis had renewed the reputation which Italy previously had for producing visually sophisticated and culturally meaningful products. Memphis was only one branch of Italian radicalism which many felt had surrendered to industrialised consumerism. As industry adopted the 'New Design' the strong anti-industry message of the early radical movement was toned down to suit mass production and with it, its aesthetic ability to shock. Studio Alchymia, which was

now called Nuova Alchimia remained a peripheral group. It refused to let its designs be dictated by commercial markets and remained restricted to a minority group who appreciated the Nuova Alchimia work. A new school, Domus Academy was set up in Milan in 1982, and its foundations are based on the essential concepts of 'New Design' while also accepting the innovations of the most important designers in each of the separate fields of design. It has attracted young architects and designers from all over the world, and its teaching encompasses research into new models for living as well as design for the urban scene.

As the 1980's progressed, the energy with which the movement had begun in 1981 faded towards the end of the decade. The 'New Design' had become increasingly integrated into mainstream design, and brought with it only the acceptable radical ideology. However, radical design had finally become mature and emerged as a real alternative to the Modern Movement. It was the culmination of research and experimentation which had begun in the late 1960's as a search for a post-modernist aesthetic.

CONCLUSION

Radical design emerged from the crisis of design and culture in the late 1960's. Essentially utopian in nature the movement took much of its inspiration from Pop art, Pop culture, fine art movements and the utopian visions of such groups as Archigram. The radical movement presented a number of idealised projects which set out to ridicule the economic and cultural philosophy of mainstream Italian Formalism. Overt references made by Superstudio and Archizoom and other radical groups to 'Bad Taste' stylistic revivalism, Pop culture and eclecticism were all used to undermine the modern aesthetic and what was perceived as 'Good Taste'. Archizoom's perverse logic of extremes and Superstudio's utopian terrorism reinforced the criticism of the Modern Movement as an irrelevant solution for societies' problems. Superstudio's idealistic outlook of redesigning the human environment, to solve all social, cultural and ecological problems was an unrealistic approach to design. However, the radical groups' re-evaluation of the changing cultural structure and the fragmentation of the consumer market, resulted in a logical re-examination of industrial design and the product. The proposed objective of offering the consumer a continual variety of products from which to choose was a positive step forward. But ironically, it was at odds with the strong anti-industry and anti-consumption views of many of the radical groups and individuals. This made it difficult for them to ever incorporate their ideas into mass production and to put these ideas to the test of the market.

It is doubtful whether many of their eccentric proposals would have been taken up by the manufacturers and accepted by the consumer. Instead, the movement remained on the fringes of general design activities and relied on exhibitions and specialist magazines through which to communicate their ideas. By the mid 1970's the movement had practically disappeared but it had paved the way for a new phase of radicalism.

The new radicalism which emerged essentially continued the discussion and work of the original movement. The second phase which occurred in the late 1970's and early 1980's succeeded in reaching a much wider audience and in shaking the design world. The rediscovery of the materials and shapes of the artisan tradition led to the 'New Handicrafts' which were utilised by the Studio Alchymia group. Many of the designers of this group had been associated with the first phase of radicalism and relied strongly on the strategies they had evolved from that period. The emergence of the most important radical design group, Memphis, became the major driving force of the 'New Design'. Memphis successfully presented a realistic alternative to the mainstream Italian formalism and the Modern aesthetic.

Radical design had come of age.

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