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IN THE SCENE

connecting



STYLING by Rachel Lee
 COURTESY OF Stefano Giovannoni

Stefano Giovannoni is a designer of our times. Current and astute, the Italian industrial and interior designer and architect is part of a growing wave of designers who have come to recognise design as expressions of our society and have removed the veil of design elitism with products that are made accessible to all. Giovannoni is the man behind Alessi's highly successful Girtonondo range with its iconic stick man figures and the highly acclaimed Bombo stool for Magis, amongst many other products, and was recently in town for the Furniture Design Forum 2007: Design Led Business. We caught up with the man himself and found ourselves speaking to a man of insight and passion.



with design

Describe yourself in one sentence.

In one sentence...

Or two if you need.

It's too difficult... I am a designer with a good balance of the creative and the logical. On one side, I work on concepts and ideas; on the other, I take a lot of care of the market and of what the object communicates to the people. It is important to create objects with sex appeal.

What makes a product commercially viable?

[There needs to be] a conscious aim to move the approach of the design from an intellectual range of customers to a wide range of customers, to create some kind of democracy in the way objects communicate. I think that it's important to communicate with a wide range of people. I think if you create a design product, it is similar to creating a television programme. You work on media, on something related to a lot of people. And also when you work with an industrial company, many times the company invests a lot of money in your product, so it is important that you create something that is successful for the market because design is not only cultural, it is also related to our economy. We are here in Singapore to speak about design business because, in a way, our company has worked on design to create important business.

Many of your products have an element of playfulness to them. Where does that come from?

They come from the consideration that in the past, the object has been something like a status symbol. So if you consider something in the 70s, we used to wear English-styled jackets and ties, we used to drive important cars like Mercedes or Porsche, we used to put on our golden Rolex watches and all these elements aid a message of our social status. In the 80s we changed the meaning of the object. We started wearing casual, we drove Volkswagen Golf – not anymore, but we used to. We used to put on our hands Swatch instead of Rolex and objects started to change from status symbols to style symbols. It said "I am an up-to-date person, I know what goes on in the world, I have culture." But in the 90s, it became a little too ostentatious and we perceived that we needed objects to relate directly to us. Not objects that we buy to show off who we are. So I use irony and create things that no longer show that you have money or culture, but something that has a more casual relationship with the people.

I read in another interview where you talked about masters in the past that you admire like Verner Panton and Ettore Sottsass. But you said that the way they designed is no longer relevant to us.

Design is related to historical periods and it's very important to connect our work to our time. And the design person needs to understand any change in our society. This is very important. We cannot work according to the book of history. We have to work according to people's desires, and understand what people want, and what people need in the future. And what people want in the future is different from what people wanted in the past. So it's important to connect the development of our job to the development of society.





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You founded the Boldist Movement in the 80s where you spoke about streamlining design. What was that about?

It was a movement that was created when we were very young, in the 80s. There was a lot of research going on among young designers about languages of expression and as a group of designers (we used to work in groups then), we tried to develop a certain (design) language that could be understood immediately by everybody. So it was a special development of the culture of design in the 80s which involved a lot of research about language. After that, the 90s were different. It was no longer about the research of language, but about production and companies. The 90s were about a spirit of freedom.

What exactly did you mean by streamlining design?

My first product was the Grotondo Family for Alessi and this product contains all the elements to understand this process. The first product was the Grotondo tray. It was a very banal object. Very simple. But it was a very clever idea. The idea was not to design the object but to take an existing object like a very simple tray that you can buy from any department store and to cut out from the edges of the tray the shape of little men. And the meaning of that product was to try to connect the design with figurative icons. Because figurative icons have always been related to popular culture and the common people has always been fond of figurative products. They have a lot of figurative products in their houses. But design has always pushed the figurative away from the modern movement into the kitsch, so I tried to introduce a figurative element within a design context under the label of an established company like Alessi. It was revolutionary. The Grotondo family in the design context is the absolute bestseller with more than 6 million pieces sold. No other product in the design context has been sold in such kinds of numbers. And the reason is that it speaks a language that everybody can understand. A 14-year-old girl (can connect with it) like her mother can, like her grandmother can.

You were trained in architecture. What is the difference between architecture and industrial design?

Architecture and industrial design has to be related to the same field. In the sense that design interior and architecture has to be connected to the change in our society and they express points of this development. And I think they relate to a more complex situation where the modern movement arrived at the minimalist and the modern movement tried to clean more and more, to be something that creates very perfect objects, very clean, very polished. But today we arrive at an end of this process and we need to think about all these categories of products to a different approach.

I think if we consider the perception of the future today, the city, the interior, the product, is not anymore something pure, perfect and clean. Today the city is a hybrid. In every city today, especially in our country, you have many different groups of people, different ethnic identities. In Milan, the percentage of Italians to foreigners is being reduced. All around there are more different quarters like the Chinese, the Arabians, the Muslims, the Philippines, and so on and so forth, and it's really a hybridisation of people from different races, different cultures. And the same happens in interiors. My house I think is very interesting. It's a real hybrid house in the sense that, in my living room, there are very modern objects and also objects from the 60s, a Chinese table from 100 years ago, together with an Indian product and together with a table that came from the Philippines. And this I think is very enthralling, this kind of hybridisation of different historical ages and cultures express very well this age today. Also in design I think we are finished with this period of minimalism, and we need new meaning where we come back to find a new language that possesses a more complex relation with our memory, with our identity. For example, the modern movement cleaned the object of decoration. Today, many designers discover decoration, discover many different ways to create a new richness for the object.

You have taught design students before. What advice did you constantly tell your students?

It's important to understand that design is not a problem of good design or bad design. Design is a problem related to the development of our society. So if you want to be a good designer, you have to understand where our society goes, and you have to understand what people desire, and you have to adapt your way of working to the new social, economical and cultural issues. This is very important because design is not something out of our society. Design is an expression of our society so we have to understand the situation of our society today, and we have to understand what we have tomorrow, and our language has to be related to such kinds of changes.

Is it possible to teach this at school?

It's possible, of course! It's not easy, but it's possible. 

1. Family First 2. Chair First 3. Tango Table 4. Revolving Stool Cupper
5. Revolving Stool Chair 6. Table First 7. Tango Table 1 8. Tango Table 2

IN THE SCENE

it's a kind of magis



interview by Rossara Jami
images courtesy of Magis

His glasses perpetually perched on his forehead, the charismatic founder of Magis bears the aura of a man befitting one helming its rise. Started in 1976 as a no-factory production company for mass production of furniture, Magis was also the company that brought a new light to the step ladder with the 1984 project called Step - but was snubbed for it by the design industry. Ladders, in popular opinion, belong in hardware stores. Today, he notes a greater dearth of creativity. Yet, the Italian company still believes in pushing the envelope. Magis continues to cast its magic with its team of talented and acclaimed designers like Stefano Giovannoni and Michael Young. In an interview peppered with "Bravo!" at his interpreter Nicola Morelli's deftness with two languages, the straight-talking Eugenio Perazza tells how design and business can co-exist.



What, do you think, does it take to come up with fresh and happy designs?

The most important thing is to have a culture of ideas. The ideas don't fall from heaven. Firstly, we don't look too much at what others are doing. Then, we try to get a design that is feasible, first and foremost, for ourselves. We are not market-oriented in the first place. We prefer to take into consideration something that we might like first. And once we are satisfied with the idea, and we like it, we put it out in the market and, hopefully, the market responds.

What do you think of the design industry now?

I think it's a moment of great confusion. There is a lot of academy and exercise of style.

What do you mean by academy?

It means style repeating itself. It's a mere exercise of style, but lacking in what are cool ideas and passion. The companies are losing courage. It looks like it's a rat race among companies in coming up with pretty much the same sort of items.

You mean, it's a lot of borrowing influences from the past?

No, it means it doesn't have added freshness. It's a moment of confusion in the way that instead of coming up with something that has character or personality, companies just look at what others are doing and pretty much come up with the same sort of object. Nowadays, it's hard to see a company take its own path in following its own style and character as a company, and taking the risk of working on the edge sometimes yet is prepared to take the success or the fail with certain products.

Do you think there's a reason behind this mentality?

Because companies nowadays like to play it safe. They don't want to take risks design-wise.

Someone does come up with new ideas but people follow it very quickly.

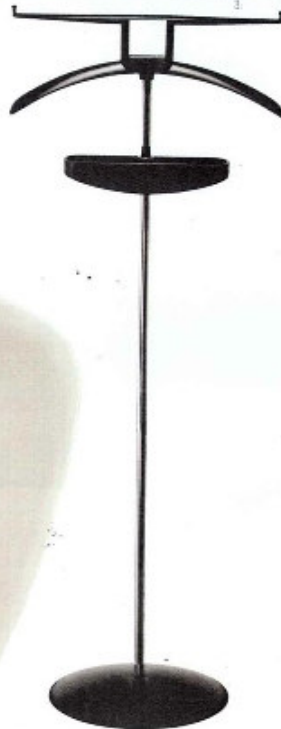
(Nods) Magis is a public domain. It has a big record of prizes won and competitions won. Not only that, some of Magis designs belong to permanent collections in important museums like MoMa (Museum of Modern Art) in New York. Some companies can claim the same achievements in the records. Magis is the only one company that has the record of being the most imitated company in its own right.

Well, imitation is the best form of flattery.

(Laughs) Yes. Even Coco Chanel said, "I will be worried the day they stop copying my style."

Is there any product or item you wish you had designed yourself?

Every item bears the signature of the designer, but in Magis, we work on the project of developing an item with the designer. It's not like the designer comes with this idea and shows us, "I think I would like to do this and that" and we say yes. It's more like Magis gives the lead and the guidelines and what we want to achieve with the project. Sometimes, we do a little research and look at the market for what we would like to work on. We do a briefing with the designer and explain what we'd like to achieve with this or that project, and then we work together on it. For us, it's not like the designer is a main actor working by himself. It's a main actor working on a script that Magis gives him, to use an analogy. To answer your question, the products wear the name of the designer, but they are sons of Magis. That's why every item that comes out of Magis is a bit of my brainchild. It's like a child as it needs a woman and a man. The man is the company and the woman who gives birth is the designer. So it takes two.





How do you keep design accessible to the masses? In a way they can understand?
 It's a combination of different factors. Mostly, it depends on the price of the items and the target customers of the company. For instance, Magis's target customers are the young consumers. Not just the young, but the young at heart. If the consumer is fresh and young in mind, it doesn't matter if he's a Singaporean or New Yorker or Hong Konger. Because literature, cinema, fashion or music tries to make one big world so you can appreciate art and its forms. Design is part of it. So, it doesn't matter which part of the world you come from. It's different from the past.

So, how do you reconcile design with business? How do you get the balance?
 Every company can continue to survive as long as there's commercial success. Sometimes, we work on some projects that we lead into the market knowing that there'll be no return on investment. If the market doesn't respond, or the product doesn't go too well, we are not puzzled or surprised by it. Because it was already preconceived, it was in our expectations.

Why do you work on such projects then?
 Most of the time, it helps in improving the intellectual capital of the company. To make an instance, we develop a doghouse with designer Michael Young. It's not that we get great sales out of this project. Like everything, there is a flipside to things. Like a coin. If you go to the accountancy department in Magis and ask, "What do you think of the doghouse?" There will be a complete fiasco! Simply because we spend a lot of money on that, but we haven't got back the returns. The flipside is if I give the same question to the guy in charge of public relations at Magis, he'll say, "I love it." That's because it has won some prizes and the press talks about it. It was in magazines. What is the truth? The truth is that even if it doesn't get good sales, the doghouse helps increase the intellectual capital of Magis and establish Magis as an asset. It gives to the company, if not good sales, a good name.

What do you like to see in the design industry in the next 5 years, or 10 years?
 In a world where everything looks like it's going down, I expect and hope for one thing to improve: the quality of the project. Because everyday I go to malls and shops and I see heaps of new products. They may be new products, but what do you have in terms of ideas? A few, or nothing. So I hope, in the near future, that the amount of new products might diminish with an increase in the quality of the product - an improvement of the object itself.

Is it possible?
 Well, if it's possible, it is important to be happening.

What do you think is needed for it to happen?
 To achieve this, we need to keep on improving the culture of the consumer. Once the taste and sense of aesthetic in the consumer is improved, it would lead to different things; a higher design, quality and freshness in terms of ideas. The consumer Magis is referring to is one who would like to improve the quality of his life. He himself is a seeker, someone who is in search of better things, even in everyday objects. A journalist asked me recently, how would a house decorated with all Magis items be? I said it'll be the ugliest house I can think of! (Laughs) The reason is simple. Magis objects are "temperamental" objects. You just need one or two of them in a house. Otherwise, they'll fight with each other. And the same journalist asked me, "What's your dream, Mr Perazza?" So I said, when you dream, you always dream big. I would like one day to make Magis synonymous with anything that looks out of the scheme. That looks differently. That gives a different light.

Out of the mainstream?
 (Nods) Out of the old schemes. Yes.

1. Chair One Public's Seat 2. Warp 3. Provo 4. Kismet 5. Warp Glassy 6. Easy Table 7. Steel One

IN THE SCENE



Rocko



Bambu



leapfrog



Organic Cook

Loop

The best places to look for new, untried design ideas are most possibly schools. There is a certain freshness and idealism that accompanies the concepts and innovations that come from budding designers honing their skills in school. Case in point, the Industrial Design programme at the National University of Singapore. The designs that have sprouted from the Industrial Design programme have been nothing short of impressive, winning numerous international awards such as the Osaka Design Prize, the Red Dot Concept Awards and the Electrolux Design Lab Awards, just to name a few. There is a brand of design that fuses strong research with an equally robust foundation in conceptual thinking.

This year, the 5th batch of graduating students from the programme goes public with a graduation show, titled *Not by Default, But By Design*, held at VivoCity from 24 to 28 May. And like fruit ripe for the picking, many of the designs showed a certain level of rigor that qualifies them for a design world where aesthetics, functional adeptness and commercial viability have come to be equal heavyweights. We take a closer look at some of the designs that caught our attention, either with their innovation, foresight or stunning simplicity.

An example of this aforementioned simplicity is *Bambu* by Ong Zhen Qi, a lamp that is almost instinctive in its design. Here, light intensity is adjusted by the intuitive twisting of the inner core of the lamp, either up or down, the constant user-product interaction resulting in an ever-changing form. Wrapped in a veneer of timber and awarded the Gold Award at this year's Singapore Furniture Design Award, *Bambu* has a tendency to evoke a "why-didn't-anybody-think-of-that-before?" mentality, a sure sign of a good design.

A recipient of the Braun Prize 2007, Second Stage, *Leapfrog* by Dorn Koh humanises the assistive walker for the mentally-impaired child. As its name suggests, there is a playful toy-like approachability to the walker – a far cry from the cold and sterile aesthetic of medical engineering, yet there is nothing elementary about its design. *Leapfrog* combines stand and walker functionality as it transforms and assists in sync with the child's intention to sit, stand or walk.

Moving along a similar train of thought is *Rocko* by Alec Wong. This transformable infant cradle was designed to grow with the infant as he goes through the different developmental stages of his childhood. At one time a rocker, at another a rocking chair, and at yet another a stool. Astutely made of timber, *Rocko* has even been designed to age gracefully with time, ensuring its material aesthetic is enhanced with each passing year of use.

It seems that despite being a relatively young programme, the Industrial Design programme is proving to be a force to be reckoned with, if the designs produced by this year's graduating batch are anything to go by. ☛

www.nusindustrialdesign.com

Text by Rachel Lee

finishing (design) School

We pick out some of our favourites from the exhibition put up by the graduating students from the Industrial Design programme at the National University of Singapore.