

INTERVIEW/ OF ALBERTO MAURI TO LIEVORE ALTHERR MOLINA 2007

How would you define your line of work? What is it that sets you apart from other designers?

Our starting point is that design is communication, not self-fulfillment. We seek to instill harmony, balance, values we believe in: we are out to seduce rather than impress.

We look at objects as something more than a mere manifestation of a style. It is a synthesis of meaning on many levels into one single form. Our objective is not to renounce anything: neither form nor function, neither reason nor sensitivity, neither art nor technique, neither innovation nor continuity... It means working on the search for a form that is dense but balanced, free of stiff gestures or jokes. We are looking to attain a serene tension, achieved through not having a single dominant value.

What then does communication mean for a business?

It is not only about a wish to communicate with the other, the purchaser. You have to listen to them and understand their codes if you want to sell a product in the market. Both parties have to be speaking the same language in order to communicate. If one isn't interested in finding a common language, communication does not happen.

Above all, many businesses lack initiative in communicating with themselves - in other words, reflect on what they do. The identity of a business is not solely based on its products, but rather the products form part of a whole that includes business strategy and a cultural project.

You are three professionals sharing the same studio. What are your work methods? Does being three make the work easier or harder?

In our group the total is much more than the sum of the parts: it is the interaction among the three.

We start work by exchanging a great deal of views on the new project.

Generally one of us by naturally identifies more with the theme: whoever that may turn out to be takes it forward and the other two contribute throughout the process.

The first sketches are idealisations, dream images, pure wishful.

The subsequent development work is a continuous negotiation: between ergonomics and gesture, between technology and the client's possibilities... between what is desirable and the principle of reality. Work flows from one studio desk to another in the same way.

We are three totally different and complementary personalities. All of us design, but in addition each has areas where they have evolved some degree of specialisation: Alberto in the intellectual (strategies, theories), Jeannette in contemporary culture (visual communication) and Manel in the intuitive (concept visualisation and project development). This breadth allows us to undertake projects collectively from a complex and global perspective, which enriches both us and the projects.

We are able to say that when a project leaves the office it has gone through so many filters that there is little danger that it will awaken only a short-lived interest.

Interior design, industrial design, consulting, art direction - in which of these areas do you find yourselves most comfortable?

In all of them, particularly when we can act in all these areas within one single project, because one area conditions and feeds the other. A good design that does not communicate well or does not fit into the business with the appropriate profile is unlikely to work.

Which product do you consider to be most representative of your designs?

Perhaps the Catifa chair, because it encapsulates all the values that we are interested in:

- Synthesis: The austere form. Reduction. Minimal expression. Removing. Stripping off. Simplifying. Stopping when the moment is right.
- Sensuality: Luscious form. Flowing. Continuous. Seductive. Without breaks or points of tension.
- Ingenuity: Inventing. Looking ahead. Tying up the threads. Using technology without making it obvious. Serving in silence.
- Memory: Form without an identifiable date. Reference. Saga, duration. Or, quite simply, validity. A lasting presence.
- Icon: Form with a message. Totemic. A sign of itself. Self-referential.

Which style do you identify with most?

We have no one style. Each client requires a tailored solution.

We neither want to, nor are able to, repeat ourselves. We have created the identity of businesses as diverse as Arper, Andreu, Dona, Demos...

But you would not deny that you have a style of your own...

Someone recently told us:

“There is a sensibility common to all your projects, but it always surprises. There is no standard or ‘style’ “. That pleases us because that is what we aim for.

If there is a recognisable sensibility, essence... it is our cultural experience and as such it works sub-consciously, but in our work we want to remain in the background. We do not think it is important to have a distinctive stamp, to be a brand. If our work is identifiable, that is not our intention. If someone

calls on us to produce a “lievore altherr molina”, we do not believe we could do it – and we probably wouldn’t even be interested in trying.

One of your most successful designs was the Leaf chair and chaise longue for the Italian firm Arper.

Nature was the source of inspiration in this case.

What other subjects serve as inspiration for you?

Some design masterworks such as those of Eames, Kjaerholm, Bertola, Noguchi.... in general design that is humanist, optimistic and art-loving. Architecture, both classical and contemporary. Life in all its complexity and richness.

How can design be brought closer to the “man on the street” and lose its elitist label?

Previously design was considered as something elitist. Today design is already out on the street. Indeed, good design is frequently popular, such as the Thonet chairs, the Jackobsen chair, the i-pod, the first Swatch watch... If design is nowadays considered elitist it may be because it self-references the sector, if it is so extreme or abstract that it is only of interest to this very limited circle. Or when it is suggested that design is rare, surprising, “fun”, particularly “groundbreaking”, that it is not part of daily life, or only operates within “design” space. Or that it is Art, and therefore exclusive.

This phenomenon has grown in recent years, since the workings of the fashion world are also applied to the product sector. We are in a suicidal circle of selling at any price, in a society of spectacle, and “design” plays the part of “entertainer”. Many current products reflect this situation. Designers and producers who do not want to conform to that find themselves in a quandary. Should we produce joke-objects to reach the public?

We do not believe that an object should be jokey or ironic.

It would be like the same joke repeated over and over again. We believe it is more interesting to communicate other values.

What is design?

“Form follows function?” Design resides beyond function. Or, in any event, the word function needs to be redefined. Design today does not just address an object’s functionality and aesthetic. It is far more

complex. Technology, organisation of production, a perfect understanding of the markets being addressed, its mode of communication and distribution, among other factors, all make design something that, rather than considered a specific discipline, is a system of disciplines that interact with each other. Design is foreseeing, organisation, service, process, synthesis, expression, communication, culture. It is giving shape to ideals.

If design is giving shape to ideals, which are your ideals? What distinguishes a good design from a bad one?

That is a very subjective matter. For us, good design makes us fall in love with it, sometimes for different reasons: its balance, its iconic strength, synthesis, sensuality, ingeniousness... or all rolled into one. An object is well designed when it makes us believe that such a function could not have been resolved in any other way.

Good design is timeless.

Are there any common qualities or features in timeless design?

You would need to distinguish the pieces that represent a historical moment and are sometimes called “classics,” from those that are truly timeless design.

How can timeless design be defined?

It is that which embraces a collective iconography, whose basis is as real as life itself and therefore steadfast in time. It is that which survives the qualities of the new and the strange to become a model of the collective iconography.

What is your favourite example of universal design?

A bowl made in any part of the world is the expression of drinking from the hands... Is there anything more universal than that?