2 FROM MARI TO MEMPHIS: THE ROLE OF PROTOTYPES IN ITALIAN RADICAL AND POSTMODERN DESIGN

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On its debut at the 1981 Milan furniture fair, the brash, bright furniture of the first Memphis collection provoked extreme reactions. For Karl Lagerfeld, it was 'love at first sight' (Anon. 1991: 5); so enamoured was the German fashion designer that he furnished his entire Monte Carlo apartment with the imaginings of the international design collective. A few years later he sold it all off; a move not surprising for a design collective that aspired to the life cycle of fashion, to be the New International Style.

Memphis had been dreamt up less than a year earlier during a series of evenings at the Milanese home of the architect Ettore Sottsass in December 1980. Its name came up during one of these mythical get-togethers; playing on repeat in the background was Bob Dylan's 1966 record *Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again*. Around thirty international designers and architects would sign up to the Memphis group, including Michael Graves, Michele De Lucchi, Hans Hollein and Martine Bedin. Together, they contributed fifty-five examples of furniture, clocks, glass and ceramics that were then unveiled at Milan's Arc '74 showroom.

This was furniture that deliberately broke the rules. It trod over the canons of good taste and the modernist myth of good design and distanced itself from a postmodernism of neoclassicism and historical pastiche. Instead, Memphis offered furniture covered in plastic laminates and fabrics whose patterns, such as Sottsass's 'Casablanca' sideboard (Figure 2.1), combined everything from Primitivism to Pop, real marble and fake finishes and clashed acid yellows and violent pinks—a pluralism that confirmed their postmodern credentials. These were designs to be photographed, to be looked at, and they were deliberately endowed with an attention-grabbing quality confirmed by the media frenzy that quickly erupted. With hundreds of articles, exhibitions, copies, famous owners and film appearances, the Memphis designs were soon celebrities in their own right.

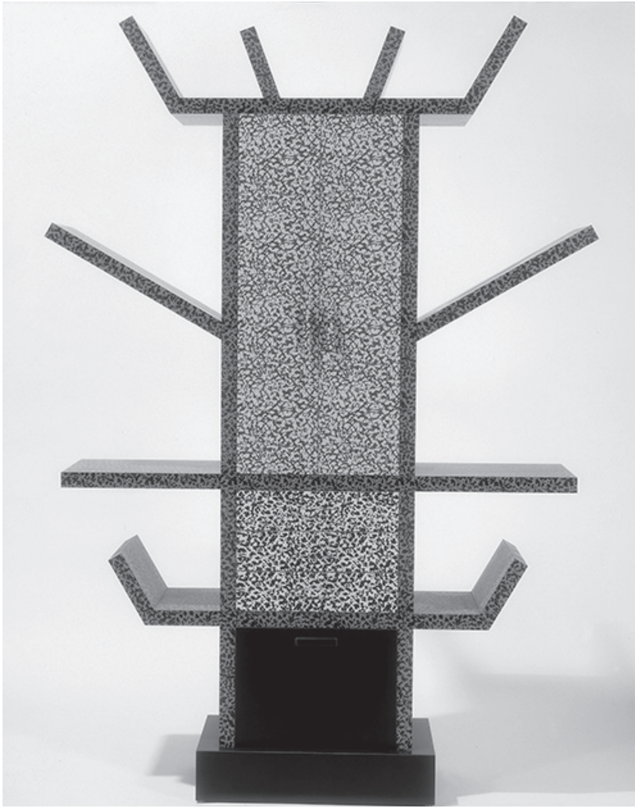

Figure 2.1 Ettore Sottsass, 'Casablanca' sideboard, Memphis, 1981. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

But despite their familiarity, one aspect of the Memphis furniture has been overlooked—their condition as one-off, handcrafted prototypes, one-of-a-kind provisional ideas palmed off as finished products. For this first collection—there would be five until the group was officially disbanded in 1987—nothing came before or after. There were no construction drawings, no models, no developments—a transition from sketch to smash hit in less than a year.

Of course, Memphis was not the first design phenomenon to rely on the prototype. In many ways, it had been the default status of design in postwar Italy, the objects photographed for the articles and adverts in design magazines, such as *Domus* and *Casabella*, and shown in international showcases, such as the annual furniture fair and the *Triennale di Milano*, the exhibition of design and architecture held every three years in the city until 1996. Designed for publicity as much as for production, the prototype contributed to the huge international success of Italy's postwar generations of architects and designers.

The prototype also spoke of the intimate and underrecognized relationship between design and craft in postwar Italy. In 1981, the same year of Memphis's debut, the Italian architect Enzo Mari curated an exhibition that asked *Where is the Craftsman?* (Mari 1981). In the postindustrial context of the early 1980s the answer was surprisingly positive: Italy's furniture and apparel industries were dominated by a network of small-scale artisanal enterprises. These workshops were equally important when it came to factory production; much of Mari's exhibition was devoted to the role of those artisans responsible for dies, moulds, patterns, models and prototypes that made industrial manufacture possible.

Yet the prototype, of vital importance to Italy's postwar design story, has been overlooked. Arguably, this is not surprising. On the one hand, the success of Italian design becomes a lot more uncertain when it becomes clear that many of its iconic objects never even went into production. On the other, in the context of the Italian furniture industry, the prototype was an object handmade by craft practitioners. As such, the lack of recognition for its role becomes shorthand for the marginalization of craft as a whole in Italian design historiography.

This paper concentrates on one aspect of this story. In the growing crisis that defined Italian design from the late 1960s to early 1980s, the prototype played a central role as a polemical and increasingly publicity-driven type of object, one at the centre of design and craft's relationship. This shifting role of the prototype in Italian radical and postmodern design can only be understood in light of the roles the prototype performed in the earlier postwar period. Once these are established, the reason why the Memphis objects were prototypes—and why this mattered—should become clear.

ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY AND ARTISANAL TECHNIQUES: PROTOTYPES IN ITALIAN DESIGN, 1945 TO 1960

The seeds for the different roles that the prototype took on in Italian radical and postmodern design were sown some thirty years earlier. Design was part of the larger project of postwar reconstruction. Without any discrete design pedagogy or profession until the 1960s, it was Italy's architects who were designing furniture to rebuild the nation and set the template for Italy's emergence on the international marketplace. As such, the production of prototypes was geared towards developing another object type: the archetype.

The interplay between archetype and prototype was most explicit in the 'Superleggera' (Figure 2.2). Designed by the Milanese architect Gio Ponti, this chair is one of the so-called icons of Italian design, produced by Cassina from 1957 and still in production today. This chair was the result of a quest for ever-increasing lightness that inspired much of Ponti's work, from the slender

Figure 2.2 Gio Ponti's *Superleggera* chair mid-air above the Cassina factory, in a demonstration of its strength and lightness. © Archivio Storico Cassina.

Pirelli skyscraper in Milan (1956–60) to the Taranto Cathedral in the South of Italy (1970).

It took nearly ten years of sketches, design drawings and prototypes to get to be *superleggera*—beyond lightness. The first version of the chair, in painted ash with brass-tipped legs from 1949, was made by Giordano Chiesa, a furniture maker who Ponti repeatedly turned to for prototypes and one-off commissions. By 1951 it had become the 'Leggera' (light), put into production following the extensive technical innovation needed to achieve the desire for conjoined actual and formal lightness.

This combination of manufacturers willing to invest in product development and skilled artisans available to translate designs into objects would become a hallmark of Italian manufacturing. The 1950s may have been marked by a wave of industrialization, the latest in what had been a staggered and fragmented process, but it remained a localized phenomenon, dominated by the industrial triangle of Genoa, Milan and Turin in which craft skills and processes remained vital. Certainly the furniture industry, centred in the Milanese hinterland of Brianza, remained predominantly artisanal in character.

This widespread availability of craft production in Italy often translated into artisans' skills and ongoing traditions being taken for granted. In 1952, when the chair was still just the 'Leggera', Ponti was already speaking of its archetypal status. In an article in *Domus*, the magazine he edited from its foundation in 1928 until his death in 1979, Ponti (1952: 1) wrote an article called 'Without Adjectives' in which he differentiates between his chair and what he calls 'haughty chairs with adjectives'—although a plethora are used in the article. He describes it as a 'chair-chair', 'the true "chair of always", the chair that was already there, the pre-existing chair'. Ponti rejects antecedents, and adjectives are rejected in order to make the 'Leggera' into an archetype; Ponti invites readers to follow him, to produce 'beds-beds, wardrobes-wardrobes', and so on.

However, the 'Leggera' was not an archetype. On the one hand, it was a prototype—the 'Superleggera' was yet to come. Moreover, despite Ponti's claims, there was a preexisting chair—the 'Chiavari' chair, a smart straw-seated ladderback chair from the Ligurian coast in production since the 1800s. This chair enjoyed renewed popularity in the early 1950s and was featured in exhibitions of Italian design in which it was described as the *leggerissima* (lightest) chair. Ponti even relied on the continuing production of these chairs for the manufacturing of the 'Superleggera'. Mass produced in the Cassina factory—itself a site of craftsmanship—the chair seat was handwoven by female pieceworkers in the Chiavari hinterland. This labour-intensive production process contributed to the chair's status as an unwittingly expensive, luxury object available only to the few rather than the desired masses.

The 1950s was defined by this faith in industrial production that fell down when confronted with Italy's inability to produce or consume on a modern, mass scale. It was also seen in furniture such as the 'San Luca' armchair from 1959, designed by Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni and produced by Gavina. In the 'San Luca', traditional upholstery was rejected in favour of innovative rubber padding. Paradoxically, this use of advanced materials necessitated manual production, as the chair was composed of a series of separate padded components, which had to be constructed and finished individually before being screwed together. Mari included the 'San Luca' in his 1981 exhibition as an example of a quasi prototype, 'designed to be mass-produced but in fact manufactured one or two at a time, and only to order' (Mari 1981: 44).

The 'San Luca' was designed at the peak of Italy's mythical economic miracle, or boom, the years between 1958 and 1962 in which the nation explosively emerged as a productive and consumer power. Italian design served up an image of elegance to cement its international prestige and meet the desires of the nation's newfound image of consumerist prosperity. In this luxury turn, materials

such as leather and marble became what the design historian Penny Sparke has called the '*sine qua non*' of Italian design (Sparke 1990: 178). So pervasive was the logic of luxury that architects, such as Vico Magistretti, even turned their attention to that most inauspicious of materials—plastics—to producing synthetic furnishings every bit a part of *la dolce vita* as the shoes of Salvatore Ferragamo or the cinema of Federico Fellini.

This modern, industrial material still demanded artisanal knowledge and a close dialogue between architect and artisan. So complex was the *s* shaped section of the 'Selene' that Magistretti (Pasca 1991: 49) said 'it couldn't be drawn', and so instead he turned to a 'sublime' model maker to visualize and develop his design. As the craft practitioner and theorist David Pye (1968: 75) described, craft skills do not disappear in industrial production but instead relocate to the 'preparatory' phases of which prototypes, moulds and tooling are all part.

POLEMICAL PROTOTYPES: ITALIAN RADICAL DESIGN

The miracle did not last long. By the mid-1960s inflation, unemployment, high levels of internal migration and a lack of investment in public infrastructure were joined by increasing international disaffection with the modern consumer society. In this first wave of what would be known as radical, or anti- or counter-design, Italy's avant-garde architects responded with objects that ironically engaged with the mass consumerist language of kitsch and Pop and anticipated the populist references of the postmodern style. In recognition of this, Sottsass (Nelson 1983) would later describe the 'very strange' brightly coloured striped laminate 'Superboxes' (Figure 2.3) from 1966 as representing the origins of Memphis.

The inclusion of the 'Superboxes' in *Domus* spread awareness of the increasingly contestatory stance of Italy's avant-garde. Framed by a series of furnishings, including rugs and hi-fis, the Superboxes proposed a new aesthetic for the domestic interior. However, despite their appearance, these were not 1:1 scale prototypes but miniature models. The furnishings were in fact miniature props—doll-house pieces bought from a Milanese toy store that gave the illusion of full-sized rooms.

By the early 1970s full scale-versions were produced for exhibition purposes. Several years later the 'Superboxes' were put into production, a shift that transformed these models retrospectively into prototypes. This time lag between appearance and production is telling. Ultimately, it speaks of a shift in emphasis amongst Italy's radical architects. Design was no longer about making prototypes, let alone archetypes. Instead, it was about an open-ended exploration with more conceptual and behavioural aims.

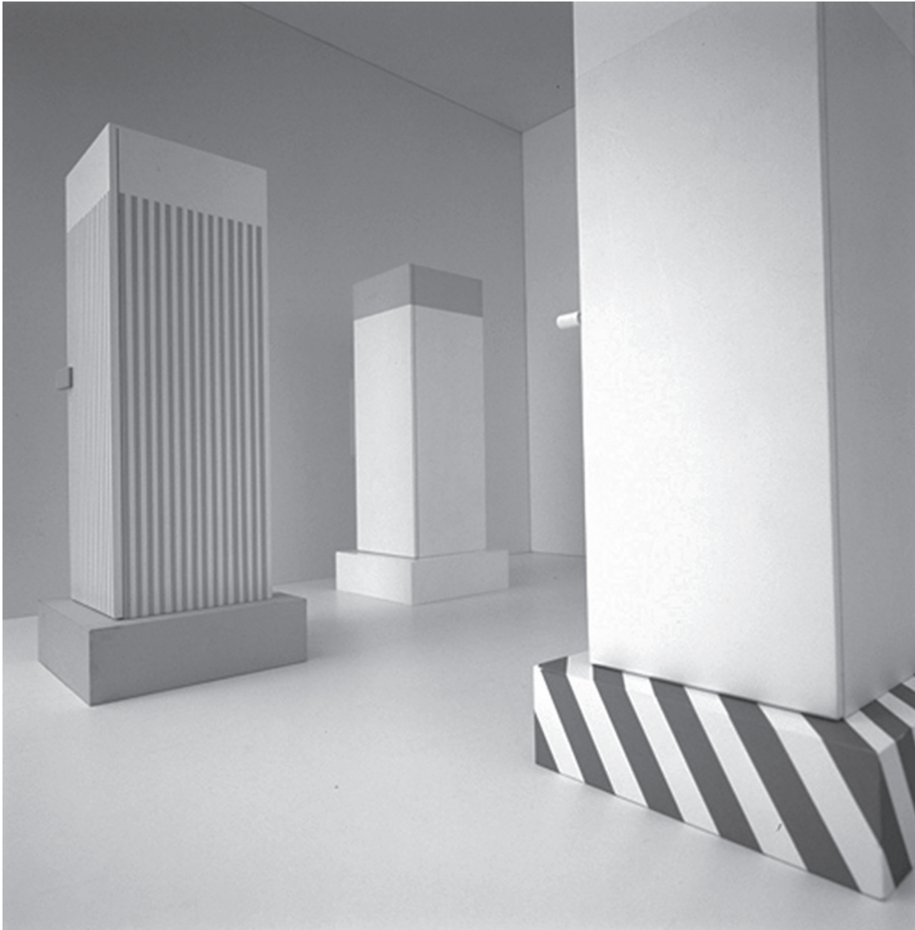

Figure 2.3 Ettore Sottsass, *Superbox*, designed in 1966. © Maria Assunta Radice, Sottsass Archive.

The same was true of the Archizoom Associati, the radical group established in 1966 by the young Florentine architects Andrea Branzi, Gilberto Corretti, Paolo Deganello and Massimo Morozzi. Like the 'Superboxes', their 'Dream Beds' (1967) appeared in *Domus*, and these too were miniature models in carefully choreographed fictional set-ups. For a generation of architects largely out of work and increasingly reluctant to engage with the mechanisms of mass production and consumption, the small-scale model made sense. It was not only more economically feasible and ideologically palatable, but in the shift from market-driven to conceptual-oriented design, all that was needed was something that could be photographed and disseminated through a magazine, however fictitious it was.

Like Sottsass's 'Superboxes', some of Archizoom Associati's products were subsequently produced. Progressive manufacturers, such as Poltronova and Gufram, picked up on the appeal objects like the 'Superonda' and 'Safari' sofas had for the growing youth market. Increasingly, however, these Pop products were themselves seen as problematic. The Marxist architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri (1989: 99) criticized Archizoom Associati and the associated Superstudio group as peddling an 'increasingly commercialized' form of irony, and by the 1970s these design objects were seen as an inadequate and too easily commodified critical response.

The crisis of Italian design and the complexity of its responses were most famously on display in the landmark 1972 MoMA exhibition 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems in Italian Design'. Curated by the Argentinean architect Emilio Ambasz, this was the most comprehensive survey of Italian design of the postwar period. Alongside the displays of design objects, from the mainstream elegance of Magistretti's 'Selene' to Sottsass's radical 'Superboxes', were eleven especially commissioned 'domestic environments'. Ambasz invited architects including Gae Aulenti, Gaetano Pesce, Superstudio and Sottsass to produce designs that ultimately demonstrated the degrees of contestation that were increasingly defining Italy's countercultural design movement.

Sottsass's 'environment' consisted of a series of interconnected grey fibreglass furnishing units. It epitomized the turn towards dematerialization in Italian design, influenced by larger movements in the international artistic avant-garde. In the catalogue, Sottsass (Ambasz 1972: 162) described how he wanted to make furniture 'from which we feel so detached, so disinterested, and so uninvolved that it is of absolutely no importance to us'. He also attended to the stage-set status of these objects:

> Given the time and conditions, and given the general views held by people as well, my pieces of furniture on view in this exhibition can be nothing more than prototypes, or perhaps even pre-prototypes, and thus, if you approach them, you realize that hardly anything really 'works' . . . These pieces of furniture, in fact, represent a series of ideas, and not a series of products to be put on the market this evening or tomorrow morning.

Ambasz's design brief explicitly advocated conceiving the environments as prototypes. This was not necessarily because he saw them as precursors to production, but because as an object type, he saw (Ambasz 1969) the prototype as best revealing the true nature of design. Increasingly, design was being understood more as a process of synthesis related to its surrounding environment rather than a fetishized formal solution. This overt attention to the prototype

points to a shift in the Marxism that had defined much of the politics of Italy's left-wing architects. In the early 1970s it mirrored a larger idea that if architects wanted change, then they had to go further back in the design process than the superstructural level of designing commodities; change would only occur at the level of designing the processes of design and manufacture.

DESIGNING PRODUCTION, DESIGNING DESIGN

This was at its most explicit in an early 1970s project by the Marxist firebrand Mari. In 1974 Mari put on an exhibition entitled *Proposta per un'Autoprogettazione* (Proposal for a Self-Design) in Milan. It featured eighteen self-declared prototypes of furniture, including chairs, desks, a wardrobe and beds, all designed by Mari and produced by the Bolognese producer Simon International.

Even in the context of the exhibition, the emphasis was more on the process rather than the object. The catalogue was, in fact, a manual of photos and design drawings with a statement by Mari included in the front (2008: 1):

> A project for making easy-to-assemble furniture using rough boards and nails. An elementary technique to teach anyone to look at present production with a critical eye. (Anyone, apart from factories and traders, can use these designs to make them by themselves. The author hopes the idea will last into the future and asks those who build the furniture, and in particular, variations of it, to send photos to his studio.)

The connection between prototype and product was loosening; these designs would not be mass produced by professional manufacturers but handmade by amateurs in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, as Mari's rejection of 'factories and traders' suggests, this was not some project of benign do-it-yourself but participatory activism. In making the users put the furniture together themselves, Mari aimed to expose the mystification and inflated value of commodities.

For some radical designers, however, this controlled form of participation did not go far enough. In a series of *tecnica povera* (minimal technology) experiments conducted by the architect Riccardo Dalisi between 1971 and 1973 in Traiano, one of Naples's most impoverished quarters, the design process was itself reimagined. Dalisi's much-lauded project paralleled the *povera* movement in art, theatre and architecture. Influenced by the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1972), advocates of *povera* proposed direct participation and the use of natural, or rather unmediated, materials in order to return to the unalienated condition of the 'savage mind'. Dalisi engaged in a game of behavioural primitivism in which he encouraged Neapolitan street children to design and make improvised, spontaneous furniture—these barely educated children were seen

to be subjects who were as unconditioned by culture as possible. The chairs that resulted were the prototypes not for a new aesthetic or style but rather for a new design method based on play and participation.

Dalisi's experiments were taken up by Global Tools, the collective setup in 1973 that is seen to have marked the apotheosis and decline of Italian radical design. Set up in the offices of *Casabella*, then edited by radical architect Alessandro Mendini, Global Tools was populated by the leading lights of Italian radicalism, from Sottsass to Archizoom Associati, Superstudio and Gaetano Pesce. The group proposed a definition of tools as a form of communication, as media, as extensions of the body. Although Global Tools broke up three years later, it was their understanding of tools and design in general, clearly influenced by the writings of Marshall McLuhan (1964), that would later be taken up by the Memphis architects.

Although it was a decade of increasingly fragmented and disparate design activity, by the mid-1970s radical design was no longer about objects at all. This was a period of increasingly dystopian views, where nonmaking gave way, in its most nihilist and pessimistic form, to unmaking, to destruction. Mendini's 'Monumentino da Casa' (Little Household Monument), a laminate-covered wooden chair from 1974 produced by the experimental Cassina offshoot Braccio di Ferro was designed and made solely to be burnt and then featured on the cover of *Casabella*. The flat, photographic space of the magazine had become the loci of design activity in this period, serving to document the increasingly performative nature of radical design.

Mendini did get around to making objects again. In 1978 he joined Studio Alchymia, the Milanese gallery and studio set up by siblings Adriana and Alessandro Guerriero two years earlier. He was accompanied by Branzi, De Lucchi, Sottsass and several other protagonists of radical design. Branzi (1984: 141) described their 1979 'Bauhaus' collection as the first example of the New Handicrafts of the postindustrial landscape. As in all of postwar Italian design, there is no ideological distinction between artisanal and industrial making here: 'the prototype and the limited run make no pretence of being an alternative to mass-production, but treat it as a possible subsequent phase to the experiments in design permitted by the new handicrafts.'

However, to describe Alchymia's designs as prototypes was not strictly accurate. As Barbara Radice, journalist, Sottsass's partner and Memphis biographer, described (1993: 212), these one-off designs 'envisaged neither production nor commercial distribution.' However, while Mendini maintained the desire to keep distant from the mass market, De Lucchi and Sottsass saw this as the only viable arena of communication. This contributed to them breaking away from Alchymia to set up Memphis a year later.

Two design projects merit attention in the move from Alchymia to Memphis. First were Branzi and Sottsass's furniture designs for the Italian department store Croff Casa. With their bright but unpatterned surfaces, totemic yet recognizably furniture-like forms, their designs sat somewhere between the 'Superboxes' and Memphis. However, this step back towards the marketplace was disastrous. According to Radice (1985: 23), the department store sales assistants 'actually discouraged clients from buying the pieces'.

At least they got past the prototype stage. In 1979, while still with Alchymia, De Lucchi exhibited a series of painted wooden prototypes for small appliances that had been commissioned by the Italian domestic goods firm Girmi at the Milan *Triennale*. These toy-like, pastel-coloured forms were meant to signal a new aesthetic for domestic technologies. They were warmly received by the Italian press, and yet they were never put into production by Girmi, a belated reminder that prototypes do not always lead to products.

MAKING MEMPHIS, MARKETING MEMPHIS

Memphis seemed to have learnt from these experiences: conventionality in terms of production and dissemination did not guarantee market success. Accordingly, the roles of designers and manufacturers were renegotiated; if the latter could not be relied on to put these provocative imaginings into the marketplace, then their role had to be circumvented through the media.

Ernesto Gismondi, director of lighting company Artemide, was both one of Memphis's financial backers and its president. He was given no say in which objects went into production for the first Memphis collection, nor in the technologies or materials used. Instead, designs were discussed amongst the group at Sottsass's house and sent to the workshop of Renzo Brugola, a carpenter who had worked with Sottsass since the 1950s and who was also one of the Memphis partners, along with Brunella and Mario Godani, who owned the Arc '74 showroom (Rossi 2010).

From his Brianza workshop, Brugola coordinated production of the Memphis furniture, subcontracting local specialist workshops in the process. As Memphis progressed, the more it engaged with Italy's wealth of regionally based craft traditions. For the second 1982 collection, the Memphis architects designed domestic furnishings and accessories handmade by Murano's glass blowers, Vicenza's silversmiths, Carrara's marble manufacturers and Montelupo's ceramic manufacturers.

This network of integrated scales of production reflected the shape of Italian industry in the early 1980s. In the context of economic crisis, large industry was

effectively stagnant. In its place was what the British magazine *Design* (Anon. 1983: 41) described 'as an anachronistic industrial structure; a network of family-run firms combines with a layer of craft-rich artisans to translate the often vague proposals of designers into prototypes and mass-produced goods.'

No construction drawings exist for the Memphis furniture. Instead, the architect and artisan relied on informal forms of visual and verbal communication. By now Brugola knew which thickness of materials Sottsass liked and his preference for rounded corners; Sottsass would give Brugola some sketches and just say 'arrangiarti!'—get on with it (Rossi 2010)! However, for all this reliance on Italy's continuing wealth of craft skills, any notion of this being some sort of 'craft revival' was denied by both critics and the architects themselves (Sudjic 1982: 42).

Instead, these were prototypes destined for industrial production. As Sottsass explained (Sudjic 1982: 42), 'they can all be produced by machines. Plastic laminate is made by a machine as are all the other elements.' However there was a problem with this desire for machine manufacture. As an exasperated Gismondi (Anon. 1989: 11) would later describe of Sottsass's *Carlton* room divider: 'The bookcase is built up of numerous pieces of plastic laminate glued onto wood, each piece being different from all the others. On no account can this be produced in series. There is no option other than doing it by hand.'

If more prototypes had been developed, then these problems could potentially have been ironed out. These prototype-as-products were partly due to the short time lag between the foundation of Memphis and its unveiling at the 1981 *Salone*, the most important date in the design calendar. The speed from concept to prototype and the provisionality of the objects also testifies to the inbuilt aesthetic obsolesce, or rather deliberate fashionability, of the objects, and increasingly, design in general, in the 1980s. It also ties in with another condition of these objects, one linked with the sheets of laminates that were plastered over every surface. These were produced by Abet Laminati, Italy's largest manufacturer of laminates, who had also financed Memphis and sponsored its catalogue. This continued their role as benefactor and beneficiary of radical design. Abet Laminati had sponsored 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape' and provided the laminates for Sottsass's 'Superboxes'. By the early 1980s this relationship became more concrete in a series of Abet adverts that promoted their design connections. As with all marketing exercises, this was a mutually beneficial relationship; as producers of 'semi-finished' products (Castelli, Antonelli and Picchi 2007: 198), Abet could not participate on their own in the *Salone*. Instead, as they had done since the 1960s and before, they had to find design partners willing to design objects using their materials.

THE PROBLEM OF PROTOTYPES: ALESSI'S 'TEA AND COFFEE PIAZZA'

The postmodern prototype can therefore be understood principally as a publicity ploy. This is confirmed by one of the most well-known manifestations of Italian postmodernism: the 'Tea and Coffee Piazza' project. Instigated by Mendini, the project brought together designs by eleven different architects for the Italian firm Alessi. This was an example of the design editor phenomenon of designers that would flourish in the 1980s.

The services were available in sterling silver in limited editions of ninety-nine. There were also three prototypical 'proofs' of each service available in brass or silvered copper. Unlike with the Memphis objects, there was a considerable time lag between the inception and realization of these objects. While first dreamt up in 1979, the 'Tea and Coffee Piazza' services would not go into production until 1983, yet they made their first public appearance in an advert in *Domus* in 1981 under the headline 'L'Officina Alessi'. The advert featured drawings of prototypes for some of the tea and coffee pots by the architects involved, including Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Mendini himself (Figure 2.4). According to the advert's lengthy copy (*L'Officina Alessi* 1981):

> Other prototypes, at this time, are being defined and will be reconsidered by the authors. Other studies, other preparatory sketches are in the course of being elaborated . . . From the designs of this group of architects will be made prototypes, or curiosities, or small productive series, or objects destined to enter into mass Alessi production.

The same advert was printed in *Casabella*, and prototypes of some of the services were shown in exhibitions in Germany, Switzerland and Italy from 1982 onwards. With such widespread marketing and such preeminence of the prototype, Alessi was surely confident of success. But the advert was really a piece of bravado—no one knew at that stage if all of the designs for the 'Piazzas' could even be made as prototypes, let alone be put into large-scale production.

The key to the story lies back in 1979. Alberto Alessi, the son of the firm's founder, was in charge of the project. He gave descriptions to the participating architects of what could and could not be done with stainless steel, the default Alessi material for Alessi production. They were offered the choice of designing for either small- or industrial-scale production, and all chose to work towards the latter. With sketches and design drawings beginning to arrive, the question of how to make the 'Piazzas' came to the fore. In Alberto's words (Gabra-Liddell 1994: 38–9):

> The time came to make a few prototypes, and that is when the problems started . . . almost none of the projects had the necessary characteristics for series production, and the option of small-scale artisan production included

Figure 2.4 Alessandro Mendini, design for the *Tea & Coffee Piazza* project, Alessi, electroplated silver, 1983. © Aldo Ballo, Museo Alessi.

> by myself in the brief with great bravery and foolhardiness, was in actual fact very difficult to put into practice at Alessi. All our excellent mechanics and model makers, the only people able to work on a small-scale series, were already involved with the construction of the moulds and the prototypes necessary to the ranges already in production.

Over the next couple of years Alberto had a few prototypes covertly made in the Alessi workshop; the other members of the family were either unconvinced or never even told about the project. Come 1982 Alberto was under pressure from Mendini to provide closure, and he handed production over to several artisans in the Milanese hinterland. He had to pay for the first silver prototypes out of his own pocket—such was his concern that his family would not look too favourably on the idea (Gabra-Liddell 1994: 39).

Even once the prototypes were made, Alberto's woes were not over (Gabra-Liddell 1994: 39): 'I realised . . . that it was one thing making the prototypes, and another selling these objects, which always resulted in being more exciting from the expressive point of view, but were scarcely functional and extremely expensive.' The preemptive exhibitions in Europe in 1982 became just the first step in a large-scale, international publicity campaign that deliberately sought out museums, galleries and private collectors—the only possible buyers for these exorbitantly priced objects.

So the decision to make small-scale, silver objects was not desired from the outset. Just like the Memphis furniture, despite the wishes of the manufacturer and even the architects involved, Alessi's 'Tea and Coffee Piazzas' could not be mass produced, certainly not at an accessible price. Instead, they were reliant on and designed in mind with the ongoing wealth of artisans willing and able to interpret architects' ideas into reality, as well as innovative manufacturers willing to invest time and money into design research.

CONCLUSION

From the 'Superleggera' to the 'Tea and Coffee Piazzas', this chapter has demonstrated the centrality of the prototype to the story of postwar Italian design. Taken together, it is clear that throughout this period, from 1945 to the early 1980s, the prototype was caught up in Italian design's ambiguous relationship with postwar modernity. At first certain of a future of industrial production, in the 1950s, architects, such as Ponti and the Castiglioni brothers, were designing objects suited for a mass system of production and consumption that did not exist. In the crisis of consumerist values in the mid-1960s Italy's architects lost their faith in both this certainty and any clear-cut future at all. By the 1980s Sottsass and his band of Memphis architects were designing objects that could not be produced or consumed on a large-scale. Increasingly, however, this did not matter; once photographed and disseminated, the prototype had performed its function as a vehicle for communication, and the distinction between prototype and product had therefore collapsed.

Throughout, one thing remained a constant about the prototype—its position at the centre of an ongoing discourse between design, craft and industry in postwar Italy, one that shows up the strength and the cracks of this vital tripartite relationship.

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