Context, Culture and Innovation

Italian versus Universal Design

> *"First of all, design is a very relative thing. It depends on the culture in which it is consumed. Absolute design, there is not. No design is absolute. All design work is relative. So it depends on the culture and that's I think the fundamental thing to understand about design." – Isao Hosoe, 2005*

What Isao Hosoe speaks of is the fundamental idea that design is relative to context and must be considered holistically. Universal Design attempts to create an overall solution that is applicable to any situation. In reality, conceptions of Universal Design fail to develop a lasting impact because they do not consider the context in which the design is intended for. Italian design is on the opposite side of the spectrum, and deeply considers the context in which the design exists. An Italian designer understands and is embedded in the situation, which informs all aspects of the design. It is perhaps this quality, which most clearly defines Italian design from its competitors: its awareness. In our studies, we were struck by how deeply embedded "Italy" is in virtually every product. And it is this quality that we feel we can learn the most from. Awareness of the contextual basis of design is what is at the core of Italian innovativeness.

Italian Context as Innovative Driver

What is context and why is it important? How can we analyze it? In Italy, when someone goes to get a coffee, they do so in a unique way. What makes this act distinctly Italian is that they are situated in a particular context. Context is the environment that surrounds and gives meaning to the objects and people within it. In many ways, it is what leads to the creation of a specific 'culture'. It is the myriad of forces that are almost invisible at the scale of everyday activity, but in a huge way shape a people's identity and lifestyle. In the case of Italy, this context shapes the *players* of Italian design (intellectuals, designers, and companies) and informs their processes. An understanding of contextual elements provides a mode of analysis, a way of seeing, a model, that illustrates how their unique combination differentiates the Italian design approach from something more universal; it provides a way of thinking about how a particular place or situation affects a particular object or design. This paper will show how context affects form and design philosophy. The forces that have the biggest impact on Italian design will be explored in this paper: Italy's erratic economy, the positive legacy and constraining effects of its academia, the balkanized socio-geographic landscape, and the breadth of Italian culture and history. These forces shape Italy's unique context and studying these elements provides us with a lens through which we can view the results of Italian manufacturing in a way that enables us to understand these final forms. This then allows for an analysis of the unique dynamic of the players that are embedded in this context.

The unique combination of contextual elements within Italy creates a hotbed for innovation. Despite Italy's ongoing economic issues, it remains innovative. How? Each element of Italy's design context is an innovative driver that has a valuable impact on the country as a design leader. The economic status and market readiness impact how innovations are realized. The overproduction of knowledge workers places power in the academia, where highly concentrated areas of knowledge encourage theoretical research. Geographical distinctions foster diversity of approaches and Italian virtuosity, which leads to innovation. Finally, Italy's rich history is one of the most influential contextual elements and is the backbone for the other contributing elements.

The Culture of "Slowness"

Unique combinations of contextual elements form culture.
In the interviews we conducted throughout Italy in June and July of 2005, it became clear that a fundamental relationship with time to the process of designing was incredibly important to Italian Design. How? How is time considered differently than in most Canadian design? In the best Italian design, time is not to be conquered, as a production model more based on efficiency would view it, but is built into the final form to ensure a unique cultural value: the goal of longevity. Examples of this are seen not just in design, but in all aspects of Italian lifestyle: the long and delicate wine-aging process, shopping daily in the market, "passeggiata" (evening walks) and in Italy's Slow Cities and Slow Foods movement. Our studies indicate that Italians and Italian designers believe that a

project will be completed when it is ready; that it is not untouchable once construction begins, and many other things that could be thought of as "inefficiencies". To not be romantic about this, to be certain, Italians rail at this inefficiency at times. But, without this negative, the positive of letting things happen over time in natural ways cannot be achieved. This is a characteristic often missing in British design or American design. But without it, Italian design would be quite different. We struggled with what to call this key ingredient in Italian process. We wish our readers to know that to us, it is the most admirable of qualities. The term "slowness", which will be used throughout this paper, therefore refers back to this distinction. Perhaps there is a better term, but for now, we have settled on this to try to capture something elusive and essential. Thus, contemporary Italy's driving culture of "slowness" has stemmed from deeply embedded values within Italian everyday life. It manifests as a process of quality, at a pace that enables one to look at the finer details to ensure excellence. The culture of slowness views time, not as a constraint, but as an enabling factor. These are issues of "context". Hence, CONTEXT is crucial to this study, and it is where we began our study: the design process and the designers who use it, flow from context. As with Venturi before us, as a research team we consider our work to be, and be of, "contextual design".

So, a key argument is that: like culture itself, the contextual elements of Italy each fuel innovation in distinct, yet interconnected ways. And these contribute to an overall embedded meta-value of "slowness" in the context of Italian design. Milan, as a representative Italian design city, is a *measurably* innovative capital (Simmie, 2001), one of the most consistently innovative in Europe. As Italy transforms in the post-industrial market, our belief is that this innovativeness coupled with export productiveness will spread more to centres like Rome and Florence, where we sense that a rapid transformation is already underway. The remainder of this paper attempts to explain what we have learned during our field study work in Italy in regards to the Italian design context: how it provides the origins of the culture of slowness and how the combination of these elements then creates a hotbed for innovation.

The contextual elements that contribute most to Italy's innovation and culture of slowness will be explored, beginning with the most defining element: history.

History

To understand Italy, one must begin with history. This is no surprise. But one cannot really understand a Gio Ponti, a Vico Magistretti or Patricia Urquiola chair if one does not consider how deeply it resonates with a comfortableness with the past.
The rich history within this country is the underlying element for all that exists today. From the bedrock of the Etruscans, through the usual suspects to Palladianism and the seeds of modern design, Italy's long history has been built layer upon layer in such a way that it is deeply engrained into current Italian culture and everyday life.

The Slow Industrial Revolution

But to begin a bit more focussed, the key historical factor that played the largest role in shaping Italy's current designing context was its unique industrial revolution. Unlike countries such as Britain or Germany, Italy did not have an industrial revolution where all the citizens left the land and became workers. Italy had a slow industrial revolution, where many of its citizens remained on the land, or had links to the land for a very long time (Foot, 2005). Industrialism started much later and lasted much later, well into the 20th century. It's boom was much briefer. This all resulted in a unique relationship between the artisans and craftspeople of the countryside to modern industry. This seems small, but when you see how connected craft is to production in Italy, you begin to realize that it is a major key to innovation. While industry centres, like Torino and Milan, began to grow and modernize, those in the countryside continued to practice crafts as they always had. And many of Italy's major firms, as well as many smaller ones, built their factories, not in urban centres, but in the small towns their clans came from: Bialetti in Omegna, Ferrari in Maranello, Piaggio in Pontedera. This close relationship between craft and industry still exists today and largely explains why Italy remains so connected to its traditions, but also why craft ideals are embedded in everyday practices, and at the highest levels of design and production. No other country exhibits this characteristic to the same degree. Everyday practices are thus deeply embedded in the design objects, and spaces Italy, and Italians produce. This also is worth highlighting as the value of "everyday things" increases in

both the design and technology sectors. Italy seems to have been doing this for quite some time.

A small, yet valuable example can be seen in the every day practice of purchasing of meat and cheeses. Compared to a typical North American supermarket or deli that has much of its contents shrink-wrapped, Italians see the cheese as a craft and treat it so. Typically, when purchased, the desired amount is carefully cut and wrapped, as though it was an art itself. There is no rush to serve as many people as possible in as short of a time. At a larger economic scale, would be the manufacturing process of the northern Italian company, Alessi. A family-run company, Alessi is famous for creating objects and appliances for the kitchen in highly polished steel and colourful plastics. Within their manufacturing process, the avocation of working in the Alessi factory has become a craft in and of itself, with generation after generation in a family continuing the tradition of working on the Alessi production line. One can even see the attention to craft in the hand-polished finish of each Alessi piece: this one act is the single highest time consuming factor on the line. This company has managed to balance mass-production with the craft that makes objects more than just ordinary. We as a research team heard this same approach in every design office we visited over the past two years: the link is clear. It seems to be "an Italian thing"! Yet, though, we can speak of some shared "Italian" characteristics, it is important to note that Italy's approaches to many issues are not all shared cohesively. The major factor contributing to the difference is Italy's socio-geographic distinctiveness. Italy remains a nation of fiercely distinct city-states and regions. How does Italy's extreme differences in local culture affect this scenario?

Geographical Distinctions

Several factors in Italy's history have caused often extreme geographical distinctions between the different areas within Italy. Italy is not, nor has it ever been geographically "unified". People unfamiliar with the greater nuance and the history of the contemporary nation assume that "Italy" is a shared concept, long in history and tradition, unbroken from Augustus to Berlusconi. This is far from reality. There has been a long history of "italic peoples", who have inhabited the Italic Peninsula ("Italy") for thousands of years. Yet from the beginning, this inhabitation was seldom experienced in a unified way. Perhaps the only era of a singular conception of socio-geographic "Italians" was under the Romans. They were the last to rule the entire peninsula before the "nation" of Italy was founded in 1870.

Although a leading industrial nation, Italy remains largely divided even today. Rome is the capital, yet those from the South feel that their capital does not necessarily represent their local reality; local governments and other forces often exert more influence. Sicily and Naples are the best examples -- in many ways ruled by enormously powerful local families whose effects are much more profoundly felt by the citizenry than any edict from the "Italian" capital of Rome or the industrial successes of the North. Italy after the Romans, and in many ways to this day, remains a conglomeration of disparate states that see little in common with their far-flung Italian countrymen at either end of the boot. This has resulted in distinct regions and areas with unique cultures, and differences in language, custom and temperament. As stated above, the slow industrial revolution allowed many craftspeople to remain in the countryside throughout Italy. But this had different effects on the South than in the North. While craftsmanship married production in the North, mass production facilities have had limited success in the South. So, as a result, many Italians have remained tied to the land and older patterns south of Rome. The part of Italy that you are from deeply affects the way you see the world, and as a result, how you design. The North/South distinction is the most extreme, but as we shall see, attitudes shift literally from town and town in Italy. Yet, at its best, this reality creates an incredible diversity and accounts for the distinctiveness of approach we see in the players. We shall investigate this phenomenon further in the paper, "The Players of Italian Design". So, suffice to say at this point that Italy benefits from both: a shared set of unique qualities, and fierce individual approach. Let us at this point speak more to the shared characteristics.

A Rich History of Knowledge

Knowledge is inherently connected to innovation. So we must also speak of Italy's relationship to the production of knowledge. Italy's history of intellectual thinking provides fertile ground for the contemporary academia and Italian design has long been intricately entwined with academia. Most Italian designers also teach design and they always have. Another small but fundamental difference to note. Italy's fertile learning culture does, it has for a long time,

and looks to continue to thrive. Again, contextually we begin with the historical relationship. To begin with, Italy has long lacked many natural resources as an economic basis (as Canada continues to do); successive generations of inhabitation stripped the land long ago, making a resource-supported economy difficult. Thus, Italians were forced to form a new kind of wealth --an intellectual wealth. Italy has clearly had a history of great thinkers and innovators: Seneca, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Galileo, Brunelleschi, Da Vinci, Marconi to name but a few. The modern day presence of these scholars in the form of monuments and sculptures are a reminder of Italy's rich history of knowledge. Italy also produced the first university in the western world. The University of Bologna was born in 1088. Over nine centuries later, it is still addressing new challenges with a focus on globalisation and the harmony of diverse cultures and academic traditions. As are Italy's other great Universities and Institutions: Rome Sapienza, University of Venice, Florence University, Milan Politecnico, Domus Academy. Italy has long understood the value of knowledge and it's worth when applied to many things, including design, making Italy a hotbed for the establishment of, and model of a contemporary "knowledge economy". Knowledge on its own is not productive, it must be applied. The link has long been understood and establishes the importance of knowledge and the need to adapt as times change. Innovation breeds where the productivity of knowledge is valued and it is a key ingredient in economic improvement in changing times. Indeed without new knowledge, innovation cannot occur. Design has long been a "thinking" practice in Italy. Currently, a new wave of intellectual thinkers from Stefano Boeri in Milano to Stefano Mirti and the Cliostraat group in Torino, Luca Galofaro and the IaN+ group in Rome, build on the ongoing discourse created by masters such as Andrea Branzi, Ezio Manzini, Sottsass, Mendini and others. Renzo Piano and Massimiliano Fuksas, bear the torch of knowledge-design Italian-style abroad. The relationship between designers and intellectuals will be discussed in more detail in the *Players* paper. History shows a strong tradition of emphasis on intellectual thinking APPLIED to processes in Italy and demonstrates that such intertwining forms the ability to adapt to new contexts. In the case of Italy, this leads to a powerful knowledge economy where, once you strip away other layers, it is clear that "the real power in Italy lies in the academia" (IaN+, 2005). As the economy spikes and drops, the knowledge work continues, awaiting application when times improve and learning to do things better with less when times are, not so good. In Italy, it is essential, we found out, to have the long-term in mind.

Economic Spikes

Italian designers seem sanguine about riding out the inevitable peaks and valleys of the economic cycle. This is a good thing, as Italy more than most countries seems to suffer through them. In terms of economy, Italy has a history of recession with sudden spikes of economic growth. The economy rapidly shifted from primarily one of agriculture before World War II, to booming industry in the 1950's. In Italy it was called, "the Economic Miracle", raising the real possibility of a divine Italian hand. But in the 1970's, it all came crashing down, much more heavily than in other places. More recent positives spikes were seen in the 1980s. Italy is currently suffering through yet another set of challenges. Yet, Rome is seeing the most new architectural building since Mussolini. Florence is similarly resolving its relationship to its ancient past in its centre and major projects are going up. Torino is being re-thought as a post-industrial city in the wake of its Olympic bid. Milan: well Milan seems almost impervious. Despite its current serious economic woes, Italy remains ranked as the world's fifth largest industrial economy and belongs to the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized nations. What has consistently driven this output has been the economic engines of the North in Milano, Genova and Torino. These engines drive the Italian economy. And these engines are driven by design and innovation. What seems to set Italy off from other countries is an approach to treating down times as opportunities and not panicking when they inevitably occur (Ricci-Spaini, 2005). Italians traditionally don't panic when things go bad and they don't think short-term. At the risk of romanticizing or re-enforcing stereotypes, think an olive farm: the Italian farmer knows he will have bad years, bad weather and each tree is cared for with an eye to the future of its many cycles which cannot be rushed. The tree may outlive the farmer and is thought of as being part of a long history. The economy is also treated as "historical" and so the sense of calm Italians seem to have about many things - or rather the patience they will take with tasks- extends here as well.

In summation: historical awareness provides a foundation for all other context in Italy. History, therefore, is the backbone for the other elements that together construct Italy's current context: Geography, Academia, and Economy. While each of these elements is related in some way, they all are tied to the history. These elements then individually support innovation and the culture of slowness. Below we will add colour to these four categories

before making some conclusions and some comment on the present and future of Italian Design in context.

Geography

Diversity from Regions to Neighbourhoods

Although a small country (relative to Canada!), it is interesting to note that Italy exhibits geographic distinctions unlike any other country in the world. These distinctions bring to design a diversity of approaches. Large distinctions can be seen in the landscape of different regions. One of the most recognized distinctions is seen between the North and South of Italy. During its industrial revolution and the post-war Economic Miracle, the North gained industrial power and built powerful manufacturing cities, while the South remained largely an agricultural landscape. This has remained so. "I think this is the only place in Europe where you can read this geographic difference between the North and South" (Galofaro, 2005). Both of these distinctions support what we call "the culture of slowness" in completely different ways. In the North, Milan is seen as a hub of design activity, where there is constant dialog between the designers and manufacturers. A company, such as Alessi, is a great example of this. Alessi's design process consists of designers that are closely involved with every step of the process and by and large live and practice independently in the churn of Milano. But when working with Alessi the designer usually works directly in Crusinallo at key points. For instance, in our interview at Alessi, Gloria Barcellini told us that the designers often ask to inspect each version of the mould and work with the engineers to ensure that nothing important gets lost from their original concept. Indeed, the designer often works directly with the engineer, even changing specs as the project progresses. Some of them driving the engineers mad in the process: Alessi's book "The Dream Factory", documents several of these interactions, involving Richard Sapper, Mendini, Rossi and Michael Graves. The same occurred in degrees at Danese with Enzo Mari, at Artemide with Michele de Lucchi, Sottsass and others. This is unique; and even unheard of in Canadian design -0 to have designers involved at the start of processes and to be involved in the process throughout production. Our model is still primarily the "hand-off" paradigm, and design is handed-off all too often at the end. The only example that comes to mind being the work that Karim Rashid has done with Umbra. Because this process is such an open system, designing is iterative and thus supports a slow, thoughtful process. This is "slowness" in the North. On the other hand, the South has a completely different design process. Their process is tied more closely to tradition and to the craft. Emphasis is placed on the quality of the item, rather than on efficiency. Massimiliano Fuksas seems to practice this distinction every time out in his jewel-like hand-crafted buildings. At the risk of over-simplifying: if Milan is a Cassina couch, Rome is a Bulgari necklace. More detail of this process will be explored in the third section of this paper, *Italian Process.* Suffice to say, in both South and North, in different ways, craftsmanship emerges in the process, thus contributing to "the culture of slowness", that identifies Italian design as a brand.

But beyond this large geographical divide, the distinctions between cities within each region vary as well. First, the South. For example, in the South, power is concentrated in Rome, which holds the administration, the pope and the church. Naples continues show significant problems of rampant unemployment, lawlessness, the under-world presence and slow growth. Many Sicilians and citizens in the south do not even consider themselves Italian and never have. These general comments would seem to reinforce the stereotypes. Yet in our conversations with Alessandro Vignozzi and Luca Galofaro in particular- both of whom work in Sicily and Napoli - there are positive signs of development and unique local characteristics, certainly worth more time in investigation in further iterations of this project. At this time, in summary, the differences between Rome, Naples and Sicily remain profound, as does the disparity from the experience in the North and relative absence of strong models of innovation and design. To date, we have spent more time in the North and can speak more intelligently about the distinctions. We have spoken of "the North" as the economic engine. It often is. But on the ground, designers in Torino, for one example exhibit a very different sensibility and approach to the Milanese. Our interview with Luca Poncellini and knowledge of Cliostraat, clearly indicated a distinct flavour to design in Torino. In the North, the cities of Milano, Torino and Genova, though virtually in commuting distance, greatly differ from one another. Torino was and still is to a great degree based on a heavy industrial model, and thus is greatly dependant on factory industry and companies like FIAT; it is the Detroit of Italy. Because of this, Torino in recent years has been in a slump along with the decreasing industry in Italy. Milan on the other hand, is an innovation capital and is largely based on a model of the knowledge economy. Because of this structure, Milan is able to maintain its strength by

adapting and evolving in the post-industrial context. This is what Andrea Branzi means when he speaks of the "weak structure" of Italian design. "It's a weak kind of structure, Italian design - incomplete, imperfect. But that is why it is very able to expand, to find new solutions, and to adapt to the new realities that we have". Milan attracts knowledge workers, researchers and designers (from all over Italy and the world), who feed into the innovative process. It is this emphasis on knowledge, not heavy industry, which needs to spread in Italy if more regions are to share the wealth. Suffice to say that old categories like "the North" are not therefore even sufficient to get at the wealth of diversity.

This strength in diversity applies to even much smaller scales of towns and neighbourhoods. For example, our study of Tuscan hill towns showed that despite being only kilometres apart, centres within a region are unique to one another. Siena is known for its civic roots, as seen in the Piazza del Campo, whereas Montalcino is famous for its fine Brunello wine, Chiusi for its Estrucan roots, Cortona for its daily rituals and Saturday market – and each is suspicious of its neighbours! Patterns observed in the piazzas of Pienza are distinct from those of Montepulciano or Chiusi, a stones-throw away. Further distinctions can even been seen within the neighbourhoods of these towns. In Siena, to use a well-known example, the Palio di Siena held twice a year, a single horse and rider represent one of the seventeen contrade, or city wards as a way of settling long-held differences within the same town. The suspicion of nearby Florence, of course goes back to the 1300's but seems to have happened yesterday, and divides the two to this day. In Florence, their civic rivalry is played out annually in the Calcio Storico (historic soccer), where teams representing the old neighbourhoods play out the age-old bitter feuds in a brutal game that seems more like a combination of rugby and boxing, than the soccer it birthed. Virtually every "Italian" town is like this. The reader can reference our extensive studies of Italian towns and their civic piazzas and major corridors in our project website. This work attempts to use form analysis matrices to measurably analyze these subtle but real differences in ten different towns and cities in contemporary Tuscany. At this micro level, the differences are real, from town to town, or in what is known as "campanilismo" (the distance to the next town's main bell-tower defines the territory); and the differences within the towns, that seem not to have been much resolved since the time of the Guelphs and Ghibellines (those who supported the Pope versus those who supported the Holy-Roman Emperor). Distinction and difference, pride and tradition, beginning – indeed – from the family itself, is Italian.

Strength in Diversity

Are there any characteristics, in fact, that are entirely shared? As a national identity, Italians seem to posses a noted "stubbornness". This is not to be understood in a negative way; it is simply Italian virtuosity: the strength of being able to look at things a different way and believing they can do something better than what has come before. In any case, the neighbourhoods, towns, cities and regions are distinct, by way of language, attitudes and values; each region, city or town possess competing ideas of what it means to be Italian. All Italians think of themselves first geographically and regionally as far as their identity goes, and often are connected to a particular city: Siena, Florence, Milan, Naples, Calabria, Roma. They are Romans, Calabrese, Florentine or Milanese first before Italians. This diversity becomes another driving factor of innovation, as each designer comes from a different 'reality', and so, can contribute a fresh way of looking at things. In each case, the individuals satisfy the overall concept of innovation, but do so in their own diverse way.

Academia

A Wealth of Knowledge and Theoretical Research

Because of Italy's history and lack of natural resources, power was placed in the Academia and the educational system. As stated in the history section, Italy had a rich history of great thinkers and a strong emphasis on the acquisition and distribution of knowledge. Presently, the extraordinary accessibility to well-supported private and government initiatives and prestigious exhibitions, such as the Salone de Mobile, Milan Triennale, la Rinascente Compasso d'Oro, Venice Biennale, as well as the profuse number of innovative and successful institutions, such as Domus, Ivrea and NABA (Nuova Accademia delle Belle Arti) continue to feed into the knowledge pool by providing

a central place for the distribution, sharing and communication of knowledge within the academic community, and its diffusion to design, technologists and innovation and knowledge workers. Furthermore, participation in international competitions allows for exploration and radical ideas.

At times the over-abundance of University graduates in Italy can be epidemic as it was in the 1970's. This situation, in part, has led to an overproduction of designers and architects. The danger in that, for Italy, is the high demand for jobs that this large group entails. Yet, the benefit from this situation is that Italy, and specifically Milan, has become a highly concentrated centre of applied knowledge and this partly explains how it persists as an innovative capital. The constant creation of new knowledge then leads to "knowledge spillovers", which represent the overabundance of accessible knowledge. This then attracts more knowledge workers to the area, who in turn contribute back to the pool of new knowledge, creating growth cycles. The fact that the Italia Field Study travels from Canada all the way to Italy for six weeks to study Italian innovation and design processes shows that there is indeed a great deal of knowledge to be shared, and interest from abroad, as well as some clear evidence that Italy has at least in the past done this well. As knowledge workers, we are attracted to what we can learn from Italy and Milan, and in turn, we contribute to the pool of knowledge and the innovation cycle through our knowledge spillover; this paper is a testament to that.

Because of the academic situation, there has been firm support for theoretical research in and into design, which has become a documented driving factor of innovation also. This type of research differs from more universal functionalist design research, in that the end goal is not measured only by way of profit, but also as a cultural and conceptual way of thinking that benefits the design discourse which spills over into the economic sector and innovation cycle (Branzi, 2005). Andrea Branzi, a paradigmatic Italian designer-theorist-academic (2005) states that,

> *"next to pure industrial production, there exists in Italy a kind of production that is more theoretical, and more conceptual – also experimental – and thus at times also more artistic. Not without merit to society it can also be more spiritual or poetic. That way of working – connected to industrial design - is really useful for industry, because by using that theoretical research, the industry gets a lot of information because the designer works in society, in the culture, but not in the industry. That difference between the industrial and the cultural way of proceeding is very important, and very unique to Italy."*

This illustrates the shift in focus in the Italian context from industry and production, to what Branzi calls more of an 'invisible quality' that is spiritual and poetic. There is at times, perhaps no direct or immediate economic gain from producing this invisible quality; but there is a great need for it. But in the longer-term this quality enables Italian industry to remain more impervious to trends and fashions. In many ways, once this view was connected to the elegant form of modernism set forth by the generation previous to Branzi's, perhaps best evidenced by Gio Ponti or the Castiglionis, the "formula" – if we could be so crass - for success of the "brand Italia" image was defined in the international public's mind. One could look only at Branzi's formal design contribution or say Enzo Mari's and from a more conservative point of view claim that their design as produced artefact is not always the best "functionally", but it would be our opinion that this would miss the point entirely, and miss the more important quality of their contribution within the cycle of knowledge production - thus short-changing the potential for innovation to occur. And this, indeed, is the problem with too much North American design. In the end, if we can't learn to think in terms of cultural and discourse contributions as contributions worth investing in than what innovation there is will follow economic trends slavishly up and down, always focused on technology, and the bottom line for shareholders. Great cities are not built this way. And, perhaps something business will hear better: neither are innovative cities. Italian design and industry can teach us that this is short-sighted and misses the value of long-term thinking in maintaining a brand image and a the goal of building and sustaining innovative cities. But more importantly, as a by-product, it helps *sustains* a healthy culture, and ensures sustainable businesses and sustainable design.

The "Factory of Excellence"

But much has changed recently in Italian design programs in the shift to European standards and the suffusion of private institutes who teach "design", but almost entirely from a "skills" point of view – as if design were a technical operation. The overabundance of designers problem has now become much more problematic at the moment in Italy because many of the new breed have no training in the cultural mindset we have spoken of above.

Indeed, even within hallowed ground like Milan's Politecnico we hear that the European standardization at present is producing a less conceptual designer. From a less idealistic point of view, some designers we spoke to, including some from Cliostraat, compared the emergent design educational system to "a factory" that produces people who can be used. Tongue firmly in cheek we even heard it referred to as the "factory of excellence". Holding the mirror up, and hoping to be accurate, there seems to be an important critique that needs to occur of the current mass training of architectural and design students, who often receive only practical and technical training. The students often are no longer close to those enigmatic, inspirational, and innovative figures of Italian design – the Castiglionis and Branzi, Mangiarotti. Magistretti – that motivated an exploration of craft and quality. Therefore, though we recognize a need in Canadian design to find the poetic; conversely, In Italy we fear that the concentration on theoretical research that Italy had in the past may be lost in the training and practices of these new students; and at a time when the younger design community searches for leaders who build more, and talk less - in an expected generational swing away from the previous generation's tradition. In our interview with Cliostraat's Luca Poncellini, he stated, "After the reform, it's [the design school system] much more similar to a farm that has to produce people who they can use. And the highest number of persons that school is able to finish with a degree, the bigger the success for the school" (Cliostraat, 2005). It was not the only comment we heard to this affect off the record.

For a long span of history, Italy has been basking in the glow of an over-abundance of great thinkers, which has played a large role in Italy's success in innovation. Academia was generally thought to be free of ties to economic goals or expectations. The working relationships of Italian designers as independent contractors to companies who maintained their independence has been a key strategic difference that has clearly led to innovation. This way of thinking allowed for both a discourse in thoughtful exploration of ideas, but also for ideas and cultural thinking to penetrate the plastic or stainless sheen of Italian products as well. Several prestigious exhibitions and institutions provided the space for discourse within the academic community, and this looks to continue. The focus of Italian design at its best has revolved around experimentation and a slower, informed process, rather than efficiency. And yet design factories in Italy – from Alessi, to Cassina, Da Driade, Kartell – have also been profitable and measurably and consistently so. Currently, this entire system seems to be in flux. The "Brand Italia" image is coming under threat from abroad (particularly production in the far east), challenging the notion of craft, and its related costs – and benefits. An older generation remains tied to processes and experimentation; yet, according to Poncellini, the younger generation is not headed in the same direction. This seems to be backed up by outside sources. In a recent issue of *The Economist*, it was stated, "Educational standards have slipped: the country comes out badly in the OECD's PISA cross-national comparisons, and no Italian university now makes it into the world's top 90. Spending on research and development is low by international standards (the Economist, 2005)." Whatever the current directions and motivations of the academia may be, at present, there remains a highly concentrated source of knowledge [at least in Milan], which is what ultimately contributes to producing innovation. Yet, this may change. It seems apparent that the educational system is not investing into its students as well as it could, and the older generations' ideas and practices are becoming increasingly absent within the new wave of designers. Our lasting sense from the generation of Italian designers just breaking through however, was one of hope, as 'Italy's New Wave' of innovative firms like Cliostraat, Metrogramma and IaN+ step up to the plate. All three seemed to have adapted to the international currents and carry on the best of the legacy, while obviously not standing by waiting for a torch to be passed. At present the context of Italian Design seems to be sustaining the healthy production of knowledge and knowledge workers so key to the innovation cycle. That the three design firms are based not just in Milan, also seems to be a positive sign; and of the one who is (Metrogramma), the principals are fiercely Florentine.

Economy

Economic Spikes and Recessions

Throughout its long history, it is apparent that Italy's economic structure is often in recession. Yet it is equally clear that it enjoys sudden spikes of economic activity. One spike was the economic miracle of the 1950's. So many of today's most innovative design organizations – Kartell, Artemide, Saporiti, Cassina, Danese were fundamentally born in this period. Yet, in hindsight, that boom had attributes that were unsettling for the long-term. The car company, Fiat was the undisputed leader of the economic miracle to the point that in the 60s, Fiat itself was

responsible for 25% of all industrial investment in Italy (Jones, 2002). As Italy continues to go through its post-industrial mutations, this number must shift if the long-term health is to be sustained. It will be important to see, for example, their technology sector grow and prosper more rapidly to fill this gap between old and new economies. In this regard the loss of Interaction Design IVREA is perhaps not progressive. Our team being based in Vancouver and Vancouver's position within a Provincial economy still largely based on extraction industry may be instructive. As the mills and presses move out and are being replaced by new technology companies; the gaming industry, the entertainment industry and, increasingly, design are moving in and weathering successive waves of downturns - without a single driving company, such as Microsoft represents to nearby Seattle or Fiat represented fro Italy.

Presently, Italy is in yet another recession. Italy also at present lacks a FIAT leading the way as it did in the past, so perhaps the two are very much connected. This seems apparent, as the once strong Fiat Auto is in economic crisis, losing 1.35bn Euros and 8000 jobs in 2002 alone (Israely, 2003). Italy's average economic growth over the past 15 years has been the slowest in the European Union, lagging behind even France's and Germany's (the Economist, 2005). From a North American point of view, constant economic recession would be seen as being unproductive. It would be easy to count Italy out, as many American commentators seem to do. The stereotype we hear is that Italy is mired and always seems to be these days and it looks to get worse. Our position is that is not the case and lacks a nuanced understanding of how Italians deal with their economic inconsistencies. Indeed, something we heard over and over in different ways was the *value* of incubation and time for thinking in the economic down cycle. There is an Italian saying for this, that architect Filippo Spaini shared with us, "La difficulta l'aguzzare l'ingegno" (RicciSpani, 2005). This is translated as difficulties and limitations sharpen your ingenuity. So the economic status dictates the production of designs, but not the production of ideas. Times of poor economic status encourage exploration of ideas and conceptual thinking until the economy allows for production. It is not considered as a constraint, but only a shift of mentality. Since Italy has a history of recession, it further contributes to the "process of slowness" we speak of in this paper, as it allows for ideas to incubate and develop until an economic boom, when production can occur. John Foot (2005) believes that "the renewal of that can only come from outside, from when the economic wave comes – when the next wave comes." But when it comes, Italian designers have a history of seizing opportunity, even if only short-lived. But even the cab-driver will tell you: everyone has had enough of the present government, which is widely blamed for the problems and the length of "la difficulta" the nation has and is enduring at present - and here *The Economist* concurred with the Roman taxi driver. So we would like to argue that indeed, incubation of ideas is yet another feature of sustained Italian innovativeness, and one to emulate.

Market-readiness

How this most clearly resonates in Italian businesses connected to design in what could be called "market-readiness". Market readiness, a key management strategy, analogous to Spaini's "l'ingegno", promotes the incubation of ideas in built forms. When asked how they remain competitive in their industry, Rafaelle Saporiti replied, "To understand and then combine the best of design, and the trend, which is the interface and the marketing, it's really difficult because sometimes you have beautiful projects, that we [feel are] very interesting. [But], we cannot do them because the market is not prepared" (Saporiti, 2005). Often, Saporiti goes on to say, the company must wait out cycles with a good idea that they sense is too early. "Therefore, there must be a combination of good design, trends and marketing, where one element cannot be seen in isolation from the other. For instance, a strong idea and design may not necessarily be successful if the market is not ready for it". Thinking of this in another way, "market-readiness" can also be applied to Cassina's philosophy to sell objects not on trend or fast, but for a long time. An example of this, one of many they cited, is the *Maralunga* chair by Vico Magistretti for Cassina. It was created in 1973 and is only now becoming popular. "The Maralunga was developed in '71. At the start, it sell nothing. We wait, nothing. But a lot of pieces that are important for Cassina take time to develop. At the start was nothing, but we walk away from the product? No. What is new needs the time to be comprehended." (Cassina, 2005). So, it is apparent that economic recession and the lack of a market do not stop ideas from being developed. Instead, Italians are patient and continue to explore and develop ideas over time until the market is ready. "So being successful is really a mix of the creativity, which of course is extremely important; but also the approach to the market. It's not always easy and also not always possible to combine them. So, the company has to balance market needs with innovation needs, and further always with creativity and the process

of experimenting with new things...(Saporiti, 2005)."

The Past and Present of Italian Design

The purpose of this paper was to identify and analyze the elements of Italian context and how they help foster innovation in Italy. Each of these elements exhibits characteristics that contribute to a complex and nuanced whole. Each contribute to what we identify as "the culture of slowness", that seems to allow innovation to keep occurring in Italy. But in a complex turn, which in turn is what allows Italy to be innovative because innovation is not efficient; innovation takes time. The intricacies of Italian context are far more complex and interrelated than has been explored in this paper. Yet, we hope to have provided a fresh voice in our first attempt at explaining how and why the environment of Italy has created a hotbed for innovation.

Italy's past is the foundation for its present success in design and innovation, and it will be for its future. Therefore, understanding the history is important to understanding the current context. All other elements stem out of this rich history that has been carved in the stone of its streets, churches and sculptures, and in the collective memory of its people. Italy's industrial revolution was gradual and allowed craftspeople to remain on the land for a long period of time. This created strong ties between industry and craft; together they contribute to Italy's distinctive quality-driven approach to craft in industry. Italy's economic structure to date has relied on moments of strength and market power amidst and tempered by seemingly constant economic recession. The constant economic slumps have allowed for incubation of ideas until the market is ready for them. Theoretical research and experimental thinking resulted from a history of great thinkers and continue today in a powerful knowledge economy. The wealth of theoretical research allows for slow, thoughtful experimentation of ideas. Geographic distinctions from neighbourhoods to regions have been created through a nation that has never been truly unified, yet contributes to a wealth of diversity. There remains a global valuing of Italian culture, as witnessed by its astounding annual tourism. Yet, we feel that what those tourists come looking for is what is to be found in Italian design, and is therefore something they can own and live with it home: the deeply embedded valuing of time. And this is slowness.

The Future of Italian Design

As for the future of Italian design, globalization is an encroaching reality. Young firms are beginning to work internationally for two reasons: first, they lack the critics within Italy that will challenge their work; second, Italian design competition selections are highly political, which does not allow for an equal opportunity for newer, less established firms. Luca Galofaro (2005) of Rome's IaN+ explains the situation, "we love also to do competition outside of Italy because we don't know who is the jury. We don't know if there is something in between, you know?... And so we prefer to do competition -- this is a joke -- where we don't know nobody…" It has become, perhaps unfortunately, the norm that Italian designers must establish themselves elsewhere before they begin getting work in their home country. Renzo Piano established this pattern and more recently Massimiliano Fuksas has perfected it. But regardless, Italian designers and companies are working increasingly outside of Italy.

The situation of non-Italian designers working within Italy is also becoming increasingly common. "A lot of people aren't Italian who work in Italian design (Foot, 2005)". The advance of the EU has made the situation of half an office being non-Italian all but commonplace. In Gio Ponti's day this was unheard of, let alone even ten years ago. But everywhere we went, designers spoke of the value of outside perspectives on Italian design. Architect Michele Rossi of Park Associati, Milano, models his office intentionally this way. As do Metrogrmma, whose office is bursting its walls with foreign and non-Milanese designers. In the Erasmus reality of the EU, students are bringing fresh ideas form all over Europe. We saw this in many places, but in particular at young firms IaN+ and Metrogramma. It seems to be increasing in the younger firms. Designer Isao Hosoe, who is originally from Japan but has been working in Italy for 40 years, is a perfect example of this, but evinces that the hotbed of Milano in particular has been attracting the world's best for some time. James Irvine is another prominent example of an ex-pat design infusion that has been continuing to build for twenty years. The academia is also aware of the trend of globalisation and the transformation of Europe into an economic area founded upon knowledge (www.eng.unibo.it). The

University of Bologna has adopted a new system that would "encourage scientific and cultural exchanges at all levels and allow for the maximum mobility of qualified workers, students, and researchers". This shows a great deal of evidence of a shift to the globalization of Italian design.

This contextual change arouses new questions about the future of Italian design. The subject of the last DesDes conference in Milan at the Salone del Mobile was focussed on this subject, and is being further investigated at the 2006 event- to be held, by no accident in returning-hero Fuksas' new Rho-Pero Fiera facility. Globalization works both ways, where Italian designers begin to work internationally and foreign designers work within Italy.

So we have some initial questions to lead next year's study. When this becomes increasingly common, what would be considered "Italian design"? Do the designers adopt the contextual culture of their current location? If this were the case, then foreign designers would then be creating Italian design, whereas Italians working elsewhere would not. Or, do designers bring with them their own context, which would then inform their design? How will this situation affect Italy's "culture of slowness" if outside designers bring in their own values? What will be the 'Italian Identity'? How will "brand Italia" evolve? Last word goes to Rafaelle Saporiti, whose family has supported this study from the beginning, "…we have to look at the situation with a new approach because the situation has changed. Globalization is totally present and we have to face it in a new way with a very open mind [from what] we had in the past. [We must adapt to] a certain context, which is now different" (Saporiti, 2005). The context for Italian design, therefore, is deeply embedded, but certainly about to change.

Bibliography:

Quotes from our interviews are noted by company or individual and dated.
These quotes and related ones are further explored in the sound clips connected to the "interviews" section of the *ItaliaDesign* project website at http://www.sfu.ca/italiadesign .

Jones, T. "The car that Italians love was the symbol of the post-war miracle."
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FQP/is_4611_131/ai_94509914

Israely, J. "The End of the Road". http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/article/0,13005,901030203-411396,00.html