

# The Players of Italian Design

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## Introduction

"Italy was, from the outset, more determined [than other countries] to discover a *new* formula for its particular marriage between art and industry" (Sparke, 1987). From the start, this formula manifested in relationships very particular to Italian economic realities, with design playing a key and leading role; this situation was markedly different from the prevailing industrial economic model used in other countries. Since the onset of modernity and the late - at first slow - industrial revolution in Italy, it has been particular people and groups who have made this uniquely Italian design a reality, and who continue to play key roles in Italian industry to this day. These are the *players* of Italian design: intellectuals, designers, and enlightened companies. Through discourse between each other, the *players* collaboratively distill the geographic, economic, historic, and cultural context of Italy into forms that can be applied to production. This discursive relationship is unique to Italy. It is our entry point for illuminating how innovative design remains a key generator of economic success in Italy.

At a time when the Italian economy is again struggling, our perspective as Canadians between the American and European situations, and as foreigners in Italy, leads us to conclude that understanding the nature of inter-relationships between Italian designers will be a key factor in enabling economic recovery, and can provide an alternative model that will inform how we design in Canada. Italy has a rich past of innovating through design and this paper will seek to analyze how this success is formed, in its manifold ways. Designer and theorist Andrea Branzi spoke of the "many different realities" of Italian design. Each category of player in Italian design presides over one of these realities – these ways of looking at things – and the results of their investigation of that reality facilitate a discourse that fuels the uniquely valuable Italian approach to design process. In the discourse between companies, designers, and intellects, the criteria for evaluating design, the ideas themselves, and the production needs have all evolved over generations. The discourse also produces strong relationships between the players that bring critical mass to projects and ultimately grow out from the embedded values of Italian culture: our project's meta-thesis of "slowness", family and relationships, quality, and theoretical pursuit. This paper will begin the process of revealing the unique ways that the players of Italian design operate and, through their interplay, continue to create innovation.

## Definition of *player* categories: companies, designers, intellectuals

It is important for us to first define where the boundaries are between the different categories.

**Companies** are the most clear and easy to define players in Italian design. They are the organizations with the means to bring an idea into production, and whose interests are born from financial goals in relation to the market. Companies seek to sustain themselves by producing marketable products. They

are different from **intellectuals**, whose goals are primarily to analyze design in relation to culture in order to develop a criterion for critical analysis of design artifacts, and advance concepts about design. Finally, **designers** are defined as those who develop ideas for production with a company, and whose goals are strongly tied to culture and context. There is often an overlap between these categories of players, particularly between designers and intellectuals. For this reason, these labels are best thought of as roles that any individual or organization can be at different points in time – and an individual can be many at once; they are different lenses through which to view the Italian design system.

## Companies

*“The chief requirement from industrialists was an ability to set social and cultural goals beyond immediate profits. And since then industrial production has earned its right to be considered an important factor in Italian culture and not just a factor in the Italian economy.”*

(Argan, 1982)

There are three characteristics that define the Italian design companies that have been successful since the Economic Miracle of the 1940's and 50's. The first is that they have a strong sense of family and relationships; the second is that they have the goal of understanding the market; the third is that they engage in collaboration with other companies and industries. We will focus mainly on Alessi and Saporiti, two companies we visited during our study period in Italy in June and July 2005, who have had a strong presence in shaping the Italian identity of design since the Economic Miracle, and seem poised for continued success in the face of increasing global competition, at a time when Italian cultural values seem more threatened than ever before.

## Family and Relationships

Alessi has been one of the most successful companies since the 1980's and, not by coincidence, is also a paradigmatic study in the enlightened Italian company's embrace of design. Alessi evidences all three earmark qualities. Born out of the slow industrial revolution, Alessi had its humble beginnings at Lake Orta in the Italian Alps, where Giovanni Alessi created “small wooden and metal objects” (Meret, 1994) with Alfonso Bialetti (who founded the Bialetti company in 1933 in Coccaglio). In these early stages, they were strictly working on commissions doing artisan production, but soon were able to start making their own kitchen and table products. In 1930, Carlo Alessi joined the company after studying industrial design; he was responsible for most of the design output until 1945. During the 40s, Alessi developed innovative processes for military production and Ettore Alessi developed the cold pressing technique the company is now famous for. Carlo eventually became the general manager, relinquishing his design duties, and began to bring in designers from outside the company. Through the 50s and 60s, Alessi increased their exports to more international markets. In the 70s, Alberto Alessi, the current general manager, graduated with a law degree and then joined the company in a commercial and communications capacity. In 1975, Alberto's brother Michele finished his mechanical engineering degree and joined the company in an organizational and financial capacity. Both of them became general managers during the 80s, at which point the company's research and production expanded into new and different metals. In 1980, Alessio (Carlo's son) also joined the company to take over marketing.

The Alessi company has been managed by Alessi family members for 3 generations now, evolving and adapting to the market on many occasions, but has always kept true to its foundation of artisan roots. Alberto says now, reflecting on visiting the factory of Giovanni Alessi as a child, "I find it difficult to clearly define the difference between 'industry' and 'handicraft' ... not to mention [defining] what the strange word 'design' really means." (Meret, 1994) You see this reflected in the current company philosophy, which is "that of a 'design factory', a hotbed of creative ideas, making the company function more as a collective of designers, such as those seen at the beginning of this century ... rather than as a purely industrial production line." (Meret, 1994) It is evident from statements like this that Italians have not only a strong respect for the roots of the business, but a strong *desire* to evolve the idea behind the company and keep it relevant for new markets. Saporiti is another example of a healthy tension and dialogue between the new and old guard in the family: "This is a family company, my father founded it in 1948 ... we fight a lot with him [over the direction of the company]," Raffaella Saporiti says jokingly, "but [that's] a good thing." (Saporiti, 2005)

Also of note is that there appears to be little doubt that the next of kin is the best qualified to run the family business. This is important because it reinforces the idea that there is more than just a financial motive for these families. Where a North American company might look to hire someone who has made other businesses profitable, Italy's predominant model is that of the family-owned organization. Indeed, in Italy today "family owned firms ... [are] the backbone of the economy" (The Economist, 2005). What is the reason for this? In the case of Alessi and Saporiti, at least, they measure the success of their company according to a set of values that have evolved over the course of their company's history, and as such their children's familiarity with these values is seen as a huge asset. In this system, the revenue of the company becomes a means to an end, and not the end itself. It is the longevity of the family business over generations – over time – that is the value to measure success, not the shareholders' stock.

Of course, the notion of 'family' is not merely genetic. Family *and relationships* is a way of thinking that pervades Italian design and manufacturers. It can extend to people who share the same values and have developed a strong bond over the years in collaboration with the company. This bond can be seen in the many families who have worked on the Alessi production line for generations. It can also be seen in the relationship that the companies form with their designers. The furniture manufacturer Moroso, for example, "[develops] long term relationships with designers that [they] feel are innovative." (Moroso, 2005) In the case of Alessi, they brought in Alessandro Mendini in 1979 as their primary design consultant after a stint as editor of the Alessi-published *Modo* magazine. To this day Mendini is the key consultant on design direction for Alessi. It was at the behest of Mendini that Alessi created the experimental wing *Officina Alessi* in 1983. And, most of the important design work done on the projects is completed by designers from outside the company such as Michael Graves, who worked on the Tea and Coffee Piazza project that made Alessi an international success in the 80s. Of his relationship with Alessi, Michael Graves says "[a]s a designer you and your people are brought in and treated as members of a family – it's a very personal relationship of designer and manufacturer." (Gabra-Liddell, 1994) One could run down the list of the most influential designers of our time and see many of them are a part of the Alessi family: Ettore Sottsass, Richard Sapper, and the legendary Achille Castiglioni among them. These ties to designers and intellects from outside the company are strongly valued and contribute in great ways to the company's internal discourse on quality and design philosophy.

## **Understanding the Market**

“While Fiat, Zanussi and Benetton continue to sell Italian style to the whole world, their real skills lie in their ability to reach the right markets, to direct the right product to the right customer.” (Sparke, 1987) The main goal of an Italian company is the same business objective of companies in any other country: profit. However, the motivation behind understanding the market is not solely to turn a profit at that moment, but to allow the company to sustain itself as an innovative force, confidently waiting for ideas to find their time. Raffaella Saporiti says, “The most difficult thing in a business like this is to understand and combine the good design – the trend – and the marketing.” (Saporiti, 2005) Sometimes, the Italian design factories have what they feel are great projects, but the market isn’t yet ready to accept them – they are too early. [B]eing successful is really a mix of the creativity – which is of course extremely important – but also the approach to the market. And it’s not always easy, and also not always possible to combine [marketing and creativity]. So a company has to balance the innovation, the creativity, the process of experimenting with new things ... innovation that is not accepted in the long term is not useful.” (Saporiti, 2005) You see this echoed by Cassina’s Luciano Bon: “[t]he market today needs what they know, not what is new, because new is unnecessary.” (Cassina, 2005)

To aid in demystifying this understanding, Alessi has developed a scoring system for their products to help them gauge how successful a product will be by ranking four aspects of their products, each on a scale of 1 to 5: functionality, price, communication elements, and aesthetics. The resulting score, out of 20, allows them to confidently assess a product’s market potential: anything scoring 13 or higher is considered ready for the market.

However, Italian companies do not always subordinate themselves to the demands of the market, and acknowledge that their role is “sometimes to educate” (Saporiti, 2005) the customer if they want to remain innovative firms. This means that the company has to understand not only just the needs and wants of the consumer, but the desires as well. This is where the real benefit lies in understanding the market for an Italian company, and where they really capitalize on that knowledge.

## **Collaboration**

Another mainstay of the Italian design company is their willingness to collaborate openly with any other party. In pre-war Italy, it was common for there to be clusters of craftsman and artisan workshops responsible for the highly specialized production: doorknobs, framing, woodworking, etc. They would frequently collaborate on projects, or outsource jobs to each other. This idea of an open network between companies appears to have become genetically embedded in the Italian design industry as a marker of a successful company. Saporiti is built on the philosophy of doing experiments and looking outside of the furniture and interior design process, an outlook strongly rooted in the same geographical proximity to other industries that facilitated collaboration in pre-war Italy – they are in the same province as the aviation industry and many textiles factories.

However, the idea of collaboration carries itself forward to the global economy as well. “[A]ll these ideas came both from the designers, and strict relationships with the suppliers, but also with other industries ... We take a lot of inspiration from other industries that we have here around this small village [and] far away.” (Saporiti, 2005) Saporiti started outsourcing six years ago, creating a manufacturing plant in India and another in Vietnam. To Saporiti, as long as they can have control over the process, goods don’t have to be produced locally. This collaborative spirit has always been the same, but due to globalization it now looks further, involving designers and materials from outside Italy.

### **Towards the future: Patience with innovation, then and now**

Saporiti felt that Italian industry is still very patient with innovative ideas (Saporiti, 2005). He further felt that industry’s strength was in it’s ability to rapid prototype and develop well-crafted products...

When we asked Saporiti about Italian industry’s patience with innovation in the past compared to the current state of things, he said, “still this is very good in Italy.” (Saporiti, 2005) However, he qualified that statement by saying that their strength is really in the ability to rapid prototype and develop well-crafted products for the niche high-end market; they have never really been a strong industrial force. Italy now competes in a global market, so they need to begin looking outside their own borders for efficient production techniques that allow for the same approach to open collaboration that has strengthened Italian design and made it a success within Italy. They must take their knowledge of the market, their values, their sense of family, and their collaborative spirit, and open up avenues for the ideas and products proposed by the intellectuals and designers they work with.

### **Intellectuals**

*“Love architecture, be it ancient or modern. Love it for its fantastic, adventurous and solemn creations; for its inventions; for the abstract, allusive and figurative forms that enchant our spirit and enrapture our thoughts. Love architecture, the stage and support of our lives.”*

These are the words of Gio Ponti, a man often referred to as the Godfather of Italian design. In his words rings true a sentiment that applies not only to the architecture that has come out of Italy, but of design in general. Ponti was one of the first and most vocal proponents of the vision “of designers working across a wide spectrum of projects and in this he showed the way.” (Sparke, 1987) He was the first person to champion the interdisciplinary designer architect. But, more importantly, he was the first of a series of intellectual figureheads that served to inspire, challenge, and lead Italian design. Each of these movements, from Bel Design to Archizoom to Memphis, has contributed to the definition of quality, and acted as a critical voice. Perhaps more than in any other country, academics have made their stamp on industry, design and the social-urban sphere. Until recently, the notion of asking the opinion of a social scientist or semiotician would not have occurred to most North American companies. In Italy, since the 1940’s and to this day, intellectuals play a key role in the production and application of knowledge and design form.

## **Movements**

"While the European designer tends to see himself in a permanent relationship with history, the American designer operates in a continuous present." (Branzi, 1988)

Different movements in Italy's design history have preached distinctly different aesthetic and ethic priorities, and at their peak have become such a strong force that they are imprinted in the Italian design identity. They have defined the different generations of designers, and reinvigorated the design scene numerous times. Immediately post-war, Ernesto Rogers coined the phrase "from the spoon to the city," defining the limits (or limitlessness) of what could be accomplished with design; he promoted a rationalist aesthetic freed from the restrictions of its fascist beginning and focused more towards a utopian goal. In response, the 60s offered up what is known as Radical Architecture or Anti-design, fronted by groups like Superstudio and Archizoom, which attempted to counter the over-rational approach to design; it became a forum for the advance of theory surrounding the context of design. Then, in the 80s, Memphis and Studio Alchymia sought to liven up the furniture design scene by integrating vivid colour and expression into their pieces through materials research, strongly affecting what is remembered internationally as the 80s aesthetic.

Currently, Italian design is between movements. Penny Sparke noted in 1987, the "older generation of Italian designers has not been succeeded by a younger one, able to carry on where they leave off." (Sparke, 1987) In a recent essay published in 2001, she continues to say that "a modern design movement features less strongly in Italy's contemporary identity." (Sparke, 2001) However, a recent issue of the magazine *Metropolis* announced "Italy's New Wave". In the issue, Luca Molinari, curator of Milan's Triennale, says "[t]he nineties generation is galvanized by new ideas, and they are realistic. They've determined that architecture is expressed by works built and processes related." (*Metropolis*, 2005) This is a definite reaction to the generation of architects who preceded them and who had very few projects built to their name; they had entered the realm of bourgeois idealism, suggesting social reform that never came to fruition. This 'New Wave' promises to have more practical ideas, and their contribution will hopefully be to extend the geographic borders of Italian design beyond 'the Boot'.

## **Role in defining notions of quality**

Each of these design movements also had a strong role in creating the definition of Italian quality for their generation. One thing that is constant about the Italian notion of quality is that it changes to reflect the context of Italy at any given moment in time, and it is largely concerned with a discussion around the embedded values of Italian culture that we have spoken of already. It is this unwillingness to arrive at an agreement that is unique about Italian design.

The longest standing intellectual forum for the debate on quality is *Domus*, a magazine started in the 1920s by prolific Italian designer Gio Ponti. At its inception, *Domus* was the voice for the Novecento movement, which Gio Ponti was a part of, whose aesthetic was a reworking of classical form inspired by the "decorative arts of France and Austria rather than from the 'machine style' of Germany and the USA." (Sparke, 1987) In the 1940s, Ponti was replaced as the editor of *Domus* by Ernesto N. Rogers, who held the post for the next 6 years. The group that came to prominence during Rogers' tenure spearheaded the

famous “spoon to the city” movement, founded in Rationalism, by “mix[ing] tradition and modernity in the stuff they created” (Foot, 2005), with a strong anti-fascist push. Both of these movements suggested different overall aesthetics and criteria for determining what was good and what was bad in design and architecture. Other magazines such as *Casabella and Stile*, as well as exhibitions including the Fiera and Triennale have also contributed as forums for discourse.

### **Role as critics**

The intellectuals are not only responsible for plotting new trajectories for design and defining the concept of quality, their critical views of design are also important. Magazines and exhibitions can provide a means for feedback on the work of the designer – young designers in particular. Luca Gaforalo says that “the big problem of the Italian situation is that we don’t have critics ... [who] play with us, [who] can also teach us, and show us ways to think.” (IaN+, 2005) Every good designer will have some sense of a ‘meta project’ – a recurring theme in their work – and a strong body of critics is crucial in helping the designer externalize this idea and become a great designer. In the environment created by this critical assessment, “many different activities around the design [were] raised up from the intellectual world - for example so many reviews of design and architecture, theoretical schools like *Domus*, and movements like *Alchimea* and *Memphis*.” (Branzi, 2005)

### **Academia**

Lastly, there are the institutions themselves that the intellectual community calls home. The idea of academia and the importance of a learned approach is an ever-present feature of Italy: the Romans’ classical thinking, the world’s first medieval university in Bologna, the Renaissance. This emphasis on learning has made Italy a mecca for intellectual debate and advancements on many occasions throughout history, influencing most of the known world in the process. The value placed on education is still a dominant force today, with reputable institutions like the Politecnico, Domus Academy, Ivrea, and NABA representing some of the best known design education in the world. At the head of these institutions are the intellectual figureheads of Italian design, and it is their body of work and theory that provides a direction for much of Italian design on a practical level, leading the way for the younger design and architecture students who will form the next wave of great designers.

Historically, stemming from Gio Ponti’s initial definition of design in Italy, these schools have followed the model of interdisciplinary study – combining design and architecture. Just recently, many schools have started to switch to a model that separates design and architecture, something viewed by many as a mistake inconsistent with the craft-based interdisciplinary approach that has for so long been a backbone of Italian design. “After the reform, [the school became] much more similar to a factory that has to produce people who they can use. And the [greater] number of persons that school is able to finish with a degree, the bigger the success for the school” (Cliostraat, 2005). Based on this, it appears that churning out the greatest number of students is not consistent with Italian values.

### **The continuing theoretical pursuit**

Whether it is a member of a company like Alessi, an enigmatic design voice like Ponti or Branzi, or an independent critic wandering the floors of an exhibition to write a piece of journalism, the group of people called *intellectuals* hold important domain over the idea of Italian design. The company and designer rely on the intellectual as an objective voice, but one who is well aware of the contextual elements germane to the design scene.

## DESIGNERS

*"People began to speak of the Italian look, and indeed almost everything Italian [that produces] pleasing visual effects. But unlike Scandinavian production, there was never any indulgence in naturalistic, folk or populist effects. The real innovation was that things were designed for a real society rather than projected forward into a hypothetical and utopian realm."*

(Argan, 1982)

The central player in the Italian design process is the designer. This group is responsible for that dynamic visual delight that has come to define Italian design and style internationally over the past 50 years. The designer is, in many ways, the intermediate step between the *intellectual* and the *company*. While the intellectual struggles with the idea of design and the company ensures there is an adequate market and means to production, the designer brings an interdisciplinary breadth to the table, a sense of virtuosity, and an awareness of the culture.

## Interdisciplinary focus

*"The thing that ... seems to matter more is [that] people who apply ... don't necessarily have to be architects - finished, trained architects. They have to be passionate, have ideas of their own. [I] don't know if it's a sensible thing to say, but you can work as an architect without being one - quite well actually -, if you have ideas of your own, if you're passionate." (Metrogramma, 2005)*

One important quality of the Italian designer's mentality is the importance they place on being interdisciplinary. The North American notion of specialization does not always hold true in Italian culture. This stems from the traditional interdisciplinary approach to schooling that has evolved in Italy, but it also extends to their practice. "We are not specialized ... our specialization is to not be specialized." (Park Associati, 2005) The Italian designer has always been someone who will work across mediums, applying their meta-level design principles to architecture, furniture, fashion, automotives, interactive spaces, or art. The only requirement is that they be extremely passionate about what they do, and hold a love for the craft.

## Virtuosity

*"[I]f you go to Germany, if you go by car, there are a lot of things that are always the same. And [when asked] 'why did you make all the things the same?', the answer was 'because we found something that was very good, very cheap, perfect, that gave the*

*best solution. That's why we made all of them.' If you go in the Italian one, and you make the Autostrade, you can see all different elements. All the bridges are different, because all the engineers ask themselves 'maybe I am the best, and I can make something better than all the others.' You have to evaluate all the realities and choose the best one. And that is not only the type of competition but is a way of thinking in which you are very critical every time of what is important. And that is why every time you can find new solutions." (Branzi, 2005)*

The Italians are a culture known for their stubbornness and individuality, two traits that carry over in a very positive way to design. They take pride in doing things their own way, and 'their own way' doesn't just mean the Italian way; each designer in Italy has a strong will to bring things to fruition in line with their own vision. This element of virtuosity advances ideas and supports the intellectual debate around quality. The varied approaches and opinions that each designer has enrich the overall discussion about design and quality, and provide a healthy tension that fosters a creative environment. As Luca describes Cliotraat's process, with the nine charter members of the company:

*"Formally there is no hierarchy. Then, of course, when we sit around a table and we discuss about projects; there is always a better idea or another idea or [possibly] even two ideas each. It is difficult to say which is better ... and we fight a lot within ourselves. Even for toilet paper. But there are[also] normal things that happen: we share [our] experiences with other people. And it's when you do a project and you sit together you realize the fact that the different people ... have different interests. And they will put in the project some ideas or contributions ... which are beyond maybe your personal skills of interests and so you may not think about it." (Cliotraat, 2005)*

### **Cultural Awareness**

"[Designers] also ... *know what people like*, what people need, and how society is changing being in normal life." (Alessi, 2005)

Quite often, the distinct opinion that a designer forms about how to solve a situation will be borne from their investigation into the context around it – their cultural awareness. As they, more than companies and intellectuals, are situated within the very culture they design for, understanding the culture becomes one of their primary responsibilities to the system. "This is really an Italian issue; you always think where are people going to meet? ... the first thing you do in an Italian project is you ask 'Where are people going to have a cigarette? Where are they going to have a talk?'" (Park Associati, 2005) For the Italian designer, the most important thing is "finding the way that people can find something that will actually feel *theirs*; part of a community." (Park Associati, 2005)

A key function of the cultural awareness is recognizing trends. Because of the slow nature of Italy and its design system, Italian design has remained very resistant to technological trends. There seems to be a stronger understanding that "you always have to be careful when you do a public space that it's not going to be [using a technology] that is going to be fashionable that after six months is going to look awkward, or unusual, or stupid." (Park Associati, 2005)

## **Balance between built and conceptual**

Where a designer's role can sometimes overlap with those of the company and intellectual is in decisions on the type of project to undertake. One thing that is distinct about Italian designers and architects is that the successful ones are always those who strike the right balance between doing contracts to pay the bills, and expanding their repertoire with a more theoretical or conceptual design experiment. IaN+ presents themselves as a firm who is going through a stronger period of experimental design; their friends Metrogramma are doing a lot more commercial projects. However, both companies have a history of switching between theoretical and commercial work. For example, Metrogramma is working on a long-term theoretical project aimed at redevelopment in Bolzano, and IaN+ speaks of the number of years that they spent doing more banal work in order to get the degree of freedom they enjoy right now. In the case of Park Associati, when we visited them last year they were doing far more pro bono work, and investigative studies, but this year have scaled back on that approach and have taken a few more commercial contracts. In Italy right now it can be difficult to find paid work, because Italy is "not a country that gives a lot of building opportunities." (Park Associati, 2005) As a response to this, many native Italian designers and architects have started to look outside the country for work.

## **Import & Export: the changing face of the Italian designer**

"It is much more mixed now, you know. Castiglioni was a pure Italian; Fuksas is not, which I think is good. I think even designers like Jasper Morris learn from Italian culture, even if they are not Italian designers (Park Associati, 2005)

As Italy continues to move towards competing in a global economy, there is increasing ambiguity around the notion of what "Italian Design" is. Contributing to this ambiguity is the influx of foreign designers like Fuksas and Piano into Italy during the 90's, as well as the export of Italian designers internationally. Further, the new wave of Italian designers, led by IaN+, Metrogramma, and Cliostraat is seeking to again refine the concept of "Italian Design". Most Italian companies feel that this worldwide exposure and influence has helped: "[W]e have an international background and international experience that makes our office, I think, more modern," says Michele of Park Associati. The Italian design system is one that has always thrived on new ideas and points of view, all of which are offered by these new global opportunities.

## **Conclusion: The debate continues**

To complete the quote used earlier:

*"while Fiat, Zanussi and Benetton continue to sell Italian style to the whole world, their real skills lie in their ability to reach the right markets, to direct the right product to the right customer. ... Increased competition has also meant that Italy had to develop much more sophisticated marketing strategies than the ones it used in the early days when it was out on its own. What is missing from this new emphasis, however, is the level of cultural and philosophical debate that characterized the heroic years of Italian design and gave it its uniqueness and its strength." (Sparke, 1987)*

When Penny Sparke wrote *The History of Italian Design from 1870 to the present* in 1987, she seemed to be implying that Italian design had reached its plateau and, though it was now strongly commodifiable, it was less relevant as a voice for innovation. But, in 2005, our interviews revealed that this voice for innovation is still strong. The players of Italian design are tackling issues such as sustainability and globalization, bringing their generations-old values of quality and the family to new products, new markets, and a new audience. The 'New Wave' of young Italian architecture firms leading this debate are exploring the notion of what 'quality' really is with renewed vigor. This theoretical debate among the new generation is expanding the role of Italian design by incorporating new approaches - ones that cross into the Interaction Design and Experience Design fields. These new approaches have come naturally to Italy, through vigorous debates and new idea testing. The changing field of Italian design is well positioned to regain its international influence in the emerging fields of interaction and experience design, building on their experience with industrial and furniture design in previous decades. The new firms and organizations are also rebuilding the openly collaborative networks that have existed in the past golden moments of Italy's design history and are progressing the notion of family yet again. All of these processes, of course, in their "weak" and often inefficient Italian way, are supporting the culturally marvelous ingrained "slowness" of Italian life, which ensures that ideas will have sufficient time to incubate and solidify before moving into production.

Italy has had to adjust its design, manufacturing and production in the face of global market competition, particularly with the cheap labour and production that countries like China offer. In recent years, this has begun to take a larger share of Italy's design and manufacturing pie, and the brand Italia label is reproducible beyond Italy itself. Italians know that things will cycle up and down as they have for thousands of years since the Roman Empire. In Italy, design is always changing, and the players who are responsible for it continue to adapt. The strength of Italy is best summed up by Andrea Branzi: "Italian design, as you have seen, is made of a lot of different realities... that are not the same - that are one against the other. I think that it's true that in Italy, design is very important - is very known - but is also ... not very defined. The thing that you can learn, to make a summary of Italian design, is not to only solve problems, but to make new ways of thinking."

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Italy's New Wave

By Virginia Gardiner

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(Metrogramma, 2005)

(Moroso, 2005)

(Park Associati, 2005)

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