Design in Italy from the 1950s to the 1990s was integral in setting the foundation for Italian Design today. The work of Alessandro Mendini established a level of thought that has been passed on to the next generation of designers. One of Medini’s greatest contributions to Italian Design is the idea of collaborating with other designers. This allows for a discourse to develop based on shared ideas from different cultural backgrounds. This discourse of knowledge, as well, is something that Mendini strives for in his work. As an intellectual, the theories and ideas of Alessandro Mendini helped define the level of quality in Italian Design, and the importance of knowledge in creating thought provoking, emotional works that reflect their cultural context.

Following World War II, Milan was in an economic crisis. It had been devastated by bombings and there were political tensions between fascist supporters and left-wing radicals. As outside funding began to help repair the struggling economy, southern Italians moved to Milan to take advantage of the newly rising financial success. Factories were back on their feet, but as people were still relatively poor, they could not afford most necessities. At this time, designers began producing products for the mass market. They were simple, inexpensive, and designed for everybody. Although the forms were still pleasing, they lacked the aesthetics of traditional Italian design.

After graduating from the Politecnico di Milano in 1959 with a degree in architecture, Mendini had the training in a field that unfortunately was not flourishing at the time due to the still-recovering economy of post-war Italy. There were no design schools in Milan at this point; “all of the designers were architects. Zamuso, Sotsass, Gio Ponti, Magistretti, Castiglioni, all architects” (Mendini, 2006). The exploration of design by those who were formally trained in architecture created a
discourse of new theories and ideas: the foundations of Radical Design. These intellectuals collaborated with each other, sharing their ideas of new design. In Milan, magazines like *Casabella, Domus,* and *Modo* were published as a means of circulating these new ideas within a larger design audience. Mendini assumed the role of editor of all three aforementioned magazines during the 1970s and 80s.

The value of knowledge is immeasurable, and having the ability to share knowledge with others is an opportunity that is often taken for granted. It is this opportunity that fuels Alessandro Mendini’s work and his ideas that lead to the theories of Italian Radical Design in Milan during the 1960s. Focusing on the humanistic side of design and not on mass production, Mendini and other theorists of the time, such as Ettore Sottsass, drew from intellectual ideas as inspiration for their work. Mendini’s attitude of being “more interested in humanity than naturalness” allowed him to produce works that were focused on the specific context in which he was part of (Mendini, 2005).

For example, one of his earlier works, *The Proust Armchair,* from 1978 is a direct response to the lack of decoration and traditional aesthetics in post-war Italian design. He focused on the banal act of sitting in a chair, transforming it to raise questions about design. Mendini strongly believed that everything had already been invented, so he often built his work from a preexisting form. *The Proust Armchair* is an example of this technique, utilizing a form “inspired from the Louis XV style” and applying hand painted pointillism to the surface. Italian Radical Designers were frequently experimenting with forms, materials and new theories. Mendini turns to his paper and pen to develop new ideas. This goal of experimentation and Mendini’s perfectionism are apparent as he explains that when drawing out his ideas, he will “never use an eraser. [He would] rather throw everything away and start afresh” (Mendini, 2005).
attitude is valuable for designers and is one that, if not already, should regularly be employed in the design process. Having the ability to identify a strong idea and leave behind the weaker ones allows the designer to progress past the ideation stage with an idea rich in possibilities.

The book *Pulviscoli* is a collection of over 2400 of Mendini’s drawings dating from 1960 to 2005. Many of his produced works can be seen in their earliest stages of ideation. The *Anna G* corkscrew, which he produced for Alessi in 1994, was part of the Anna Family project. The corkscrew has become one of Alessi’s most famous products, garnering attention around the world. The humanistic qualities and quirkiness of the design have, like make of Mendini’s works, put an emphasis on the banal. The *Anna G* corkscrew has also been duplicated on a larger scale and stands outside the Alessi warehouse in Crusinallo.

Another concept that emerged during the period of Radical Design is the act of collaborating with others. While working with Alessi, Mendini proposed a meta-project with the goal of making a “major contribution to the history of design in the ‘80s” (Alessi, 1998). *The Tea and Coffee Piazza* project involved the collaboration of ten international architects, including Richard Meier, Robert Venturi and Aldo Rossi. These architects, none of whom had experience in industrial design, were asked to consider the role of the piazza as an urban hub and how architecture could be related to the service of tea and coffee. What resulted was a series of very different, yet exquisite designs. Each architect’s style was infused in his design; some were post-modern while others exhibited traits of neo-modernism.

As art director of the project, Mendini’s idea of collaboration began to spread as Alessi’s reputation became world-renowned. Later, he would again organize
the *Tea and Coffee Tower* project with Alessi. Another collaboration with Alessi in which Mendini was art director of was called *100% Make Up* in 1992. This involved recruiting 100 designers to design the surface of a miniature vase in which Mendini had design a few years earlier. At the end of the project, each vase was produced 100 times, creating a series of 10,000 vases with the same form but 100 different styles. Mendini continues to use multiple architects and designers in projects, such as the *MetroNapoli* station project in which he and his brother, Francesco, were art directing. Each of the metro stations in Napoli (Naples) has a unique style to it.

Mendini strongly believes that “having people working with them from different backgrounds and places yields interesting perspectives in design.” In terms of the *MetroNapoli* project, the collaboration has produced “new results and different ideas for the stations than they could have thought of on their own” (ItaliaDesign, 2006). This role of “art director” is rooted in Italy. Milan’s Palomba Serafini Associati (PS+A) offers art direction to their clients. They feel that they can build a stronger relationship with their clients by proving them with more attention. Like many Italian design companies, PS+A employs a variety of individuals, including architects, industrial designers, and graphic designers, to create a collaboration of disciplines. The company is not specialized in only one field and can therefore offer a wider range of services to clients in “total design packages” (Azure, 2008).

Mendini’s legacy is that of a new design philosophy: experimentation with new ideas, and collaboration with people of different cultural backgrounds. The quality of design improves through these processes. The ideas are richer. The variety of contexts often leads to an intellectual discourse, which in turn promotes new ideas. If this philosophy can continue to be employed in the design process today, we can look forward to a future of knowledge-infused, thought provoking, intelligent design.
References


