Patricia Urquiola

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Milan is one of Italy’s thriving design centers. Designers from all over Europe and the world are coming to work in this city and are, in turn, bringing new innovative ideas to what has come to be known as Italian design. Designers such as Patricia Urquiola are key players in the business that has grown as a designer around this city. She in particular has become one of the most successful designers in Milan today with her unique approaches to classical designs. However, considering that many of the new designers in Milan are not Italian born, are they still part of Italian design?

In order to answer this question, one must look at the definition of Italian design. Italian design is made up of several key concepts which include movements towards innovative ideas, taking culture into consideration, building joy of use into products, retaining communication between designers and the design factories, collaborating, the notion of putting the value of the product above the need to meet a bottom line, and constantly striving for the best quality and the sense of timelessness that has become a standard concept within Italian design. The designers in particular display a passion for their own ideas that works well with their individuality and stubbornness. This makes certain that the designers’ inter-company work is valuable for both the companies and themselves.
All of these things help define what Italian design is. Considering the concepts of what Italian design has been defined as, it is found that designers like Patricia Urquiola are part of Italian design.

Patricia Urquiola was born in Spain in 1961. She studied architecture in Madrid at Faculdad de Arquitectura for several years before moving to Milan to finish off her degree. She graduated from Politecnico di Milano in 1989 and remained there for several years afterwards, working for various companies. While at the Politecnico di Milano, her thesis was supervised by the Maestro Achille Castiglioni and it was he who convinced her to put aside architecture for the time being and focus more on product and furniture design. It was this relationship between her and the Maestro that allowed her to develop the essential and classical style that is pervasive throughout her work. She would later say about her mentor that “After you meet [him], you cannot think of anything except how important it is to design. He shows you that the little things can be just as interesting as architecture.” While she worked on how to make her designs something to be desired, she also began working with people such as Vico Magistretti, the people from de Padova and Lissoni Associati in order to further develop her business.
sense. This would serve her well when, in 2001, she opened her own design studio in Milan.

Many of these factors in her life have led her to be what one would call an Italian designer. Maestri from the past have been interdisciplinary and, as such, have brought knowledge and ideals from one medium to the next. This has made their work even better and Urquiola is the same. She studied architecture like many of the Maestri before her then began working in the product design industry. This was, as she states, mostly due to the influence of Castiglioni, however and it works to her advantage.

As well, it should be noted that many of the designers before her had studied architecture, but, due to the time period not many buildings were being built. Many architects from Italy were traveling abroad in order to seek out contracts to build. But those who did not leave the country in search of architectural work remained in Italy. There, many designers turned to industrial and product design in order to use their abilities. Times have changed once more, and more things are being built. As such, designers such as Urquiola have been working in furniture design but are being given the opportunities now to do building designs not only in Italy, but around the world.

Over the years she has maintained excellent relationships with the companies in and around Milan. These relationships were the ones that allowed her to further her own creative possibilities. People such as Patrizia Moroso from Moroso had taken their chances with her and given her considerable freedom with which to create what she wished with the help of the company. In this particular instance, she ended up creating two of her signature pieces for them: the Fjord and Bloom series.
These two sets of furniture both hold certain value with the concept that all the pieces she creates should be functional and timeless. This does not mean, however, that the idea of timelessness is restricted to a more tame style of design. Urquiola does have a great deal of respect for those avant-garde designers that are pushing the limits of what is considered design. These pieces that are pushing the boundaries are what is making Italian design so fascinating and has made it so all these years. But her concerns lie where the aesthetic and narrative aspects of the products become more important and completely overshadow the actual functionality of the product. “A personal style should be a good mix of form and material use, none of which dominates the other. If you make things trendy, but not useful, you are not being a designer.” (Urquiola, 2007)

This concern with having the pieces she creates being suitable for usage with her clients is an aspect of Italian design. It’s her concern for the culture into which many of her products go into that ensures that they will be useful to the users. If products are not created with concern to the environment into which they are intended to go, the reaction towards them may not by bewhat was expected. The products
will not be able to attain the interest of the clients and may not even be suitable functionally for who will be using them. The curator at MOMA was quoted saying, “Patricia is able to create things that are completely innovative, yet perfectly attuned to people’s homes.” With many of her designs, Urquiola has strived to make pieces that fit into people’s lives. Though products must be designed for people with the idea that they will be attractive must be taken into consideration in relation to the idea of trends as well.

Her opinion on concern with products being “trendy” is a very real concern. If a product is only meant to be “fashionable” at the time of release, it means that, six months later, the product may not have the same potency that it had at its unveiling. This is something Urquiola strives to go beyond. It’s the idea of timelessness that is important. Each of her pieces must be of such a design that they will not go “out of style” as the years pass. Even these innovative pieces that reflect so much of her personality and individuality will endure the test of time because they were not created with the idea that they would be consumed immediately and then forgotten. By keeping the design classical, clean and baring in mind the essential qualities her product must have, she is creating pieces with classical forms, and instead
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uses the “skins” of the products to express her more flamboyant and individual designs side.

Take for example the Ffjord series chair. In this example, she has created a comfortable design that conforms to the body and seems to anticipate the movements of the user. At the same time she is using the stitching on the actual seat to make the look of it different and emphasize its contemporary design. (architonic.com, 2008) Through pieces such as this, that is are unique but not trendy, she is making an impact on the culture around her and providing a challenge to her clients that will stand through time.

It is also because of the high quality that the products she creates are able to stand through time. This is something that has become synonymous with Italian design; the idea is that the products created will endure and are meant to be used and will last. The products made can be passed down through the family and will not only still be attractive, but will be functional as well.

The idea of being innovative is a very important aspect of Italia design as well which Urquiola has displayed through several of her pieces. As was mentioned, she uses a more classical style with innovative skins and textures to give her piece individuality as well as moving them
forward. At the same time, however, she is pushing the limits, creating pieces that challenge the users and educate them, thereby creating a more innovative environment for future works. Take, for example, her Llowland series of furniture. These pieces “may be defined as a geoform, it recalls the large stepping stones of a river joint together by an imaginative path that takes you safely to the other side.” (architonic.com, 2008) This is a fascinating piece as it is meant to allow the users to change it according to their wishes. Each piece of the sofa can be moved to create a different composition according to the preference of the client. This piece challenges the user to create something different and gives them credit, saying they can do it. This is part of what makes this particular piece so innovative: it gives people a chance to interact with it in a new way and allows them to make it their own.

Another concept that has been integrated with the Lowland series is the sheer joy of use that is present within its design. Each person that interacts with it can decide how they want to use it and can make it their own. This causes them to have an emotional attachment to the interaction involved with the product. This makes the product so much more valuable as the user feels that the product is more theirs than any product that just sits quietly and has only one specific way of interacting with it. It is not only creating usage that is fascinating, but discovering
it is also equally as attractive. Such as with the Lowseat series in which one becomes curious about how they would sit on it and how comfortable it would be. This is the similar case with the Antibodi series where the materials covering the functional sitting side are arranged in a quilt like flower pattern. The interaction with these pieces really communicates the idea of joy of use. They also create an emotional tie to the product which leaves a lasting impression.

Through all these designs, it has been important to recognize one more concept in Italian design and that is the designer’s passion for their own ideas. It was said in the paper Players of Italian Design that bridges in Italy were all different because each engineer who designed a bridge believed that their design was the best design and therefore built it their own way. This confidence in their own ideas is really what stimulates the innovative side of design in Italy. With Patricia Urquiola, all of her ideas come from her own experience. Her individuality can be seen in each piece such as in the Bloomy series for Moroso. These pieces symbolize the stages of the life of a flower with its gently curving form and solid design. With her designs, she brings a classic and feminine look to many of her products.

With these designs as well, the series has been allowed to develop over time allowing the designer to iterate over the pieces. The Bloomy series,
for example, began in 2004 with its armchairs. The next year after its release though, Moroso announced that there was a sofa to be made as well by Urquiola. The designs continue to be iterated over within the context of the development of the culture.

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Overall, Patricia Urquiola has become what is known as an Italian designer. Born in Spain and graduated from Politecnico di Milano, she has brought her innovative ideas and personal touch to the world of furniture and product design. These concepts that are associated with Italian design are what make many designers, including Urquiola unique and successful. Italian designers’ ability to be innovative and bring their own ideas to the table while learning from the companies they work for make their roles in the design industry that much more important. Designers like Urquiola will go from company to company, exploring the possibilities within that company. We can also look forward to the change that culture will bring with respect to the products they will create in the future. From this, we can expect to see more timeless creations and iterations of said creations appear from the Italian designers today.

As for Patricia Urquiola in particular, her design firm continues to pick up contracts not only in the furniture design field but in architecture and
many other product fields as well. Her newest pieces include work for B&B’s new outdoor collection such as the Canasta series. One should look forward to seeing her next move within Italian design.
References


