

# The Process of Italian Design

## **Abstract**

How is the Italian process of designing unique from other major design leaders?

What makes Italian design distinct from, say, Dutch design.

In Italian design, there is a common yet often unsaid, deeply felt collective value of "quality".

This unspoken notion of quality evolves through a discourse between the players in Italian design.

It is always first and foremost this shared ideal, quality, and ensuring that it is achieved, which determines the successful attributes of a particular project.

In Italy, quality is an all important value and several crucial conceptions of the quality of the project in relationship to time are always seen as ways to measure the enduring success of the product rather than a hurdle to overcome.

Quality of process seems to be the defining factor.

To arrive at the quality that Italians speak of, they have developed a unique shared approach to processing – not a "design process" so much as a "process for designing." Time is not a constraining factor in this process either; it is not a barrier to achieving quality. It is seen as a tool of quality measurement to ensure the ultimate success and, more importantly, the enduring life span of a particular project. Time is seen as part of the process. The Italian design process is synonymous with quality conceptions in everyday Italian life – a meal is not rushed, a family is valued over generations. The players in the Italian design field, which include the designers, companies, and theorists, begin from this common place, and *then* take into account the more universal design issues: functionality, form, technology, and overall aesthetic quality.

This paper will discuss these issues and is based on private interviews conducted in Italy during June and July of 2005 graciously granted by the following Italian designers, theorists, and companies:

Alessi, Alessandro Vignozzi, Andrea Branzi, Cassina, laN+, Isao Hosoe, Metrogramma, Park Associati, Tom Rankin, Ricci-Spaini, Saporiti. All quotes are taken from these private interviews and recorded for this research process.

But first it is important to define terms that we will use that will be distinct to this paper.

We will begin by defining our use of particular terms that are in common usage but can have competing meanings. By doing so, we hope to avoid confusion among readers who might see the work through a paradigm that does not come from the one unique to Italy, and that is the subject of this study.

## **The Terms**

After the interview and studio visits conducted in Italy during June and July, 2005, vast quantities of sometimes conflicting information needed sorting so they could be organized in a thoughtful way.

This paper belongs to the first year of a five year study aiming to understand the very complex subject of Italian design. The challenge was in beginning to lay a framework for next year's studies of the Italian design process. Our primary goal for this year's study was to come to some general agreement on how to describe the information and experiences that we were hoping to collect.

The first issue is that common terms assumed in North American design, such as "user", seem to be problematic within the Italian context of design. Their conception of the "user" is different: users are more varied and culturally distinct. Therefore, we believe it is important for us to begin this analysis of process by defining the terminology that may be misinterpreted in a different context, but will be defined below for the context of this paper.

This agreed terminology will then be used throughout for our purposes in describing the knowledge that was gained concerning the process of Italian design. The following words or phrases will be used throughout the paper so we begin by defining what we mean by their use.

## **The Project Idea**

The project idea is a term we use that is the foundation of the final form. It is the concept, the start, the most important part of the design; without a good project idea what is being created may end up

as an unsuccessful form that may not meet the society or users' needs. In Italian design the project idea begins from more than needs. Most often the project begins from desires and wants as much the needs that would drive any universal project.

### **The Users**

In the vernacular of North American design, the word *user* has come to represent an important conceptual starting place for contemporary design projects. Yet, we often find that the term *user* tends to isolate the technological and computing aspects of a project as the main concerns, leading to less emphasis on the human dimensions of the user. In North America, projects are most often driven by *needs*. But whose needs are the determining factor? The software designer's? Or, the people who use the software? Which needs are the ones being addressed? The physical, the perceptual, the cognitive, the perceived? More importantly, these limited questions are where most "user-centered design" stops. In contrast, we often found that the Italian designer begins not from needs, but from a desire to communicate or to address users' emotions and desires of the end user, while simultaneously addressing the practical usability and useful attributes associated with needs. It is important to begin from understanding the users and their needs, but the Italian designer would see that as an incomplete place to begin. When we speak of the user, we will speak of the user in this holistic manner, and of their relationship to context, their environment, their culture and the society that they live in.

In Italian design the user is never designed for separately from these other elements.

### **The Final Form**

In our research we found that many Italian designers do not view the finished product produced as the end of that form's process. To an Italian designer, a work can always be in progress, even years after it has been produced for the market. For example, Alessi's conception of the Meta project allows designers to continuously iterate and revise their work. There is always the option to go back, recreate or enhance what has been developed. The form should be intuitive enough to communicate the narrative, experiences, and functionality that the designer has created, yet remain as an open work. Form is understood to be iterative and processes are kept open as long as possible to obtain quality.

### **Quality and time**

In the process of Italian design it has become obvious that there are two encompassing traits which appear in conjunction with each other: quality and time.

Quality embeds itself in time as a slow and methodical approach heavily influences the Italian design process. It is innate and effortless for Italian designers to instill quality in the process of design. Time is a large part of the Italian context (which is more thoroughly discussed in the context paper), where there are many different factors which contribute to what elsewhere we define as the "culture of slowness" that has been observed through our experiences in Italy. Time is not always defined as a quantitative measure and is rarely as a constraint. There is less hurry or rush to finish a project and this seems to allow the final form to gain cultural potency and achieve longevity. While quality comes intuitively to many Italian designers, it is also achieved in a measurable way when time is taken to create and build the overall form. There is a stronger focus on following the measure of quality than there is on the focus of following time. It does not mean that the two are completely separate behaviors in the process, but in the context of this paper, they are written of as two separate sub-studies in the process of design. The goal is how much product can be churned out in as little time as possible; the goal is to create a quality product in the least amount of time. This process allows the designer to concentrate on making something worthwhile, without worrying about time efficiency. Italian designers ultimately believe that making a good product yields good business, whose investment pays off in products that will sustain themselves over time and survive the changes of styles and taste. Equally as important, this belief creates products that have greater cultural sustainability and energy, and this is proven when the context of Italian design and production shifts to other countries through export and the "idea" is not lost in the new context. This is much more than making stuff that is "NEW". Presently, there are too many companies and design firms who create so

many “everyday” items that the word “new” becomes inconsequential, because really, what is new? It is safe to say that the only thing that is “new” is the approach taken when innovating on a common and necessary form. Buildings, forks, and chairs, well, those are not new, but essential in everyday life. To be innovative in design requires a new way of thinking of that object through the use of process. Quality is not new.

### **What is quality**

Quality is fundamental to the process of Italian design. The designers draw on it intuitively. They do not have to think critically whether they are integrating quality into the project as quality already exists. Italian design is like wine making or other Italian crafts. There is satisfaction and enjoyment in taking the time to work on a project, ensuring all details are honed and perfected, and taking pride in the craftsmanship that goes into the process and the final form.

### **The Big Workshop**

*Alessi (19:00 audio clip #1)*

*“This company is more like a big workshop than a real mass production company. We in fact have very big and rich catalogue; we have more than 2000 different products but we produce for each one just a small quantity with a small production run. For some pieces we produce a few hundred pieces a year, so to afford this kind of production, to afford this small quantity, we cannot invest too much into the molds. However, a lot of those items are made in different steps by hand, that’s why Alessi is closer to a big workshop that is using mass production technology instead of being a conventional mass production company. [We are] more craft orientated.” (Alessi, 2005)*

Craftsmanship manifests itself not only in the process of making form, but also in the workplace, studio, and factory. In our studies, we found craftsmanship not only in the design process and the final form, but even in more unlikely places like the factory. We witnessed in Italy, factories where the focus was not only on manufacturing, but where there was a value placed on detail and ensuring every step of the manufacturing process is being developed at high standards.

### **Growing the Network**

Craftsmanship in mass production is the result, and this creates ongoing quality. Craftsmanship and quality can also be seen in the collaboration between the players of Italian design, and their network of interdisciplinary work. Quality is ensured when working closely within the family of players, and also between different producers. Over time, the network has grown. Luca Pongellini from Cliostroaat says:

*Cliostroaat (53:15 audio clip)*

*“We freelance [...] and then we work within a group because we like it. Because we think it enriches the quality of the things that you can do. It improves it. And then as a group we try to be part of a network, an ever changing network [...] of relations within Italy, and especially outside of Italy.” (Cliostroaat, 2005)*

This network between the players allows them to constantly push each other to meet the high standard of quality and at the same time help generate innovative final forms that will meet the users’ emotions, desires, and needs. The network allows new ideas to come in and to synthesize what an organization already does well.

*Alessi (7:07 audio clip #1)*

*“We are convinced [that] when you start working for a company you start knowing a lot [about it, so that] your approach to things becomes [subjective. You become restricted and] know the limits of the problem. [Therefore, we] prefer working with [people outside of the company because] they represent the real innovative resource for us; they are in contact with people, and know what they are like, their needs, and how society is changing. [...] so they know better than what we could know. [Outsiders] come here with spontaneous projects and*

*ideas, show them to us, we make an evaluation, and then we start working with them.” (Alessi, 2005)*

This growing network was first seen in the 1950's and 60's; the designers would work with the manufacturers and by working in a close relationship, they became responsible to each other in ensuring quality was communicated through the final form.

*Ricci-Spaini (24:39-26:49 audio clip)*

*“Designer[s] work very, very closely with the manufacturer [...] In a lot of small industries, it's more factory-like.... In the 60s and 70s, when the manufacturing processes probably were not so complex as they are now, the designer[s] that could work near the manufacturer; near the workers, could produce new ideas more frequently, more noticeably than they can do now. Because now, so much more is possible in design. For example, take plastics, where there are a lot of manufacturing processes, you can design everything and you can produce everything.... But there is a lack of creativity. Because the big ideas born when you have no money, no resources, and no facilities to do what you like....” (Ricci-Spaini, 2005)*

### **Quality as an intuitive work and thought**

In the Italian context of design, quality is ingrained in the designer's way of thought. Instinctively, quality should be integrated all throughout the process of Italian design. Italian designers are observant and attentive to their work and surroundings, drawing inspiration from their environment, and creating innovative forms through this process.

*[It's to live in this habit of observing, having [a] keen sense of being creative without being creative, a constant ongoing creative thinking, living and be[ing] out there in the world,] “to be a foreigner is to be a designer;” [the senses are keener and as a designer you are more isolated.] (Isao Hosoe, 2005 written quote no audio, at end of interview when we were asking him questions)*

Isao Hosoe's designs are simple, yet innovative. Take for example the Hebi lamp where the central material is a piece of PVC tubing. He explains that he observes, as though he is a constant foreigner in the Italian city (despite having living in Italy for more than 30 years), which enables him to live this quality of life he calls “habitude”. This is a special type of qualitative thinking, but it is essential to his design process.

The “craftsman's hand” in Italian design creates quality and at times can even become a slow and methodical process. This can increase the value of the final form because it takes time to create and as such, quality is embedded in times; it is this elusive fabric upon which conjuring the meaning of brand Italia is stamped. This “craftsman's hand” is their driving identity; the processing in quality leads to Italian innovation. When theorist Andrea Branzi was comparing the German and Italian highway design, he described the German's design of the highway as being the same everywhere because once they found a design that works, which could be good and inexpensive, it manifests as an “optimist” universal solution. In Italy, however, according to Branzi, many of the motorways are different because Italian engineers believe that their own design is the best and that they can create something better than their other compatriots, while critically thinking about all the different realities. This comment relates what we know of the depth of the Italian geographic context and its contribution of a constant, dynamic diversity.

*Andrea Branzi (10:30 audio clip)*

*“[I hope] that Canada can find a different way from Germany and [the] US in particular – an academic way [...] a more theoretical way. In Canada there are many European connections that are living and very important. So maybe [their existence will provide an] opportunity for Canada to be in a position on the North American continent that will be of more intelligent approach and, I think, cultural in the true sense of the word. Maybe Canada will have a role with more impulsive ideas, and not be so connected to the companies as in*

*the United States. Then they can suggest to the US and the world as the whole, a more European or more modern way to think about design.” (Andrea Branzi, 2005)*

Canadian designers must think critically about their own realities, their own contextual geographies. Canada lies between two powerful cultural realities – between the American and the European influential contexts. This is an opportunity for a unique contribution and approach to design and the seeds of a meaningful, sustainable, approach to innovation.

*Andrea Branzi (1:17 audio clip)*

*“Maybe, Italian design is internationally appreciated maybe not only for the aesthetic but for the philosophy of life.”*

### **Quality as concept, for Society and the user**

The concept is the basis of the final form and part of that concept is to understand the users’ emotions, desires, and needs, and how they may interact with that form.

Forms that are known to have good quality are ones that evoke emotions and meaningful experiences from people. To understand the user, the designer must make thoughtful choices of what resources to use to communicate the experience. As well, designers must think about the semiotics that are used to create this form, and even if technology should be part of this experience. Resources include technology, material, and environment; why do designers choose one type of texture over another? What reasons are there to use one piece of technology and not another and for that matter why use technology at all?

*Cassina (57:30 audio clip)*

*“The difference for me, for a good designer, is [that] a good designer talks [not only] about not technology, materials, dimensions, fabrics, and foam. What is different from [one designer to the next] is the idea.” (Cassina, 2005)*

Ideas that address wants and desires therefore come, often, before there is a large market for them. Still, there are important questions pertaining to the user’s needs that must be asked at the conceptual stage. Will the user have any use for it or is it going to be another product that creates meaningless experiences? In society, there are already so many “new” forms that the everyday world becomes a wasteland of meaningless experiences. These forms have no communication to which users may associate themselves with; quality is lost at the wayside. When asking John Foot, author of Milan Since the Miracle, regarding the subject of how Italy may continue to bolster its industry in an economic way, he points out that the best way to ensure its continuing innovative drive is through quality.

*John Foot (1:10 audio clip)*

*“The way out, I think,... is that they have to sort out the quality side of things. That’s the only way that {Italy’s} going to maintain its market share [...] To put it quite simply, there’s a lot of rubbish out there. It’s got to stay with things that are of good quality and not that expensive which all have a particular identity. Otherwise it’s had it.” (John Foot, 2005)*

The concept of the form can begin with the concept of “new.” What is new? Is new part of that technological “rubbish”? Asked specifically about this issue, Cassina and Alessi had this to say about the idea of concept and what new is:

*Cassina (45:05 audio clip)*

*“The best answer is to develop good ideas, strange idea[s], but good ideas; what is [a] good idea, what is true, is necessary to do. New is not important, new; why new, what is new, new is different? New is what? A good designer talks not about technology, materials, dimensions, fabrics, and form.” (Cassina, 2005)*

*Alessi (20:04 audio clip #3)*

*“The concept is a kind of metaphysical work. You start with an idea you try to translate the idea, the concept, into a shape, that [is] the difficult thing, but you always have to start from the concept; not just go straight to form and the final solution. The concept should always be the strongest element behind the form.” (Alessi, 2005)*

Andrea Branzi puts it more philosophically, where we, as Canadian designers should really remember to start design for our own projects:

*Andrea Branzi (38:21 audio clip)*

*"The image of the internal part of the architecture is more important than the external part of the architecture."*

At Isao Hosoe's design studio we learned the importance of the truly understanding greater range of the user and their emotions, desires, and needs. In researching a new office system, he remarked:

*Isao Hosoe (53:49-55:45 audio clip)*

*"One of the team[s] went out to the city and knocked on a lot of company office doors asking the workers what is lacking. 'What do you need for your office ambience?' And many people replied, 'we need windows.' 'But you have the windows here.' 'But we can not open it when we want.' And it is true. In very high skyscrapers, there is no technical possibility to open them, or as you like to interact with the opening and closing of the window. And air conditioning is very, shall we say, 'democratic:' the same condition for all the people. If you want it warmer or cooler---no. Very democratic! So probably there is not a physiological necessity, but some kind of psychological or cultural necessity, to open or to feel the exterior. The air. Just to touch the air. The possibility to open it. It's a small thing, physically."*

The quote refers to the InterAct office desk system that the studio has created which extends the consideration of user needs to more than just the physical realm; the first began by studying environment of the office worker for their unmet psychological or cultural needs. So, here we have a beginning from need, but drawn out through cultural and sociological needs and testing. At Park Associati, we found in our interview with Michele Rossi, the same philosophy of looking first at people's interactions:

*Park Associati (1:08 audio clip)*

*"We usually integrate, we try to create new urban spaces when we are doing a project, it's like a museum, its like a rock, but inside it's got a new covered piazza. A new urban space for the seating [...] it's something we're very interested in [...] when you do a project, this is really an Italian issue, you always think where people are going to meet, as you know for example in American cities, [it's] not a question [...] people we meet at a bar, not in a public square. [...]"*

But, Italians meet in front of the building, in the street, the square: the public realm. Technology cannot do this in itself.

*Park Associati 1:10:25 - "interaction can really help you if you touch something and you feel if this surface is heated or whatever this kind of thing. I believe in this technology that you don't really see this technology" (Park Associati, 2005)*

Another factor of quality is the users' emotions, their memories; it is about evoking a response from them: emotional design.

*Isao Hosoe (60:34-61:29 audio clip)*

*"If you need to discover something, a new combination or to find out something [you've] never seen, you need to use not only the rational side of your capacity, [the] thinking capacity, but also the emotional, also the experience of your memory, the far memory, using all human capacity; this can be called tacit knowledge. So, it is not explicit knowledge where you can write, but tacit knowledge [can] not always can be described in a rational way." (Isao Hosoe, 2005)*

The interaction between the final form and the user creates a dialogue inducing a response which becomes an emotional act, a bond that is created between the form and user. As John Foot said above, there is a lot of "rubbish" being offered up to the public and too much rote form – making exercises: and, yes, even in Italian design. Too many chairs and too many tables – more choices than ever for the users that it becomes surplus and unnecessary or kitsch.

What is necessary is the quality that goes into the process of design to give it the emotional quality that separates affective quality from the merely banal. It is easy to design for the basic needs of people, but it should be about designing at a higher level, about putting art and poetry into every day life, designing for the non-rational selves of people:

*Cassina (54.33 audio clip)*

*"Every thing is life, every day is your life, you live in your time, you live with your friends, you try to develop what is necessary to do, not to do business only. But what we make should stir our emotions, to talk about something, to give some emotional quality [...] I don't know, something meaningful, to give some choice [...]. Do we need a new chair? [Do we] think we need a new chair? New sofa? New table? I think not, not again, it's not necessary, really it's not necessary. We have a lot of philosophy in terms of modern, post modern, old modern [...] sorry it's too much for me. Quality is instinct. I want some ideas that are important, that make [a] difference" (Cassina, 2005)*

### **What is Time**

Many times while driving with Italians, they remark while flagrantly ignoring a by-law, "it is only a suggestion!" Perhaps their experience of time is similar. Time becomes more like a guideline.

In Italy, time is not experienced, nor does it have the same connotations as in North America. In Italian design, time occurs as less of a constraint to the project.

In the Italian context there is this culture of slowness where the acts of doing and making are not hurried or rushed, where time is not looked upon with anxiety. This is not to say that Italians are slow moving, but that they take the time to complete a project, to get it right. This is where the intuitiveness of quality is integrated. The focus is more on how quality can be achieved in time during a project. In the Italian design, time is looked upon as a benefit. The longer a project lasts through time and is continually met by society's enjoyment, shows how great the quality was at the start of the project.

### **Examples We Saw of the Culture of Slowness in Italy**

During our six weeks in Italy we saw many examples of how time and the culture of slowness does not dictate process, much less the Italian way of life.

During our visit to the Tuscan Benedictine monastery in the town of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, it was noticed that time was not marked by a clock, but by the rituals that the monks follow day after day, marking a passage through time. Those rituals are the things that structure their day, not a clock, and not the efficiency to be on time. Our team observed these rituals in awed silence – vespers, evening meal, Gregorian chants – and lost all sense of usual time.

The passeggiata that many Italians still take every day, where they go out dressed in their best and promenade around their city or town, usually around supper, is a ritual not marked by a specific time. They could be walking in one area at 4:05pm, but the next day the walk can be in a completely different time and location. The passeggiata is not marked by a clock, it is a quality of life, a ritual done every day that marks the flow of time.

At the Gattevecchi wine cellar, in Montepulciano, Tuscany, time is marked by the how long the wine was processed in the keg, and drinking their wine is like tasting time. It is not the fruit that you taste, but the quality produced when someone invested the time to create this fantastic wine.

In this daily siesta, almost everything closes for a few hours in the middle of the afternoon to cool down from the heat or to relax, we see the culture of slowness. There is no gripping panic to be financially competitive from one store to another because the culture of slowness is about taking your time, not to be in a rush to do everything as shops closed from 1-3pm. Inefficient? No. Once re-opened most Italian shops then stay open until 8pm. In Italy, there is this collective feeling of enjoying life; people seem genuinely more well-mannered when they are given the freedom to release the constrictiveness that time constraints can bring. Time is made valuable and pleasurable; when things need to be done, they get done, but when time is needed to relax, that time will be taken without any consequence to the project or to the rest of the day.

### Taking the time

The final form does not mean it is finalized because the designer can always return to the project to enhance and redevelop the form. This revisit to the project can become a process of slowness as it may take many years for the final form to ultimately be introduced to the user. For example, the architect Ricardo Dalisi worked with Alberto Alessi on his well-known Neapolitan Coffee Maker, which took seven years to design with many iterations being developed. Dalisi was never satisfied with the final result and was always finding something to change. He wanted to create a never ending story that is discursive. Gloria Boncellini at Alessi spoke of this discursive process:

*Alessi (~12:47 audio clip)*

*"Roberto Venturi is the exactly the same [as Ricardo Dalisi]. Alberto collaborated with him, but he told me it was impossible to arrive to an end with Venturi because Venturi, [...] always found something that he wanted to change. It's like he considers the project something that is growing up, so it's a never ending story." (Alessi, 2005)*

It seems to us that this is a luxury, but also a responsibility of Italian design. It is important not to romanticize the role of time in the process of design. Being able to have this luxury, to be slow and methodical, has benefits, but there are also repercussions for taking too long.

*Isao Hosoe (51:03-52:10 audio clip)*

*"Many times we have to change and modify our projects. This is the very difficult side of this kind of novelty work. Because you don't know when you arrive at the finished form, it has hard to break this kind of process. This is one of the very practical problems [in Italian design]. It is not easy to predict how much time a project will take, or how much it will cost [when it could have many iterations over many years]. In any case, [as an Italian designer,] you enjoy [the whole process]" (Isao Hosoe, 2005)*

It can work to the disadvantage of the designer, especially when he or she has a project idea that they want to start, but cannot because of the political and geographical nature of the often large-scale, urban space projects. There is always a cause and effect to everything and so the negative effect is that projects do not get finished or take too long to start.

*Tom Rankin (8:28 audio clip)*

*"Renzo Piano wins the competition [to build the Church of the Millennium]. The working process in Italy in general, unfortunately, can be very, very slow from the point when somebody wins a competition to the point where the building is actually completed and this started out as an example of that. And I think it's due to the experience, and perseverance of Renzo Piano that it didn't just get stuck in the mud the way many projects do. The main problem is that, traditionally, Italian governments change very quickly. If one government gives you the job, the next government is just as anxious to take it away from you and not complete their predecessor's victory. So there's a political reason why things don't get finished here. But in this case, that didn't quite happen."*

Tom Rankin, our guide during our tour of modern and contemporary urban Roma and president of the American Institute for Roman Culture, reminded us that sometimes the Italian idea of time does not work, that the slowness in this process can be the downfall of any design project.

In the Park Associati meeting with Michele Rossi, he was explaining the difference between the Anglo-Saxon and Italian process of design, trying to elaborate on what makes Italians different regarding deadlines and time constraints. Not to say that there are none to meet (how else would any work get finished), but what type of importance and thought Italians give to the concept of hard given deadlines:

*Park Associati (45:20 audio clip)*

*"Creative process is a process, like work and drawing process, you have 24 hours to do the design, and then you have 20 [hours] to do the final design and then, I don't know, 100 to do the working drawings and if you came up with a good design after 24 hrs then good, if it's not it's good anyways [...] because*



*that's the time you have to do the concept which for us, Italians, is crazy" (Park Associati, 2005)*

Michele goes on to explain how even though Italians are given deadlines, the most important part of the process is about the quality and ensuring that the project outcome gives the user the best experience that can be created.

### **An icon out of time**

Unique pieces today were used as every day household items when they were introduced to the market, but through time they have become iconic or classic design. It is almost as if time creates these icons, to see how long they will sustain; time creates longevity. The Supperleggera by Gio Ponti for Cassina is now considered an icon. At the time of introduction into the market, this iconic chair was touted technologically, as the world's lightest, yet strongest, modern chair, yet it met the users' needs; it had a simple design and was affordable. It was designed to work that way, to be strong and inexpensive, but through time the Supperleggera has become an icon representing tradition and modernity simultaneously. Why? Perhaps because its concept was so much more than merely its "super-lightness." Its form was derived from a traditional chair from Chiavara. The seat reflects this humble precedent. This form is embedded and suffused in, through and with time pull on the users' emotions and desires. This teaches these companies to take ample time processing particular projects. Needless to say, a side-effect of such a decision is a by slowing down of production, making them more expensive and rare, hard to come by products. Their prices go up and they become unattainable to the masses, which may not have been Ponti's intention. This paper will not get into this issue further. It is a real effect, but our focus has to speak of a relationship between the Italian design process, quality, and time. At this time, they become a valuable commodity for society's own collective and personal use. **The net effect:** the piece becomes "timeless" and is as popular and sells as well today as it was in the year of production.

### **Contextual time**

History is a part of the design process through the context of time. For example, in Firenze, during our tour of modern Firenze with Alessandro Vignozzi, we were shown the redesigned gateway to Firenze's main highway by Gae Aulenti. The gateway project takes on the same consistent pre-existing Renaissance style, but brings in a new, modern language. If it is well considered, like the Aulenti gateway in Firenze, the design will take account the historical content without romanticizing the history behind its original design. It is not about the specific history of what occurred during an era or that the original design was from the Renaissance, but it is taking the same quality that it was designed in during that period and making it relevant today. The façade semiotics of the historical content, the pastiche surface level treatment of "history" is not where the real design process lies in the historical context of time. It lies in the continuing belief that valuing of the quality from that time in history is still alive. We can't, nor should we do Sangallo-esque Firenze or "borrow" Alberti-isms. This treats the city as "done," as complete. Firenze will not grow, as it desperately needs to do again, out from its glorious centre. It is the continuing belief that a city like Firenze, the original Renaissance city of art and culture, with so much historical context will continue inspiring quality in the process of design; that is worth doing, that each design or engineering work is worthy of a craftsman hand. What you derive from the historical context is the craftsman hand, and that creating the fascination of "delight", with Firenze as an example, is worth achieving.

### **Wisdom and the experimental**

*"La difficoltà l'aguzzare l'ingegno" (Ricci-Spini, 2005)*

The quote was said after explaining how the design process is the most innovative and creative during hard times, such as during the 1950's when Italy's resources were rationed after the Second World War. It made the Italian designers think critically of what resources to use and thereby **BECOME** more innovative because of the limitations that surrounded them.

It is a guarantee that through the context of time, bad economic situations will arise, but it is important not to panic, but to draw on the wisdom that there are other things to do besides panic about economic productivity. Indeed, knowledge and social production thrive in difficult circumstances. Innovation often comes by being inventive with what's about. Perhaps by no accident, our final studio visit was to Achille Castiglioni's Milano office in Piazza Castello, graciously opened to us by il maestro's widow, Signora Castiglioni. Signora Castiglioni showed us the master's work in the way he was reported to do so at conferences and at his classes at Milano Politecnico; by how the form was inspired.

Out of a seemingly limitless cupboard in the centre of the studio came odd bits of ephemera – a chimney brush, a child's toy pipe, ice hockey pads, slinky toys, folding Japanese slippers. Each of us was asked to derive its original purpose. Then, Signora Castiglioni showed us the products that had been inspired by these storage forms: the slinky – an ashtray for Alessi, the slippers – a chair for Danese. Innovation through limitations sharpens your ingenuity. *"La difficoltà l'aguzzare l'ingegno"*

Flippo Spaini was our first interview in week two of our six weeks in Italy this past summer. At the very first design office visit in Roma our team came upon a crucial piece of Italian thinking that would define our approach in the coming weeks. Our team asked Spaini about how the downward turn in the economy was affecting the office's design. A shrug of the shoulder was followed by the quote:

*"La difficoltà l'aguzzare l'ingegno" or [Difficulties or limitations grow and sharpen your ingenuity] (Ricci-Spaini, 2005)*

Knowledge and social production thrive in critical times. Ricci-Spain teaches us that it is important to have times of experimental energy, in a firm's life, in an economy, in order to remain innovative, and to sustain growth over the long-term because it forces, causes and allows the thought to continually evolve critically. And, as a designer it is important to develop this as a "habitude", as Castiglioni did, of remaining in this state even when times were good and the office healthy. Isao Hosoe teaches us to remain "a foreigner" in order to design better. Castiglioni reminds us to remain curious and see the value in things people pass over, to keep "seeing". All of these ideas are shades of the same fundamental Italian ideal. This ideal we found everywhere.

*Saporiti (2:10 audio clip)*

*"To be open, to not be afraid of doing experiments and going a little bit out of ordinary. This is how [Italian designers'] stay ahead." (Saporiti, 2005)*

Saporiti describes their process as to be a little experimental and not to be afraid of doing something out of the ordinary; it is what they feel that differentiates their company from others as they get "inspiration from other industries". Alessi describes their process as being able to introduce a final form to the user and to see if it will be rejected or if it will be a success; it is their "borderline" measurement. They are able to be as experimental as they want, but still have a discourse with the user for feedback to understand the market better. Alessi uses this mode, ideal, as way of seeing how far they can *constantly* go:

*Alessi (6.40 audio clip #4)*

*"Sometimes the risk is that you go too far and you go over an important line, but when you recognize that, when you are enter the production, when you present some pieces into the market, and the market doesn't react as you expect, in that moment you know that you are over. In that moment you see the borderline because you see the mistake; you understand the mistake. So, what happened with that project? You will not make business. **But** if you do the correct step you will introduce the new [revised] one in [the] correct direction, **and in that sense you make the correct step** and it means strategically, you are creating something really new because no one is there like you. It is an exceptional new idea that people will like to have, so it means that you will sell that idea; that is the kind of crazy or brave policy [we have], but it is our strategy." (Alessi, 2005)*

If Italian designers and companies were under constantly firm deadlines to put out a final form, they would not have the time to be able to **play** with these experiments or to test the user in this many ways. Through the seemingly unreliable, hard-to-quantify 'non'-constraint of time as a process, Italian

design, companies, and firms are allowed the freedom of a natural experimentation and reaction cycle from the market. But most importantly, if the users, and the society, do not welcome it; it often just means they are not ready for it: and NOT that the design is poor. On the contrary as has been shown in this paper, with examples like the Superleggera, this process expressly seeks forms that last. And that is good business, and a good investment - not to speak of the benefits to society.

The idea that time is not a constraint or a hindrance to the process of designing and industry is a revelation. The luxury of "*slowness*", the investment of time that puts quality into work, this evokes important cultural values that transcend place and nation, and invests emotions and values from the user, and designs poetry and art into the non-rational side of people's lives. That this is POSSIBLE to do with design is in many ways a revelation in of itself.

### **Conclusion**

In the process of Italian design there are two important aspects that work in tandem, synchronized effortlessly together: quality and time. Quality is embedded in time; it is not about how quickly one can mass produce the final form, but the time that it takes to create a final form that we can be proud of, that lasts, that speaks. To get to the final form means understanding society's emotions, desires, and needs, through their interactions. As a designer – or academic, economist, manager, business leader, manufacturer – you should live in Isao Hosoe's of "*habitude*": being observant of the environment in hopes to gather inspiration for innovative projects, and not just to create "new" forms for the sake of creating something "new." New is not good enough. New is old.

There needs to be a stronger focus on following the measure of quality than there is on the focus of following time in design processes, research and development, and manufacturing. This we know so far. The process of Italian design is a very complex issue, and in fact it was extremely difficult to pinpoint the exact nature of what makes Italian design so unique. Neither was spending six weeks in Italy to try to understand their innovation nearly long enough. But it is a start, one that we will continue in year three of our project this coming spring and summer, 2006. We know that what we have uncovered is skimming the surface of a very intricate problem with a large scope.

Yet, we feel that this year we began to constrain the problem. We hope that what we have uncovered to date intrigues our readers and that, as in any good Italian design process you will be curious enough to see where this project goes in one year progressions. Our methodology for the coming study in 2006 will be essentially the same, but built on what we have learned here, asking new questions from what we know so far, conducting new interviews, extending new lines of question to get closer to understanding our much-loved subject, and the designers who have given so generously to this study.

### **Bibliography:**

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Andrea Branzi (2005)  
Cliostraat (2005) **Luca Ponceolini**  
Isao Hosoe (2005)  
Saporiti (2005) Raffaele Saporiti  
Tom Rankin (2005)

Ian+// luca galofaro  
Ricci-Spaini // Filippo Spaini  
Alessandro Vignozzi //AV  
Park Associati//Michele Rossi  
Cassina // Luciano Bon

*(Isao Hosoe, 2005 written quote no audio, at end of interview when we were asking him questions)*

*Use Italian names for cities, milano, firenze, roma*

*Raffaele*