

Fall 2006

www.italchambers.ca VOLUME 4 • ISSUE 4

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The official magazine of the Italian Chamber of Commerce of Toronto

In a world full of plastic knock-offs
and build-it-yourself livingrooms...

is
Italian
Design?
still
relevant

Plus

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Letter from the Editor

What a fantastic land! What a magical place! Here things happen. Dreams can become reality. In the centre of this city there is a great willpower, a spirit of enterprise and hard work, a feeling of constant evolution. A city always ready to change. Ready to start again.

Are you thinking about Toronto? Or did you assume I was talking about Milan?

You are right in both cases. Milan and Toronto could both fit this description, although for different reasons.

For Milan, entrepreneurial skills, creativity, a tradition of manufacturing and unbeatable quality in the details make it a glorious capital of fashion and design. The combination of these elements has created the masterpieces displayed throughout the months of October and November in Toronto at the Design Exchange. Milano: Made in Design is an extraordinary opportunity to find out about what Milan has done in interior design, mechanics, home accessories, automotive and aeronautics, graphic and lighting design. It is a mesmerizing narration of a city that breathes creativity and spurs on some of the world's most talented artists and visionaries—visionaries represented at the exhibit most dramatically by an interactive installation created by Milan's own multimedia phenoms, Studio Azzurro.

On the other side of the coin, in Toronto one discovers other characteristics supported by a mobile city in perpetual change and able to continually reinvent itself. A city that vibrates, that is able to transmit energy. A city that is able to welcome, to build through diversity. A city that invests in culture and communication, that makes room for entrepreneurship and ambition. Toronto is destined to become an example of "what to do" not only for Canada, but for all people, for all nations starting from countries where thousands of immigrants departed and made this country what it is today.

These two lands are magical, but their meeting can be magical too. One can learn from the other, one can give to the other resources and experiences. Both can speak the very same language drawing from their complementarities.

For these reasons the rapport between Milan and Toronto cannot be limited to a twinning of institutions. It should and it can become a dialogue between communities, far apart in physical space but close in the geography of the spirit. A bridge where business and culture, art and work, stories and adventures travel together continuously.

(This is a column by four hands, written together with Fabio Terragni, CEO Milano Metropolis.)



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In a world full of knock-offs, mass market production and cheap manufacturing...

Is Italian Design Still Relevant?

*Shakti. Designed by
Marzio Rusconi Dienci for
Kundajit in 2001, this
lamp emanates a white
light even in the colored
sections of the Plexiglas*

by Christopher Hume

Images from Milano: Made In Design ©2006 Contrasto

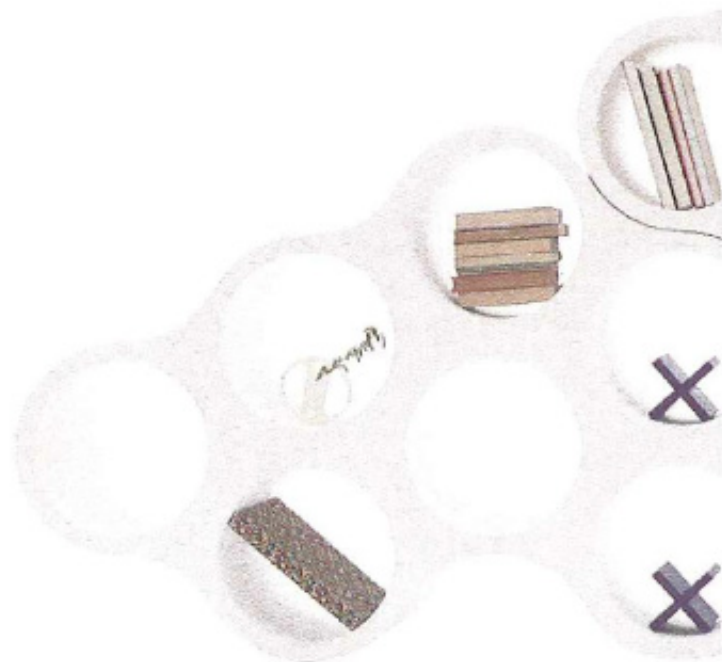
If you can't be the biggest, be the best. These words pretty well sum up the Italian approach to design and manufacturing.

"A small country like Italy can't compete with a giant like China," says Aldo Colonetti, editor of *Ottogono* magazine and scientific director of the Istituto Europeo di Design in Milan. "So we have no choice but to opt for excellence."

Colonetti and a posse of politicians from the City and Province of Milan were in Toronto this past September to attend the opening of the exhibition *Milano: Made In Design* at the Design Exchange. Featuring new and innovative twists on everyday objects like chairs, lamps, bookshelves, cookware and even helmets, the show is yet another example of the enormous effort that city devotes to maintaining its position at the centre of the world of international design.

The show, which opened in New York and will soon travel to Asia, goes beyond issues of aesthetics and style; it's also an examination of the unique relationship that exists between Milan's designers and manufacturers. Therein lies the secret of its enormous success: every city has designers, but how many manage to get their work into production? The answer, of course, is very few.

Canada is a good example. Though our designers rank among the most accomplished anywhere—think of Karim Rashid, Bruce



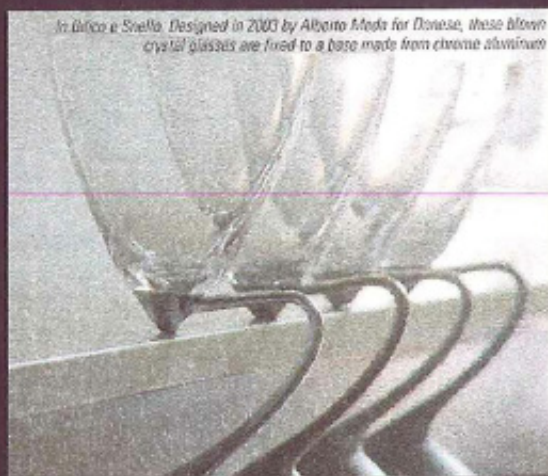
Mau, Douglas Ball—few people, including Canadians, have any concept of Canadian design. Like our actors and comedians, the most successful are forced to go elsewhere to build a career. The simple truth is that manufacturers in the Great White North are generally averse to anything they consider a risk. They take their cues from other centres.

In Milan, on the other hand, the relationship between designers, manufacturers, marketers and entrepreneurs runs deep. The Milanese don't just design, they make.

"You can find great design in Toronto, New York and London," says Fabio Terragni, CEO of Milano Metropoli. "But you can't find the craftsmanship that we have in Milan. We have a large number of firms, small and medium-sized, that are top-quality production houses. We think the magic of Milan lies in this. The design industry is based on direct connections between these different sectors."

As Terragni points out, these production houses can sit down with designers and translate their ideas into manufactured reality. Because these businesses, many of them family run, are small, they can focus on high-quality goods. Needless to say, designers love the idea of seeing their work rendered by the finest craftsmen using the finest materials.

The exhibition makes this clear by highlighting a number of pieces designed by figures as disparate as architect Norman Foster and designer Jasper Morrison, both from Britain. Foster is represented with his table, *Nomos*, which transforms the most mundane domestic object into a high-tech fantasy. Morrison's contribution, *Low Pad Chair*, is thoroughly minimalist in its appearance but at the same time actually manages to look comfortable. In both cases, the quality of the workmanship is as much a part of the appeal as the design.



In Difco e Soella. Designed in 2003 by Alberto Meda for Donese, these blown crystal glasses are fixed to a base made from chrome stainless steel.

As Colonetti also makes clear, Milan has the intellectual infrastructure to support its design industry. This infrastructure takes the form of a number of schools and an active publishing scene that produces some of the leading international design magazines—including *Domus*, *Habitare* and *Ottogono*—which contributes to a culture of design that flourishes at every level.

"We can't compete with the mass market," says Terragni. "But the mass market can't compete with us in terms of quality."

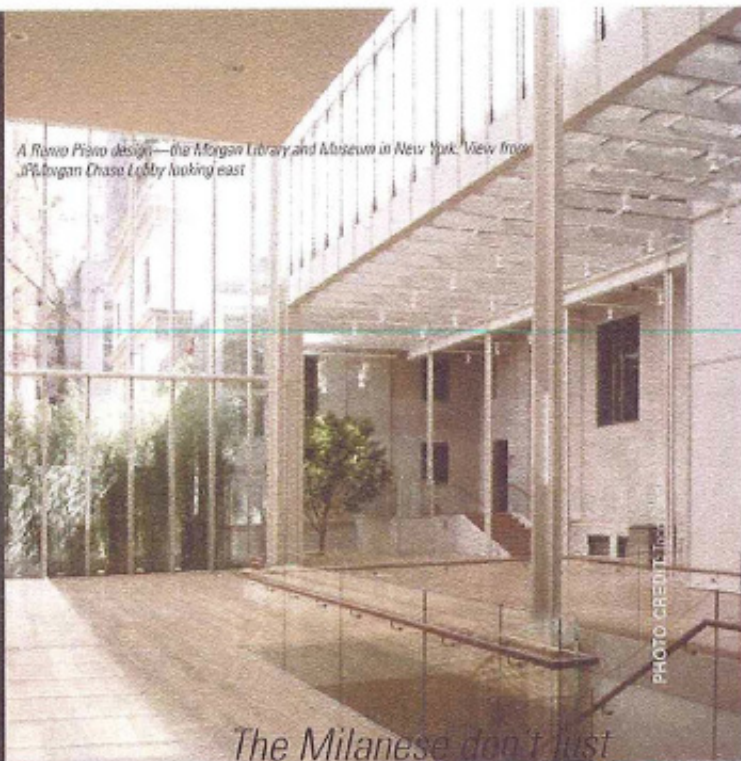


Cloud. Designed by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for Cappellini in 2003, this shelving unit is stackable and can rotate.

Casco Fighter Bluetooth®. Created in 2004 by Memo Design, this elegant helmet integrates a Wireless Motore microphone with Wireless Bluetooth® technology.



A Renzo Piano design—the Morgan Library and Museum in New York. View from JP Morgan Chase Lobby looking east.



The Milanese don't just design, **they make.**

The point is worth making; although we live in a world awash in cheap consumer goods imported mostly from China, there's still a market for the top-notch. And at a time when the desire for authenticity has grown urgent, this is more important than ever.

Consider the case of the modernist icon, the B306 *chaise longue* designed by Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand in 1928. It is still in production, manufactured in Milan by Cassina under license from Fondation Le Corbusier. It costs about \$3,000. On the other hand, a Canadian supermarket chain recently introduced a B306 knock-off that sells for about \$350.


Though the two may look alike at first glance, they are anything but. You get what you pay for, needless to say, and for many the imitation is as good as the original. But not everyone agrees, and that's where the Milan approach comes into the equation. "In the face of globalization, we don't have so many strengths," Terragni notes. "So for us, creativity, design and quality production can be our role in the world."

This strategy takes advantage of a history of high design that goes back to the early years of the 20th century. Though this tradition has been formalized through a series of government initiatives, it ultimately grows out of a commitment to design and building that in many cases runs in families, passed down over generations from individual to individual.

There's no better example of this than Renzo Piano, the Genoa-born architect who has established himself as one of the leading practitioners of the day. Piano, who calls his practice the Building Workshop, comes from a long line of builders. His father, brothers and uncles are all contractors, so architecture represented a natural progression in the family. Indeed, after he graduated from the Milan Polytechnic Architecture School in 1964, he spent several years with his father's construction company.



Serie Up. Designed by Gaetano Pesce for DSD Italia from 1969 until 2000, this chair and footstool are made entirely from polyurethane and upholstered with an elasticized fabric.



RBOGLIND. Designed for Segis in 2004, Bartoli Design + Faucighetti Engineering were the first to apply the newly patented RGD5 polymer in this chair



Designed by Renzo Piano, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, with the building's mechanical equipment displayed on the exterior, is a fine example of the kind of forward-thinking found in Italian design



Spring. This chair, designed by Massimo Sestini in 1992 for Giogotti, is made with flexible materials that allow the piece to bend and twist with your body

"We can't compete with the mass market," says Terragni.
"But the mass market can't compete with us in terms of quality!"

By the time Piano won architecture's highest award, the \$100,000(US) Pritzker Prize in 1989, he had worked on some of the most celebrated projects of the time, including the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Menil Collection in Houston, Kansai Airport Terminal in Osaka and the Morgan Library and Museum in New York. When Piano did the Pompidou (with English architect Richard Rogers) in the 1970s, he was known as a proponent of a high-tech aesthetic that put the mechanical equipment of the building on the exterior and made it the pre-eminent design feature. Since then, however, he has moved to a more classically inspired approach in which light and space become the main elements. At the Morgan, for instance, his addition aspires to a kind of invisibility, content to allow the spotlight to shine on the museum's historic buildings and collection.

Not all Italian designers are content with such restraint. In the 1980s, the Milan-based design collective, Memphis, attracted attention everywhere, especially in the mainstream media. Given the startlingly bold work produced by Memphis, that shouldn't be surprising. Led by Milan architect Ettore Sottsass, who is also represented in the Design Exchange exhibition, the group turned conventional notions of design upside-down. Using manufactured materials such as leopard-skin Arborite, Memphis opted for bombast rather than subtlety. Looking back from the vantage point of the 21st century, Memphis seems to have been more about excess than serious design. On the other hand, perhaps it was something that had to happen.

And therein lies the enduring beauty of great design; it serves its purpose and more.

It recognizes that no object is so humble that it can't speak to us on different levels, both rational and emotional

"Memphis was a critique of the notion that form follows function," Colonetti argues. "It was a very important movement. Now Memphis is dead, but Ettore Sottsass isn't."

In fact, Sottsass is represented in the show with a simple chrome and glass table that appears to turn its back on the sound and fury that was Memphis. Another former Memphisite, Michele de Lucchi, is also in the exhibition. His contribution is the instantly familiar and decidedly functional lamp, Tolomeo. Designed in 1986 and manu-


factured by Artemide, it is no less attractive for all its obvious utility.

"The beauty of Tolomeo," de Lucchi writes, "is that it's very simple, almost natural. It is an office lamp that has made it out of the office. It is an object that goes beyond the functional quality linked to décor. Another strong point is that it's high-tech but homey, technology is there but not so much that it is perceived as such..."

And therein lies the enduring beauty of great design; it serves its purpose and more. It recognizes that no object is so humble that it can't speak to us on different levels, both rational and emotional.

Let's not forget that designers must also produce brake pads, running shoes, coffee machines, kettles and bicycles. Some things are sexier than others, but that doesn't concern the designer; the possibility of beauty can never be ignored. Of course, the "magic" of which Terragni speaks isn't just pulled out of a hat. It must be carefully nurtured and promoted. It must itself be designed. So it's hardly surprising to discover that government is involved.

As Luigi Vimercate, deputy minister of the Italian Ministry of Communications, points out, a fund of two million Euros is available annually for creative start-up businesses. So far this year in Milan there have been 570 applications, which gives some indication of the health of its design industry.

"It's the heart of our system of production," Vimercate says. "And our hope for the future." 

Milano: Made in Design runs until November 12, at Toronto's Design Exchange.

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