

Piero Lissoni Recent Architecture

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**HATJE
CANTZ**

IL LIBRO E' PX AUE....

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It's Only Architecture, but I Like It

Piero Lissoni: Architecture in Progress

Once upon a time there was a designer whose creations, at least as far as I was concerned, were not particularly exciting. However, we were at the beginning of the nineties, that extraordinary last phase of *Capitalismo Casalingo Italiano* (capitalism of the Italian domestic landscape), which saw the emergence of new companies and new designers who were able to stand apart somewhat from that vicious circle of market-design-production-market, and from the visual confusion that is today such a characteristic of industrial production and above all the resulting immensely dull furniture. I was living with my first wife and very young daughter in a small house in Zurich, and had already established myself as a respected "design critic" as a result of some articles and a couple of books on cult firms, which I had published in my early thirties. Occasionally I would return to Milan, which, though small geographically, seemed to me large in heart and aspirations, a place where Italian design could still reserve some surprises for those who still believed in innovation. New designers, for example, were shaking themselves free of the cultural weight of the masters who, despite now being in their seventies, were still very active, very dynamic, and popular and continued to exert an overly strong influence on producers and buyers, so much so that designers of the generation that followed were obliged to invent a new idea of the professional. This figure was a great deal more cunning and savvy of the rules and the difficulties of marketing, in contrast to the rather artisan-oriented inspiration of the masters, apparently all genius and disorder. In order to

distinguish themselves from the mainstream of production, these younger authors were obliged to fashion their own identity, principally by trying to ensure that the form of their products would be recognized as their own. This mode of operation, however, has not always been successful, since precisely that attention to the requirements of marketing often requires an ability to improvise, to trust one's intuition and fleeting feelings and impressions. While this might guarantee results in terms of quality, it does not always produce "iconic" products, objects that last and that are today the thinly veiled and seldom realized inspiration of both producers and consumers.

This was the reason why, in the early nineties, the work of Piero Lissoni failed to win me over, even though he was then starting to become successful among the old masters and their more or less trusty followers. His first essays as a star-designer, such as furniture and systems for Cappellini, spoke a subdued language, as if both the designer and the producer lacked the courage to bring out truly original inspiration. It was as if they were afraid of breaking the rather miraculous and extraordinary equilibrium of that still dominant business model where merely the fact of having created an important name (*Fatt'a nomina e fregatinne*, as they say in Naples, "Make yourself a name and then just sit back") automatically gave one the right either to stop inventing altogether, or to continue working with microscopic precision on those modernist canons that were so assimilated as to be immediately familiar, and therefore appreciated, by the urbane but slightly jaded design public.

It therefore surprised me to see Lissoni suddenly come up with a piece of furniture that was different from the others, a *machine pour s'asseoir*, an object that did not require dressing up in a twenties or thirties style but that made the user comfortable, and found its own direction on the trail of diverse forms, that which constitutes the history of design. The rather odd name of the chair, a frog about to jump, hinted at the irony—practically sarcasm for those who have come to know the man better—that transpires from the eyes and wry

smile of this designer. This irony or sarcasm also probably forms the basis of all the immense professional grounding and skill that have led Lissoni, in just twenty years, to become the mentor of the new generation of entrepreneurs—the last in my opinion, at least in Italy—taking them by the hand, together with certain other designers, and redrawing Italian design, or more precisely, the international domestic landscape. If not, how can one explain why a variety of young entrepreneurs (mainly Dutch, but also some French, an American, and some naturalized Italians) participate on the hunting ground of international design and tend more than anything to baroque modernism and are pursued by just as many producers, whose only success is achieved through the media? Lissoni and the companies with whom he works continue to create very successful masterpieces in terms of products such as sofas, handles, kitchens, chairs, coffee makers, trolleys, tables, bookcases, and water taps. These become iconic without disturbing too much the idea of a house, which most people would like to be comfortable, like a pedestal table, something present but unnoticed. I am not being ironic but I have to admit that Lissoni's creations are among the few I would place in the house I may one day own.

The bond between the designer I once disliked and the manufacturers is so strong, their partnership as climbers on the mountain of success has worked so well, that their love story can also help us understand how Lissoni has evolved from designer to architect, concerned with structures, volumes, overhangs, voids, and solids, *chiaroscuro*, masses, and transparencies. My impression is that by stripping material and even form from sofas, handles, kitchens, chairs, coffee makers, trolleys, tables, bookcases, and shelves he has developed and refined his nature as an artisan constructor even more. The word artisan is important for a variety of reasons but principally because, besides containing the root art, it includes the idea that each time we tackle the manufacture of a new piece, be it a beautiful moccasin or a thirty-story skyscraper, if highly skilled, we will always try to intro-

duce some innovation or novelty, or simply an enhancement (an improvement, as the old functionalists, the saviors of humanity, would have said). In this way that individual new object, besides becoming something unique, simultaneously contains all the knowledge of the person creating it and those before him—maybe even back to the smith who created Achilles' shield, or a little less far back, to the masons who constructed the cathedrals in France. This allows the producer, who is without doubt primarily a designer, to feel like part of the power of being creative, a process that has relatively little to do with budgets, planning offices, marketing plans, and planning permissions, and for this it is magic. These thoughts were not invented by me but came to mind during the few conversations that I have had with Piero Lissoni—between a phone call with a client or a person dear to him, the cautious entrance of a collaborator who reminds him of urgent tasks in the studio, or his golden retrievers seeking caresses—trying to concentrate on the meaning of that mass of ideas that, almost without being aware of it, hauls an industrious designer through scores of projects. Consequently, if someone asks the mundane question, "What are you doing at the moment?" or, if the speaker is a little more intelligent, "Why are you doing it?" we are taken somewhat aback, vainly trying to find the words to explain why we are in effect so very busy, above and beyond having to pay the bloodsucking taxes and the necessary salaries of the team.

Not long ago, during one of these conversations, I gained some insight into Lissoni concerning precisely his practicing architecture as an artisan, progressively putting together pieces of tried and tested wisdom and spur-of-the-moment intuitions, a long repressed desire that finally has the opportunity to express itself, and every now and again a client who fully assumes his role as a father of architecture, to quote Filarete. Naturally, given that each project, each designer, and each client is, or should be, distinct from the others, the skill lies in coming up with a different though not necessarily new solution each time, putting together each

piece of that complicated jigsaw that is constructing buildings, especially when people must live in them, perhaps for their entire lives. Thus, for example, it must have again been his training as a designer for companies that luckily still conserved an essence of artisanship that made working with the limited range of materials available in architecture, in contrast to the innumerable choices in industrial production, a great deal simpler for Lissoni. We could go further and say that the challenge of putting together a building with just a few materials such as steel, cement and glass, like writing a poem with just one hundred words or playing the samba with just one note, was a much more rewarding challenge than amusing oneself by choosing from a vast range of materials or inventing new ones, maybe only in order to make a toilet brush more attractive.

I am writing this because close scrutiny of Lissoni's architecture, particularly houses, reveals a resemblance more to experimental pavilions, as could have been thought up by avant-garde architects of the past, all tending to demonstrate the possibility of realizing a new idea for living with materials then relatively new, more contemporary, even of the future, so that each fragment of utopia that exists in every architectural project—given that on average they come to fruition some years after having been thought up—is projected a great deal further ahead and exaggerated to a certain extent.

The fact is that, sadly, in this first decade of the twenty-first century, no one seems to have any idea of what living really means, let alone creating a home, which would be the day-to-day essence of living, in places that are not just randomly assembled. This issue should not be underestimated if one thinks that for more than a century designers have been puzzling over this apparently banal question in order to produce buildings that communicate a sense or spirit of time or *Zeitgeist*, which gives them and those who inhabit them a reason to spend a little more time on them than on that taken up by the job, the project, the construction, the move, and the publication—when things go well—in a fashion weekly.

Consequently, Lissoni has generally had to turn to a notion when starting to think of a "house," even though he is dealing with people made up of flesh, blood, bone, and brain within whom there is layer upon layer of both accurate and mistaken ideas of what should constitute a dwelling. It seems to me that his favorite construct is a geometric world where the rules of statics remain valid, a world where it is not absolutely essential to demonstrate the wonders of the stability of possibly complex structures, where curves, when present, are at most a necessity dictated by the situation, where the exterior and interior are part of the same continuum precisely as presented, or at least used to be presented, in geometry texts where any two- or three-dimensional form is simply the delimitation of one field within another, generally referred to as infinity, the existence of which, at least to me, is a mystery. With an almost mystical sense of faith, Lissoni operates within this construct, placing essential diaphragm-like divisions between one function and another, but only when they are indispensable for reasons of statics. These partitions are always as transparent as possible and reduced to thin structural elements so that in the end, the spaces and the areas surrounding them are similar to the lined frames of which they are made: geometrical abstractions of polygons and solids. Lissoni's buildings are like this, suspended in the emptiness of a geometrical infinity with a trace of equilibrium. This is perhaps also, on an existential level, the difficulty today of finding one's bearings in the void, of deciphering the meaning of living for those who are not animated by an obstinate desire to construct, as happens with architects, designers, producers, and constructors.

In this way, with a potentially risky faith in abstraction and with no knowledge of what the imminent future may bring, Lissoni, in order to navigate in infinity, carries this intuitive and almost primitive skill like a sextant to produce objects with a minimum of material and tools. He is followed in this by his most loyal manufacturers, who continue to entrust to him not only the design of their products, their image to the world and their meaning, but also those same places that serve to produce, exhibit, and contain those items. In

this way he enjoys a great responsibility but also the sheer pleasure of being able to continually increase the scale of his measured experimentation, without ever abandoning his wry smile, accompanied by an extremely personal irony that hides the depth and the difficulty of the profession behind the elegant and slightly aloof spaces of his objects and buildings.

Finally, the words of another rather aloof pop star come to mind. This is someone a little shorter, a little older, but certainly no less wise than Lissoni, one of the Rolling Stones, whose skills as an artisan-musician in adapting the blues to the modern era have immortalized him, a little like what could happen in the future regarding all the art of construction, if some accomplished person continues to include a little of the healthy innovation of the master craftsman. We just need to replace the words rock 'n' roll with the word architecture to provide a very pertinent finish to these thoughts that have spilled out on this gray November morning:
It's only architecture, but I like it ...

—Stefano Casciani