The International Design Yearbook Edited by Philippe Starck

THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN YEARBOOK 3

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INTRODUCTION

This is the third volume of *The International Design Yearbook*. Like its predecessors, it brings together a selection of the year's best and most memorable new domestic designs from around the world, chosen from several thousand submissions.

Producing a survey of this kind inevitably raises for the editors the question of how to deal with judgments about quality. If the book included only those designs which measured up to some absolute standard of uncompromised excellence it would fail in its other objective: to provide a permanent record of many special pieces which have helped to characterize some twelve months' production. For it is intended very much as a catalogue of the design year, pointing out a range of stylistic tendencies and options.

In the nature of things there are no more than a few designs annually that can be called genuine landmarks; and their identification must be provisional until enough time has elapsed for properly reflective judgments to be possible. So the question remains: should the selector attempt some system of presentation which reflects his subjective viewpoint? If so, how to distinguish between those pieces which, in his opinion, are outstanding, and those which, while important and interesting enough to be included, do not have the same range of qualities?

For this volume the editor Philippe Starck has indeed chosen to highlight what he feels are the most significant designs; in doing so he necessarily qualifies his approval of others. Some works, in his view, follow innovation rather than achieving it; some – despite imaginativeness of concept – do not mirror this in their execution; and some may simply represent a failure to break away from previously established directions in the work of their designers. To convey such qualifications and to showcase his particular favourites, Starck has suggested his own design solution. Outstanding work is allowed most space, while other interesting and important developments are reproduced in closer proximity than last year to ensure comprehensiveness of content in the book and ease of reference. But the Yearbook is still selective: it does not seek to show everything, but only what seems to be appropriate in providing a record of significant pieces.

In each of the five areas with which the Yearbook deals – furniture, lighting, tableware, textiles and products – entries are grouped according to

merit; within these groupings, they are arranged in alphabetical order for simplicity. Biographies of designers and worldwide addresses of suppliers are provided at the end. Further special features in this volume include 'Coming Next', a choice of planned but as yet unexecuted designs submitted by some of the world's most prominent designers and a list of major acquisitions by collections of contemporary design.

Looking at this year's selection, it is possible to see a continuation of the decentralizing trend in design. France and Spain have carried on growing in significance at the expense of Italy, with the establishment of more and more new manufacturers and distributors, while Japan in particular has enjoyed a sudden burst of attention from major companies in Italy and from the critics in France, Britain, Italy and America. There are signs on the Italian scene of an over-harvesting, recalling the fate that overtook the Scandinavians in the 1950s when, in the face of the persisting demand for their designs, some leading designers simply ran out of new things to say.

Stylistically furniture is cooler and simpler, relying more often on the tactile qualities of materials and ingenuity in operation than on applied decoration or ornament. There is a renewed interest in exploring the basic formal archetypes – the chair, the club armchair and so on – rather than in over-elaborate exercises in symbolism or inventing completely new forms. If anything, furniture design has become more accessible and popular, after the serious intellectualism of some of the Italians. As in furniture, lighting designers have in some cases returned to the classics and attempted to update them rather than starting from scratch. The increasing involvement of architects in the design of simple tableware continues to be another noteworthy phenomenon.

Peter Smithson once wrote that in the twentieth century the ultimate test of architectural genius had become the ability or otherwise to design a completely convincing chair. But while architects such as Norman Foster, Mario Botta, Oscar Tusquets and many others have continued to design furniture, for some the focus of attention has shifted towards more frankly decorative household objects. The designer signature now appearing even on such apparently mundane items as teapots and cutlery has ensured that considerable attention must now be lavished on them too.

The most far-reaching technical innovations are, not surprisingly, in the field of product design. Miniaturization has continued, as has the growing tendency of artefacts originally produced as office equipment to become

domesticated as costs have fallen – a phenomenon which ten years ago overtook portable calculators and telephone-answering machines and is now beginning to happen to telefax transmitters. In the process the distinct visual identities of domestic and office products have become blurred: domestic TV sets are now styled by Sony to look like professional studio monitors, while word processors intended for office use are beginning to incorporate frankly decorative features.

It is in product design that one gets the earliest warning of shifting ways of living. Microwaves and ever smaller pieces of kitchen equipment, for example, point to a loosening of the tie of the traditional kitchen. For more and more people meals are taken outside the home or else involve less and less preparation. At the same time there is a lesser but perhaps equally significant trend among consumers towards treating cooking as a recreational activity, a tendency that is recognized in Alessi's new range of gourmet cookware designed by Richard Sapper (plates 330–332).

However, the furniture designers and architects remain the most influential group in the development of imagery for products. It has taken even Zanussi, one of the most impressive firms in design terms in the household appliances market, until now to catch up with the ideas of the post-modernist architects of the 1970s – witness their *Wizard's Collection* of refrigerators (plate 466).

In every area, design is becoming an increasingly important force, recognized as such by governments and manufacturers. As industrialization makes products more and more alike, it is designers who fulfil the crucial role of providing them with differences that will appeal to the consumer. It is not just the traditional design-conscious companies in furniture and lighting who are now using design: consumer-electronics firms and even mass-market retailers too are assuming a greater responsibility for determining the shape of what the consumer sees on the shop shelves ■

DEYAN SUDJIC

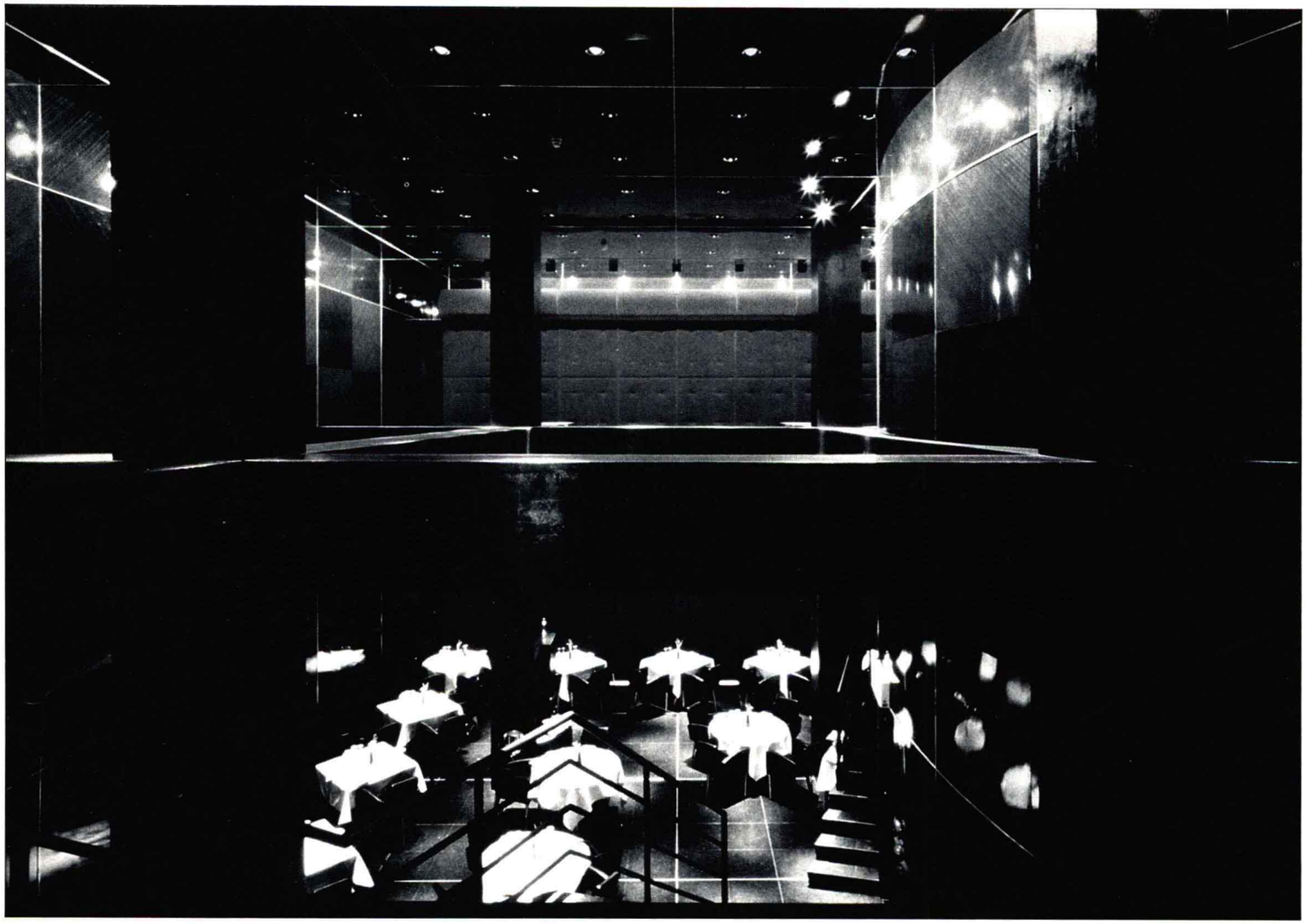
THE NEW MODERN DESIGN

This book tries to provide both a point of view, giving prominence to what I find are interesting pieces of useful, modern design, and also a record of the most significant pieces of design of all tendencies. It is fascinating how much stimulating current work there is, and how open the possibilities are for aspiring designers. The old rules have gone, and for the moment at least we are in a situation where innovative ideas from anywhere have an equal chance of being heard. The Italians no longer have things all their own way, and it is possible to see other countries developing their own approaches to design. That is why I have tried to include in the Yearbook as many pieces as possible, although the weight of coverage in each section is biased towards the work that we believe meets our criteria of excellence most exactly.

Of course there are shortcomings in any book like this, no matter how rich the scope of its contents. It would have been nice to have been able to include a price for each piece, to allow judgment of quality against that most searching of tests; but of course the delays between product launches and publication, along with currency fluctuations in different countries, make that impossible. I have given pride of place to those pieces which I see as having something to say, whether it is through technical ingenuity in the way that they work or, just occasionally, because of their wit.

One can divide design at this moment in the 1980s into two broad schools. At one extreme there are what could be called the Baroque pieces: designs such as those of Tom Dixon, Ron Arad and others which are flamboyant in form, eclectic in imagery and defiantly unfunctional. At the other end of the spectrum is the sleek, neo-modern functionalism of Bellini, Sapper and so on. Currently both coexist, in part because there is no longer a dominance of the design world by any one nationality.

For myself – and I must offer my apologies for being so immodest as to include various designs of my own in my selection – I have to make it clear that my cultural background is not really French. It is the product of a childhood colonized by dreams of America. Even my father came under these same influences: he spent his life designing aircraft, and was Americanized enough to wear a stetson. And it is perhaps that American influence



The Restaurant Manin in Tokyo,
designed by Starck

Pratfall, Starck's three-legged chair from the Café Costes

that has shaped my work, to the extent that I proceed instinctively and, above all, fast.

As a designer I am not a theorist; I prefer to be called a man of action. But I am not against theory, and I do believe that designers have responsibilities to themselves and to the people who use their work. That is certainly the viewpoint that I have adopted in selecting designs for this book. I believe in modern, functional design, and for me that is usually determined by industrial design rather than by ideas about furniture. It is the industrial designers who have to get to grips with technology and innovation first, and that is why it is so important. Usually the car and aircraft designers innovate and the furniture designers follow them, drawing on their work both for visual inspiration and for technological know-how.

Certainly I see my own design in functional terms. For the Café Costes for example, I could go through every detail and explain why it is the way it is, strictly functionally: from the three-legged chairs which make life easier for the waiters because there is less to trip over, to the apparently wilful details of the staircase. This is a new kind of functionalism, of course; it is the product of the present, and in particular of our viewpoint now that Roland Barthes has demystified the way that consumer society treats its objects. Nevertheless, to me good design has to be functional. A doctor is there to cure you, a politician is meant to run the country, and a designer's whole *raison d'être* is to be of service. It is impossible to have a serious career as a designer unless you can help people in one way or another.

But one cannot be narrow in defining functionalism. Design is to do, in one sense, with creating objects that give pleasure; it can also be an educational act, since an object can have the power to make people's lives better. It is absolutely necessary that objects 'talk'. Barthes' message was that our possessions can carry a range of meanings that amounts to a language, and for an object to carry the appropriate meaning is certainly part of its function. There are for example insecure people who need the kind of obvious reassurances about status and comfort that a chair can give. In the same way that clothes can work as flags, signalling the allegiances of their owner to a particular class or group, so a chair can be essentially a flag. That is how I saw my *Richard III* armchair.