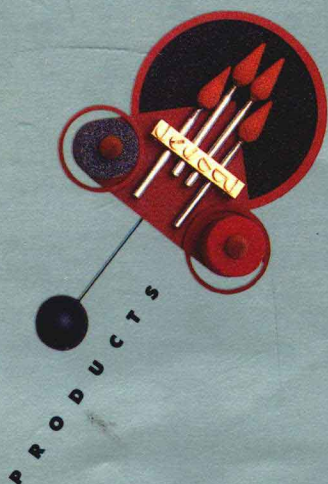
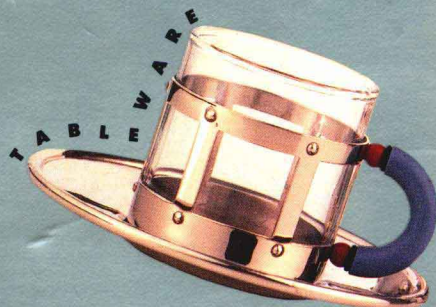
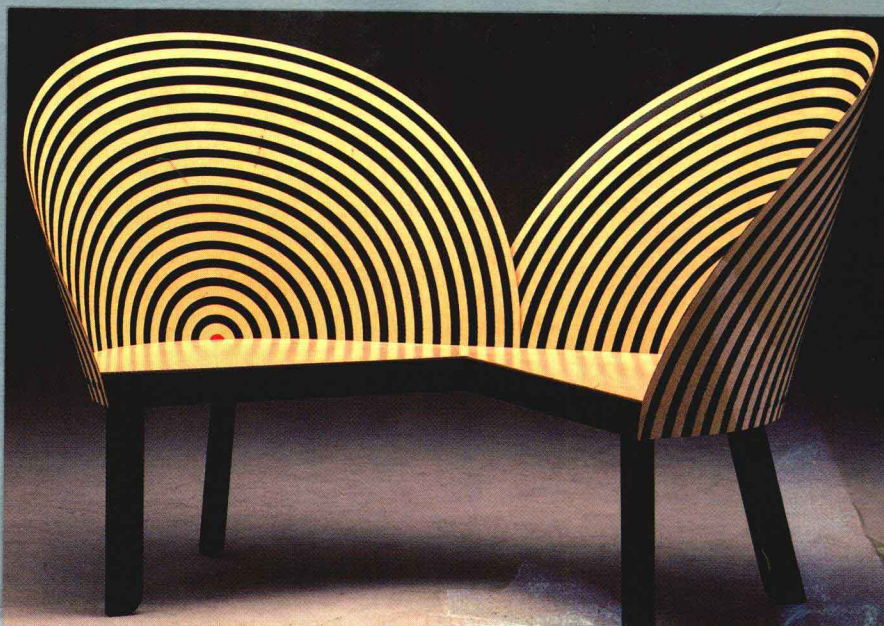


THE
**INTERNATIONAL
DESIGN
YEARBOOK**
1990/91 EDITED BY MARIO BELLINI

TEXTILES



FURNITURE



GENERAL EDITOR NONIE NIESEWAND

THE
INTERNATIONAL
DESIGN
YEARBOOK

1990 / 91

EDITOR
MARIO BELLINI

GENERAL EDITOR
NONIE NIESEWAND



THAMES AND HUDSON



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by Thames and Hudson Ltd, London

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MARIO BELLINI

GENERAL EDITOR

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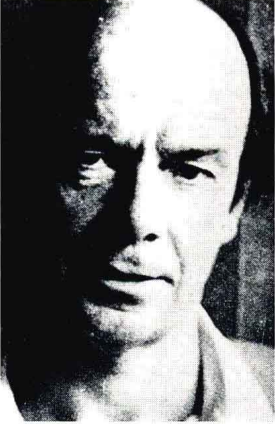
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FOREWORD

Mario Bellini



For over thirty years I have written and argued against the jargonistic abuse of the word "design", against its use as a euphemism for a hypothetical, specialist, autonomous art, supposedly formed, during modernism, as a consequence of the industrial revolution. Now, a trifle paradoxically, here I am engaged in

selecting from many thousands of illustrations some five hundred or so to represent prototypes, products and works for this sixth international "design" yearbook.

Fortunately, these yearbooks do not pose particular problems of terminology or discipline. With British pragmatism, the editors have always gathered (under the tolerant and slightly leaky umbrella of "design") a balanced mix of furniture, lighting, tableware and textiles, with a small group of industrial products, all limited to domestic use. Furthermore, despite the different kinds of commitment from the various Guest Editors and their diverse personal viewpoints, at first glance the

result is surprisingly homogeneous. The books therefore constitute an extraordinary document of comparison and knowledge of their respective periods and of the complex trends of continuity, evolution, decline and innovation usually seen only over a long period of time.

The five categories in this book wisely ignore any concern about the existence and nature of "design" itself, and therefore root themselves in the domestic scene, in the dimension of home living. Here, they study and interpret the objects' forms, independent of any improbable and abstract methodological unity, and any classification by type or production process. This may be interpreted as an implicit and healthy refusal to acknowledge design as an autonomous art, specifically and historically connoted. But I believe it is of interest – at least in the context of this Foreword – to analyse more critically the disquieting questions raised by this premise, even if we arrive at the same conclusion. This applies even if it is still the banner (or perhaps the limp flag) of many schools, associations, congresses and confused avowals of faith. These disturbing but illuminating questions concern the relationship and conflict between design and industrial design, craftsmanship and industry, design as an art and the art of design, the design of furniture and the design of machines, and between decoration and production.

Four years ago, when I became the editor of *Domus*, I wrote my first editorial in which – encouraged by a long and wide experience as a designer and an architect and guided by an intuition of which I am ever more convinced – I placed in a non-academic perspective those themes which, since its foundation, have always been the difficult and intriguing components of that glorious publication:

"The house of man – that is, architecture and more than just architecture alone

— is encompassed in this risky subtitle of that early postwar *Domus* (edited by Ernesto Rogers in 1946). This will be the unifying dimension of the new review. Gone is the naive hypothesis that industrial design will overtake architecture. Our objective will be to combine furniture design with the culture of interiors and to return interior design to its architectural context. We will try to show industrial design as part of the materialistic culture of which it is the expression, in the context of the environmental and anthropological scheme to which it belongs, just as architecture belongs in the context of the city or the area where it was born and in which it breathes...”

I must confess that it has not been easy, and sometimes even embarrassing, to follow up those words with selections and facts. Nevertheless, they have reinforced my obsessive and continual questioning of the crucial relationship between architecture, furniture, machines, art, technology, tradition, the modern and the contemporary.

In the effort to make objects suitable for the manufacturing processes, industrial design is still liable to lose contact with its main reference point. This is the place of living, the central point around which the culture of the inhabitant is expressed and measured by his furnishings, objects and machines. In its turn, the domestic product, because of its tendency to isolation, risks mistaking the construction of the place for the design of a myth. In other words, it betrays its purpose, being incapable of evaluating and meeting the inevitable challenges of the industrial era, a civilization perhaps still barbaric but which exudes an irreversible vitality.

The industrial revolution began only two centuries ago and is still in progress, although we ought already to consider ourselves to be in the post-industrial era. In the field of architecture and design, the so-called Modern Movement has been only a partial earthquake, the recording of an initial tremor, a still hopeful and ambitious reaction to that revolution. But it was of great poetic value, producing mainly linguistic experiments and metaphorical contributions of the highest order.

In fact, industrial technologies, at least in architecture and furniture, are not only not yet fully developed, but have not yet shown their superiority. Frequently, they are an obvious hindrance, and even foreign to the consolidated semantic systems of our culture of home living. Technologico-functional considerations by themselves have proved to be insufficient to support an effective and meaningful design for interiors and furniture. This is substantially true also of machines, despite the vast differences which distinguish them from pieces of furniture.

Machines have a short history and often often shaken by continual technological evolutions and revolutions. Their more ephemeral image is often liable to be juxtaposed with their functional value. Furniture, on the other hand, and with it tools and non-mechanical equipment, has a thousand-year-old history. Its image, though subject to continual stylistic revision, cannot be ambiguously split into mechanism and exterior form, and is therefore much more

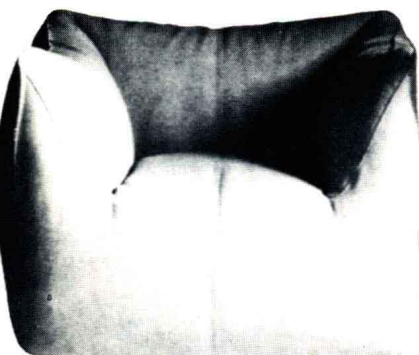


MARIO BELLINI
Imago office chair for
Vitra, 1984



MARIO BELLINI
Cupola coffee service for
Rosenthal, 1987

sharply defined and proven. It is profoundly connected with semantic values that have left their traces in it – values of the sacred, of body shape, of rites and meanings bound up with function.



MARIO BELLINI

Le Bambole armchair for
B & B, 1972

It is here that one can recognize the ineluctable difference of the machine – the “mechanism” as original sin, and the “casing” as the pathetic mask of an industrial civilization which does not yet appear to have found its own authentic form of expression. Only old tools, and furniture in general, have the privilege of integrity, of being entirely and solely that which can be seen, touched and understood.

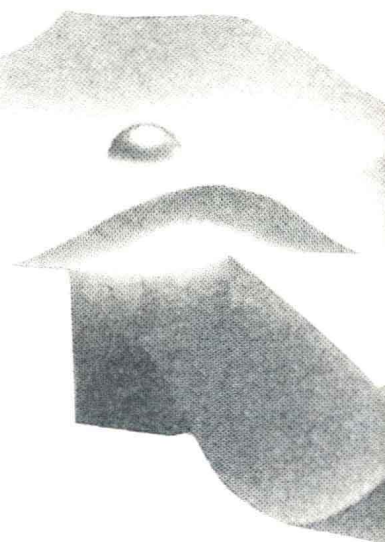
Think how simple and even commonplace is the design of a whisking machine or a household appliance – by this I mean the external casing.

This popular student exercise can be compared with the design of cutlery or of chairs, which is so direct, so ancient and so difficult – authentic *pièces de résistance* reserved for the great masters of design.

I myself have always liked to think that the most difficult thing in the world to design is the chair. In fact, we can say that the chair has descended from another chair, and another chair before that . . . from a slow process of definition through time, of infinite experiences of living and of building. The chair predates even the cultural choice of sitting above, rather than on, the level of the ground, or on one's heels. But no designer invented “the chair”, just as no architect invented “the house”.

Machines, furnishings and buildings belong to design groups which originated in remote eras, each far apart from the other, whether thousands or hundreds of years, or just decades, ago. They evolve at different speeds – cars have changed more in the last fifty years than houses have in the last two thousand. This produces goods which differ greatly in durability and usefulness. It is no coincidence that there are no major industrial manufacturers of furniture comparable to those of cars, and yet there is no real technological reason why there should not be, except for a few thousand years of history. If the needs of the motorist can be satisfied with a few models divided according to class, speed, capacity, prestige, cost, etc., the needs of the home dweller are too complex. They defy any classification, following laws and criteria of a different dimension. Against this mighty barrier, the self-assured illusions of standardization and mass production have been shattered. The mass-produced item has conquered the office, and attacked the kitchen, but left the bedroom and the sitting room undefiled.

As travellers, we first sacrificed the fascination of the old carriages, and then the vintage cars, forfeiting plush materials, décor and typologies in order to reap the advantages of price, popularity and performance brought by extreme industrialization. But as home dwellers we have put up a stiffer resistance. We have not been so ready to renounce the pleasures of fine, natural and traditional



MARIO BELLINI

Area lamps for Artemide,
1974

materials. We have not given up the infinite variety of designs and decoration. We have remained relatively indifferent to the temptations of new performance levels and to the logic of "progress" in general.

The recent history of modern furniture, which began less than a hundred years ago, ought to have signalled an irreversible turning-point, the expression of an age of rapid transformation under the impetus of mass production and mass culture. But the myth of giving form to the industrial product dissolved before mass production could have any decisive or lasting effect on furniture design. In this respect, the metaphorical theories advanced by the heroic avant gardes of the Twenties and Thirties were never developed or verified. Contrary to the principles which generated them, they have been reabsorbed into the mainstream of history and have become cult objects or models that can be reproduced regardless of their historical and technical roots – the significant expression of the style of their time, the "modern style".

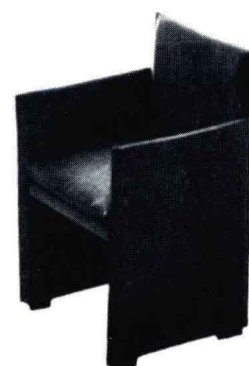
In pre-industrial times "knowledge", and in this case the knowledge of how to create and to build, was passed down by a continuity of tradition, nourished and renewed by the unstoppable flow and corroboration of experience. The Modern Movement suddenly interrupted all this by dogmatically presuming to establish a new idiom, severing links with tradition and theorizing on new technologies which did not meet the industrial reality. But it also had visions of a new culture of living, unmatched by a correspondingly new society, and of a new city which was abstract compared to its organic growth capacities. Thus it dragged architects and builders into a hazardous, though exhilarating, leap into the dark.

The theory and practice of architecture and interior design still suffer from that wrench right up to this day. The separation of the organic correspondence between a common syntax and reciprocal, proven methods of construction and production has left the architect and designer to stand alone against the undefined and independent systems of all possible languages and techniques. Perhaps this lack of what would in any case still be a very difficult beginning of a decisive industrial breakthrough in the architectural and "domestic" scene is actually responsible for the extraordinary vitality of architects and designers today. While it explains the frequent loss of quality and reliability, it prolongs the expectation of infinite possibilities.

Bramante and Borromini never designed any chairs, and did not feel the need to do so. A host of craftsmen-creators continued to supply grand houses and palaces with the right chairs, Renaissance or Baroque, according to the requirements of the time. This lasted until less than a hundred years ago, when the architects felt they could no longer count on the craftsmen class which was weakened and disoriented. The architects themselves, with their new ideas, together with the advent of new industries, had contributed to this problem, but they then decided almost unanimously to deal with the matter directly themselves.

MARIO BELLINI

*Break dining chair for
Cassina, 1976*



Since then, nearly every single architect of note has continued to design “his” chairs, lavishing on this activity the same talent he would dedicate to his architecture, and in some cases attaining extraordinary results destined to bear witness to an epoch. But the scarcity of such successes, compared with the relatively larger number of major architectural achievements by any one architect, reveals the mounting difficulty encountered in this practice, especially since decoration has offered less of a pretext for variations or linguistic digressions.

The limits, liabilities and values of aesthetics such as those of Ungers, Botta, Meier, Venturi and Rossi are today a little more understandable, perhaps thanks to the chairs which, generously, they have begun to design again. Architects have turned their attention once more to this formidably daunting art, taking on a challenging task that in the past has brought more than one master to his knees, and throwing into crisis the optimistic prospect of self-sufficiency for industrial design. Suffice it to say that whereas for centuries it has been considered normal to base the teaching of architecture partially on its history, design schools (including, alas, the architectural schools from which the best furniture designers have come) have not generally felt the need to teach the extremely rich history of furniture. This unjustifiable sense of ideological superiority (or should it be inferiority?) has led to a notable impoverishment of the design panorama in this sector.

The society we live in must be very disturbed if there are still producers of “real” chairs – made to be used, to sit on – who may be unaware of the irreversible transformation that has succeeded the extinction of a thousand-year-old craft tradition. They passively continue with their products, ignoring the crucial contribution made by a constant design analysis. And more and more designers, maybe unconsciously, are driven by the need to atone, and go on hyper-designing “unreal” chairs with the complicity of manufacturers who are prepared to pay the tribute of a few pieces, lavishly got up, which have no logic of use or of manufacture. This is a disturbed society, mirrored in an industrial culture at times coarse and aggressive, often cynical and fragmentary.

I have already affirmed that, to all effects, “design” can be a form of art in the sense that, like architecture, it is at its best the profound testimony of a civilization. But between a chair by Le Corbusier and a chair by Oldenburg there is a fundamental difference. The chair by Oldenburg is a sculpture that represents a chair; the chair by Le Corbusier *is* a chair, and to cease to be one it would have to be signed by Duchamp and put on a pedestal like the celebrated Bottle-rack.

Naturally, there is nothing to prevent someone from sitting on a sculpture, or a designer playing the artist from having a chair-work put into “production”. To try



MARIO BELLINI
ET 111 electronic
typewriter for Olivetti, 1983



MARIO BELLINI
Divisumma 18 electronic
calculator for Olivetti,
1972

to establish frontiers as to what is or is not art can be risky, but it is even more risky to try to extend "resistance to purpose" (as in the design of a chair, for example) beyond breaking point. This would precipitate us into a waste land of "linguistic research" or autobiographical rhetoric.

In an era when already too much is said about "design" and there is too much nonchalant toying with such an equivocal term, it is still worth remembering that it has no meaning if it is isolated from its natural context, the wide-ranging culture of making, manufacturing, using and living. (Recently, an interviewer asked me how one distinguished between a designer coffee-pot and a normal one.) Far from representing a discipline, design cannot even aspire to represent the style of our times; to do so, it would sadly have to be reduced to just one of many possible styles (as indeed is suggested by the revealing question about the coffee-pot).

It would be interesting to understand what drives designers, manufacturers and others to indulge in these sterile dissipations. Often modest, they mortify both art and technology without enriching our undoubted desire to dream and to fantasize. One suspects they just conceal boredom, cynicism and contempt: boredom with the lengthy task entailed in tenacious and scrupulous research; cynicism about our creative potential which can be enriched by today's technologies, and contempt for the intelligence of all of us, consumers and home dwellers.

Where furniture is concerned (but this is also true of household goods, utensils and the new field of machines), the conversion from handcraft to industrial techniques brought important, traumatic changes. The creator-builder, who for centuries built up a craft knowledge with which he nourished the incessant changes in style and typology (and vice versa), began to die out. Construction techniques became manufacturing techniques and a new character, the industrial designer, came to the fore. He was not allowed to practise the new techniques, which became increasingly foreign to him, but from this time on he was expected to control them through the meta-technical aspects of the project. He had to work out a new technique, that of "design", because he needed to find a way in which he could be creative while being separated from the making process.

Freed from the slavery of traditional technique, but also from the fertile dialectic clash sustained with it for thousands of years, the architect and the designer see their creative principles put to a severe test. They have already been shaken by technicalist and functionalist misunderstandings with which in vain they attempted to shirk the responsibility of a language which, now more than ever, architects, designers and artists are called upon to assume. It must be remembered that the strengthening of new production, or rather reproduction, techniques has not necessarily widened the creative horizons. One need only

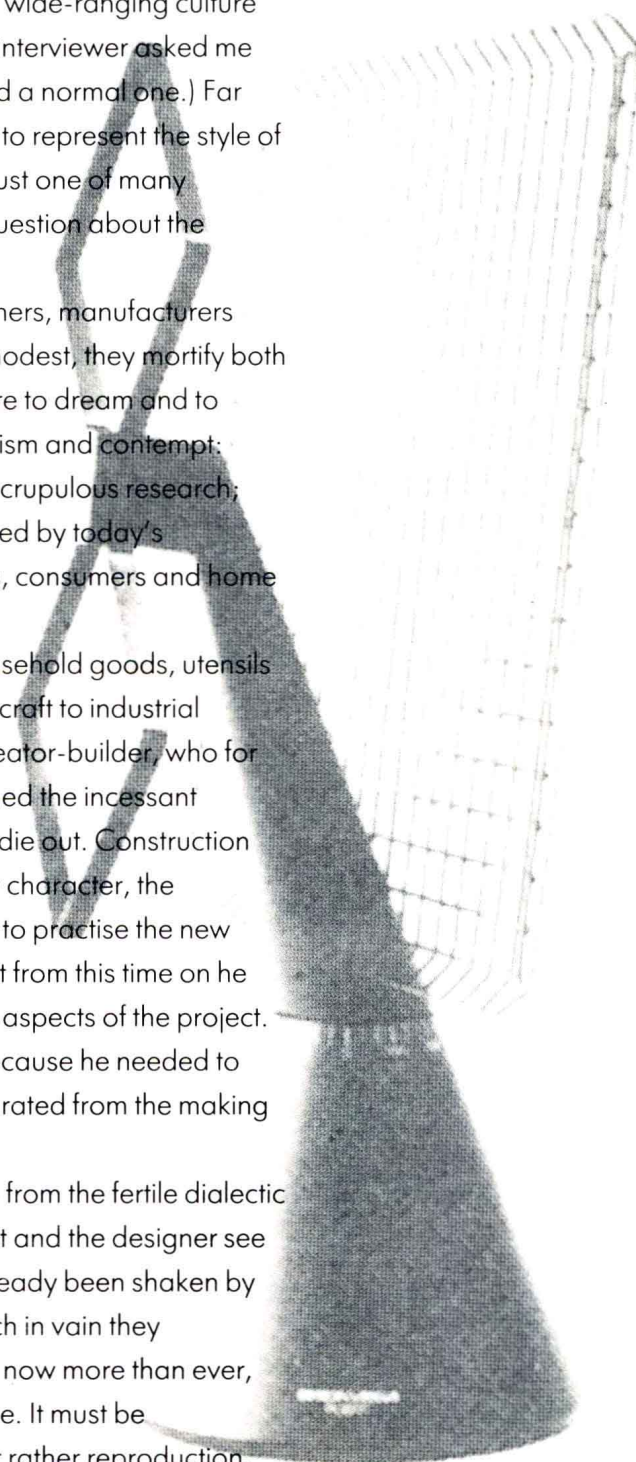
MARIO BELLINI

*Robot rotating aerial for
Brionvega, 1980*



MARIO BELLINI

*Mindeca thermos flask
for Zojirushi, 1983*



compare the infinite wealth of typologies and idiomatic variations of pre-industrial chairs with the lean, at times dull, panorama of post-craft “modern”. Even in some of its better examples, such as the tubular metal models of the Twenties, it had to make do with metaphoric depictions of a new technique which it did not yet in reality possess, or had only imagined. And then it had to construct them in a substantially artisan way. This is without considering the disorientation provoked by the reverse possibility – organizing on an industrial scale the production of models originally conceived in artisan conditions – which has proved to be increasingly and perversely practicable.

The industrial revolution was also a great market revolution. It substantially upset the delicate balance that had existed between individuals and furnishings, household goods, implements, even homes and cities, by abruptly inundating our environment with machines and electronic equipment. A new concept of goods and forced consumerism overturned the old structure of buying as need dictated. But on top of all this the industrial revolution was also a large-scale revolution in design, not only because design had to be brought to machines and a form had to be given to electronic phantoms, but above all because since then, a time when designing was still considered creating, the conditions surrounding the design of products with an ancient history and a tradition have completely changed.

The rapid modernization of production methods has interrupted the continuity between making and thinking. The artisan-creator had to give way to the new class of pure designers, who found themselves confronted by a blank sheet of paper, just as their older colleagues the architects did some thousands of years ago when they took over from the builders of huts. They discovered, as many have yet to do, that it is more difficult to take the place of a jeweller, a potter, a cabinet-maker, an upholsterer or a tailor (crafts which have not yet quite vanished) than it is to give form and decoration (and unfortunately only rarely any meaning) to machines, which are the newcomers of our industrial civilization. This is the drama of the modern designer: liberated from the necessity of producing, he can feel like God. But in the depths of his reasoning, when deprived of the light and the experience of actually making, he can generate monsters.

His pencil – swifter and more powerful than chisel, saw, pickaxe, graver’s tool, scissors, needle, trowel or any machine – can design anything, and thus transform the world. This is a privilege whose origins are to be found with the architects of the Pharaohs. But progressive isolation, together with the strengthening of the architect’s and the designer’s faculties in the industrial era, has enormously increased the responsibilities. It is not by chance that the architects (the oldest skilled “modern” designers of history) bore the brunt of the

MARIO BELLINI
ETP 55 electronic
typewriter for Olivetti,
1985-6



MARIO BELLINI
Cab chair for Cassina,
1976



industrial revolution. They answered the call a century ago and sustain the weight of it still, as is shown by the recent history of design, and particularly the important Italian chapter. If this has helped to mask or subdue the ideological failure of the modern avant garde, whose generous illusions have faded in little more than two generations, it is not an excuse to neglect or underrate the importance of unresolved questions and lingering open wounds.

The critical debate and the challenge posed to architecture, design and perhaps to art more generally, reside in the gap between contemporaneity and modernity, a gap which, though in some cases still marginal, may in others appear almost unbridgeable. The term "contemporary", without necessarily implying value judgements, refers to the purely chronological congruence of an event or work with its time, and hence to an intrinsically transitory condition, subject to continual change. On the other hand, "modern", or rather the idea of modern, while at times mistaken for contemporary, bears an indelible historical imprint and an ideological force than can be traced to that imprint. It is a concept which can be evaluated according to a given frame of reference, but which is also dynamic and susceptible to reincarnations in the present time.

Now that historical modern has ceased to be a contemporary phenomenon, it is evident that the sole fact of being contemporary, without any artistic or design objective and unsupported by any parallel ideological or moral tension, is insufficient to guarantee works which, besides belonging to their period, must also have significance and be able to represent it. And if our times can still be defined as modern, our works must also, in a sense, be modern works.

Some architects and designers continue uncritically and scrupulously reproducing "modern architecture and design" in order to feel contemporary. For the same reason others have felt the need to oppose it, taking refuge in creating alternative languages and theories. Still others question themselves, even through their work, on how to be and remain modern and not just contemporary. It is impossible to continue innocently in the historical modern experience, which is irremediably dated, though surely not yet exhausted.

So, one will have to keep using the modern when grappling with contemporary challenges, even in its new form as a dialectical balance between the need for, and the denial of, its roots and a plausible ideological tension. It is a modern now far removed from its ingenuous avant-garde beginnings. Nevertheless, it has become an inevitable and irreversible dimension, indispensable to understanding and designing in these unruly and uncertain times.

ABBREVIATIONS

Apart from H (height), L (length), W (width), D (depth) and Di (diameter), the following abbreviations are used in the book:
 ABS acrylo-butyl styrene
 LCD liquid crystal display
 MDF medium-density fibreboard

MARIO BELLINI

Forum table for Vitra,
 1986

