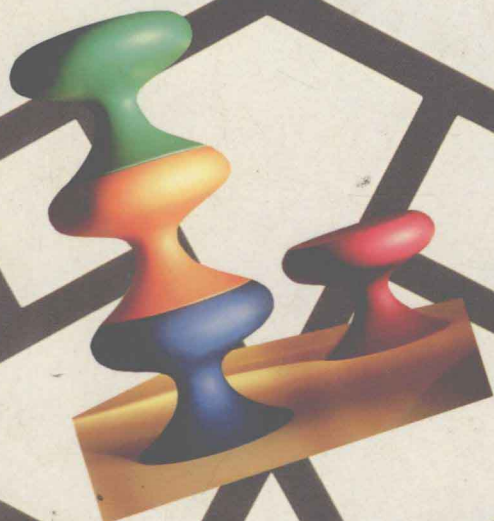




THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN YEARBOOK



EDITED BY BOŘEK ŠÍPEK

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INTERNATIONAL
DESIGN
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EDITOR

BOŘEK ŠÍPEK

GENERAL EDITOR

RICK POYNOR

ASSISTANT EDITOR

JENNIFER HUDSON

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INTRODUCTION



Dinner service,
Albertine
(porcelain),
manufactured by
Driade in 1989.

RIGHT:
Chair, **Leonora**
(cherrywood,
polyurethane,
leather),
manufactured by
Aleph-Driade in
1991.

In previous editions of the *International Design Yearbook*, it has been the tradition for guest editors to set down their impressions of the work they have seen in the form of a foreword, and the results have ranged from the brief and pointed to the discursive and analytical. This year, given the personal style and preference of the guest editor, Bořek Šípek, it was decided that an interview would be the most appropriate way to analyse the work he had sifted through and selected, and to examine the light it casts on current trends in design. Where previous guest editors have sometimes deliberated at great length before consigning a design to the out-tray, or more occasionally the in-tray, Bořek Šípek was at all times focused and decisive, and offered firm opinions on the sequence in which the designs should be displayed – a framework broadly followed by the book. Rick Poyner spoke to Bořek Šípek after the selection meeting, at his studio in Amsterdam. (The illustrations all show designs by Bořek Šípek.)

Do you think that the selection of material you looked at was fairly typical of what is happening now in design?

I think it was very typical and I was a little bit disappointed that there was no sign of a new approach. But if you look at what is happening now in theatre, in fashion and in other areas of culture, everything is becoming simpler in a formal sense. It is more important now to find the substance of the thing.

Why do you think this is? What has caused the change?

Maybe one of the reasons is the recession, but I don't think that's the main reason. In the last ten or fifteen years, style went as far as it could go. It was starting to become exhausting, crazy even. Everything was

possible, so nothing was shocking any more. There was nothing in this selection that shocked me, or even particularly surprised me. I think people have become a little bit tired of the sameness of recent design. In the 1980s, we were in a similar position to the Victorians at the end of the nineteenth century; people were piling ornament on top of ornament for its own sake. In my own work I am trying to be more serious and to use fewer ornaments. I like ornament, but I have always needed a reason to use it. Now I need two, three or more reasons. They might be functional, practical, tactile, aesthetic, symbolic, technological or mythological. A designer has to find new goals, new horizons, and for me the aim now is to achieve the same intensity of effect, the same emotion, but with less detail and fewer materials.

And these are the qualities you were looking for as you made your selection?

Yes. I chose very quickly, because if you look for a long time you find reasons why something is good or bad. What is important to me is the visionary image of an object – a kind of emotion at first sight – and this influenced the way I made my choice.

But you also said at one point in the selection meeting that if you had really followed your true taste, there would only have been twenty things in the book.

Yes, but that doesn't mean anything. My taste is only important to me. As an architect and designer you have to be very tolerant towards everything and everybody. There is no mathematical certainty in art, so all you can do is look for some special connection in a design with the culture and society it represents. Other people can work in ways quite different to your own. I think only very bad architects and designers assume that what they produce is the best.



But I am still left with the sense that the pieces you were most inclined to pick were by people whose work has the same emotional flourish as your own – people such as your colleague at Alterego, David Palterer. There is a clear kinship between your work and his.

Perhaps it is because I know these people personally and I know the way that they work. David Palterer has his own way of doing things and I don't always agree, but this is what I mean when I say that I accept what other designers are doing, if they are going about it in a clear, decisive way.

What do you mean when you talk about the “mythological” qualities of a piece of design?

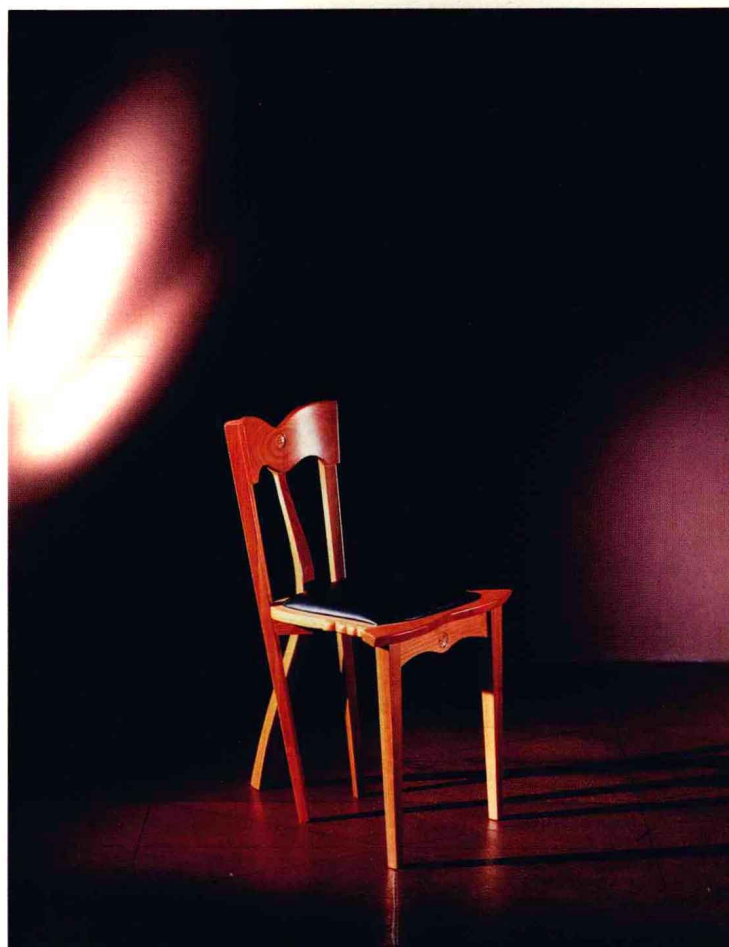
What this means to me is that you are able to find something which is part of contemporary culture almost without your knowing it, something which embodies or summarizes the essence of life in our society at this point. When I also talk about emotion or eroticism it is because these are qualities that we are in danger of losing in our technological society. When you work with computers, for instance, everything comes from the head, from the brain. Years ago, when someone asked me to define my creative motivation, I stated, “I want a return to the Baroque”. I was falsely interpreted, sadly, as proposing to use Baroque as a post-modern source of inspiration, but what I really meant to imply at the time was a release into a freer life style, a chance to shake off the “truth of functionalism” and its technical achievements in favour of individual feelings.

Is that also your objection to high tech – that it comes purely “from the head”?



*The Daybreak
coffee shop,
Amsterdam (1989).*

Dora (cherrywood, polyurethane, leather), manufactured by Aleph-Driade in 1991.



The problem with high tech is that it claims to be functional, but it is not really functional at all. In fact, it is a style which ignores function and disregards human individuality. All it really does is demonstrate a level of technical achievement. A chair with a single tube for a backrest just ends up breaking your back. The only justification for such a coldly formalist style is fashion. For me *comfort* is the most important function of furniture. I believe the apologists of high tech were mistaken, but I can't say that high tech was absolutely wrong. Perhaps we should think of it as a necessary experiment whose day has now passed.

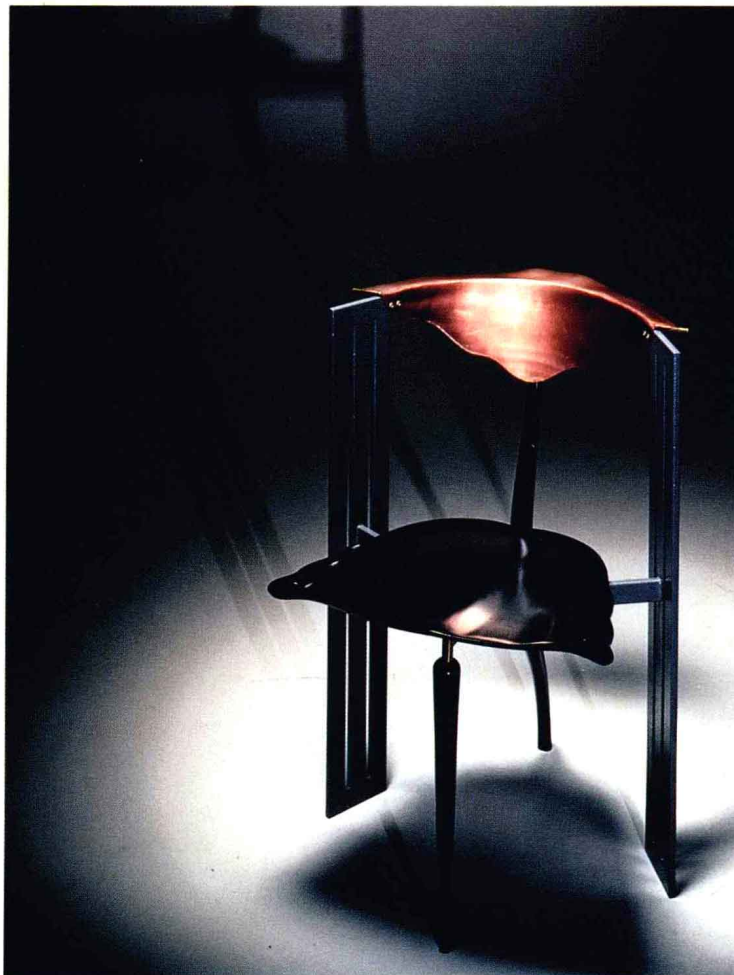
Do you think your own work has managed to escape this trap of fashion? You have been written about in the same magazines and in the same terms as Starck and all the other "star" designers.

I don't think that designing should be an anonymous process, because the designer's personality is an aspect of the mythology of the object. We don't need stars, but we do need identifiable personalities. I did not want to become a star and I was not even looking for success. I just did what interested me and found that people wanted to publish it in magazines. As a result my work became fashionable, but this was never my intention. I will continue to look for new ideas, regardless of fashionable opinion. What I want to do is to make things that people will love. If you stay true to your own vision, you win respect. Look at Sottsass. He is now in his late seventies, but he has maintained his position in the vanguard by his constant progressiveness. Starck, too, remains true to his vision, but this is not static – his style continues to evolve.

When you were sifting through the product designs, you seemed impatient with much of the work. What were you looking for – a more ornamental approach?

Perhaps I am being over critical, but for me too many of these products make us completely stupid. You just push the button of the camera or radio and everything is done for you. In a car radio, preset buttons are a worthwhile development because you should be giving your attention to driving and not to adjusting the radio. But at home you are not faced with the same problem; there is time to look at the radio, to think about it, and touch it. I remember when I was a small child in Prague. I had never been abroad, but I knew all the capital cities of the world because they were printed on the radio and I would read them as I searched for the station I wanted, using my eyes and hand. Perhaps children today experience something comparable with their computers – I don't know – but I have a strong sense that in the rush to streamline

Ota Otanek (wood,
metal, copper),
manufactured by
Vitra in 1988.



experience and make the technology do all the work for us, some extra vital dimension has been lost. I think we need a stronger relationship to the instruments we use, and a much greater regard for the importance of the tactile environment, if we are not going to lose the sense of ourselves as physical beings.

You selected a couple of interesting experiments in TV and video monitor design from Sharp, pieces with a very strong "image". Is this the kind of expressive product design you prefer?

I think these are a new development. They show what *could* happen. I think that what Philips and the Japanese are doing, this kind of technical design, is all right, but it has nothing to do with culture. Their television sets are not pieces of furniture, they are simply there in the room with you.

You look at the programmes the television transmits, but not at the machine itself. The television's shell is a kind of packaging. This is fine, but I don't think it belongs in the *International Design Yearbook*, which should offer a cultural portrait of the moment.

What are the priorities for designers now?

I don't know. I'm not really interested in the future. What concerns me is that design risks losing contact with ordinary people. We saw it in the 1980s, especially in high tech, where the main concern was formal beauty and the designers forgot that their objects are made for people to use. In fact, 99 per cent of what we do as designers is unnecessary. The world does not actually need any new chairs – there are quite enough marvellous designs already. The only real justification for the designer to create another chair is if he treats it like a work of art and uses it to express or interpret the culture of the moment. Too many designers take themselves too seriously and fool themselves into thinking that their designs can somehow save the world. They imagine that their task is to come up with something that completely shatters the mould. They think that design is a kind of research. But you cannot, in any fundamental sense, reinvent the chair. It will remain forevermore a raised surface for sitting on which offers the sitter at least a degree of extra support. So the impetus for new designs comes from changes in culture, not from changes in the nature of the chair.

The most significant designs in this edition of the *Yearbook* almost invariably come from well-established names. The young "unknowns" you hoped to find making interesting work seemed quiet this year. How do you account for this?





*Shoebaloo,
Amsterdam (1991).*

At this point it is very difficult for young designers to create something so genuinely unexpected that it stops us in our tracks. Maybe the key issue now, above all others, is one of quality; but it is very difficult to achieve quality when you are young because it comes from experience – the very thing you lack. It has always been much easier for young designers to create something extreme or experimental. In architecture it takes years for people to come into their own, because the discipline is so complicated, not just technically but philosophically. You need to have achieved a state of inner quiet, to be sure about what you think, and this is much more difficult for young people. If you look at the most important architects, there is no one younger than fifty. I think this also holds true for design.

The work that seems most impressive at present, and the most in keeping with the points you made at the beginning of our conversation, is actually the most restrained: people like Antonio Citterio and Jasper Morrison. But I had the impression that you did not particularly like this kind of design – that you did not find it eventful enough.

I've often thought about Jasper Morrison and I like his seriousness very much. For me, though, his pieces are too simple and too similar to designs from the Bauhaus. But perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps he really is someone who could be the father to the new style. I am certainly convinced that we need a quieter period, so that we can discover a new exuberance.

Do we also need a verbal cooling off period? Has there been too much talk about design, when the key issues are, in fact, fairly straightforward?

I don't think that we speak too much about design. If you ask people on the street, they know very little about it. We're a very small society of people.

And is that the way it should be?

Yes, and I think it is designers who need to look out to the world, rather than the world that needs to look into design. We should be better educated in philosophy and the humanities. Philosophy gives you self-awareness and helps you to think through the consequences of your actions. It helps you to see how your work fits into the wider social and cultural picture. I think theatre and literature are also important because they enter society's bloodstream much quicker than design. Designers work five or ten years behind literature, which is much more powerful, more abstract and less dependent on the material world. I also listen to modern music and opera, and I love ballet. I'm much more interested in these things than in art or design. When I was twenty or thirty I went to exhibitions all over Europe and I took in so much information that I'm full to the brim now. It is the narrative quality of these other art forms that interests me, and how I can apply it to my work. Sometimes, though, when you witness the terrible events that happen in the world – the terror in Bosnia, or seeing your friends die from AIDS – it seems impossible to express your reactions through design. Designers can only really work for a positive world and leave the negative things to literature. This is another reason why I think it may be time now for design to speak more gently, to place the emphasis once again on humanism.