

Research on the Influence of Early Italian Pioneer Design Thoughts on Memphis Design*

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Abstract—"Memphis" design as an important turning point in the history of post-modern industrial design has had profound impact on Western post-modern industrial design. However, the creation of the "Memphis" design is not isolated. By returning to the historical context of the creation of Memphis design, this paper deeply analyzes the influence of early Italian pioneering design thoughts on Memphis design, which is of great significance for people to further understand and recognize Memphis design.

Keywords—*Memphis design; early pioneering design; influence research*

I. INTRODUCTION

"Italian Design" emerged as a proper noun for special styles and established a worldwide reputation after 1945. Italians called it "reconstruction" period. In the early post-war period, Italy was deeply influenced by American design, and the impact was two-fold. On the one hand, influenced by the so-called "good design" of functionalist design, the chair of Eames had an impact on Italian furniture design. On the other hand, the commercial design of the United States, especially the streamlined design, had great impact on Italy. The peak of Italian design took place during the "Italian economic miracle". From 1958 to 1963, Italy created a high-grade, new persuasive modern aesthetic perspective that replaced internationally successful Scandinavian style previously. Like Scandinavia, it focused on the culture of the family, but it agreed with "new and modern materials and types" rather than repeating the values of tradition. Contemporary sculpture was used as an aesthetic paradigm. As for the product and art, the mass consumer goods and the Italian aesthetic concept were combined ingeniously to become the material symbol of the international "elegant design".

Two magazines in the 1970s promoted the development of radical design. They were *Casabella* (from 1970 to 1976, edited by Alexander Mondini, and *Casabella* announced the establishment of *Global Tools* in 1973). In the early 1970s,

the Italian radical design movement as a strong cultural member was consolidated, and this period also marked the end of the first radical movement. The characteristics of this era were marked by two important exhibitions. First was an exhibition entitled "Italy: the New Look of Household Products" at the Museum of Modern Art in the United States; and the second was "Assumption design: an example from Italy" held by IDN in Berlin, Germany. Both exhibitions treated radical design as a historical phenomenon rather than an ongoing activity. It was in this historical context that the early pioneer design of Italy and the later "Memphis" design came into being.

II. SUPERSTUDIO

Under the influence of Pop design and post-modern architectural design, the Italian design field was obviously difficult to calm down. In the 1960s, Italy emerged a lot of what was later called "anti-design" and the design group of radical design. The reason why believed that they were anti-design was due to their resistance to the hegemonic position and dull context of modernism and internationalism. Their design types usually spanned architectural design, product design, and furniture design. In the meantime, irony, metaphor, and banter had become the main methods for them to challenge the style of internationalism. They intended to become the vanguard of breaking the rules and leading the trend. Superstudio was one of the representative groups. Founded in 1966, Superstudio was first launched in Florence by two young architects, Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano di Francia. Later, designers and architects such as Piero Frassinelli, Roberto, and Giancarlo Magris joined the team. The activities of Superstudio were mainly concentrated in the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1978, Superstudio were dissolved in a collective work, but their members still expressed their ideals in various ways, either through writing, education, architectural design, or other design methods. The studio first opposed the design and satirized the great destruction of globalization on local culture and the bondage of people by designing a series of furniture with check pattern such as tables, chairs and cabinets. The furniture series *Quaderna* they designed for the Zano brand is still available today.

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These seemingly rectangular blocks of furniture suggest that global design make us live in a huge grid that loses its regional character. All buildings, cities and even furniture and supplies can essentially be deformed from this grid.

Superstudio hoped to intervene in the real society through design and make the society reach the ideal state of fairness and justice. Most of the radical design groups in this period had such a vision. Memphis was also dissatisfied with the Italian mainstream elegant design at that time, which was too powerful and refined. It hoped that the design could pay more attention to the public and be close to the public. Therefore, it used many popular patterns, colors and cheap materials to fight against the elitism of elegant design. In 1967, Natali divided the future buildings into three types, "Monument Architecture", "Image Architecture", "Technical Architecture". In 1969, his representative work "Continuous Monument" came out. He used a borderless grid covering the city and the landscape, meaning replacing the existing structure and creating a rectangular structure of the new environment, where everyone had a neutral space away from material and consumerist pressures. [1] Compared with Superstudio directly putting the critique of the social environment into its own design works, the "Memphis" design also had resistance to its own living environment and ecological culture crisis. However, this crisis and resistance were transferred into more personal emotional expression of the designer. Therefore, it was expressed as a kind of disgusting, metaphorical, ironic personal feelings.

III. "ARCHIZOOM" DESIGN GROUP

Like the Superstudio, Archizoom design group was born in Florence, Italy in 1966. They were influenced by the Italian student movement in the 1960s. The design group was mainly composed of architects and designers, including architects Andrea Branzi, Gilberto Corretti, Paolo de Ganello, Massimo Morozzi, as well as designers Dario Bartolini and Lucia Bartolini. Their designs were mainly influenced by Popper design, including architectural design, product design, and urban landscape design. Their first exhibition was a "megastructure" style work created in conjunction with Superstudio in December 1966. These works were very colorful and bold, with strong Pop features. The most representative is "Superonda Sofa". It was made of vinyl-wrapped polyurethane foam, lightweight, soft and easy to handle. Also, it had a variety of uses. As a lounge chair, it can also be used as a lounge chair or sofa. The "dream beds" and the "Safari Chair" designed in 1967 all maintained their consistent "megastructure" style. The design of "dream beds" borrowed the elements of Art Deco and Pop art style to break Italian mainstream elegant design. As for the "Safari Chair", it mocked orthodox design with its borrowing of leopard print and quirky styling. The "bad taste" became their design strategy to resist modernist design and orthodox design.

The group was dissolved in 1974. The most representative of Archizoom design group was the "Non-stop City" project. The team members made bold imaginations about the future development of the city, without border restrictions and filled with air-conditioning units and artificial lighting everywhere, seeming to fit the image

scenes in pessimistic science fiction. Similar to the Superstudio, the Archizoom design community was also full of strong utopian colors. They hoped that they could convey their different political ideas and had certain influences through design. Therefore, many of their works also stayed at sketch and text level. The Archizoom design community had profound impact on the later Alchimia design and the "Memphis" design. However, unlike Archizoom design mainly referring to the Pop style, Memphis design reference style was more broad and diverse. Compared with the strong Utopia concept of Archizoom design, the "Memphis" design presented its design concept through the actual design works, and the emotional connotation expressed by the designer was also very rich. It was not only the resistance to function and authority. The interestingness of a certain design element often became the reason expressed by designers.

IV. ALCHIMIA STUDIO

Archizoom design mocked elegant design with a "bad taste" design strategy by referring to Pop style. "Alchimia" studio resisted and countered modern design through "destructive" redesign of the classic design. The word "Alchimia" came from the secrets of the middle ages. This technique could turn ordinary things into gold. The source of ideas created by "Achemia" was derived from the "Golden Touch". They became what they called "redesign" by re-decorating daily necessities. "Alchimia" studio was founded in 1976 in Milan, Italy, with promoters including Alessandro Guerriero, Michele De Lucchi, Adriana Guillerio and Bruno and Giorgio Gregori. The core members were Alessandro Mendini and Ettore Sottsass. Their "redesign" method was mainly to decorate the works of surrealism, abstraction, cubism, Pop painting or partial daily necessities, resulting in contradictions and conflicts between the outer decorative surface of the product and the product function. Through this cynical approach, people were subversively aware of traditional functional design. Mendini's representative work "Prost" armchair was decorated by the artist's post-impressionist painter's touch brush on a classical armchair. The "Kantinsky" sofa was decorated with the elements of the abstractist painter Kandinsky on the back panel of the sofa. Obviously, it was difficult to associate these decorative patterns with the traditional knowledge of armchairs and sofas. Together, this was exactly what Achemian pursued – the "destructive" redesign. In 1979 and 1980, they held two exhibitions of "Bauhaus 1" and "Bauhaus 2" respectively, showing the works of Mendini and Sotsas, as well as other designers. Including product design, popular culture, daily life and many other aspects, it showed people that ordinary things could become the driving force of innovation.

Alchimia and functional design had a far cry from the pursuit of mass production of products. They almost did not consider the mass production of design products, but regarded design as a cultural activity that conveyed the designer's ideas. Just like its founder Alexander Gryro said in the "Alchimia Declaration": "For the Alchimia group, today's design action is important. It is a production process of painting. It is not a 'design' or a 'sketch', but a free, continuous thought movement that expresses a motivated

movement through visual methods. As a painting group, Alchimia's mission is to introduce emotional thoughts. Its motivation is not to pursue practical efficiency. The "beauty" of an object is composed of love and charm. An object is designed by these forces, and it also connotes these spirits." [2]

As a pioneer of the Memphis design, Alchimia made an exploratory effort for the birth of the Memphis design team. Their core members such as Alexandro Mendini and Etto Sottsass became the leader of the "Memphis" design team. However, the two groups still had great differences in their ideological concepts, which led to the leave of Alexandro Mendini and Etto Sottsass in 1980. First of all, Alchimia's "redesign" always uses some of the past design works as the cornerstone of creation, and the "Memphis" design is obviously more decisive in emphasizing the originality of the design works. Secondly, compared to Achemia regarding design activities as a cultural behavior and conception, Memphis design hopes to link its design works to market businesses. However, they do not regard functional pursuits as the ultimate conversion.

V. CONCLUSION

Viewing the early pioneering design thoughts of Italy as a rebellion and criticism of Italian modern elegant design, its approach to artistic expression and sensible design thinking are the rebellion against the Italian modernist design fossilization and program. In the field of design criticism, there are still many disputes about the pioneering design. It has a direct influence on the creation of the "Memphis" design. The understanding of the "Memphis" design should also be deep into its historical context for multi-perspective exploration and reading.

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