Chapter 2

Design Strategies as Paradigms

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the works for interiors made by Albini, Sottsass, Gio Ponti, Mendini, the Castiglioni brothers, the Bouroullec brothers, La Pietra, Starck, Guixé and De Lucchi, different design strategies will be illustrated, which, despite their diversity, are considered representative of possible smart, innovative, and wise approaches to interior design. Every author is then read through their most significant projects belonging to interiors or settings and furthermore associated with a particular strategy that is able to represent the common style of every project, in particular regarding the approach and the driving thinking.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter illustrates a series of possible design strategies collected from the interior design work of past masters and contemporary designers. The goal is to offer a possible reading of certain important examples, providing an inventory, by definition an incomplete one, of design approaches, ways of thinking, and practices. Sometimes there is a common thread, sometimes not. A few belong to the more distant past of architectural and design history, yet nonetheless remain masterful and of great use to the present day. The intent is to focus on examples that share certain ideas and that can therefore contribute innovative solutions to the practice of interior design in the contemporary world, providing some coordinates by which to navigate.

BACKGROUND

There are countless works covering the most distinguished architects and designers from the twentieth century avant-garde. These tend to be chronological histories, monographs on a particular designer, and series for laypeople, all written by architecture and design historians. However, this chapter relays these experiences in a completely different way: through the eye of a designer. These are not biographies, since they don’t explore the lives of the authors. In a certain sense they could be considered anti-biographies in
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as much as each example starts with an interpretation based on both factual elements as well as circum-
stantial paradigms. The defining element of their work is “isolated” to define what could be considered
as their peculiar way of operating.

Each strategy by a designer or architect engaged in interior design has been matched with that of one
or more artists as a kind of inspirational “soundtrack”. A bit like Herman Hesse’s The Glass Bead Game,
we are provided with only vague and indecipherable instructions. It is an attempt - both difficult and
questionable - to grasp the author’s poetics, signature style, the way they relate to their own time, and
how they measure against other schools of thought. These are all aspects that have been amply covered
in books on the history of architecture and design. However, this is also an attempt to unearth the hidden,
almost secret, inner folds that sometimes evade the more meticulous and sometimes pedantic historical
texts; the aspects that are more readily visible to those familiar with the impatient aspects of design, to
its inevitable calculated risk, the qualities that are not found through traditional research or by studying
documents. Some of these comparisons have already been suggested by others, albeit for different rea-
sons (Giannone, 2011). Others are based on actual relationships between the different designers, artists,
and musicians. Others simply seem highly plausible. Still, others might appear to be arbitrary or thrown
out on the table, like cards, just “to see”. The goal is to trigger a kind of mental short-circuit, however
risky, to demonstrate how important it is for the interior designer to go beyond professional boundar-
ies during the design phase, employing all available means, that is, material, colour, light, dimensions,
form, relationships, and hierarchies. However necessary, the manuals, technical and code knowledge,
attention to the behavioural aspects of the users, and social research are not enough. There needs to be
an approach to design acquired through time and experience, developed day after day through studying
good examples, a process facilitated by the interpretation techniques described herein. The boundaries
between the different potential strategies described here are in certain cases exaggerated to make a point;
however, they can also be interpreted in different and contradictory ways, like shuffling a deck of cards
and dealing out another hand.

Surrealist Naturalism: Franco Albini

In 1936, Albini - together with Camus, Clausetti, Gardella, Mazzoleni, Minoletti, Mucchi, Palanti, and
Romano - was asked to organise the Mostra dell’Abitazione (Housing Exhibition) at the VI Triennale di
Milano. “In particular, Albini was in charge of the design of an installation Stanza per un uomo (Room
for a Man), a unique space of about 20 m² that included a place for sleeping, studying, reading, and
exercising. It was a modular system, using the bed as the primary unit of measure, with a shower and
desk (2 × 1 metre), and furniture. More than a room, it was an installation. The widespread use of square
steel tubing to structure the frame, support the curtains, enclose spaces and ‘closets’, and ‘create’ stairs
certainly owes much to the style that Albini usually reserves for exhibition spaces” (Crespi, 2005, p.15).
Albini performs a sophisticated operation. Amidst the early and contradictory signs of modernisation
beginning to appear in Italy - which was lagging behind the more advanced countries - rather than de-
sign an actual room for a man, he engaged in an exercise in the concept of the intérieur that was being
explored in those years. He designed a room that, while containing certain living functions, operated
allegorically, through a clearly surrealistic matrix.

The exercise area, hanging jacket, towel spread out to dry, hat resting on the shelf, shoes taken off: it
all tells a story of absence. It establishes a certain spirit, and alludes to something that could exist, but
which is not visible. It is like certain Magritte paintings, where we do not immediately grasp the miss-