



'I have the most possible freedom'

Vico Magistretti explains the conditions of his work

Basically I work alone, in a very small office I took over from my father in the centre of the old part of Milan. I work at an old table, that has been in the family some time, and sit on one of my Poggi chairs (which are, despite the way they look, extremely comfortable).

My office is a very small one because I decided from the beginning to be an artist and a designer, not a manager. I wanted to ensure that I would have some free time, in order to think. I reasoned that if I were burdened with all the tasks that a manager has, I would not have time to think about *how* I was designing, and more particularly *why* I was designing. Sometimes I work eight or ten hours a day; sometimes not at all.

I don't want to be bored by the everyday routine of my work. This is one of the reasons why I accept opportunities to travel around the world very willingly. I know that I can work in a plane or a train, or even when I am in a car. The benefit of travel is not that you pick up ideas, but that new experiences can jolt you into taking a different approach. I think that one of the secrets of design is

to look at reality from a slightly different angle.

As an absurd example, when I have to design a table, the first thing I wonder is, whether it has to be flat or not. (Usually it has to be flat.) But you must never take anything for granted when you're designing. It is very easy to limit the possibilities open to you by passing a decision point without making a decision, but just making an assumption.

My last piece for Cassina, the Sindbad range, arose from an experience I had in London, when I entered a shop and saw horse blankets in lovely extraordinary colours. At the time I needed a new cover for my sofa in Milan, and I thought: why not buy one of these blankets, beautiful and natural as it is, and throw it over the sofa. It is so simple to transfer whatever you find in one reality into your own reality – to say, well I can use that for that. Why not? The blanket could be fixed with two buttons, so if I needed to remove it, that's all I'd have to undo. If I changed my mind about the colour, to replace it would not be expensive.

So Sindbad sofas arose directly from something that already existed.

Another feeling underlying that design is my concern to put myself in the position of being a connection ring in a chain – on one side is the past, on the other the future, and I am the present. So I always try to take something from the past – not as a fashion or as a mannerism, but as a real value which has an application today. For example, in this case the colours are those used in racing stables in the 18th century.

Besides that, the blankets for Sindbad are Crombie. I have a Crombie coat, and it is a beautiful material. It would annoy me to cut into it, that would seem like a blasphemy, so the problem was to find a way of using it as it was, just folding it. That simple factor is another element in the design.

Good design is concept design. It is idea design. It is something that can be expressed without necessarily having to be drawn. If you can pick up the phone and explain that you want to make a sofa in a particular way, and you can transmit your thought, then that is a good test of a worthwhile idea.

For Sindbad, as with other products I've designed, I didn't prepare precise drawings. I just gave Cassina the sketches I had made for myself. We develop the product together, on the basis of what is the best and simplest way to make it. The important factor is the basic concept, not the details.

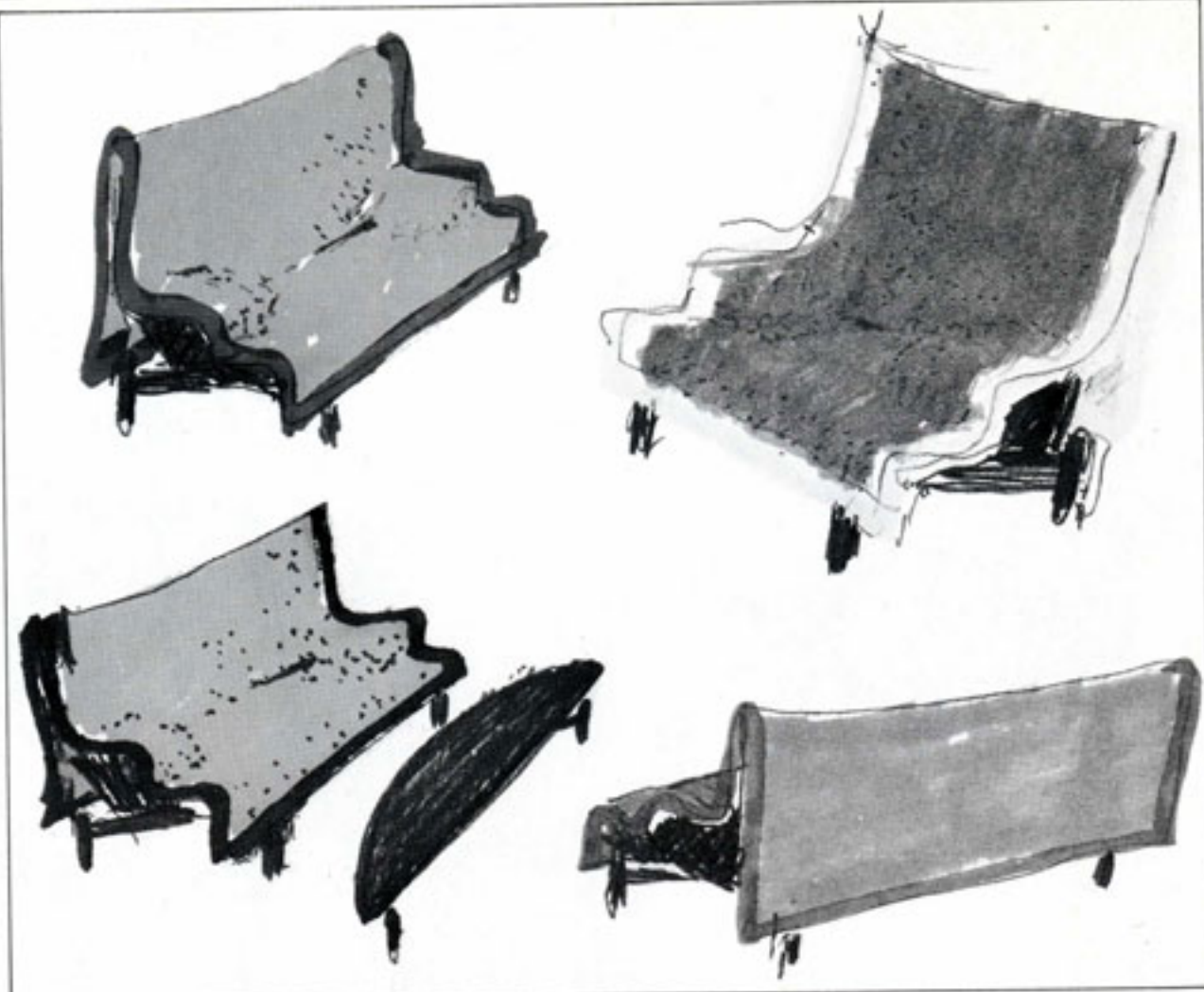
It is a great fault if a manufacturer cannot work from a sketch. One man cannot be an architect, a designer, an upholsterer and a joiner. I am not a joiner. Why should I teach them how to make a joint. They can teach me. What I have to give them is a completely different thing.

In architecture, you always know the name of the architect, but you are not interested at all in the name of the contractor or builder. Who built the Seagram Building or Frank Lloyd Wright's Waterfall House? No one knows. But in design the contrary is the case, because there is a very close connection and a parity of contribution between the producer and the designer – so both names are important. I cannot claim sole authorship, because I am not responsible for the high quality of Cassina. Sindbad is a very simple piece, but the quality of the finishing is fantastic.

A UK manufacturer asked me to design something for him, and in showing me his products he explained: 'This is done exactly as the designer specified'. Such a claim means nothing. It implies that he gave the designer a job that was not a design job. To study a joint, why should a designer do that? He has to give the manufacturer a different kind of expertise.

I work with few companies, because there are few that offer very high quality, and with which I can have a very close connection – Cassina, Artemide, Oluce, Poggi, Asko. If another manufacturer asks me to design something for him I normally say no.

I never plan what I will do next, and don't know what will happen in the future. What I like to do is to live day by day, to take the opportunities I see, and to translate what I feel into my work. Always when I finish one project, the future seems to be empty. But I could never think in terms of 'well, the next thing I'll design is a piece like that, and then one like this'. Ninety nine per cent of my pro-



Magistretti's sketches from which Cassina made his Sindbad range

jects arise because I have an idea which I take to a manufacturer.

Sometimes I say yes to a specific request for a product. Philip Rosenthal asked me to design something for his furniture range, and I remembered visiting an exhibition of childhood. Something I'd seen prompted me to think of doing a chair as a kind of person, a character around the table, and so I designed the Pan chair. That chair was so successful that Rosenthal asked me to design another one for a lower price range. I knew it was necessary for me to make an effort to do an extremely simple thing. On that occasion Philip Rosenthal went out of my office at eleven in the morning, and I would say that at 11.10 or 11.20 I had done some sketches for the new Elfo chair.

Sometimes a design idea seems to come in one

second. In reality it is the expression of a lifetime of work.

You don't necessarily *know* whether the idea is a good one. But you feel it. In a way, you can never look for the solution – but you find it. The moment comes when you feel that *this* is what you intended to do.

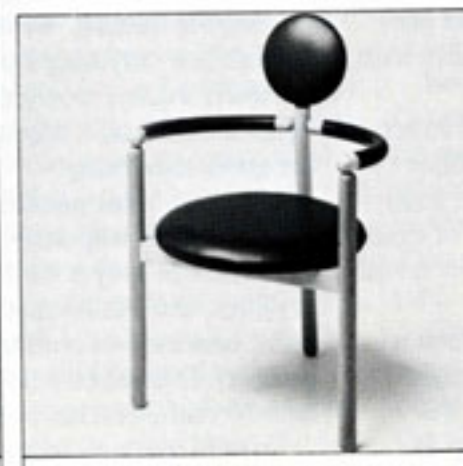
Architecture is a much more difficult process than design. Working on the biology faculty for Milan University last year was a real torture. Although I liked the way the design was going from the beginning, it took a very long time for me to be satisfied. I filled pages with drawings, until the moment when I felt I had caught it. Afterwards it is a great pleasure, of course, and you work to refine the idea. But that final stage is not important: it is only an amusement.



Carimate 892 chair for Cassina, 1960



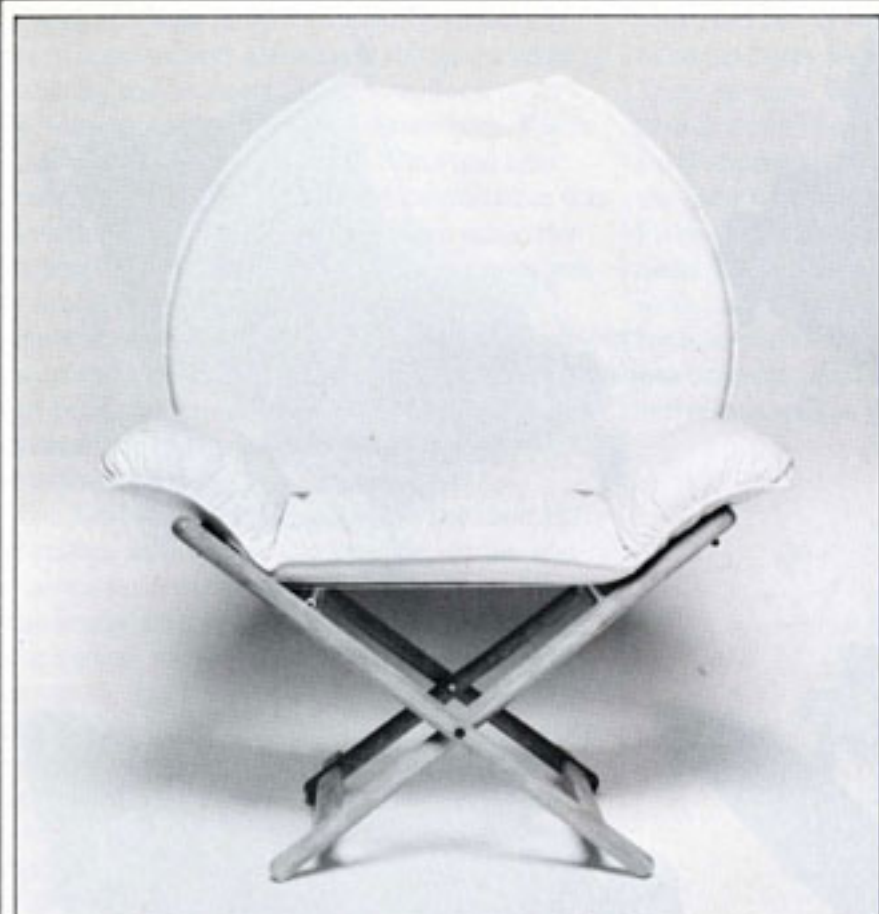
The 122 for Cassina, 1964



Pan chair for Rosenthal, 1980



Golem chair for Poggi, 1968, in which Magistretti sits to work



Regina d'Africa for Alias, 1979



Elfo chairs for Rosenthal, 1981



Vicario for Artemide, 1970



Barbettis for Poggi, 1980

Basically I am an architect, and at the beginning of my career I only designed what I needed for my buildings. I did a clubhouse in the early sixties, and the chairs that I designed for the dining room started the process whereby my design work gradually became more important than my architectural work. The chairs were on show at the Milan Triennale in 1960, where they were seen by Terence Conran. He began to sell them in England, and meanwhile Cesare Cassina came to my office and suggested that Cassina could perhaps manufacture them, and my relationship with that company began.

I've now worked for Cassina for nearly twenty years, and virtually every product we've done together is still in production. In my view, good design has to survive at least fifty years. For example, the Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chair is still a living design.

To do something just to catch the attention is exactly the contrary of my approach to design. To try to be fashionable I think is pure folly; it is nothing to do with furniture. We are trying at Cassina to do Rolls Royces, not racing cars.

Compared with architecture, the costs of working on a product are reasonable. It is not so expen-

sive to do a mock-up of a piece, to see whether it is worth producing or not. I have been very lucky in that when I thought I'd produced a good idea, Cassina were always prepared to make it. I was never told: 'Yes, it's beautiful, but you know at the moment the market . . .' The only times a piece was abandoned was when I myself didn't feel convinced about it, and suggested it should be dropped.

As a result there were four years when I did nothing for Cassina. We were always in touch, but I didn't have anything I thought was worthwhile for them. I didn't worry about that. I was doing other things. And it is better to do a few things that are good, than many.

I have the most possible freedom. If I make bad things, it is my responsibility alone. The normal agreement in Italy is for the designer to be paid royalties, and I think that arrangement is quite right, because you both take the risk, producer and designer. It could be a flop, but if it is not, and it lasts 30 years, you can both enjoy it.

I would like very much to design across a very wide range of products. This year I have completed a big building for the University of Milan, the Sindbad project for Cassina, at the same time as

designing golf clubs for Spalding. And I'd equally like to design a desk calculator. The challenge is not to do something different, but to find, through a close analysis of the problem, some factor which lets you look at it from a different angle. I would never try just to make such an object a more beautiful shape. I would try to understand what is happening inside, and then express that reality on the outside with my design.

My work is an emotional work. When I travel, it is not so much to look at things, as to exercise my imagination. Last summer I was in Borneo and for me it meant seeing a forest, coming to a river, crossing a bridge, seeing people living in a certain way. I don't know what it will lead to, but I would never think of copying an object.

In any case, I have no visual memory at all. This is a great advantage, as is the fact that I am not a very good draughtsman. No one will be charmed by the beauty of my drawings, so I am forced to dig to find the roots of things.

Design seems to be easy: an idea comes in a second, two seconds, no more. But I don't believe in inspiration. Behind that there is long hard work. I feel I understand very well what it is to be anxious. I am not always very gay.