

MAGISTRETTI RIDES IN ON A BROOMSTICK

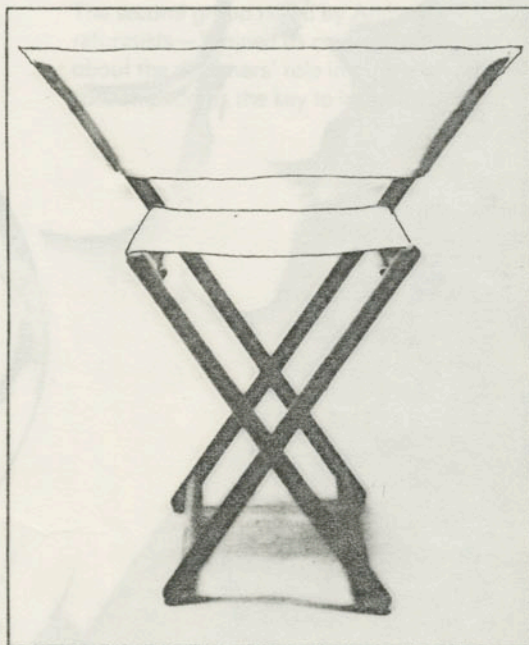
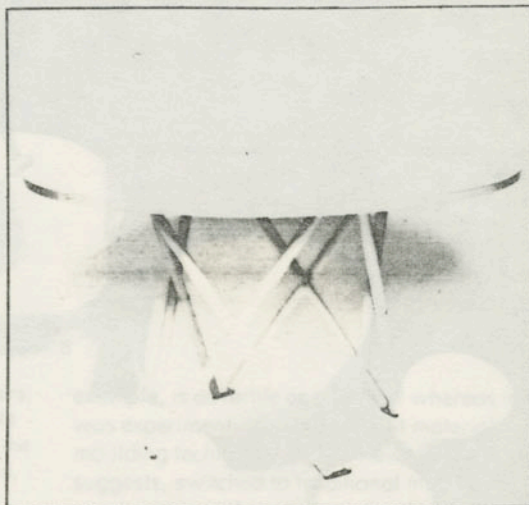
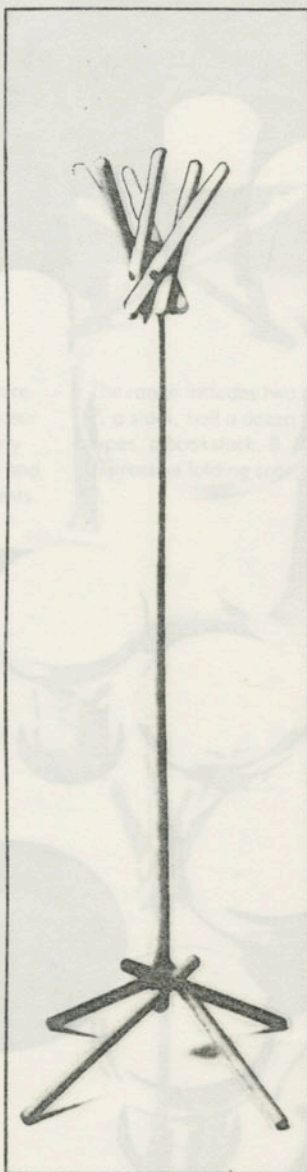
high-powered designers who could have designed a better product, all those fancy engineers and testers who could have helped to make the product work only a little bit better or a little bit more reliably.

With any luck it may take years before customers become aware of the improved performance and reliability of products made by overseas competitors. And it can take even longer before these factors reduce the share of home and export markets claimed by British firms. But when the pinch comes, profits are inevitably low, high wages are just not on and, naturally, industrial relations are none too good.

Is this the time for luxuries like well-paid designers and engineers? No, of course not. What is needed is to deal with the day-to-day problems of getting the metal through the shop and of dealing with the difficult chaps on the shop floor. Despite its critics, British industry has formed the solution to all its ills: merger and rationalisation, not design.

Peter Senker

Peter Senker is a senior fellow at the University of Sussex Science Policy Research Unit.



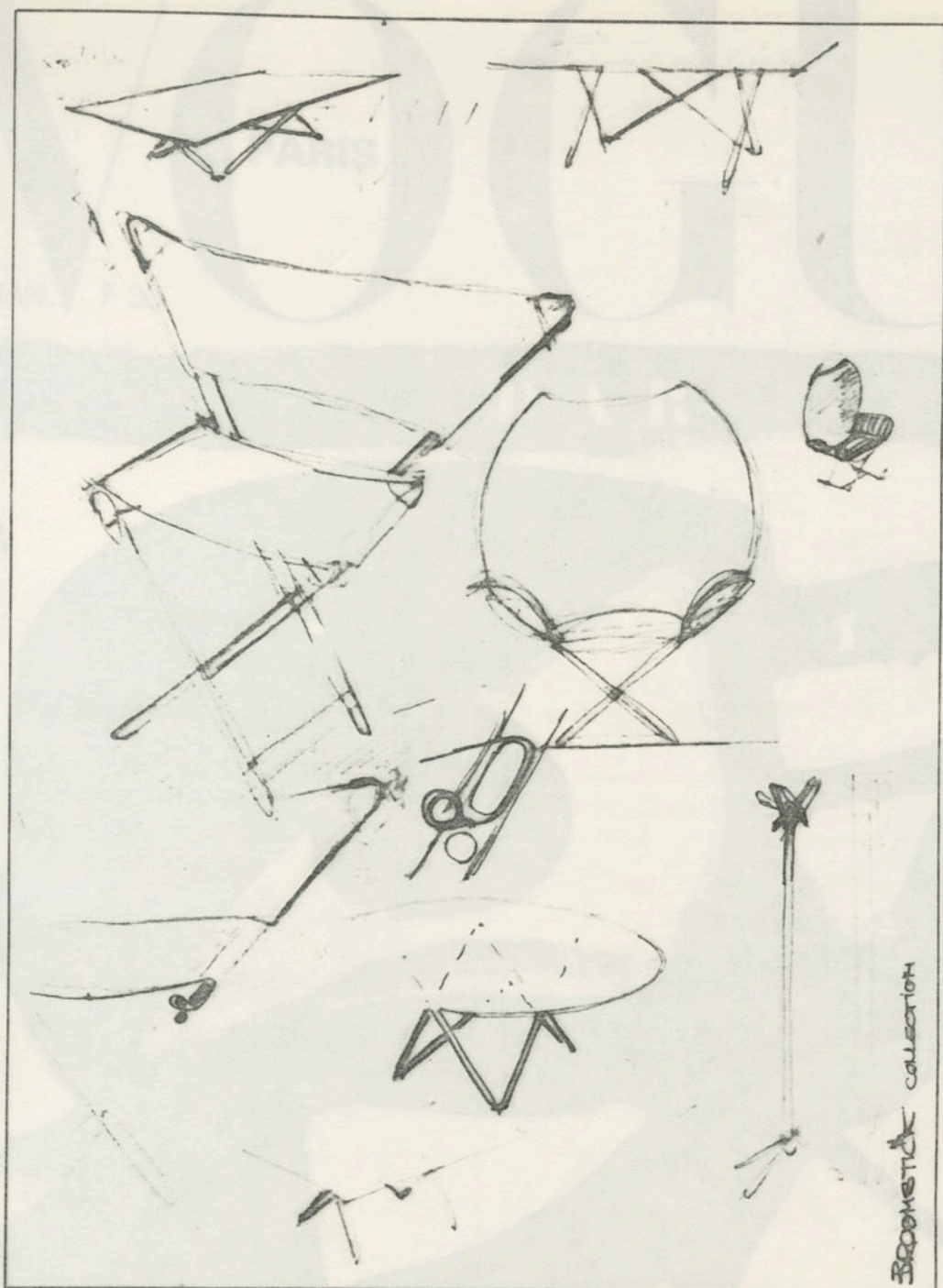
Vico Magistretti plans to spend about 40 per cent of his time in England at his new Dulwich-based company, Broomstick Designs. Which is good news. Even better news: the products that emerge will be at a price that suits you and me.

The new company is a logical exploitation of Magistretti's long-haul commuting which involves him in regular trips from his home in Milan to New York and Europe generally. His colleague in the venture is fellow Italian Carlo Forcolini, who also designs for Lucii.

As the designer of the 'Selene', one of the first successful moulded plastics chairs, Magistretti is inevitably associated with designs that exploit advanced materials technology. But he now believes that the rising costs of plastics,

tooling and development have pushed prices to a level that people are no longer willing to pay. 'If you design a very beautiful hanger, people may be prepared to pay £20 for it. But they will never pay £80. I think they're quite right.' The solution, Magistretti believes, is to get away from plastics and concentrate on simple designs, with minimum assembly costs, in natural materials like wood. This is reflected in the name of his new company and the nature of its first collection.

Although this shift in direction is a response to economic constraints, Magistretti believes that it coincides with a change in people's expectations of design. 'In the 'sixties the major theme was that form should be governed by the way a product is used. The concern was



Broomstick collection

This page: Magistretti's original drawings for his Broomstick collection. Italian manufacturers can and do use these as their starting point. Opposite left: a coat stand named Tenoro; it should retail for about £25. Top right: Kilim Ø 120 cost about £75. Bottom right: Tanganika, a snip at about £23.

to produce functional innovation. That is no longer true. The thing has to be useful – that's obvious; if you have a chair you must be able to sit in it. But now people are looking for an element of fantasy, for a secret quality in a product that they can discover for themselves.'

Magistretti believes that this intangible quality – which he describes as 'the added value of poetry' – can be achieved without outrageous expense. What is required is 'a different view of the obvious. The paintings of Magritte embody the secret of design. It is not a question of decoration or fashion; he simply had a quite different point of view.'

Structural accessibility will be an important element in Magistretti's new designs – a reaction against the inscrutable black boxes that

microprocessor technology threatens. 'We're afraid of technology. You have to take consideration of that; although that is not to say that with the highest technology you cannot achieve good things. I try always to think, "can I make it myself?" It is a Robinson Crusoe approach. I trust a design made in that way. I understand it immediately and I'm not afraid of it. It is easier for me to deal with wood than with very sophisticated, costly high technology materials. And it is easier for people to get the idea.'

Magistretti is not the first person to try to make good contemporary design more widely accessible – to offer 'not cheap objects, but objects that have a reasonable price and a very strong image.' He frequently refers to Terence Conran's Habitat, but more to its Golden

Age then its current practice: 'I admired Habitat. It had a fresh, young image. But now the objects are without invention or fantasy.'

One of the reasons for this, he says, is that Conran no longer produces his own designs. 'You don't see anything now but copies. They are a good and careful choice, but there is nothing new.' Magistretti believes it is a common dilemma in Britain, where we are 'publishers of design, not producers.'

He hopes to design and produce specifically for the British market, but 'under one condition. That I can do so at a reasonable price.' Reasonable, maybe. But suffer no illusions that a Magistretti design will ever be cheap: 'I will not be making products for cash and carry.'

Christine Walker