

A large workload need not mean an army of staff as Jan Burney found out on a visit to Vico Magistretti's small but hugely successful office in Milan

# Making light of big business

The workload of one of Italy's most commercially successful design practices includes a huge banking headquarters in Parma, recently completed, an even bigger banking complex in Bologna, luxury housing in Japan, numerous furniture, industrial and product design projects and, still under wraps, their biggest job yet for an American client in the States. So how many people are employed in this prestigious outfit? 25? 125? 250? Well, no. Two actually. One is Vico Magistretti, the other is his technician cum model maker cum draughtsman of over 30 years, Montella.

The office, and Montella, were inherited from Magistretti's father. Unpretentious, slightly shabby even, there is no suggestion of a design scheme ever having been applied to this comfortable, workmanlike environment where Magistretti meets all his clients and collaborators, from the directors of national banks to the craftsmen who manufacture his furniture. In the inner office, a collection of disparate objects has accumulated over the years, like wood prototypes and a leather version of the first chair Magistretti designed in the early fifties when he wanted something to contribute to the 'house landscaping' of his own home. Such projects led to Mr. Cassina coming to him and proposing that they do a chair together, the first of many products for his furniture company.

## Poetry and design

People have been coming to the Via Conservatorio from all over the world, ever since. 'Why should I go to them?', asks Magistretti in genuine astonishment. 'The important thing is I work with only a few people at a time and I only design when I think something needs to be designed, when I have something important to say or express with an object. Design is not a business; you should be able to sell a good design because it is something that does not exist and is not already on the market - it is not a piece of art but it should have a poetical quality. If you can sell poetry, why not design?'

Magistretti thus sees no need for the army of marketing executives and PR consultants that pad out British consultancies and intervene between

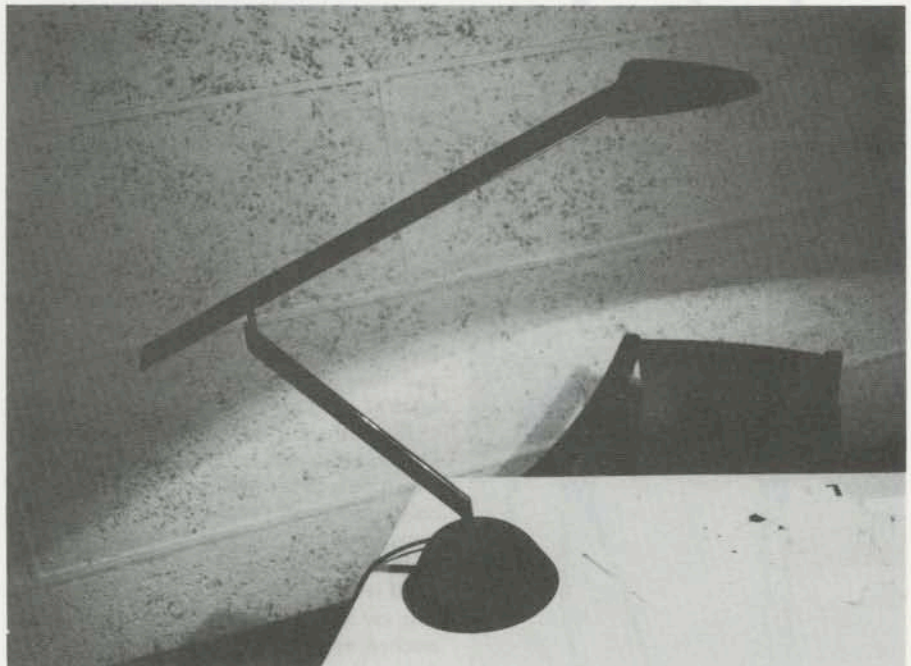
designers and their potential clients and the public. 'It would be mad for me to have an office of 20 or 25 people. I would have no relation with the builder or producer yet to have the sophistication demanded by modern construction projects would require many more people-maybe 120.' So for his architectural work, Magistretti has established a relationship with a large building company who contribute the technical and financial expertise and for the furniture and products he does some sketches, Montella makes a model and they work out the final form alongside the manufacturers.

This was the procedure that led to the appearance of Magistretti's new lamp for O Luce, Lester, named after the jockey whose cap inspired its shape. He never went to the lighting factory; the makers involved came to him and together they developed the form based on his original, and only, sketch done rapidly on a scrap of paper. Magistretti thinks the hours and weeks spent by English designers on the production of detailed drawings, though it may have been necessitated by the tragedy

of English producers not being interested in design, is foolish. 'Design is about transmitting concepts and you should be able to do that by making a model.'

## Old fashioned English

He also believes that employing lots of people is a very old-fashioned and counter-productive way to work. 'Imagine if I was managing an office with 200 people. I would have no possibility of thinking, no time to be quiet, to walk about and find inspiration in art galleries and parks.' He made the decision not to become a manager, never to do 'directional' work, 25 years ago when Alvar Aalto, who had an office of four people, reminded him that time to be quiet and think was essential. 'Every designer has a choice', he adds. As does every client, but it is not surprising that so many choose to work with Magistretti after a visit to the Via Conservatorio, where the relaxed atmosphere and Magistretti playing host does more to inspire confidence than scores of frantic communications executives and corporate account managers could do in as many years.



Magistretti's 'Lester' light: should receive a more favourable verdict than its namesake