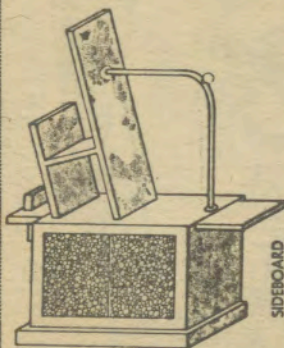


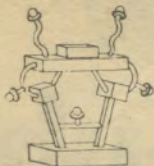
Omnibus, Sunday 10.10 BBC1

Like St Paul's Athenians, the Milanese indulge an appetite for novelty. Last year Ettore Sottsass' irrational furniture made a deep impression on that city. This year it is being exhibited at London's V&A. Also in Milan, Vico Magistretti designs furniture that is contemporary rather than avant-garde. This week in *Omnibus* Barry Norman looks at these two Milanese maestros, while here Miles Chapman looks at two approaches to design

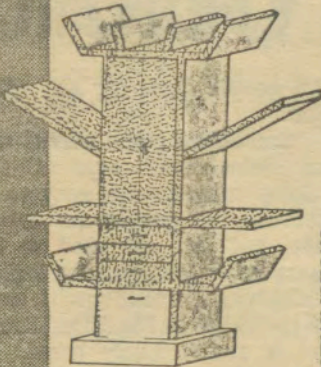
Sitting targets?



SIDEBOARD



LAMP



SOTTASS SIDEBOARD

Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin by assuming you're probably *not* sitting in one of Ettore Sottsass Jr's recent efforts.

Sottsass is one of the two very different furniture designers visited in the *Omnibus* sightseeing trip to Milan. His design group, Memphis, showed a few tables, chairs and that sort of thing at last year's Milan furniture fair - and they set the world capital of design alight. Even his fans describe the stuff as 'shocking'.

'The simple truth about the furniture,' says Stephen Bayley, director of the Conran Foundation (and a fan to the

extent of calling Sottsass a 'genius', 'shamanistic', 'a vortex of visual invention', and of organising a Memphis exhibition in December), 'is that it's genuinely shocking.'

'I see a lot in the course of my job but it's hard to over-emphasise just the actual drama of seeing an authentic piece of Memphis furniture.'

How so?

'They're just extraordinary. We've had two or three generations now who've been brought up on the assumptions that furniture should be rational - the whole modern notion of good design, primary colours, geometrical shapes, symmetrical, sensible - and Memphis totally rejects all that. It's deliberately irrational. I mean Sottsass builds a bookcase which is angled at 30 degrees...'

So the shelves slant? 'Yes...'

So the books can't actually stand?

'Yes, and he builds it in a strangely coloured plastic laminate with leopard spots on it, which he says "is tiger". It's not, it's fluorescent green with leopard spots and he says "is tiger". They're all like that.'

What else has he done? Are there tables your average family could eat at? 'No'. Are there sofas on which Aunt Madge might be put up overnight?

'No, no. But then Sottsass would probably argue that you couldn't do that in a Le Corbusier *chaise-longue* either. There's a whole school of thought which just looks at all modern furniture as pure sculpture, on the basis that you spend more time looking at it than you do sitting in it.'

Four or five years ago hardly anyone had heard of Sottsass except as an Olivetti designer - typewriters, a typist's chair and so on. Now, at 65, with a

droopy moustache left over from his hippy period (he is the walrus), he's the guru of the avant-garde cult that is presently wowing Milan, and hence the entire design world.

Alfa-Romeo, the Milanese car firm, even asked him to do a car for them. 'It was the current Alfa-Romeo Giulietta and he painted big polka-dots all over the outside, had grass on the floor and painted the headlining with clouds and blue sky. It looked stunning but Alfa scrapped it because they felt it was an embarrassment.'

This may sound a bit naive, but was it a joke?

'Well, it was a joke at a very gloomy level. Sottsass is not a humorous man but the phrase he uses most often in conversation is "*E molto ironico*" - "It's very ironic". I think what he's trying to do is to challenge people's conceptions of what objects should be. It's a controlled sort of anarchy.'

Ironically enough, Sottsass doesn't actually live with Memphis furniture. 'He lives in a tiny two-roomed flat in suburban Milan with nothing in it apart from an old record-player, a Dansette thing, where he plays scratchy Rod Stewart records, with pictures of dinosaurs torn out from *Look and Learn*, that sort of thing, Sellotaped on to the wall. It looks like it's the flat of a 19-year-old student. A few piles of design magazines. No books. No paintings really. Nothing to indicate this is the flat of a man you could actually say is a measurable creative influence and force in modern culture.'

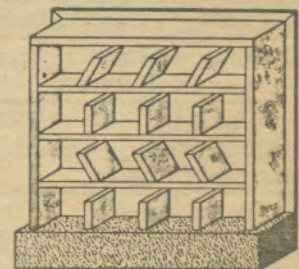
The same could not be said of the other furniture designer *Omnibus* stops at: Vico Magistretti makes a point of living with his pieces. His family house in Milan is full of the prototypes of the dozens of

The 'genuinely shocking'

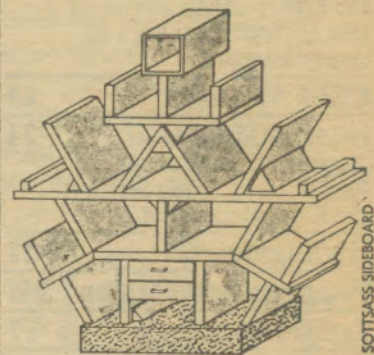
Memphis range of Ettore

Sottsass, 'the guru of

the avant-garde...'



BOOKSHELF



SOTTASS SIDEBOARD

pieces he's designed. 'They're all mine. Automatically you create your own landscape. You can't live in another one. Because basically you create this lamp or this chair for *you*.'

The doyen of contemporary, as opposed to avant-garde, Milanese design, 60-year-old Magistretti is the son of an architect who also himself trained as an architect. There are no design schools in Italy, you start as an architect and simply slip into designing tables, graphics, or whatever.

Magistretti is, however, a visiting tutor in furniture design at the Royal College of Art in London. And, following his own maxim that 'the best



Brian Griffin

**Italian sophistication:
 Giorgio Armani's winter
 collection complements
 Magistretti's Sindbad
 chair. Magistretti
 (below) says the best
 designs are the things
 you really need for
 your own home**

designs are the things that you really need for your own house', he designed a special range of cleverly collapsible furniture using canvas and cut-up broomsticks for the house he rents unfurnished in Dulwich. Like everything he does, the Broomsticks range is now being produced in its thousands in an Italian factory and is on sale at places like Liberty's and the Conran Shop. Whereas few of the Memphis pieces are made, and almost none reach us. Moreover, while Memphis were undoubtedly the artistic

success of last year's Milan furniture fair, the galloping commercial success was Magistretti's new Sindbad sofa - an ingenious but simple design making use of a horse-blanket he found in Cork Street. When pressed, Magistretti defines design by saying it is 'to look at familiar objects with an unfamiliar eye' - which doesn't sound far from Sottsass' avowed intent to make us look at things differently. But... Although both of them are deeply Milanese, both are architects designing furniture

and both are now in their venerated 60s, Sottsass and Magistretti seem to be diametrical opposites, going their separate ways, the one 'bohemian', the other 'bourgeois'. And it must be one of life's ironies that the one whose work has been honoured by inclusion in the New York Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection is... Magistretti.



Jim Forrest