

Dinah Casson

## HOME THOUGHTS FROM MILAN

It is easy to be romantic about the Italians and Italian design: but it is not possible to bathe in the delights of September in Milan with its secret courtyards and rooftop gardens, its seductive shops, showrooms and bars, its clearly intelligent urban transport, its expressionist parking, its generosity (where else could you have Leonardo all morning, a free toasted caviar sandwich for lunch, a siesta on Magistretti's new flying carpet, Sophia Loren's tax-substitute collection of Francis Bacons all afternoon, Mendini videos for aperitivo and fried *funghi* for supper?) without returning to England with a sinking heart, as the flak jackets go back on, the battering rams are sharpened and we try again.

The Fiera itself – mounted in a mini-city of 50s palazzos (home from home for me) – must be one of the most extraordinary celebrations of mankind's huge efforts to solve small problems. Tier upon tier of furniture – each piece a small development of a small thought. The problem isn't clear of course – hence the confusion in the solutions – but, nevertheless, partly prompted by the Save-Our-Trees demo at the gates (which could equally have been Save-Our-Oil-Wells-Animal-Skins-and-Iron-Ore-Deposits), I did find myself standing in the middle of it thinking: yes, it is better than any other fair I have visited – it's richer, more varied, more witty, more extreme – and yet what is it all for? Is it simply about making money? Is the money for them? Or us? Who is them? Who is us? Or is it to do with making culture? For whom?

The morality of designed industrial products never used to be a problem. My childhood journey was on a clear moral ticket: faintly socialist because it was mainly middle-class, kind and gentle – 'herbivore' thinking – and very sincere: modern design was – absolutely – better. Better for you. It was the manifestation of the post-war world – looking to the future, clean and spiritually uplifting. Money wasn't discussed – it was missionary stuff.

But here at the Fiera, there was a different kind of morality – to do with a conversation between the designer and the maker – to do with details; or virtuosity; or personalities; or money. The punters are no longer part of the equation. The degree of their involvement depends on their response to this private discussion which they see going on but from which they know they are excluded. They can take it or leave it: no one is telling them that their spirit will be affected either way. Instead of being patronised they are ignored

And so, what choices are there for the

designer? If the dialogue is only two-way, there can either be equality or inequality. If the emphasis is on the making, design is a service industry. If the emphasis is on the designing, the maker is under contract and is not responsible. If there is equality, there is a joint aim and mutual respect which neither side wants to lose. So integrity remains at the centre, but now the scale is so huge the issue is more important.

Designers' Friday examined this further – not that it meant to. Mike Glickman's global statistics of current wars and child malnutrition and death sent visible shivers down our spines. And yet within two hours we were discussing the styling of a radiation-resistant field telephone and the urban qualities of a monument to the Falklands war with Exocets treated like fairy lights. When we looked at Daniel Weil's radios, how refreshingly 'herbivorous' they seemed and David Connor's apartments seemed to be fine examples of client/designer equality.

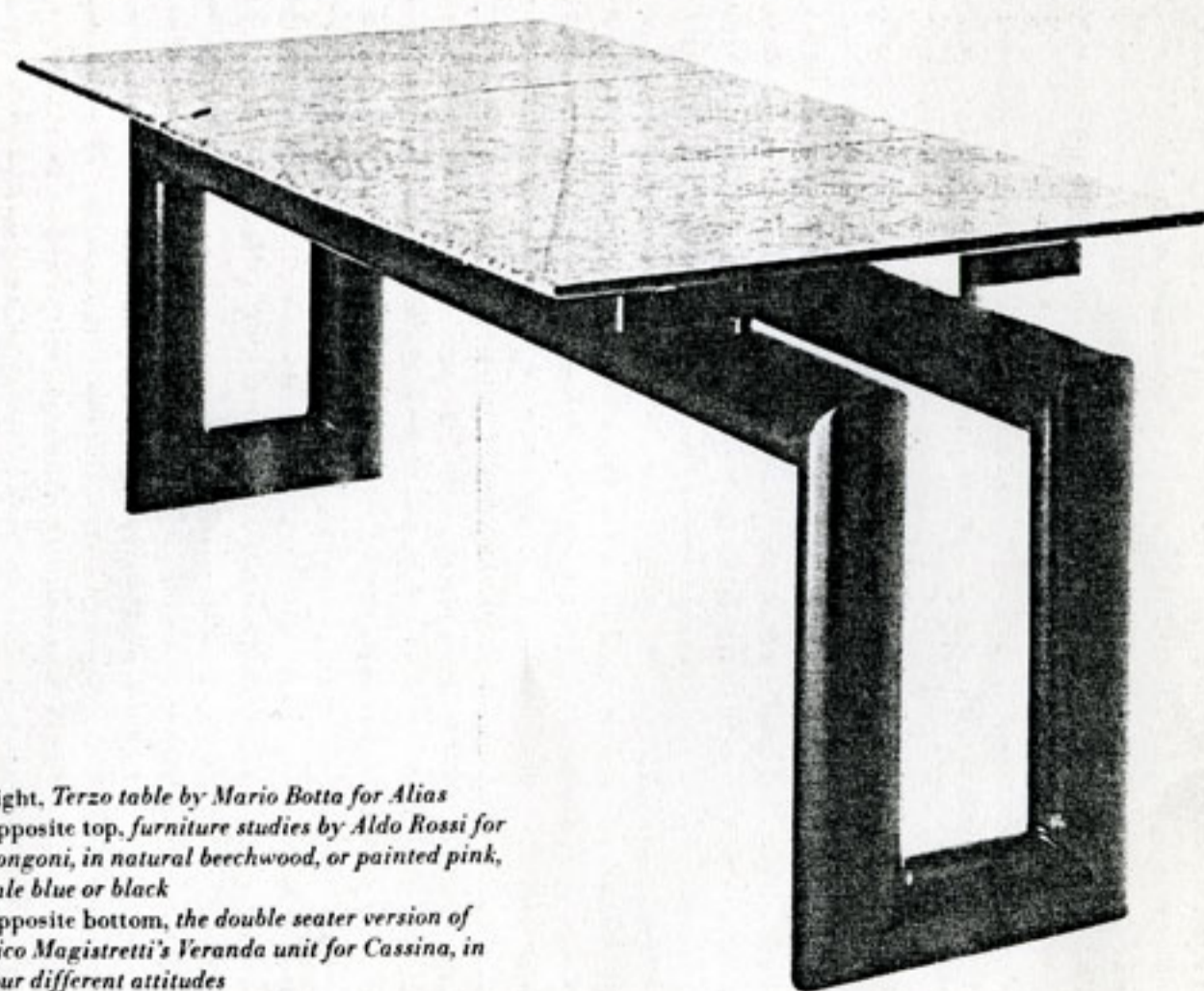
So, our pluralist society can accept all the options, but should it accept the second-rate?

In Milan it was still the work of Sottsass, Rossi, Castiglione and Magistretti to which we responded; and why? Because, though they are

the stars, they are also the artists. And they know that, unless they tread near the edge and look as though they might fall, nobody wants to watch. And they also know that it doesn't get any easier but it's the only way they can work: if they slacken off there's no loyalty out there to fall back on and who wants to live on loyalty? They are mysteriously cultured people, the Italians – in spite of their ludicrous education. They demand – and get – a high standard of design at every corporate and private level: they will accept vulgarity but not deceit.

And isn't that why virtually all the products on show on Designers' Saturday are imported? And why most of that comes from Italy? And why the prospect of Interbuild at Birmingham fills the heart with gloom? The acres of tapestry and tassels, treacle-covered moulds, sliced paper-teak MFC, where price underpins every decision. For the few who care and try there is no dialogue, no companionship.

The companies who take design seriously and who work with designers who take design seriously have as much success and as much failure as those who don't. The difference is that, in a world of sadness and strife, one is morally defensible and the other isn't.



Right, *Terzo* table by Mario Botta for Alias  
Opposite top, furniture studies by Aldo Rossi for Longoni, in natural beechwood, or painted pink, pale blue or black  
Opposite bottom, the double seater version of Vico Magistretti's *Veranda* unit for Cassina, in four different attitudes

