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STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE? THE RECEPTION OF ITALIAN DESIGN IN GREECE
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Transnational exchanges and influences are crucial in understanding design; this essay focuses specifically on the reception of Italian design in Greece. Italian design has had a steady and powerful influence on Greek design in the post-war period. In particular, the sensorial and emotional aspects of Italian design have been highly valued and exploited for commercial purposes. However, this paper argues that the reception of Italian design in Greece has been one-sided and superficial. Emotional aspects of Italian design have held a privileged and perhaps excessive role, while parametres of production, manufacturing quality and long-term strategy have been neglected or ignored. This situation may be treated as a missed opportunity for Greek design to learn and benefit from the Italian design scene.

1. Italian design in context

Contemporary Italian design is directly related to early manifestations of Italian craftsmanship, going back to the humanistic phenomenon of the Renaissance artist's studio. The tradition of producing objects of the highest quality is deeply ingrained in both the Italian North and South, with every region specializing in different materials such as clay, porcelain, glass, marble, leather, cloth, wood, metal, and so on (Mendini, 2005, p. 10). Great importance is assigned to the manufacturing aspects, and craftsmanship is particularly valued (Mendini, 2005, p. 13). Furthermore, Italian design is highly sensual: it pays great attention to the emotive and spectacular aspects of products, thus aiming to achieve a hedonistic provocation.

The developments of Italian design after the Second World War have been formative to its current state and status[1]. Following the war, the need for Italian producers to export goods became the major force behind the country's manufacturing policy, determining not only the goods produced, but also their appearance and price (Sparke, 1990). That period witnessed a shift of emphasis from design needs to issues of status and stylishness, and a boost of private consumption. This shift partially loosened the links with the functionality and the social idealism that formerly underpinned Italian design. Products began to demonstrate a new expressiveness, sensuousness and individualism. They gradually became a subject more for the glossy magazines aimed at international markets than a genuine consumption possibility for the majority of the population (Sparke, 1990, p. 185; Sparke, 1995, p. 163).

The formative role of U.S. intervention in post-war Italian reconstruction has been acknowledged in design-historical scholarship (Sparke, 1990, p. 191; Doordan, 1995). By

establishing the Marshall Plan, the United States assisted Italy and other European countries to recover from the devastating physical ravages of the war. At the same time, this support escalated into a major campaign to reconfigure the essential structure of Italian political, economic and civil culture. The rationale of U.S. aid programs to Italy in particular and Western Europe in general in the 1940s and 1950s was to encourage the development of markets and increase the production of all kinds of consumer goods. Within this context, design was seen as a tool that could be employed to foster consumption through the development of new markets and the expansion or renewal of existing markets (Doordan, 1995). Design was increasingly promoted in its most extravagant and stylish forms by manufacturers and magazines alike (Sparke, 1990, p. 190). Domestic items turned into fetishized commodities and there was a growing emphasis on the isolated object, which became aestheticized and decontextualized. For many products, little attempt was made to place them in any context other than that of fine arts (Sparke, 1990, p. 191).

The stylistic extravagance of much post-war Italian design should not distract from the achievements realized from a manufacturing point of view. In fact, many of these extravagancies were technically possible exactly because of the attention paid to craftsmanship and manufacturing. Companies associated with the production of luxury items assigned great importance to the technical aspects of their products. For example, firms like Cassina, Pirelli or Alessi have been highly active in the advanced use of common materials, in the development of new materials, and in the negotiation of craft and mass-production processes. Furthermore, companies tended to reach an optimum size and to specialize in only one advanced technological process (Sparke, 1990, p. 198)[2]. Perhaps the most significant feature of the Italian design industry from a manufacturing and organizational point of view was its industrial dualism, in other words the successful mixture of craft and high technology which has characterized Italian production throughout the 20th century. It was exactly this peculiarly Italian solution of combining small-scale manufacturing with a progressive attitude that marked the country out on the international design map in the post-war years (Sparke, 1995, p. 164). Additionally, despite the rise of consumerism and the glorification of style, design produced in Italy across the post-war decades has demonstrated sensitivity towards social issues. In the first post-war generation of master designers, the euphoria of reconstruction was combined with a view to making quality available to the wider masses (Mendini, 2005, p. 14). Such a view of a socially-oriented Italian design has been however strongly contested: it has been claimed that Italian designers, already since the 1950s and 1960s, have become the pawns of manufacturing industry and have found themselves operating within a limited sphere in which they could only talk to themselves (Sparke, 1990, p. 202). Despite such criticism, it is arguable that alternative trends expressed by design groups Superstudio, Memphis and Studio Alchymia have injected contemporary design with much needed radical content, before they were themselves assimilated into the commercial mainstream.

In more recent years, Italian design and design discourse have been characterised by increased complexity and consideration of regional, environmental and other issues, as, for example, expressed by the DESIS network for social innovation and sustainability and various other initiatives regularly presented in the magazine DIID[3]. The design discourse has become more sophisticated, with the introduction by the younger

generation of a whole new range of topics to consider. New social requirements such as environmental concerns and changes in lifestyle have been brought into the picture of design and production. As the concept of consumption dominates modern society, it becomes essential to search for new ways of controlling pollution, whether material or visual (Mendini, 2005, p. 15-16). Although the scope and effectiveness of contemporary critical design thinking in Italy is arguable, its new themes and directions do represent a promising feature.

2. National branding: Creating an image of Italian design

The 2009 call for papers for the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy was based on the idea that the western world has tended to view Italy as a domain of notable emotional intensity[4]. Such an image indeed exists and extends to the design field: Italian design is considered to be a highly emotional domain, populated by passionate, heroic individuals creating highly sensual and expressive objects. Emblematic designer Ettore Sottsass himself epitomized the emotional tendency. In 2007, a retrospective of the designer's work titled "I Want to Know Why" was opened in the city of Trieste. "I would like the visitors to leave crying — that is, with emotion," he declared at the time of the opening[5].

Various promotional pieces further stress the emotional aspects of Italian design as a key competitive advantage: "Bonaldo, the prestigious Italian company of design, has been offering since 1936 creative and sophisticated quality items. Innovation, emotion, and style are the key words that better express the company's identity."[6]

"Italian design is pleasing and fluid yet complex as well, being charged with emotion and filled with suggestiveness and unrest reflecting concerns expressed through the media and world communication. So, apart from being functional, many objects also contain a highly humane and emotional element, and indeed this type of design is classified as 'emotional design'"[7]. "In 2006 Lucci and Orlandini have created Florence, the kitchen inspired by the aesthetics, elegance and canons of classic Renaissance Italy, to transmit values of safety, prestige and architectonic innovation based on icons of style while maintaining the lightness and emotion of a designer product."[8] "A kitchen that gives off emotion and sparks passion".[9]

A wealth of similar publications have contributed to the mythologizing of Italian design. This mythical status is exemplified by promoting iconic, "perfect" objects and ignoring the complexity of underlying design processes, especially the contribution of crafts. (Rossi, 2011). The Domus magazine provides a characteristic example of the ways in which Italian design has been promoted both in Italy and abroad. Domus has been described as an ideological construct which, through its synthesis of editorial and graphic design privileged the architect-designer and epitomized the luxury and desirability of Italian design (Rossi, 2009). The stereotype of an emotional Italy has also been routinely juxtaposed to characteristics of other nations. An article on Flavio Manzoni, architect and industrial designer, claims that "his role is to develop a new design vision for the Volkswagen, Bentley, Skoda and Bugatti brands. And it's a safe bet that his creations, though Germanic in origin, will have a seductive Italian flavor."[10]

Emotional attributes of Italian production are not limited to the product design domain but extend to other aspects of daily culture, such as food. Assisted by film and advertising, spaghetti has become for the German public a treasured symbol of a highly attractive life-style (Möhring, 2012).

Thus, a generalized emotional image of the country is being constructed, which then helps promoting and selling Italian culture as a product with specific traits. Such a construction facilitates the sale of products and eventually generates the image of a country itself as a product (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2005). The resulting process may be described as the production and consumption of a culture in the global market. In a related discussion about Japan, Goldstein identifies the creation of a special image for Japanese culture which is perceived as prizing love, admiring beauty, respecting courtesy and fostering harmony. This image is contrasted to the West, which is considered to be calculated and having utilitarian goals. Might then Italy be a desirable exception within this generalized technocratic image of "the West", an emotional haven which is western but at the same time bears a positive emotional load which other countries envy and wish to emulate? In the same vein, inspired by IKEA's identification with a certain kind of "Swedishness", these questions have been put forward: What are the consequences of loading a country with powerful narratives and branding a nation as a commodity? Who decides about a country's branding and how may such national narratives be managed? What happens if this image becomes autonomous and gets its own life? (Lundström, 2009)

3. The consumption of Italian design in Greece

Greece provides a very illustrative example of the influence and success of national branding and specifically of the emotional impact of Italian design. Given that industrial design in Greece has been a primarily imported phenomenon and its indigenous expressions have been very limited, the study of foreign influences is of crucial importance in order to understand local design manifestations (Yagou, 2011). In the process of constructing a history of design in Greece, it is vital to record and analyze how foreign influences have been received and to unravel the multiple aspects of such reception: acceptance, use and glorification, but also resistance, critique and opposition, finally leading to different degrees and qualities of assimilation. Among such foreign influences to Greece, Italy has had a major role. Geographical proximity has facilitated cultural exchanges between Greece and Italy for centuries. The import of post-war Italian design culture into Greece constitutes one of the most recent examples of this relationship.

In the post-war period, Italy has been a major source from which design was imported to Greece and subsequently exploited commercially. This process did not simply include the import of "made in Italy" products to Greece (especially cars, motorcycles, furniture, clothing, shoes, and home equipment), it also encompassed the promotion of the idea of Italian design culture, communicated and popularized through the expressive albeit vague concept of "Italian style". Various advertising activities have constituted the major channels through which knowledge about Italian design has reached the Greek public. Additionally, Italy has been a very popular destination for Greeks desiring to study architecture or design. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s, a large number of people left Greece in order to study architecture or design-related subjects in various Italian cities and later returned to their homeland to work. They have acted as key agents through which Italian design culture was transferred, reproduced and disseminated. Indeed, within the small community of design professionals in Greece, there is a substantial percentage of individuals who have studied architecture, design and other related subjects in Italy. This has been a direct result of the underdevelopment of design

education in Greece and may be clearly illustrated by two surveys on the profile of industrial design professionals in the country. The first one is a survey of industrial designers in Greece during the late 1980s, and includes biographical information on 38 individuals. Among these, 16 pursued undergraduate or postgraduate studies in architecture or design in Italy, and/or worked there as designers, therefore constitute obvious agents of information and knowledge stemming from the Italian design scene (Tzirtzilakis, 1989). Similarly, in a more extensive directory of 74 Greek product designers published in 1993, there are 22 individuals clearly connected to Italy through undergraduate or postgraduate studies (Karabelas, 1993).[11] Many of these individuals have used Italian design as inspiration for their own designing. They have also propagated Italian influences through teaching for Greek public or private design schools and through interviews or publications in newspapers, popular magazines and specialist journals. However, there is no evidence that Greek design professionals have developed a substantial, local design discourse as a response to Italian input; they have been almost exclusively on the receiving end of new ideas and forms, and thus failed to sustain a creative dialogue with the Italian design community.

A search for design-related bibliography published in the Greek language but emanating from Italy yields two books on Italian design which have been translated into Greek in the late 1980s: the first is The History of Design (Storia del design) by Renato de Fusco, a well-written, illustrated volume which was published in 1989 by the obscure NOVA editions and is now out of print (de Fusco, 1989). The second book is the Introduction to Industrial Design, by Italian theoretician Gillo Dorfles, a small volume which has been used as a textbook by Greek design-related university departments, despite its poor quality of translation and editing (Dorfles, 1988). Two books constitute of course a very limited harvest, considering the prolific publication output by Italian design theorists, historians and designers during the postwar decades. However, Italian design magazines such as Domus, Abitare, Casabella, Interni, Ottagono, and Modo are relatively easily accessible in Greece: they may be purchased at some kiosks or found in Greek academic libraries.

Extending the search to specialist Greek magazines, specifically Θέματα Χώρου και Τεχνών (design + art in greece)[12], Τεύχος (Tefchos)[13], and ΝΤΙΖΑΪΝ (DESIGN)[14], shows that publications related to Italian design are relatively few. Over three decades, the specialist magazine design + art in Greece has published only a handful of short articles on Italian design, of which one is a semi-promotional piece. The Tefchos and DESIGN journals, both having editorial teams with close links to Italy, have dedicated a number of articles to Italian design, the first journal taking a more intellectual and critical stance, the second having a more superficial and celebratory attitude. In the articles published by the DESIGN journal in particular, there is a tendency to reproduce texts from Italian sources in a fragmented manner, suggesting poor understanding of the importance of context. Italian design solutions are presented as undigested information, without any apparent effort to relate these to the conditions of production, consumption and use in Italy and in Greece. Similarly, a number of impressive images of Italian design are reproduced and offered to the readership for uncritical consumption.

The familiarization of the wider Greek public with Italian design has been primarily performed by the popular press, especially home decoration magazines or newspaper inserts, where selected material was adapted and presented[15]. Evidence from the

popular press from recent decades suggests that publications on Italian design are almost exclusively connected to commercial aspects of design and act as direct or indirect advertising for various firms. Descriptive, formalist, usually glorifying texts constitute the mainstream approach towards Italian design culture, and have held a pivotal role in shaping the public's idea of Italian design. Exhibitions of various kinds also constitute a fertile field for the study of reception and its ramifications. Such exhibitions and other promotional events related to Italian design have been frequent, usually organized in collaboration with commercial firms importing Italian products. Through the aforementioned channels, Italian products gradually have become eponymous in Greece, have acquired an almost mythical value exceeding their use value and have become symbols of style (Ioannidis, 1989).

A visit by a key figure of Italian design may also be seen under the same light. Famous designer Enzo Mari gave a lecture to a number of students and staff at the Department of Architecture of the National Technical University of Athens in 1993, where he presented his personal approach to design. This event was only a secondary, informal, almost improvised event that accompanied Mari's other activities in Athens as a guest of an upmarket, local furniture firm, which had invited him to Greece in order to promote a range of objects designed by him. This incident suggests that the critical and intellectual potential of Italian design and its power to generate questions relevant to the Greek case has been obscured -more often than not- by commercially-oriented initiatives. Therefore, despite the familiarity of the Greek public with Italian design, this familiarity has in fact been partial, superficial and deceptive. It may be argued that the reception of Italian design in Greece has been primarily related to its stylistic and commercial aspects, whereas a whole range of issues that Italian designers have raised and explored during the postwar decades have remained in the dark.

Such obscured issues include manufacturing and design management, and in particular the way design development in Italy has been founded on the assimilation of small-scale craft production into a wider system of industrial manufacture. As in Greece, the importance of family units of agrarian origin has been crucial in Italy for the creation of a market where small-scale firms could flourish (Bagnasco, 1991). In this context, the small-scale, family-based firm has constituted a key factor of industrial development, through the articulation and interplay of local forms of traditional production with new, large-scale models of industrial production. Individual Italian designers have achieved to support small, craft-based firms in moving into serial production and update the aesthetic of their products accordingly, without sacrificing the positive aspects of small-scale, skilled manufacture (Sparke, 1998). Thus, tradition and innovation have stood alongside each other in Italian design culture; craft and industrial production were seen as two ends of a single continuum (Sparke, 2001).

The Italian model of design development might have been very useful to Greece, where the insistence on the polarity between arts and crafts versus industry has been a major factor undermining the consolidation and growth of design. This polarity has had a long history in Greece, going back to the pre-war years as well as clearly affecting the post-war period, and it has involved heated discussions on what was considered as two opposing and incompatible ends of the production spectrum (Yagou, 2011). The creative collaboration and interaction between crafts and industry appears to be a major lesson that Greek manufacturers, managers and designers have failed to learn from the Italian

experience. This failure to assimilate the essence of the Italian example, as opposed to simply consuming Italian "style", is an indication of the immaturity of the local industrial design scene in Greece, where Italian design has been treated as the idealized and stylized outcome of an individual, artistic process, rather than that of a complex socioeconomic process involving a range of stakeholders.

4. Conclusion

This essay has identified and discussed the reception and assimilation in Greece of design influences emanating from post-war Italy. It has been argued that an essentially commercial discourse has dominated the reception of Italian design culture in Greece. This discourse has emphasized stylistic aspects of Italian design, at the expense of technical or managerial aspects, which have been so crucial to the worldwide success of design "made in Italy". In addition to consuming a large number of Italian products, the local buying public has also been cherishing the concept of "Italian design" or "Italian style" itself, an idealized image of an easily digestible and pleasurable "italianità". The professional Greek design scene has also been under the spell of Italian design, unfortunately offering too little in response. Altogether, the Greek case illustrates the enthusiastic consumption of Italian design, albeit with minimum awareness of the conditions underpinning its emergence and growth. Given the worldwide dissemination and popularity of Italian design, research into the comparative study of the reception of Italian design culture in other national contexts would offer further insights into the transnational aspects of global design culture.

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NOTE   (↵ returns to text)

1. For a concise survey of Italian design after 1945, see Aynsley (1993). See also Woodham (1997).↵
2. See also: Lees-Maffei (2002).↵
3. Related websites: http://www.desis-network.org and http://www.disegnoindustriale.net respectively. (last accessed 30 August 2013)↵
4. Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy (ASMI), Italy and the Emotions: Perspectives from the 18th Century to the Present, London, 27-28 November 2009, http://asmi.org.uk/documents/uploads/asmi-conference-2009-programme.pdf (last accessed 30 August 2013)↵
5. http://www.ecopolis.org/ettore-sottsass-radical-emotion-design/ (last accessed 30 August 2013)↵

6. http://www.luxury-design.com/en/fine-living/home-decor/bonaldo-and-luxury-design-italian -design-and-luxury-lifestyle-393 (last accessed 30 August 2013↵

7. http://www.italianculture.net/english/design.html (last accessed 30 August 2013)↵

8. http://www.snaidero.com/classic-kitchens/florence (last accessed 30 August 2013, some modifications from earlier versions)↵

9. http://www.snaiderodistribution.com/designers.php (last accessed 30 August 2013, some modifications from earlier versions)↵

10. Manzoni brings Italian emotion to German design, http://www.autonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081124/ANE03/811239941#axzz2 UBxVonAK(last accessed 30 August 2013)↵

11. The number may in fact have been larger, because biographical information is incomplete in some of the directory entries. The recent exhibition catalogue *Design: Local and Global Growth on Strategy Innovation Culture in Business* (2010), also includes biographical information on 23 individual designers as well as several design consultancies. The influence of Italian design education institutions remains strong, although there appears to be a shift towards UK and US design education.↵

12. *Θέματα Χώρου και Τεχνών* (Design + Art in Greece) (1970-2013) has been a highly respected, annual journal on architecture, art and design↵

13. *Τεύχος* (Tefchos) (1989-1993) was an influential but short-lived journal on architecture, art and design.↵

14. *NTIZAÏN* (DESIGN) (1991-1995) was another ambitious but short-lived journal, specializing in product and graphic design.↵

15. Articles on Italian design appear regularly in publications like *BHMAgazino* and *Maison & Decoration*.↵