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CHECKING OUT

Interview by Steve Kaufman



Matteo Thun

The influential, award-winning Italian architect and designer co-founded The Memphis Group in 1981 to break the rules and loosen the grip of functionalism.

What inspired you as a young man in post-war Italy?

Architects in Italy were forced to work in small scale after the war. This is why a lot of Italian architects started to create product design and worked "from spoon to city." (In reference to Ernesto Nathan Rogers' well-known slogan.) Furthermore, all elements of culture – music, art, fashion, design, even the high quality of food – have meant a lot to Italians ever since the war. This historic sense of beauty may still influence us today.

Are there early sources of inspiration that remain a part of your work today?

I studied at the Salzburg Academy in Austria with the artist and writer Oskar Kokoschka. He taught me to see; to capture key parts of objects in a very short period of time. The design approach of Ettore Sottsass, the Italian architect and designer, to search constantly for innovative technical solutions, influences all segments of my work. I am always searching for innovation – in architecture, interior and product design.

What was The Memphis Group trying to say about form and style?

We played with colors and shapes inspired by movements such as art deco and pop art, the kitsch of the '50s and futuristic themes. We approached design in a different way, finding new extremes of language as an alternative to the unimaginative functionalism. We wanted to break the rules.

Your resume includes hotels, hospitals, offices and residences. How do you develop the statement for each?

When preparing a new project, we go to the site and analyze the *genius loci*, the spirit of the site, with its cultural and historical background, its climate and morphology, its flora and resources – [this] determines the creative process. Often, I try to visualize the ideas by using watercolors or drawings. When it comes to retail or product design, we deeply analyze the brand's nature, study the spirit and signature, and try to understand and respect all values given. ▸



A Man and his Castle

You're perhaps the only designer with his own family castle in Italy.

Not sure – but for me, Castel Thun was a childhood dream. My brother and I played in the courtyards and in the secret corridors. Each visit was a journey of discovery.

Castel Thun is situated on a hill near Mount Non and the village Vigo di Ton, in South Tyrol [Italy]. It was the property of the Thun family for 700 years before it was handed over to Italy's Trento Province in 1992. It has now been renovated and opened to the public. It includes a magnificent palace containing art gathered over the centuries, a library, a garden and fortifications.