

Matteo Thun

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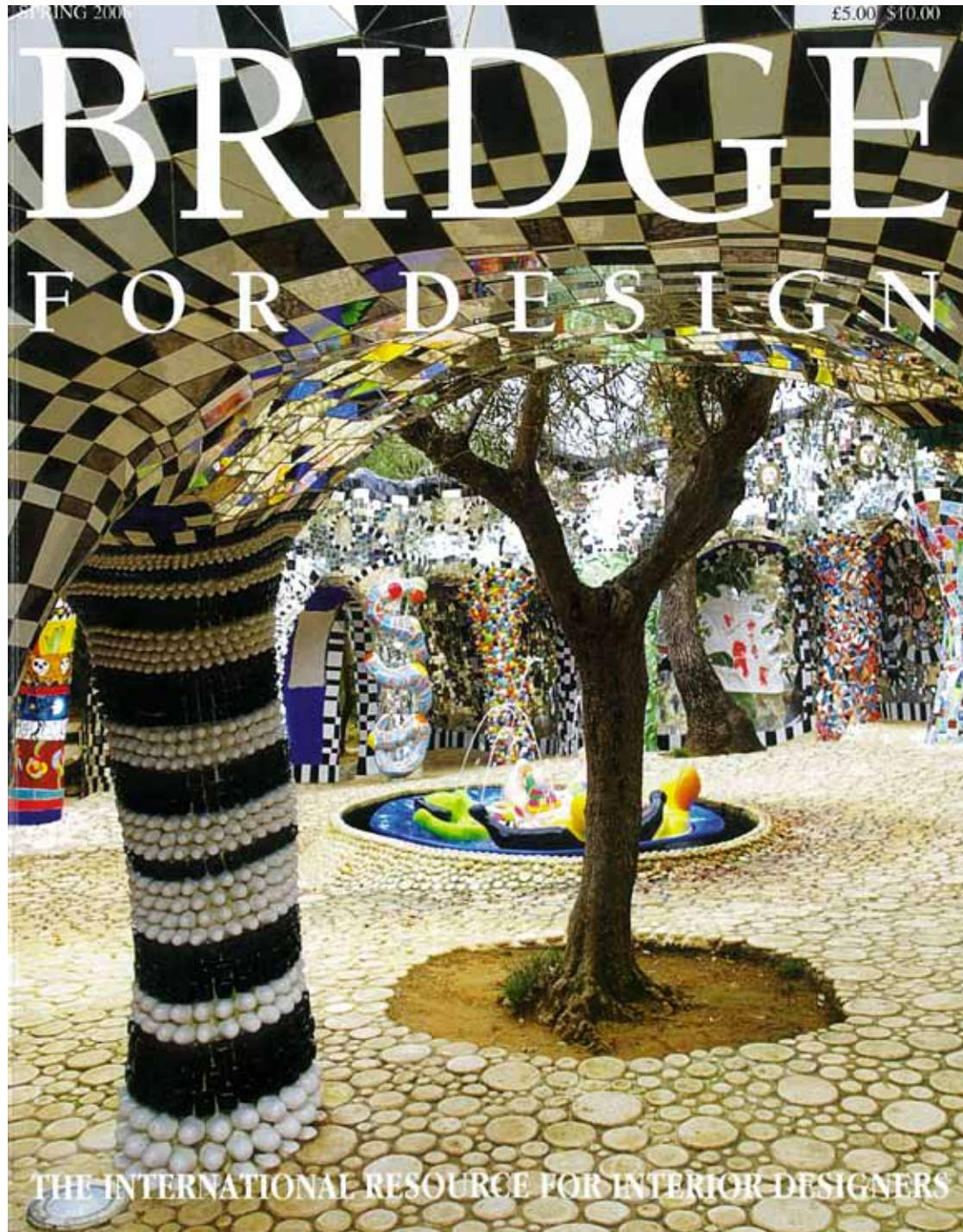
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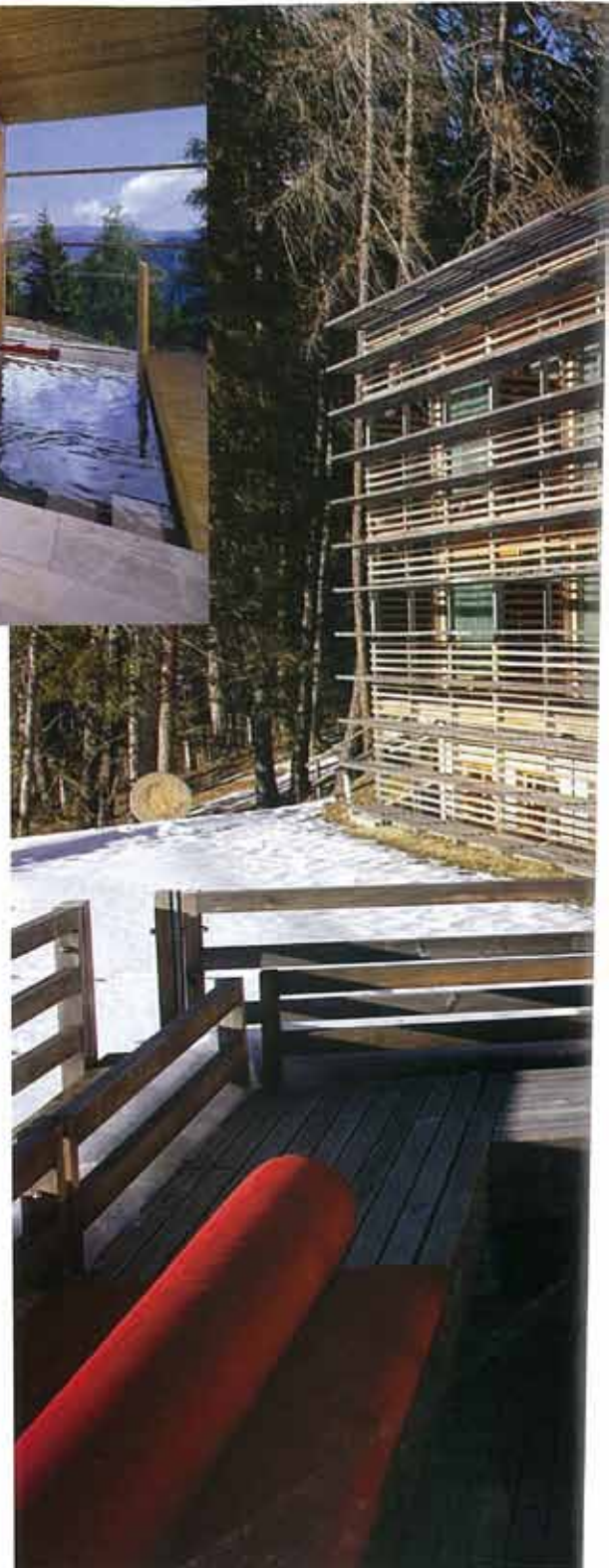
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inspired by MATTEO THUN

MATTEO THUN IS A MAN OF FEW WORDS, BUT HE hopes that his actions will speak volumes for future generations. Milan-based Thun is one of a growing number of architects embracing and promoting 'ecotecture', the design philosophy that aims to unite architecture with ecology and sustainability. "I am always driven by the 'genus loci', the soul of the location," he says. "This means that, on one hand, a building should be in harmony with the morphological characteristics of the landscape and, on the other hand, it should refer to the autochthonal culture. The guideline for this kind of architecture is the sustainability, i.e. the aesthetic, economic and technological durability."

It may sound like jargon to the uninitiated, but those are destined to be ever fewer – ecotecture has already spawned its own magazine, and exponents of the philosophy behind it include Sir Richard Rogers and Sir Norman Foster. Rogers's book, 'Cities for a Small Planet', an attempt to show how a city can respect both people and the environment through urban planning, appears to have been a great inspiration to Thun, and he talks of the aims of sustainable architecture with unusual loquacity. "My keyword is 'location, location, location...'. Before I start planning I look at the exact site where I am building and I try to take elements from it and incorporate them into the design. I want to build within the place, and not destroy or disintegrate it."





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Key to the design features for a sustainable project are the reduction of demand for energy and water, the implementation of renewable energy sources and the covering of remaining demand with highly efficient systems. "Bio-building' for an outdoor environment involves creating a harmonious relationship between the building and the surrounding environment," Thun explains. "This includes an integrated choice of the technologies and materials used in the building; low impact planned sites; energy and water resources management; planned site activities management; environmental, acoustic, visual and olfactory comfort; and air and water quality. The design philosophy itself lies in understanding and analysing the local climate and site conditions; using the building form and disposition or orientation on site to the best advantage; choosing appropriate materials, including consideration for embodied energy; and the application of simple and reliable technical systems, as controls have to be used as 'fine tuning' elements to the whole design."



Thun studied under Oskar Kokoschka at the Salzburg Academy and took an architectural doctorate in Florence in 1975. He was a founding member of Memphis Group in 1981 before setting up his architecture and design studio in Milan. His work has also involved collaboration with some of the most respected design names in Italy. "I was lucky to be able to work together with the architect and designer Ettore Sottsass," he says, "first as unpaid student, then as partner. He belongs to the last generation of designers, who were able and had the possibility to design with a truly holistic approach. For me, Sottsass is a real architect, as was Achille Castiglioni. They have had a special curiosity in approaching their work and have wanted to know – what you can do with granite and with schist, what the difference is between larch and beech and the difference between a Murano blown glass and one from Bohemia. This is the logic and the approach an architect learns. He is confronted daily with a wide range of problems and has to find new solutions."



This page: Side hotel

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Thun is fascinated by the material quality of things – “a reflection of my personal experiences with ceramics” – as well as with completed environments. He refuses to be categorised in stylistic terms or to specialise in particular project types, and is responsible for a wide variety of work ranging in scale from ambitious mountain-top hotels to shops and displays for Porsche, Missoni and Siemens, to coffee cups for Illy. He is currently working on an ‘invisible chair’, to be launched at the Milan Furniture Fair, eco outdoor furnishings made from bamboo, and more new mountain and nature resorts. “I try to follow a holistic approach to all my projects in more ways than one,” he says, “designing everything from the wristwatch to a bathtub to the hotel interior or the hotel architecture itself.”

For Thun, success is a joint achievement. “Interdisciplinary teamwork is what makes the difference, both to a career and to success in individual projects,” he says. “In my studio there are 40 architects, product designers, interior designers and graphic designers working together on a wide range of interesting projects and each department makes its own precious contribution.”

His personal mission statement is “a rejection of the designer ego and an attempt to create products and environments with a certain resonance and emotional quality” – “eco not ego” as he puts it, more succinctly. Modesty though has not stopped the accolades rolling in. Thun has been awarded the Compasso d’Oro for good design three times, was Spa Designer of the Year 2004, and was inducted into the Interior Design Hall of Fame, New York in December 2004. In 2005 he won the Worldwide Hospitality Award for the Best Hotel opened in the year with his design for the Radisson sas Hotel in Frankfurt, and the WWF’s Premio Panda d’Oro for his gravity defying, vertigo inducing Vigilius mountain resort.

Opposite: p1 disco-lounge club
Below: Missoni



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This page: Vigilus Mountain Resort

Thun clearly feels an affinity with mountain environments and has completed several resort projects in the Alps and the Dolomites. The Vigilus though reached new heights. The elliptical five star hotel is framed by terraces, has 35 rooms, 6 suites, a spa with an infinity pool, a restaurant, bar, conference room, library and lounge. It is perched on a plateau halfway up a mountain near Merano in northern Italy and can only be reached by cable car and one tiny winding mountain path, creating seemingly impossible challenges to its construction, though that seems to have been the least of Thun's problems in this case. "Building on the top of the mountains in South Tyrol is always complicated and dangerous," he says. "It is complicated from a logistical aspect, because we always have to be very concerned with not disturbing the environment. But the political and legal aspect is even more difficult, because laws for building in the mountains have not been adapted to the times."

Materials at the Vigilus are rigorously natural and with a strong emphasis on wood. Thun eulogises about the eco-sustainability of wood. He happily provides the scientific explanation for why wood is the only construction material with a balance to global warming of zero, due to the perfect life-cycle circle of its use from growth to combustion, and how, in Europe, the use of wood is less than its biological production so is a potential growth area of its own. In the Vigilus bedrooms, walls of heat-emanating clay are used to divide the bathrooms areas, creating both warmth and privacy; furnishings are in natural fibres in muted earth tones; and the view from the wooden bathtubs across the terraces is of perfectly unspoiled mountain nature. "I prefer natural, untreated materials above all others," says Thun. "They evoke a high-touch sensation, the guests feel the urge to touch and experience the materials and through this experience they become more conscious about the environment and about themselves."