

The Magis way

Notes on the publishing culture

by *Giampiero Bosoni*

Background to the story

A few years ago the editor of Domus magazine, Alessandro Mendini, approached me to write a regular monthly article for a column that we later decided to call “Blok Notes – Recensioni della piccola e media industria italiana” [“Notepad – Reviews of small and medium Italian enterprise”].¹ The idea, created together with Mendini, was to comment on the “design culture” of the most interesting firms, in terms of research and innovation, emerging among the new generations of furniture design entrepreneurs in Italy. The distinguishing characteristic that we chose for this column was to write it as if it were a “literary review” of the firms’ most recent “catalogues of publications” (the last three years), meaning, obviously, their company catalogues. The game in this approach was to “review” the object/product shown in the catalogue like a literary text, comprising a compositional and lexical structure (technique, materials, geometry, proportions) and an overall story (typological research and formal codes) in order to depict a range of qualities in an aesthetic and environmental “vision” belonging both to the designer/“writer” and, on another level, to the firm’s publishing strategy. In a nutshell, we “read” armchairs and tables like books which, paradoxically or curiously, might be compared to scientific manuals or adventure stories, or even epic historic novels: all works, great and small, gathered together into categories according to their specific profile.

The choice of companies was absolutely free, proposed by me and then reviewed together with Alessandro Mendini. Hats off to Alessandro for managing to push these articles through; they were 4 to 6 full pages long, and the magazine’s commercial offices were not at all enthusiastic. As regards the seven companies that we were able to present in Domus, it should be clear that I had no direct contact with them: the catalogues of the chosen firms were requested through the editor’s office, without specifying the reason. Thus, the companies in question only discovered at the last minute that they would find several pages of the magazine dedicated to their “publishing catalogue” – and the reviews we gave were not always entirely positive. Among the firms that I chose, one of the first was Magis, and again, their management neither saw me nor spoke to me on the phone for the purposes of my research.

The review format invented by Mendini and myself, and the interpretation I proposed as to the “vision” of Magis and its designers probably aroused some interest in the firm’s business culture, since its management, and particularly the founder, Eugenio Perazza, together with communications manager, Barbara Minetto, decided to call me to expand on that reflection regarding their latest “publishing” catalogue.

Introduction

To continue a little further with the theme of the “publishing metaphor”, it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves of a fairly obvious premise: behind every publishing programme there is always a publisher, who in our case is more than simply an entrepreneur focusing purely on the production and marketing side of things: the publisher is first and foremost a “chief designer”, with a personal vision of the world of objects that he or she wishes to produce, who interprets in a unique and personal way the scenario in which they are to be set. This scenario

is not so much just about the market, but rather, about a constantly evolving world of lifestyles, behaviours, habits and customs, that intersect and interweave to create new rituals, codes and expressions which, in the case of a furniture company, form new living spaces. Of course, the publisher's motivation also lies in conquering a slice of the market, but his deeper-seated aspiration, which goes on to become his true goal, whether or not he declares it openly, is to build a world of his own that will establish itself as a model of reference. Clearly, the designers make a valuable and essential contribution to this cultural project, especially if they interpret their work according to the definition often given by the great designer Enzo Mari (who also happens to be involved in the Magis world): "the designer's job is to implement the design brief. The higher the standard of the brief, the more pertinent and significant the designer's contribution can be."²

From this perspective, the founder and current CEO of Magis, Eugenio Perazza, has always viewed his role in the spirit of the publisher seeking "sharp minds" and "skilled hands", capable of giving shape to his vision of pleasant, practical objects for home life. The publisher's job is to establish an ethos, get the context into focus, and to reflect on these things together with the author, so that the latter can then use his or her own media and codes to express his or her own personal interpretation (which is always shared, discussed and debated). It is interesting to note that, just as a book publisher has the possibility to choose formats, bindings, paper quality and graphic supports (as well of authors, of course) and is therefore in a position to impress a cultural character on its production, and thus a commercial one too, so it is for the publisher of chairs and tables. By predefining certain typological aspects, identifying the materials to be used, eliciting the technological and production choices to be made, (both before and during the actual design phase, working alongside the designer

in question) he or she takes the position of "chief designer", laying the foundations on which to build the all-round excellence of the design.

When referring to the furniture world, the theme of "producer/publisher" also exposes a particular issue regarding the activation and management of production processes, following on from the conception and proposal phase and leading into the subsequent phase of marketing and final distribution. Having dreamt up the scenario within which to draw and have others draw a strategy made of shapes, expressions, codes and ways of generating her own "home design culture", the publisher must also identify and organize the necessary techniques and production processes, but they will not necessarily be found in-house, and indeed, they will preferably be sought, elicited and drawn in as a malleable and flexible external resource. This concept of an external production platform was one of the first points of innovation brought about by Magis way back in its earliest days, now some forty years ago.

The Magis way

We could say that the representation of Magis' production in its catalogue is like a clear collection of domestic tools. Different families of objects correspond to precise uses. The formal codes, while they may feature given aesthetic themes (be it a texture or an original "effect" in the material used), are still simple and specific in terms of their clearly-defined technical and functional characteristics: each piece also has its own poetic vein which is impressed like a fine thread into the strong weave of industrial design.

It is interesting to note that the publishing strategy of the Magis catalogue was first built around service items with a specific purpose, which could be used as folding stepladders or ironing boards as well as seating. Next it focused on the fundamental theme of seating, and developed a particular

attention for stools; later came tables and storage cabinets, and more recently, a number of upholstered pieces have also appeared, including sofas and chaises longues. It is rather as if a book publisher had started out by printing chapters of books to be distributed in instalments, then pocket books, perhaps a budget series that nonetheless includes a number of classics, and so on. The range published gradually became more and more diversified, in terms of both format and content, and it all seemed to be taking on an almost encyclopaedic, universal dimension. In the search for the right balance between a coherent production, rational functionality and the pleasure of using the object in question, Magis' design culture, with a "modest pride" typical of the best of modern Italian design, became an example of a path that has, so to speak, reinterpreted the meaning of contemporary living. Starting from the fundamental service areas of the "machine à habiter" (from the storeroom to the kitchen) it has gradually redefined the functional and representative tools of the entire domestic landscape, where rationality and the search for broad and varied hedonistic pleasures contribute to setting the stage for the life of the modern "homo ludens".

Alongside the many chairs, stools and tables in the catalogue, it is striking to see original brooms and clothes hangers, dish drainers and bottle racks, kitchen clocks and watering cans, umbrella stands and folding ladders, shopping trolleys and clothes stands, as well as a couple of provocative "off topic" items: a dog kennel and a bird table. And yet the different functional objects meet with the various families of furniture items in a natural and informal interplay of curious and unpredictable elective affinities. This has always been one of the "miracles" of Italian design: the ability to put together in the same workshop different authors with different "poetics", which (if well-coordinated within a strong, attentive and mindful publishing ethos) are then actually drawn closer together around

a shared publishing project that enables the various objects in the catalogue to interact naturally. The search for this quality of work has led the theme of individual furniture items to become emblematic of Italian design culture for the home. Indeed, as was clearly illustrated at the 1972 MoMa, New York, exhibition "Italy: the new domestic landscape", Italian design is above all about creating "environments", a response to the evolving lifestyles and behaviours that effectively "design" our ever-increasing, and increasingly variable, living space.

Magis' "writing"

For a publisher of multiples, the identification of the materials with which the author should work is undoubtedly a major factor conditioning the linguistic research in the narrative text, and is introduced through the production process. In this specific case (designer furniture, especially done the "Magis way"), the research leads us to discover a formal code, adopted by the designer to express an ideal perceptual/symbolic sense of what he proposes will be the most pleasant and practical way of using the object in question. Here it is interesting to observe that throughout the history of Magis, there have been eras marked by the prevalent use of specific materials, which we might summarily define as follows: the solid and melamine-faced beech era, the glossy ABS era, the filled polypropylene era, the polycarbonate era, the polyurethane era, the die-cast and profiled aluminium era, the rotational moulded polyethylene era, the stamped metal and solid beech era, the iron wire era, and the wrought iron era. Naturally, just as all eras in the history of civilisation have been marked by the use of certain materials (the bronze age, the iron age and so forth), the overlaying and integration of these eras is a constant throughout its historic development. Paradoxically, we note that in the history of

Magis, as time has passed, rather than chasing after hyper-innovation in its materials, as was initially the case, technological research has increasingly taken an interest in harnessing the combination of different materials. This is seen particularly in sophisticated hand-crafted details, recovering the techniques and processes of bygone days, such as wrought iron, a material that offers a particular expressive and empathic charge with a strong “poetic reaction”. But also in the case of carbon fibre “hidden” between the layers of plywood to ensure greater resistance and elasticity in the smallest possible thickness, we see significant evidence of that drive to use materials in an inverse or at least alternative semiotic key. From an industrial slant, the “dominant” sign becomes the construction detail derived from the lesson of things “well made” typical of Italian craftsmanship at its best.

This dimension of design once again harnesses the physical quality of hand-made pieces, and today it is the expression of a world that seeks to embrace the most coherent and sustainable ways of living mindfully on this planet, with which we need to find our way back to a harmonious relationship.

To this end, the industrial project that is Magis, with the encyclopaedic collection in its catalogue taxonomically divided into families, offers us a range of increasingly interrelated models that can contribute to developing a broad and sustainable culture of contemporary living.

Coming back to our opening considerations on the publishing value of a designer furniture collection such as the Magis collection, perhaps it is interesting to reflect further on the relationship between a design object and a literary work, by reading (in whatever interpretative key you choose) the illuminating definition given by the great semiologist Roland Barthes of the act of writing and of the literary value of a text. “Writing”, Barthes tells us, “is historically an action that involves constant contradiction, based on dual expectations. One aspect of writing is essentially commercial, a

means of control and segregation, steeped in the most materialistic aspect of society. The other is an act of pleasure, connected to the deepest urges of the body and to the subtlest and most successful products of art. This is how the written text is woven. All I have done is to arrange and reveal the threads. Now each can add his own warp to the weft.”³

Magis’ long and highly advanced experience has given evidence, further confirmed by this latest publishing catalogue, of an ever-growing awareness of this necessary interweaving between warp and weft, between the culture of craftsmanship and that of industry, between design culture and business culture, between form and technique, between symbolic codes and practical functions, between poetry and everyday life.

Giampiero Bosoni

Notes

¹ Giampiero Bosoni, *Blok Notes – Recensioni della piccola e media industria italiana*, in “Domus” n. 939-945, September 2010 – March 2011

² More often than not, Mari then continues by specifying that when the client has no idea of what to ask for or propose, other than the predictable expectation of a successful product, stringing together incongruous requests that essentially tell us, “I want a product that looks like gold but costs very little”, this is the ideal situation for the many “Donald Duck designers” with their artists’ hats on sideways, who use their brushes to create superfluous, self-important and conceited objects, suitable at best to ride the wave of fleeting fashion.

³ Barthes R., *Variations sur l’écriture* (1972), Editions du Seuil, Paris 1994, published in the second volume of the *Oeuvres complètes 1966-1975* (freely translated from the Italian translation, *Variazioni sulla scrittura seguite da Il piacere del testo*, Ossola C. (editor) Einaudi, Turin 1999).