

At Home in the World

DESIGN, WOMEN'S FASHION | By PILAR VILADAS | OCTOBER 12, 2010, 10:29 AM



SALONE DE MOBILE The restaurant at the W Retreat & Spa on Vieques Island by Patricia Urquiola. *Ruy Teixeira*

 FULL SCREEN

When did Italian design take over the world? Suddenly, it's everywhere: in hotels from Milan (of course) to Tokyo; in shops, restaurants and airport lounges; and even at The New York Times, where cutting-edge Italian furniture can be found throughout the building. At a time in which design has become more international than ever — provocateurs from the Netherlands, Japan and Brazil are just a few of the players who've shared the field in the last decade — Italy's reach is global.

And when you say "Italy," you really mean "Milan." It's the country's design capital, the place where every aspiring young designer heads in hopes of becoming a powerhouse. Italian design has many legendary, influential figures, like Alessandro Mendini and **Michele De Lucchi**, not to mention the firmament of departed greats like Joe Colombo, Marco Zanuso, Achille Castiglioni, Vico Magistretti and Ettore Sottsass. But among the most powerful designers in Milan today are three mega-successful people — **Antonio Citterio**, Piero Lissoni and **Patricia Urquiola**, a Spanish protégée of both Castiglioni and Magistretti who set up shop in Milan in 2001.

Tour the showrooms of the top-tier Italian companies, and these three are omnipresent. At this year's Milan furniture fair, for example, Urquiola's designs appeared at **B&B Italia**, **Kartell**, **Moroso** and **Axor** (a German maker of bathroom fixtures), to name a few. Lissoni has designed hotel interiors in Tokyo and Jerusalem. Citterio has designed furniture, most notably the lean, elegant Charles sectional sofa of 1997, which has inspired a thousand knockoffs. (According to Citterio, there is even a Chinese company whose Web site bears his name, although its copies are, of course, unauthorized.)

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What these designers have in common is a stylistic language that makes Modernism user-friendly. Their clean lines, precise details and knowing sense of fashion (a few years ago, it was coffee tables that hovered near the floor; now it's sprawling sofas suitable for a loft or club) make them shoo-ins for upscale condominium lobbies, where people want to feel comfortable as well as au courant. While it may be technically sophisticated, it isn't shocking or abrasive; it fits in anywhere. It's a kind of New International Style.

Italy's design supremacy, which was virtually unchallenged in the 1960s and '70s, and which took an odd turn in the '80s with the Memphis movement (perennially poised for a revival), seemed to have slipped in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when a kind of slick minimalism was the style of the moment. You couldn't remember which showroom you were in: didn't I just see that ultralow, nine-foot sofa at somebody else's space? And with the emergence of Dutch challengers like **Jurgen Bey**, **Hella Jongerius**, **Tord Boontje** and **Marcel Wanders**, or the Campana brothers from Brazil — all of whom subversively reimagine domestic archetypes — Italian design began to look a bit predictable. It was polished, in the tradition of the postwar masters, but it lacked their whimsy and quirkiness; it appeared to be all business.

But now, a decade into the 21st century, the balance is shifting. Maybe the global recession has brought design back down to earth — although the Dutch, and their educational methodology, have altered the fundamental ways in which we think about the dialogue between form and function — or maybe the Italians discovered that they can have their cake and squiggle icing on it, too.

Citterio's recent efforts include the ultraluxurious Bulgari Hotel in Milan and a Shaker-like wood stove for Skantherm, a German company, which brings the word "adorable" to mind and is the envy of any design aficionado who owns a weekend house. Three suites that Lissoni reworked at the Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai are filled with decorative touches like filigreed wood screens and Indian-tinged tile patterns; his multicolored glass table for Glas Italia looks good enough to eat. Urquiola, meanwhile, recently completed the W Retreat & Spa in Vieques, Puerto Rico. It strikes a colorful, casually hip, one-world balance between modern and traditional, industrial design and handcraft, and custom-made luxury and thrift-shop chic.

Projects like these are putting the fun back into Italian design. And the globalization and democratization of design are making their creators world famous. Design is no longer the province of an elite audience: thanks to people like Steve Jobs and Ian Schrager, anyone with an iPhone and an Ikea catalog has an opinion about it. Travelers are much more sophisticated these days, and high-design hotels are de rigueur rather than risky. Design has become an international marketing tool for the retail and service industries and for the designers who serve them, something that the Italian design world was quick to grasp. It seems counterintuitive now, when countries like China and India are poised to become giants on the world stage, but design-wise, we're all a little bit Italian.