

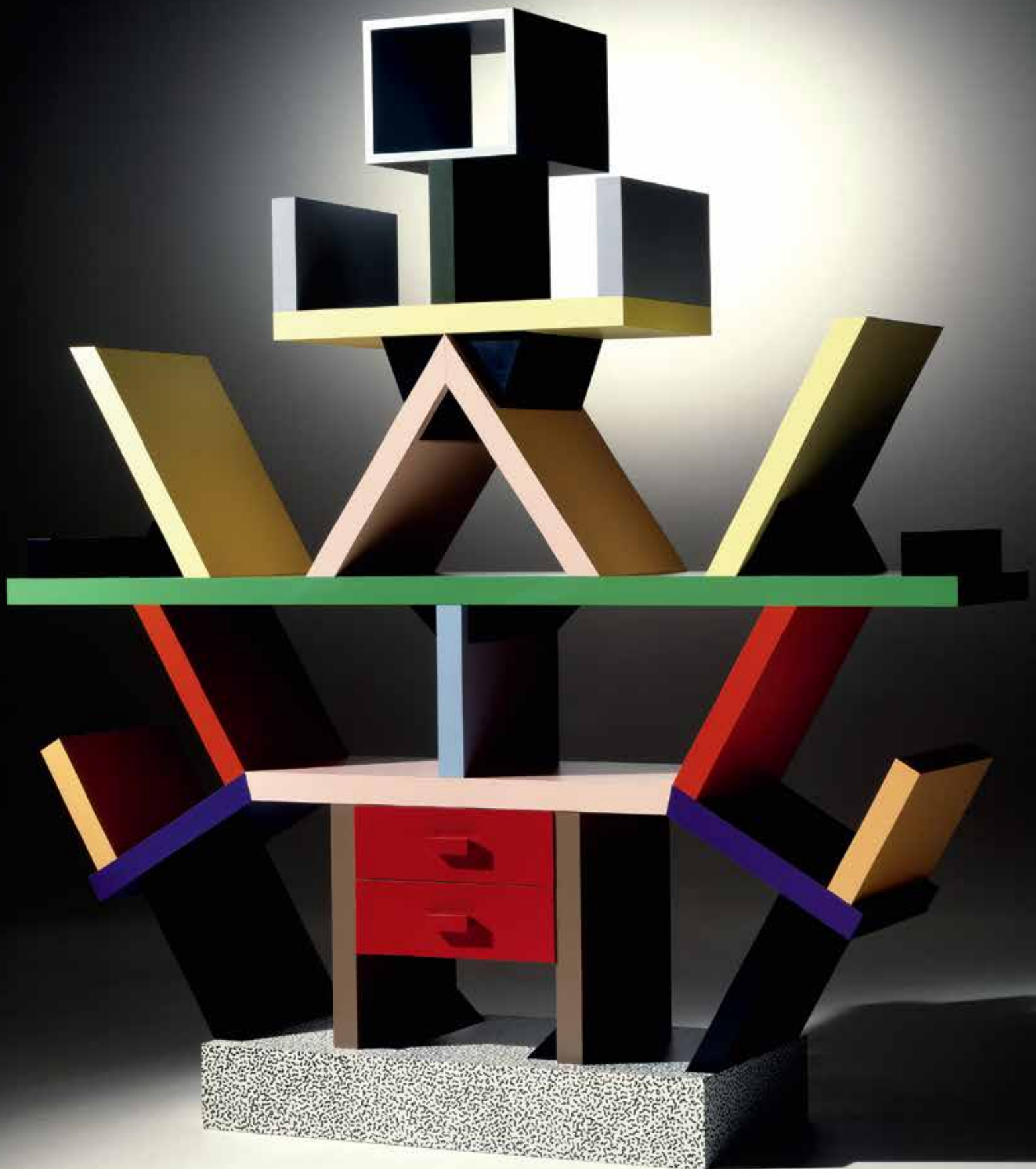
STORY **CARLI PHILIPS**



WALKING IN MEMPHIS

Challenging conventional ideas of good taste, the Milanese design movement defined the look of the 1980s with a riot of zany patterns, offbeat shapes and blockbuster colour. On its 40th anniversary, it continues to inspire

Above: **Members of the Memphis movement in the Tawaraya boxing ring; Ettore Sottsass (with moustache) is at rear, far right.** Opposite: **Carlton bookcase**



One cold night back in December 1980, a group of young architects and creatives gathered in the Milanese living room of the illustrious designer Ettore Sottsass. By the end of the evening they had sowed the seeds for a ground-breaking collective that would go on to shake up the conservative design world, rejecting the ideals of austerity in favour of joyful colour and rebellious maximalism. A ragtag bunch from all over the globe, they called themselves Memphis in honour of Bob Dylan's song Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again that had been playing on repeat in the background. They went on to meet for wine every Monday at the trattoria opposite Sottsass's apartment.

By September the following year, the provocative coterie had conjured up 55 imaginative and colour-saturated pieces spanning lighting, furniture and objects the likes of which had never been seen before: the Kristall pedestal side table, a lacquered box base on blue legs with a yellow plastic top; the Tawaraya ring, a wooden boxing ring bed with a tatami floor and silk cushions; and the Sacher hall closet with relief decoration, mother-of-pearl door and removable aluminium umbrella holders. Produced with the financial help of Ernesto Gismondi, a friend of Sottsass's and the managing director of Italian lighting manufacturer Artemide, Memphis debuted during the Milan Salone in September 1981 with a mind-boggling exhibition that drew thousands eager to see what the experimental group had dreamt up. It delivered; Memphis was a global overnight sensation. "You could feel that there was something in the air. Something was happening that would change design. There was a Tyrannosaurus rex on the invitation," reflected Sottsass's widow and the group's artistic director, Barbara Radice, in later years.

As much about an attitude as an aesthetic, Memphis flew in the face of the status quo that, until then, valued a more restrained sensibility. Its members, all of whom were in their twenties and thirties, saw an alternative to the rigidity of functionalism, putting forward an approach that considered the role of emotion and energy in design. "It was the beginning of the eighties, there was a general need to break the mould and get out of a certain rationalism and bourgeois respectability – and Memphis did [that]," says Alberto Bianchi Albrici, who purchased the Memphis-Milano brand and production rights from Gismondi after 10 years as its managing director.

Under the guidance of Sottsass who, in his sixties, already had an impressive oeuvre, Memphis pushed the boundaries, quashing accepted ideas of "good taste". Rudimentary forms were abstracted and synthetic surfaces decorated in a mash-up of zany squiggles and zig-zags. Materials were recontextualised; terrazzo, usually found on floors, was used for tables and sofas; cheap plastic laminate, traditionally used for kitchens and bathrooms, was incorporated into almost everything, from bookcases to chairs. It wasn't uncommon for luxe marble to be married with cheap fibreglass, rubber, lacquered wood, metal or cotton in a single product. The media didn't quite know what to make of it, and the collections were dubbed a "shotgun wedding between Bauhaus and Fisher Price". With its brash freight train of a palette, Radice echoed the sentiment: "Memphis colour is comic-strip colour, plastic colour, hotdogs, sundaes, artificial raspberry syrup colour. It is washed-out, cheap gouache colour, ridiculous colour, naive colour, third-world colour ... it is motel colour, suburban colour, five-and-dime colour."

Although he was fundamental to Memphis, it was just a moment in time for the Austrian-born Sottsass, whose prolific career stretched long before and after. A trained architect, he worked for George Nelson in New York and later for Olivetti, where he designed the Pop Art inspired cherry red Valentine typewriter (in 2016, an original sold at Sotheby's for £45,000). In the seventies, when he worked for Poltronova, Sottsass masterminded the iconic LED wavy pink acrylic Ultrafragola mirror (it has made a huge comeback this year, flooding the social media accounts of every model or interiors influencer lucky enough to find and afford



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– one). A leading figure in Italy's Radical Design movement, which experimented with anti-establishment and utopian ideas, he also launched Sottsass Associati, in 1980, an architecture and design practice that created showrooms for Alessi, Esprit and later, Milan's Malpensa airport.

Sottsass's ideas were deeply rooted in an expressive, sensorial approach largely cultivated during his extensive travels throughout Asia and India, where he developed an insatiable curiosity for traditional craft and spirituality. "To a Functionalist, the surface of this table is a geometrical square; to me, it's a piece of plastic, warm or cold," he said in a lost 2001 interview with art critic and historian Hans Ulrich Obrist. A writer, painter, theorist, photographer and ceramicist, Sottsass was the ultimate Renaissance man, firm in his conviction that artistic disciplines were a hybrid of creativity. It was a philosophy very much at the heart of Memphis too. When asked whether his preference was for architecture, product design or interior design, Memphis co-founder Matteo Thun responded, "No, it's all the same. I try to follow the lesson of Ettore Sottsass. [He] liked to [design] a coffee cup in the morning and a house in the afternoon."

With its playful irreverence and clumsy shapes, many questioned whether Memphis was satirical. In a candid interview with New York's Metropolis magazine, French artist and Memphis co-founder Nathalie Du Pasquier confirmed that while the concept was light-hearted and spirited, the objects themselves were deeply, thoughtfully considered. "Those patterns were not funny. It was totally misunderstood in the sense that it was taken for a joke – that the serious thinking was part of Modernism, and because what we were doing was in reaction against that, it meant we were not serious. The press thought we just wanted to have fun. But all of this was extremely serious to us. The ideas in our work were very serious in the sense that we thought they were important, and we deeply felt them. [But] it doesn't mean we were never laughing!"



Memphis was rooted in the idea that design should be a means of connection rather than esoteric elitism, and as such products were never released in limited editions

Clockwise from left: Cover of the Memphis Milano collection catalogue; historical images; invitation to the first Memphis exhibition, designed by Luciano Paccagnella; two pieces from Saint Laurent Rive Droite; MK Gallery Memphis Plastic Field Revised exhibition. Opposite: Big Sur and Oceanic

Memphis was rooted in the idea that design should be a means of connection rather than esoteric elitism and as such, products were never released in limited editions. Although they were manufactured regularly, production was expensive and Memphis failed commercially. Bianchi Albrici, however, believes there was another more significant factor at play. "I think the retail price issue never really affected the possibility of selling the pieces on a large scale," he says. "Compared to [Artemide's] huge turnover, Memphis was only a speck, something that had enormous cultural value but produced a paltry profit. Sottsass thought Memphis products should be sold on a large retail market, and for this reason he wanted to work only with common industrial materials, [but] it was immediately clear that they were extremely cultured products intended for museums or a small group of refined collectors.

"Even if it were possible to produce the Carlton [bookcase-divider] at the price of an Ikea bookcase ... this would not have greatly increased the sales. Like all Sottsass products, Carlton is far too conceptual, too sophisticated and absurd to be understood by everyone. You can find Memphis pieces in the homes of intellectuals and artists." This was apparent early on when visionary fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld bought one of the first collections for his Monte Carlo apartment. David Bowie, too, collected extensively over the years, with his Memphis pieces netting £1.3 million at a Sotheby's estate auction in 2016 (a Casablanca bookcase estimated to go for between £3000 and £5000 sold for £68,750).

Even though the group disbanded after just seven years (Sottsass left after five), its presence was momentous, influencing the look and feel of countless eighties films and graphics such as *Saved by the Bell*, MTV, *Ruthless People*, *Miami Vice* and *Beetlejuice*. Later, its aesthetic infiltrated the fashion world, inspiring the likes of Sergio Rossi, Adidas, Valentino and American Apparel. In the past few years, Memphis has charmed a whole new generation (@ettorestossass has more than 159k followers and is run by a young collector and curator) and earlier this year, Saint Laurent Rive Droite held a Memphis exhibition and ready-to-wear capsule collection that included checkerboard hoodies, squiggle motif shirts and multi-coloured leopard sneakers.

"[Memphis] stands for an approach to design linked to counter-culture, to subculture. It was edgy and played with an affirmative approach even though there was criticism," says Dr. Mateo Kries, director of the Vitra Design Museum currently showing *Memphis: 40 years of Kitsch and Elegance*, featuring the works of Michele De Lucchi, Martine Bedin, Peter Shire and others, all of whom are still active. "A lot of designers in creative industries today are looking for tendencies like that which show that design can also be a means of critique, of subversion, of radical expression. Memphis was that. So it's also an interesting role model for today."

Memphis's egalitarian roots mean that pieces are still available and ready to order, but vintage sites such as 1stDibs and Pamono are a hotbed of fans scrambling to secure valuable first editions. While Sottsass's design legacy is ubiquitous, the charismatic polymath – renowned for his hatred of hierarchy and love of women – was content with a more humble legacy. A few years before his death, when asked how he would like to be remembered, Sottsass replied in heavily accented Italian: "That's a nice question. I don't know. Like a good friend. For everybody. Maybe. And somebody, who through his work, can make somebody smile." ^(w)

