

# The last avant-garde

## Radical design in Italy 1966-1988

exhibition: 18 February - 11 June 2017  
Stedelijk Museum 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands

The exhibition *The last avant-garde* presents a survey of design in Italy in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. In these years design studios such as Archizoom, Superstudio, Alchymia and Memphis and designers such as Andrea Branzi, Ettore Sottsass and Matteo Thun developed a radical new vision of design and society. The architectural experiments, suggestions for utopian housing and playful designs they presented have lost none of their topicality. This is the first time that an overview of the last Italian avant-garde is presented in an exhibition in the Netherlands.

### Radical new vision

The Netherlands was introduced to Memphis design in the 1980s. The exuberant projects of this group of designers from Milan made an enormous impact: Memphis launched postmodern design in the Netherlands. This eye-opener in the Netherlands was in Italy the final destination of a development.

The first impulse of the radical Italian design mentality was in 1966 with the foundation of the Archizoom and Superstudio architectural practices. These design studios reacted to the major technological changes, the growing consumerism and the expansion of leisure. They concluded that modern life was freeing itself from traditional forms and functions as supermarkets, airports, enormous factories and technical systems make a new, efficient life possible. The new world is one in which indoors and outdoors, work and leisure flow seamlessly into one another.

This analysis of contemporary society led to the ambition to change the world into an open environment in which *homo ludens* would feel at home. The Italian architects thus extended their view to the design of meaningful spaces and products. Their research focused on issues such as good and bad taste, the role of history, mobility, technology and anti-technology, and the relation with outdoor life. They drew their inspiration from consumer culture and experimented with unexpected combinations of forms and materials.

### Design as playful signifier

The design of the Italian avant-garde in the years 1966 -1988 was characterised by an enormous diversity. The early designs were in line with the idiom and method of Pop Art and made use of new materials such as plexiglas, spandex, vinyl and foam. The designers deployed a delirious and ambiguous design strategies to criticise 'good taste' and the moralism of modern design.

The break with modernism resulted in the foundation of Alchymia in 1976 and Memphis in 1981. These internationally orientated design collectives presented a narrative, postmodern language of forms, expressed primarily in furniture and other utilitarian products. As the playful design of Memphis brought international recognition and commercial success, the radical and innovative design principles disappeared from view. The last important Italian design group Memphis was dissolved in 1988.

This seemed to mark the end of the utopian agenda of Italian avant-garde design, but the radical responses formulated by the visionary designers in the period 1966-1988 have continued to influence architects and designers down to the present, from the technological design of Apple to the 'value-free' architecture of Rem Koolhaas.

#### **First exhibition by new director Timo de Rijk**

*The last avant-garde* is the first exhibition by the new director of the Stedelijk Museum 's-Hertogenbosch, Timo de Rijk. He was Professor of Design at the universities of Delft and Leiden until September 2016.

Quotes:

*'The last avant-garde is a retrospective of the radical designers in Italy from 1966 to 1988. As a lover of design, I was woken up by the 1984 exhibition on Memphis here in this museum in 's-Hertogenbosch. It was the first exhibition on this influential design collective in the Netherlands. It was fantastic that something like that could be design.'*

*'The last avant-garde is also a sort of reassessment of our Memphis collection, one of the best in the Netherlands. What is still missing? What do we have from the preceding period? Taking its cue from an idea by Archizoom, the exhibition is designed as an endless space: a grid in which items of furniture and other objects, films and photo collages are placed. Most of the objects displayed have never been seen before in Dutch museums.'*

---

#### **Design in the Museumkwartier 's-Hertogenbosch**

The exhibition *The industrial nature of Kranen/Gille* from 11 February to 14 May 2017 in Het Noordbrabants Museum, which together with the Stedelijk Museum 's-Hertogenbosch forms the Museumkwartier 's-Hertogenbosch, virtually coincides with *The last avant-garde*. The two museums offer two complementary design exhibitions under one roof.

---

Not for publication - more information or press materials: [www.sm-s.nl/press/](http://www.sm-s.nl/press/) or contact Martijn van Ooststroom, marketing and communication: [communicatie@sm-s.nl](mailto:communicatie@sm-s.nl)



De Mortel 4 - 5211 HV 's-Hertogenbosch - [www.sm-s.nl](http://www.sm-s.nl)