IN CONVERSATION WITH

MATTEO THUN

A goliath of the design world, the multi-award winning Italian architect and product designer continues to break new ground in his field, while walking the fine line between innovation and sustainability

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COURTESY **MATTEO THUN & PARTNERS**

"WE APPROACHED DESIGN IN A DIFFERENT WAY, FINDING A NEW EMOTIONAL LANGUAGE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO UNIMAGINATIVE FUNCTIONALISM. WE WANTED TO BREAK THE RULES"

"Hello! Good morning, this is your morning!" greets a pleasant voice from the other end of the line. Even miles away, it is easy to instantly warm up to the friendly, genteel voice of this veteran creator. This is the appeal of one of Italy's leading architects, interior, product and industrial designers. His firm is the force behind some of the most celebrated buildings and objects globally – from the Hugo Boss business unit in Switzerland and the highly acclaimed JW Marriott Venice Resort and Spa, to the unexpectedly shaped Fantini Nice faucet and the ergonomic Zwilling Twin 1731 knives...there are few design paths he hasn't tread. Did we mention that he was also one of the founding members, along with Ettore Sottsass and several others, of the revolutionary Memphis Movement that sparked a reformation of the industry in the 1980s? Such is the impact of Matteo Thun in shaping the design world today.

A young Matteo would accompany his mother, a ceramic artist and father to the Venice Biennale every year – just one of the perks of growing up in a country steeped in arts and crafts. "I realised my flair very early in life and used to go with my parents to exhibitions. It was part of our everyday culture." Even as a kid, he didn't possess any ready-made toys – his mother would hand him a piece of clay and he would create his own playthings, essentially whatever caught his fancy.

The visionary's journey of growth began under the auspices of famed artist Oskar Kokoschka, who taught Matteo to "see". "He tutored me to capture people, faces, objects very quickly, focusing on the difficult parts of the face or body. It was a very good school for concentrating on the essentials." With such a solid foundation in place, the Italian was well equipped to take the fraternity by storm. As any young person full of fresh ideas and vitality coursing through, Matteo was distressed at how stagnant or frozen the industry had become in the '70s. He wanted to experiment with style and form, and felt constricted by the dogmas of the Bauhaus movement. At this crucial point he met the enterprising maker Ettore Sottsass and was instantly in awe of his approach to design. "He was constantly searching for innovative technical solutions and was influencing all segments of our work. He was an architect, designer, writer and photographer, the Michelangelo of the 20th century."

This admiration eventually led to Matteo becoming a founding member, along with trailblazers such as Ettore, Alessandro Mendini, Michele de Lucchi, Aldo Cibic, Nathalie Du Pasquier and more, of the Memphis Movement in 1981, which drew heavily from the American schools of Art Deco and pop art of the '60s and '80s. "We approached design in a different way, finding a new emotional language as an alternative to unimaginative functionalism. We wanted to break the rules." And break they did. When it was launched at Salone del Mobile, Milan in 1981, the police had to monitor and control the massive crowd that had gathered to witness the initiative.

However, he moved away from the group a few years later to establish his own architectural firm. "A manifesto only stays strong and sustainable when it exists for a certain time limit. So I decided to open my own studio in 1984 in Milan." His approach to architecture is singular and extremely reverential to the land. "We respect the genius loci or the soul of the place. We go to the site, analyse its spirit, cultural and historical background, climate, flora and resources. This determines our creative process. I often try to visualise ideas by doing water colours or freehand drawings." This enabled him to perfect his "triple zero philosophy." The first zero stands for zero kilometre. All the material for a project must be drawn from the site. The subsequent zeroes stand for no wastage and emissions.

Along with sustainability, Matteo is a strong advocate of handmade goods, which is reflected in the project he launched last year, Matteo Thun Atelier, where every product is customisable and focuses on handcrafting techniques. "They convey sensoriality and uniqueness. This is the key to beauty. Objects by craftsmen represent the idea of "Manus x Machina," a combination of man and machine central to the theme of today's technologies."

For an upcoming project for his eponymous firm, he is working closely with an Italian fashion textile producer and designer from Los Angeles (whose name is still under wraps) to use the same material for decor and fashion. "This is the first time we are collaborating and it is a lot of fun. I would also love to do a collection with Indian fabrics and create tableware in your country," he signs off. ◆

DESIGN PROCESS

Matteo Thun and his Spanish business partner Antonio Rodriguez try and understand the need of the manufacturer and analyse materials and technologies. They believe in "working closely together with the engineering team of the client to find long lasting solutions that people can understand intuitively." Their basis of creation and innovation is rooted in the simple question: How far can you push the boundaries of form without losing functionality?

Matteo Thun, Italy
Website: www.matteothun.com; www.matteothunatelier.com

MEMPHIS GROUP

This photograph captures the core founding members of the 1980s movement, which caught the industry's attention with its unusual forms and daring use of hues.

HUGO BOSS BUSINESS UNIT, SWITZERLAND
This glass, steel, concrete and larch structure by Matteo Thun & Partners completed in 2006 is also composed of prefab elements that allow cost cutting. The woven "basket" like timber exterior filters sunlight and controls ventilation

ELLE DECOR LOVES

STEP AHEAD

Matteo's creations have always had a future forward element in them, a lesson he internalised while co-spearheading Memphis

PRODUCED BY **TASNEEM MERCHANT**
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY **FRAHM, MARCO BERTOLINI, MATTEO THUN & PARTNERS, MEMPHIS and STUDIO AZZURRO**

TAM TAM

Imagined for Magis in 2002, these vividly coloured stools are actually inspired by the African tribal way of life. In fact, their deliberate low height signifies a closeness to Earth.

MATTEO THUN ATELIER

A great believer in the charm of handcrafted goods, he launched his own line, Matteo Thun Atelier at the Salone del Mobile in April last year. Each of the products on offer can be customised online. We especially love the series of Vasi da Colorare ceramic jars with its variety and choice of patterns.

NICE

Would you believe these knobs are actually water mixers? Matteo and his partner Antonio Rodriguez envisioned these flat faucets for Italian brand Fantini, which were launched at Salone del Mobile, 2016.