

60 seconds with Paola Navone

By Stephanie Oley

What first drew you to architecture and design?

Initially, nothing. I just wanted to travel the world, and to oppose the conservative career path my parents envisaged for me – teaching and engineering! But I eventually decided on architecture, and I became interested in utopian architecture movements such as Archigram in London and Archizoom in Florence, which were closer to the world of art than architecture.

Do you see any utopian architecture being constructed now – like the buildings going up in Dubai?

(Laughs) No – I think Dubai's architecture is realistic, not utopian, although I find it interesting. Architecture today is proving that lots of different styles can coexist – high-tech styles from Jean Nouvel, organic structures by Hadid and plant-shrouded buildings by Patrick Blanc, for example.

As a young designer, what did you first want to set out and change?

With Alchimia, [the 1980s avant-garde design group], we wanted to build an identity opposite to the design approach of that time. Structure had been seen as most important, and colours and paintwork least, but we conceived the decorative elements first. We also designed asymmetric furniture for the first time.

You've described yourself as an 'ethnic nomad'. Creatively, what has been the best thing about living in Hong Kong for the last 21 years?

I love Hong Kong's speed, energy and the willingness of people to try new things. Hong Kong is like New York on the water – it's the most interesting urban environment anywhere in the world.

What are your favourite things at home?

I love my functional kitchen, huge sofas, books and music. My Milan kitchen has an enormous marble sink, stainless steel benches, and shelves holding a collection of glasses from around the world. The sofas are the only things in my home that I designed – they're stretched-out versions of pieces I've done for Gervasoni or Casa Milano. I'm very curious. My home is full of pieces I've collected – antiques, flea-market finds, creations by young designers I've befriended.

You're known as a home entertainer. What are the essentials of a great gathering?

I cook simple Italian food, sometimes with dashes of Asian flavour. I don't have more than 12 or 18 guests at a time. I like people to be seated; I don't like it if they are walking around holding plates. I also love having a mix of different characters among my guests.

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You have a knack for creating new designs with classic references – tell us how you merge these styles.

I like combining opposites – industrial, classic, contemporary. For my recent outdoor furniture collection for Emu, [stately pieces in steel mesh], I needed resilient cushions, and stumbled on some vintage German camouflage knit fabric. It looks beautiful against the metal – like leaves.

What colours and materials are you into at the moment?

I'm loving cool colours – white, sea green, grey, light blue. With materials, I'm always mixing different things, especially timber, metal and wicker.

Is there anything you haven't designed yet that you'd like to try?

Kitchens! I'm a keen cook, so I'd design kitchens with functional features in stainless steel, marble and laminate, and decorative elements such as unusual tiles.

Where is furniture design headed right now – rustic and retro, or plastic and sleek?

Both. The future look is many different styles put together – people are more confident today, they have a lot of information about design and don't feel they have to follow one style 'religion'.

What projects are you most excited about right now?

I'm curating a project that involves eight young designers, who will create individual pieces to furnish an apartment without knowing any of the others are involved. It's top secret right now – look out for it in January '09!

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