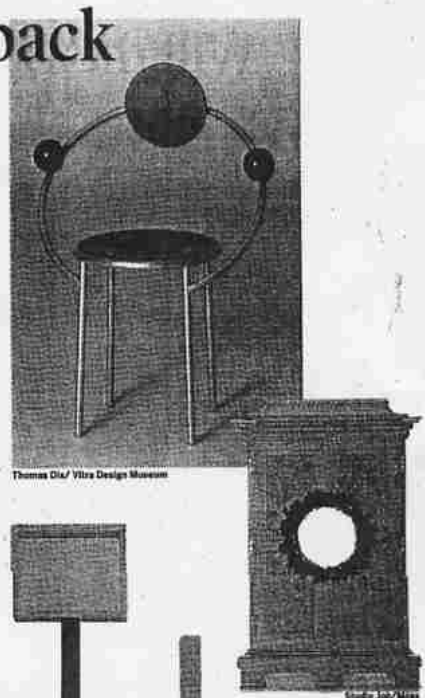


Love it or loathe it, Memphis style is back

Ettore Sottsass (top right corner) and other members of Memphis in 1981 sitting in a "conversation pit" designed by Massaroli Umeda to look like a boxing ring.



Memphis S.P.A.



Thomas Dia/Vitra Design Museum

Studio Job/Moss

By Alice Rawsthorn

LONDON

There were a couple of lessons for design buffs to learn from the last round of contemporary design auctions. One was that design, like art, is becoming vertiginously expensive. Another was that Memphis is back again.

Yes, Memphis. Remember the Milan-based group of designers and architects, who split the design world after their 1981 debut? There were those who loved the postmodernist wit

of their kitsch, colorful furniture, and others that loathed it. Like Diva, the De Lorean DMC-12, Bow Wow Wow singles and Betamax video cassettes, Memphis was then dismissed as an early 1980s blip. There still isn't a stick of the stuff in the design collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

All that's changing — MoMA's antipathy apart. Among the most sought-after lots at Phillips de Pury's most recent New York design sale were 1980s pieces by Ettore Sottsass and Andrea Branzi, both Memphis designers, and Alessandro Mendini, who was their chief collaborator in the Studio Alchymia design group during the late 1970s. All of Memphis's hallmarks — super-sizing, ditzy colors, gaudy patterns and cheesy motifs — were visible in the most directional pieces at this spring's Milan Furniture Fair. They will surface again at this week's London Design Festival. And cool young designers are suddenly citing Memphis and Studio Alchymia as inspirations.

"It's the wow effect," said Job Smeets, co-founder of Studio Job, the Dutch design duo whose Memphis-inspired objects often grace the windows of the Moss design store in New York. "When I open old Domus magazines and see those amazing pieces by Sottsass and Mendini, they seem so emotional and expressive. How were they able to think of those crazy shapes?"

Why does Memphis feel right again? Let's begin at the beginning. Memphis was cooked up in Ettore Sottsass's Milan apartment one night in December 1980, when the host, then in his 40s and a grandee of Italian design, invited a group of younger designers to develop a furniture collection to show at the following year's Milan Furniture Fair. It was to be a protest against the dry modernist style that had dominated design for decades, and they called it "Memphis" because Bob Dylan's "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" was on the record player, and the needle kept sticking (a common problem back in ye olden days of the 1980s) on the last three words of the title.

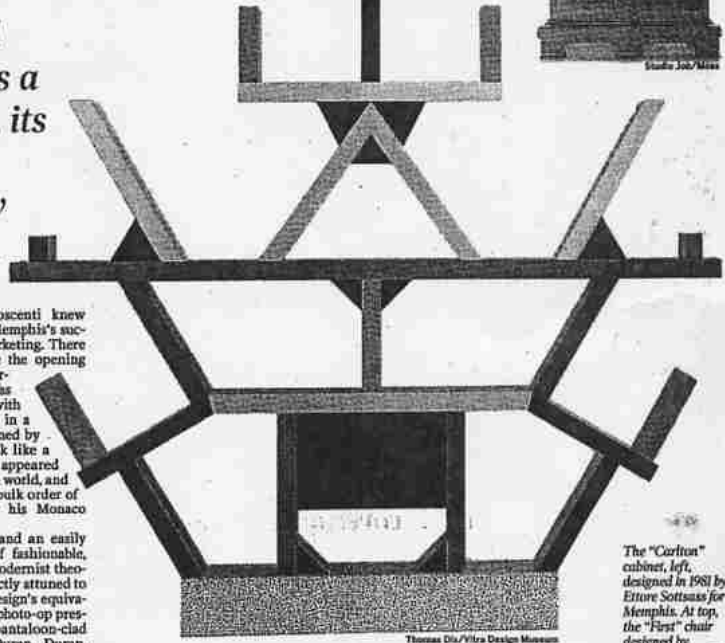
Eruberant, glittery and unashamedly kitsch, Memphis was everything that modernism wasn't. Studio Alchymia had done it all before, but

Dismissed by some as a 1980s blip, its color and kitsch now inspire

only the design cognoscenti knew about it. The secret of Memphis's success was its flair for marketing. There were long lines outside the opening party at the Milan Furniture Fair, and Sottsass posed for photographs with his young collaborators in a "conversation pit" designed by Massaroli Umeda to look like a boxing ring. That image appeared in magazines all over the world, and Karl Lagerfeld placed a bulk order of Memphis furniture for his Monaco home.

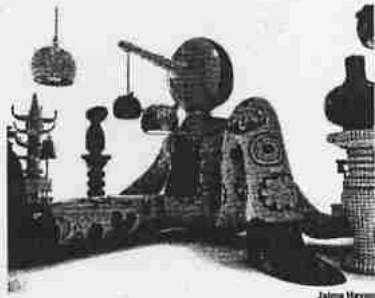
Showy, media-savvy and an easily digestible expression of fashionable, but often obscure postmodernist theories, Memphis was perfectly attuned to the early 1980s. It was design's equivalent of Ronald Reagan's photo-op presidency, and all of those pantaloons-clad New Romantics — Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet and Culture Club — preening in early MTV promos. But there was only so much leopard-printed plastic laminate that the design world could take and, by 1985, even Sottsass was bored by it. He quit Memphis, followed by most of his young collaborators.

The design pendulum then swung against PoMo playfulness, and back to rationalist restraint. Memphis's legacy lived on, not least in switching the media on to design, and vice versa. (Otherwise known as the "who cares if it's uncomfortable, look at all the great photographs" school of chair design.) It's impossible to imagine how subsequent design stars — first Philippe Starck, and then Marc Newson — could have risen quite as quickly without it. And even neo-rationalist diehards, like Jasper Morrison, who could never stomach Memphis's melo-



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The "Carlton" cabinet, left, designed in 1981 by Ettore Sottsass for Memphis. At top, the "First" chair designed by Michele de Lucchi for Memphis in 1983; and, middle, the "Robber Baron" cabinet, by the Dutch design duo Studio Job for Moss in 2007.



Jaime Hayon



Top, "Pinocchio" and other mosaic objects, 2007, by Jaime Hayon. Above, the Klaxons' album cover for "Myths of the Near Future," 2007, designed by Simon Taylor.

dramatics, have acknowledged its impact in convincing unbelievers of the importance of a conceptual approach to design.

But now Memphis is back, not just at the auctions, but in its influence on contemporary design. You could spot it in Marcel Wanders's giant replicas of ornamental porcelain bells at this spring's Milan Furniture Fair, and in the super-sized mosaic objects that Jaime Hayon exhibited there. You can see more hints of Memphis in the Day-Glo pattern of the Unfiled lamp that Karen Ryan is exhibiting at designers' block in London this week, and you'll pick them up again in the fantastical Robber Baron collection of objects that Studio Job is designing for Moss to exhibit at the Design Miami fair in Florida this December.

There is even a revival of interest in the original Memphis cast. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art staged a retrospective of Sottsass's career last year, and an exhibition of his recent

work opens this Wednesday as the inaugural show of the Friedman Benda design gallery in New York.

Memphis is back partly because design is currently going through another of its cyclical changes. Right now it is rebelling against the slickness of megabrands to chase the "emotional and expressive" qualities that Job Smeets relishes in the original Memphis pieces. Design is also searching for alternatives to the delicate neo-romantic style, which was fashionable in the early 2000s. And what could be better qualified for that than a reinvention of flashy, trashy Memphis?

The Memphis aesthetic even chimes with what's happening in pop culture. It is visible in the fluorescent colors worn by the New Ravers, who hang out at the London club, BoomBox, and in the gaudy graphics of SuperStar, the style magazine, and of acid house revivalist bands, like The Klaxons. And, let's face it, if ever an era was as showy and media savvy as the early 1980s, it's this one.

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More designs from the Memphis style.