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DESIGN

the india CONNECTION

The work of architect and designer Ettore Sottsass, founder of the Memphis group, has greatly influenced the design world. But it was Tamil Nadu's use of colour that inspired Sottsass himself

WRITER NONIE NIESEWAND · PHOTOGRAPHER VINCENT LEROUX



COLOUR BLOCK

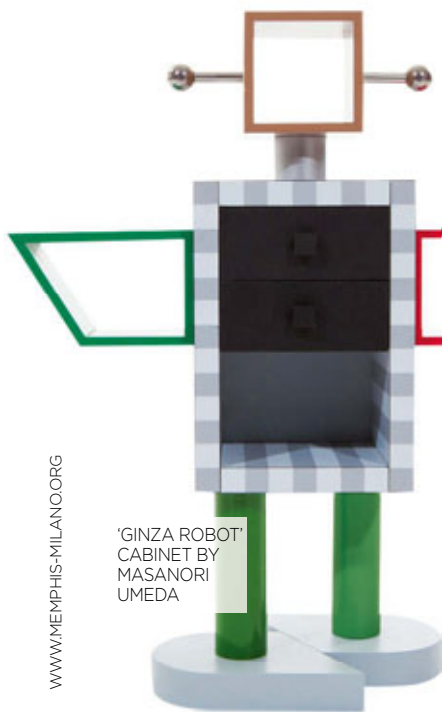
The houses in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu (seen here and on the following pages) inspired Ettore Sottsass's designs, like the 'Tahiti' table lamp with its red bill and yellow neck. Michele De Lucchi, a founding member of the Memphis group with Sottsass, designed the 'Oceanic' table lamp.



At a gathering of designers, in December 1980, a Bob Dylan record—*Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again*—looped at just the right moment. And giving it gravitas, the group leader, 64-year-old architect Ettore Sottsass found a name for the movement. The Memphis group's debut collection launched early in 1981 with outsized and weirdly shaped tables and chairs, and pots and lights as colourful as liquorice allsorts, challenging the boring predictability of the Modernist dictum that form follows function.

Memphis was an overnight sensation. Karl Lagerfeld snapped up pieces to furnish his Monaco pad even as their radical designs headlined as "a shotgun wedding between Bauhaus and Fisher-Price". Memphis had a profound impact on the design and architectural world—one that continues to this day.

No designer before had attempted to wrap up a bed as big as a boxing ring—looking just like >



'GINZA ROBOT'
CABINET BY
MASANORI
UMEDA

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< one with a black and white striped mattress fenced in behind ropes—as Masanori Umeda achieved with 'Tawaraya'. Size mattered: a forest of ceramic vases stood as tall as totem poles (Sottsass's 'Totem'), while a small pull-along light shaped like a hedgehog and bristling with bulbs was as playful as a child's toy ('Super Lamp' by Martine Bedin).

Sottsass's own designs are today the most recognizable. Towering at 196 centimetres, his ziggurat of bookshelves called 'Carlton'—made of medium-density fibreboard laminated in lemon and coral, blue and green—stacks horizontal, perpendicular and angled surfaces above two red drawers at the base. It looks haphazard, but is based on a logical system of equilateral triangles supporting both slanted and flat shelves. His 'Casablanca' cabinet, a TARDIS-like tallboy of speckled leopard patterned laminates, turned storage into eye candy. His two table lamps—"Tahiti" with its red woodpecker bill and long yellow neck, and 'Ashoka' with prongs and corkscrews like forked lightning—cast new light upon the workplace.

Bored by its success, and the groupies, Sottsass ended the Memphis group in 1987. Its influence was far greater worldwide than its commercial success. Few sold more than 50 pieces, but today—over 30 years after its inception—editions are revived by

manufacturers like Kartell, while original pieces still go on sale at Design Miami in Miami and Basel, and art galleries still showcase Memphis. The most recognizable piece by Memphis, 'Carlton', is still sold in the Memphis Milano design shop for €12,230.45 (about ₹9 lakh).

Just where such original ideas originated to change the way we slept, ate and sat was a mystery until 26 years later, when the inspiration came to light: India.

INSPIRED DESIGNS

Taken while travelling in Tamil Nadu in 2013, Vincent Leroux's photographs for *AD France* reveal the influence of the colourful and playful houses in the south Indian state upon Sottsass and the Memphis movement.

Sottsass first visited India with his wife Fernanda Pivano in 1966, invited by chemical firm Montedison to design a trade fair stand. On that first trip, the 44-year-old Sottsass fell in love with India. He was to return time and time again.

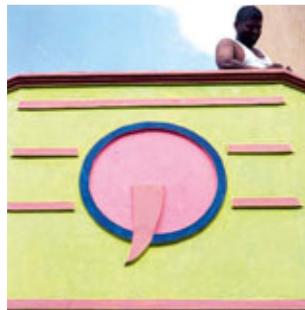
A monograph—simply titled *Sottsass*—by Philippe Thomé (Phaidon, 2014) quotes his second wife, Barbara Radice, saying, "Ettore found India because he needed India. He looked for it and found it instinctively as animals sniff the air and go to water." A portrait taken in 1988 shows him in his shirt sleeves and wearing a rakish turban, on a cane chair rigged up high on scaffolding,

with the Deccan plains unfolding way down below him.

Early on, a visit to the mountainous temple town of Tiruvannamalai in the southern state of Tamil Nadu was to become a major influence. One of the five elemental cities of Shiva—here, the god is worshipped in his fire incarnation—Tiruvannamalai swells every full moon with pilgrims, priests, sadhus and devotees on a purifying ritual at the Arunachaleswarar Temple. In 1964, three years after that first trip to India, Sottsass paid homage to Shiva in a series of ceramic plates called *Offerta a Shiva* (*Offering to Shiva*).

As important as his discovery of Shiva was the impression made upon him by the construction of some of Tiruvannamalai's houses. Walk east from the Sri Ramana Maharshi ashram down the rocky hills and across a few avenues where robotic lights punctuate the landscape like triffids with a crazy interweaving of power lines, and you will find the houses Leroux photographed.

On a street bustling with autorickshaws and cows, children and hawkers, two-storeyed houses built in the 1940s sport crazy cut-out collages on their facades. Plunging balconies, zigzagging stairs, semi-circular capitals atop columns (as ornate as an Odeon cinema of the 1930s) conceal the traditional layout of rooms and a courtyard kitchen within. Painted in the ice cream colours of >



art *Imitates Life*

Parallels can be drawn effortlessly between the shapes and colours of the Memphis group's most memorable work and the houses of Tamil Nadu

< art deco, special effects like the grid of fine white lines battened across a rose-pink facade then polka-dotted in purple could be considered tantric art. Even the traditional carved screens designed to catch the breeze, elongated and framed in green, become decorative.

FOR THE LOVE OF COLOUR

As much as the shapes that were pieced together, it was colour that caught the designer's eye. In a chapter of his book *The Curious Mr Sottsass*, subtitled 'Photographing Design and Desire' (Thames & Hudson, 1996), Sottsass writes: "Colour keeps us company in the cosmos, occasionally reminding us of our existence. When colour fades as in the dark world of Gilgamesh, when nothing remains but dust and your mouth becomes parched by the dryness of that dust, then there is no colour and there is no life either." Its frontispiece is a home he photographed in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu in 1978. Frostily lit by a fluorescent tube overhead, a rose-pink room divider is panelled with amber and blue glass. A pink wall is accentuated by an emerald green dado, and its dark green floor inset with cut-out squares and triangles in lime green.

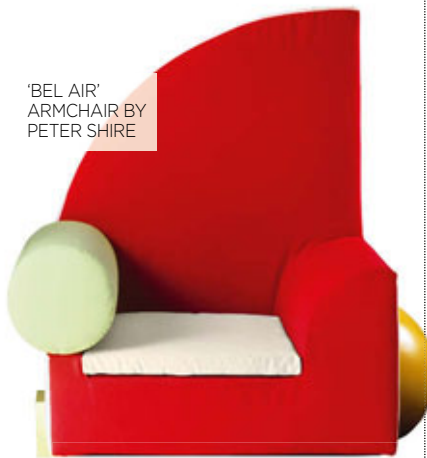
In 1992, I met Sottsass in the artist Piero Fornasetti's Milan home, surrounded by Fornasetti's designs—biscuit jars covered with Siena's architecture in black and white, his Mona Lisa winking from a dinner plate, a leopard stalking across a cabinet. Fornasetti had recently died and Sottsass gave his friend an endearingly fitting epitaph: "He explored the idea that maybe there are messages and information behind the pleasures of putting up structures," which could well describe his own approach.

Aged 75, with a silvered ponytail, he posed for a picture on Fornasetti's 'Sun' chair, decorative, crafted, so different in design from the stainless steel orbs swinging around steel hoops on the 'Satellite' chair in his own Memphis collection. Asked if he liked the 'Sun' chair, he answered shortly, "Yes." Why? "You want to know everything, but you will never find all the answers," he said brusquely. "Things always contain mysteries. But if you insist, first of all I like the sun; it's the symbol of life. And with the sun comes colour. Normally Fornasetti's work is black and white and I particularly like this sunny yellow. It's optimistic. And I like the shiny lacquered surface and the structure, which is quite simple."

It was a good answer, but after that put-down I never did get to ask the maestro for his follow-up to Memphis. ♦



'CARLTON' BOOKCASE BY ETTORE SOTTASS



'BEL AIR' ARMCHAIR BY PETER SHIRE



'LIDO' SOFA BY MICHELE DE LUCCHI



'CASABLANCA' CABINET BY ETTORE SOTTASS

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