
House & Home**Clearly inspired**

APRIL 1, 2010 by: Emily Backus

A small, white plastic cup of espresso sits by my side as I write. It is thinner than an eggshell and I was not even conscious of paying for it as I tapped the button of a dispenser for my coffee. I will toss it in the bin within minutes. Cheap, disposable plastic objects are so omnipresent in our lives it is easy to be blind to what plastic can become in good hands. “It is a perfect material,” says designer Piero Lissoni. “It is a marvel with all the incredible configurations it makes possible. It offers extremely high quality at a reasonable price.”

Plastic can take nearly any shape, consistency and colour. It can be rigid, spongy or pliable. It can be opaque or transparent, shiny or matte, colourful or colourless. It can scream artifice or imitate natural materials. It is lightweight, strong and modestly priced: high-end plastic chairs sell for €100-€200.

Lissoni, who works with leading design companies such as the Italian furniture maker Kartell, says the material can be an environmentally sound choice as well: many pieces today will last a lifetime and are recyclable. “The problem with plastic is that it is used in a violent way,” he says. “Proper use requires extremely high investment [by the maker], otherwise it immediately becomes vulgar.”

Design leaders find the hurdles increasingly worth leaping, as cognoscenti and the market now embrace plastic fusions of technological and aesthetic frontiers. Refined and challenging pieces are being commissioned from the design sector’s best and brightest talents, not only by plastic specialists such as Kartell, Magis and Heller but contemporary design names such as Driade, Moroso, Zanotta, Flou, Cappellini, Vitra, Flos, Edra and a surprisingly rich fold of emerging players.

Claudio Luti, Kartell’s president and owner, reckons his business has multiplied by a factor of 15 or 20 since the mid-1990s. His company will launch 15 new products in 2010, although each typically requires a couple of years and hundreds of thousands of euros to develop.

Yet not too long ago fine plastic was a contradiction in terms. Luti remembers the first products he developed in the late 1980s with designer Philippe Starck. Luti had just bought Kartell, having proved his entrepreneurial mettle by helping a friend from military service, Santo Versace, guide his brother Gianni’s fashion house from attic operation to international phenomenon. In fact, Luti liquidated his stake in Versace to buy Kartell, a pioneer of quality plastic design since the 1950s. But he then faced an apparent paradox: he was a luxury retail executive tackling a sector dominated by cheap, flimsy patio furniture.

“Sidewalk cafés were full of plastic chairs so cheap they were sold by weight, not by the piece,” recalls Luti. “Plastic furniture makers reasoned ‘the less material, the lower the cost [of production]’.”

Even quality plastic design had largely atrophied and had become *déclassé*. Manufacturing innovation had not kept pace with changing tastes, which no longer favoured the space-age, shiny, brightly coloured and rounded artificial forms popular in

the 1960s and 1970s. Design cognoscenti focused on artisanal, not industrial production. Luti turned to Starck to launch a drive to revitalise plastic.

“Starck told me: ‘It has to have an appearance that no one has seen before. No one should even understand what material it is made of,’” Luti recalls. The designer wanted something soft and matte, with sharp corners, thick and ergonomic slabs of material, and muted, pastel hues. After much experimentation Luti and Starck found they could achieve the desired consistency if they mixed in talc – the stuff of baby powder – to make up 20 per cent of the material. The result went into production in 1988 and became a pivotal, best-selling stool and chair series, aptly named Mr Glob and Miss Global.

Luti was soon ushering other design stars into his fold, such as Antonio Citterio, who revolutionised the plastic food trolley, and Vico Magistretti, who came up with bold new chairs of his own. Ron Arad’s meandering Bookworm shelf came out in 1993. Other Kartell collaborators included Patricia Urquiola, the Bouroullec brothers, Patrick Jouin, Lissoni and Marcel Wanders, to name a few.

“[Kartell] really invented the genre and led it for the past 40 years or so,” says Gareth Williams, senior tutor of design products for the Royal College of Art and former curator of 20th-century furniture at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

But in the past 10 years Kartell has also pioneered new sales channels that have fuelled the explosive popularity of its latest domain, notably through the use of transparent polycarbonate, a material so strong it is used in riot shields and bulletproof windows but is difficult to manufacture since it cracks easily in the drying process.

Kartell began opening flagship stores in international city centres in 1997, five years before it introduced its wildly successful Louis Ghost chair, designed by Philippe Starck, which ushered in a wave of distinct, jewel-coloured pieces that exploit polycarbonate’s resemblance to glass. Kartell’s pieces are now conceived in part to make eye-catching window displays and facilitate impulse purchases.

Kartell’s latest elaboration of the transparency theme is Starck’s Ghost Buster, a 16kg piece uniquely heavy for its genre, which will debut at this year’s furniture fair in Milan. Also new to production is Bloom, a lampshade in which hundreds of tiny, crystal-like flowers crowd to form a stove-hat-shaped lampshade, designed by Ferruccio Laviani.

The new collection from Magis, perhaps Kartell’s closest rival, features further innovation: a new production method to insert a complex, monochromatic pattern inside a polycarbonate shell, with a visual effect resembling layered glass; a material called Pet derived from recycled water bottles and, from next year, products made of a new biodegradable, recycled material called liquid wood. “Since the [economic] crisis, consumers want to consume less but better,” says Eugenio Perazza, founder and chief executive of the 34-year-old firm. “Object bulimia is over.”

And as plastic continues to break old moulds at an extraordinary pace, sometimes – as in the case of MGX by Belgium’s Materialise – it is doing away with moulds completely. MGX makes lighting and furniture by applying lasers to vats of powder or liquid polymer in a process it describes as 3D printing. What emerge are graceful, intricate, limited-series pieces free of limits on form and often inspired by fractal patterns found in nature, such as flowers, trees and crystals.

“[Plastic] has won the battle. It is here to stay,” Williams says. Yet he still sees an area begging for mastery.

“Wood and leather can improve with age. Plastic comes out as pressed perfection but no one has figured out how to make it age well. It gets worse as it gets marked and worn.”

Perhaps the next frontier could be plastic that seasons.

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