Springer Series in Design and Innovation 37

Francesca Zanella · Giampiero Bosoni · Elisabetta Di Stefano · Gioia Laura Iannilli · Giovanni Matteucci · Rita Messori · Raffaella Trocchianesi *Editors*

# Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design

## Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives

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## Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives

Springer

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# OBJECTS

# Anonima Castelli. Objects, Design and Cultural Heritage

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**Abstract.** Anonima Castelli's historical archive is an interesting resource for studying the industrial production of furniture in Italy between the 1950s and the 1980s.

This article aims to illustrate a preliminary study for a research project dedicated to the archive and the historical production of the Castelli company. The drafting of the research hypotheses was preceded by a few educational experiences carried out as part of the Degree Course in Design at the University of Ferrara, organised in collaboration with the company; these experiences confirmed how worthwhile these archival sources were for inspiring the creative process.

The thesis asserted here is that, as well as historicising the phenomenon of Italian design based on documentary sources, company archives are also able to encourage the revival of production processes with the aim of re-issuing the objects present in historical catalogues.

This way, the original project designs become documents that are useful both for historians and for designers and entrepreneurs interested in making these "memories" operational again.

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage · furniture design · project archives · archival sources · reenacting · re-issue

## 1 Design as a Cultural Heritage Asset

The relationship between design and *cultural heritage* can be investigated through two directions of research: one regarding the contribution that design disciplines are able to offer in terms of safeguarding, protecting and promoting architectural, artistic, environmental and many other types of cultural heritage; instead, the other considers design itself, its culture and history, as a public asset to preserve and promote. As the editors of the special issue of "MD Journal" dedicated to *Design as cultural heritage* [1] have emphasised, Italy has a significant cultural deposit made up of a multitude of project archives, design collections and museum study centres, the preservation, study, cataloguing and promotion of which allows us to initiate processes that can pass on knowledge.

The positive effects can occur on several levels.

The first level is cultural: the collection, documentation, study, and circulation through publications, public conferences and exhibitions, of the historical events in

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Italian design promotes greater collective awareness of the aesthetic quality and technological innovation that industrial society, with its creative, productive and commercial culture, has been able to generate in a particular historical period. The collective imaginary of Italian design should also be considered as part of this cultural heritage: not only the international circulation of its image, but also what settles in the collective memory and becomes, as claimed by George Kubler, "A visible portrait of the collective identity (…) This self-image reflected in things is a guide and a point of reference to the group for the future, and it eventually becomes the portrait given to posterity." [2].

In this regard, exhibitions have played a special role. As was highlighted by many case studies illustrated over the course of the most recent conference of the Association of Design Historians (*Design displayed: exhibiting history/the history of exhibitions*), [3] institutions and designers' preservation of historical documentation on design exhibitions, their study and (when possible) re-enacting, constitutes a practice that preserves memories useful for documenting the social meaning and importance of certain objects over time [4].

The second level of the effects is industrial. One of the characteristics of historical Italian design companies is the production of "*long-selling"* products: objects designed over half a century ago that are still present in sales catalogues, and are periodically updated with regard to regulations, production (and in part, aesthetics), using the original project documents. In this sense, the initiatives recently promoted by companies such as Cassina or Nemo with the archives of Charlotte Perriand and Le Corbusier should be considered as significant, despite not being without limits or contradictions. In this case, with the goal of motivating certain aesthetic choices in the re-issue of furnishings and lighting fixtures, the companies carried out a philological investigation based on the documents present in the LC Foundation archives [5].

But in the historical archives of Italian companies and designers (many of whom are no longer alive), there are also projects preserved that the companies never produced, and which they would like to put back into production. An interesting example, in this sense, is the re-issue project carried out by a few foundations in Milan (Castiglioni, Albini, Magistretti) to return certain historical pieces to their catalogues, with a comparative study of the original designs preserved in the archives of the same foundations, and those at the companies, or, in some cases, putting into production old designs never produced before.

The third level of interest is educational, and involves the possibility of using design collections and archives to stimulate learning processes in the field of design, in particular in the university context.

## 2 The Anonima Castelli Company

In order to briefly contextualise the history of Castelli, it is necessary to distinguish three periods. The first involves its founding in Bologna at the end of the 1800s, and its development up until the 1930s as a cabinet-making workshop. The second runs from its re-establishment in 1939, with the name Anonima Castelli, until the mid-1960s. The central figure in the company's rebirth was the founder's son, Cesare, who, in partnership with Gianni Caproni – the brilliant Italian aeronautics entrepreneur – brought to life

a new company for mass-produced furniture: after the Second World War, the brand started to specialise in the office furnishings sector. The company adopted the strategy of competing in large international public contracts that allowed them to produce in large numbers, albeit in limited series (Figs. 1 and 2).

**Fig. 1.** Comparing an original drawing of the archive with an original object of the collection

In 1965, upon the death of Cesare Castelli, his son-in-law, Giulio Ponzellini (1915–2011) took over control (along with Cesare's children) of an ambitious, innovative industrial project that would lead the company to become a market leader in Italy in the 1970s and 80s (along with Tecno) in the production of office furniture, with a notable presence on the international market as well. Starting in the 1960s, the business strategy focused on direct sales, with the opening of single-brand showrooms.

An important role in guiding Anonima Castelli towards the field of design was played, famously, by Giancarlo Piretti (1940), a designer who is still professionally active today [6].

Trained at the Bologna Academy of Fine Arts, and joining Castelli as a designer at a very young age, his creations in the 1960s and 70s helped the company to establish itself in the field of contemporary industrial products for the office and the home. Piretti was the designer, among many objects and systems, of two masterpieces of Italian design: the DSC 106 chair from 1965, characterised by the use of curved plywood and aluminium die-casting; and the Plia chair, produced starting in 1969 in millions of models, characterised by its aluminium hinge and the use, for the seat and the backrest, of Bayer's Cellidor, which gave the technicians a lot of grief in the development of its production.

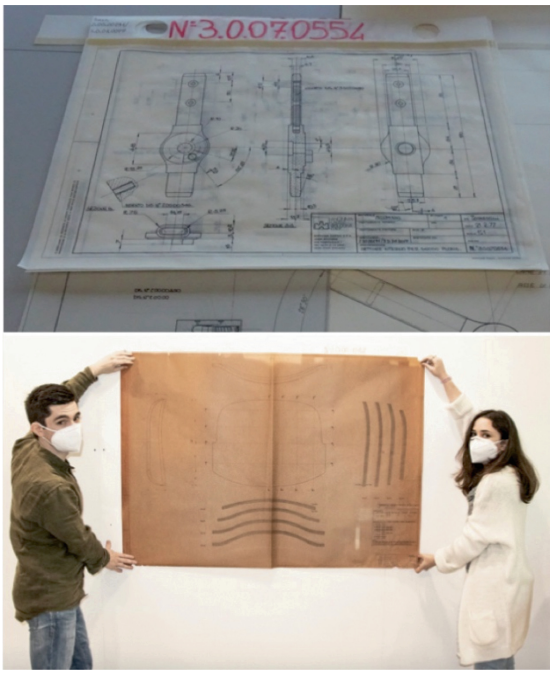


**Fig. 2.** Students shooting original drawings to study and redesign.

As well as the objects designed by Piretti in his years working for the company, Anonima Castelli has produced pieces designed by many other designers: the Box chair by Enzo Mari; the Superstudio modular systems; the office furnishing systems by Hans Pert and Richard Sapper; the innovative system of Vertebra seats from the partnership of Piretti and Ambasz; the Penelope mesh chair by American Charles Pollock.

As we are now marking the 50th anniversary of the MoMA exhibition, *Italy: the new domestic landscape* (which opened in May 1972), it is worth remembering the contribution provided by Anonima Castelli for the creation of the display towers of the *roof garden*, which housed the exhibit of "domestic design" (in the three categories of "conformist", "reformist" and "contestative"), objects which were less celebrated than the famous eleven environments, but were ultimately what circulated and sold on the international market [7].

Without dwelling here on the fate of *product-oriented* Italian family companies, which is narrated in full by the other Castelli (Giulio, the founder of Kartell), along with Paola Antonelli and Francesca Picchi, in the book *La fabbrica del design*, [8] let's just say that, after complex corporate problems that saw its ownership pass into the hands of American *holding companies* (as also happened to another Bologna-based company, Gavina), Anonima Castelli was bought in 2015 by two young Italian entrepreneurs, Enrico and Edoardo Pavan.

## 3 From the Archive to the Market: Current Production, Educational Experiences and the Research Project

Compared to the size it reached during the years of its impressive growth, today Anonima Castelli is a small company, and its mission is focused on the re-issue of items from its historical catalogue.

The production and re-issue is supported, in terms of operations and business, by two elements:

- a historical archive of project designs that are actively used, despite not yet being digitalised;
- a historical collection created with pieces collected from their current owners through purchases at auctions, from collectors and on the online market.

The collection covers the time frame of half a century, starting from the 1940s.

We could claim that – since it is based on a comparative study of the vintage designs and the pieces in the collection – from a certain point of view, this operation of production and re-issue is guided by a philological approach: at the same time, it is supported by dialogue with some of the company's historical suppliers and prototypers, who still have a good level of *know-how* with regard to certain processes.

For the entrepreneurs and designers at Castelli one of the main problems involved in the re-issue is the search for technologies suitable for contemporary production systems. They are often forced to adopt solutions that are less "industrial", and in certain ways more artisan, than those used in the 1970s, when the Plia chair was produced in tens of thousands of pieces, using specialised, dedicated machinery. Today, production amounts to a few thousand pieces per year.

The study of the historical collection sometimes requires the dissection and destruction of the sample. This work has allowed them to understand that in the 1968 version, the structural core of the Alky armchair was made from steel plates fixed to the frame with springs, which today are replaced with an elastic material similar to Nastrocord, embedded in polyurethane foam.

Motivated by scientific interest in Castelli's historical archive, as the Design School at the University of Ferrara, we have established a relationship with the company, which has engaged us in a series of educational activities and initiated certain research hypotheses.

In 2021, two teaching workshops (one as part of the bachelor's degree course in Design and one as part of the master's degree in Innovation Design, at the University of Ferrara) focused on the topic "from the archive to the market", using Anonima Castelli as a case study.

The course carried out as part of the master's degree followed the specific theme of the re-issue and updating of certain historical pieces that were no longer in production, according to modern-day needs: the Effe and Elle series of seats in wood and metal, designed in the 1950s by the first technical and artistic director, Antonio Nerozzi; the Platone and Pluff table and seat combination, the Axis system and the 61 system, all designed by Piretti in the 1970s; and the Box chair by Enzo Mari [9]. For each of the historical pieces involved in the proposals for re-issue, Anonima Castelli made the archival documents (primarily executive designs and catalogues from the period) and the pieces from the historical collection available to the students for precise investigations and

surveys. During the integrated course, the students were guided by four teachers with experience of design problems, industrial production processes, marketing and economic evaluation of products: the re-issue project involved all these aspects [10]. In particular, as the master's course was carried out in collaboration with the Unimore Engineering Department, the students were able to make use of the Enzo Ferrari Engineering Department laboratories in Modena, led by professor Francesco Gherardini.

The topic of the course carried out as part of the bachelor's degree was a project for an educational exhibition, dedicated to the historical Anonima Castelli collection, to be displayed at Palazzo Tassoni Estense, the seat of the University of Ferrara Architecture Department. In this case, the design workshop, led by the author of this paper, was accompanied by a course on design theory and criticism held by Professor Elisabetta Trincherini, which, in particular, guided the students in the historical research and the curatorial approach to the exhibition.

To stimulate the students to gain a direct understanding of the objects to be exhibited, a study day was organised at the University of Ferrara where entrepreneurs Enrico and Edoardo Pavan and designer Alessandro Zanella presented numerous pieces from the historical collection to the students in detail, which had been brought to the lecture hall for the occasion.

Various groups of students also went independently to the suppliers to document the production processes.

Indeed, the goal of the exhibition had to be to stimulate understanding of the cultural significance and technical and production quality of Italian design, through the display of pieces from the historical collection and designs from the archive.

As a teacher on both courses, I was able to observe how the students were noticeably stimulated by the study of archive materials and visits to the company and some suppliers; the results of the courses seem to have also been significant for the company, and I hope that this has repaid them for their willingness to allow the students to have direct contact with the items in the collection.

Having direct physical contact with the objects, for example touching with your hand the sad fate of the crumbling foam in the stuffing, understanding the relationship between the project design and executive problems, mouldings etc. was highly educational.

Because, as Pier Paolo Pasolini (who we remember on the centenary of his birth) maintained, you can forget what your teachers, your professors teach you, but not what things teach you [11].

At the same time, some guidelines were prepared for a research project (which we hope to develop starting next year) focusing on rewriting the history of the objects produced by the company between the 1950s and 70s, based on oral and archival documentary sources. Three types of sources have been identified:

_ oral sources
_ archival sources
_ objects

Regarding the oral sources, a preliminary study was launched in 2021, with interviews carried out with former technicians and designers involved in the projects developed by the company in the 1960s and 70s. Despite being aware of the historiographic problems regarding the use of oral sources [12], the purpose of these interviews is to

preserve memories (technical, organisational) that would otherwise be irretrievably lost. The various contributions will be used to create a map of production experiences, which we believe will be useful, in particular, for the reconstruction of the operational context and the production processes that allowed these famous objects to be brought to life.

By way of example, in one of these interviews it emerged that in the pre-production phase for the Plia chair, the moulding tests for the backrest and the seat made from Cellidor – cellulose acetate produced by Bayer, chosen for its crystal clear transparency – reached a deadlock. Once it was made, the backrest would crack close to the point of injection. Neither the designer, nor the production technicians, nor Bayer, who supplied the material, were able to find the solution to a problem that almost led the Castelli company to abandon the project. A solution was found thanks to a plastic materials representative who suggested heating the mould at the point of injection. This story may appear insignificant compared to the chair's commercial success, but it demonstrates how Plia would not have seen the light of day without the collective contribution of skills, typical of the context that has created the best works of Italian design.

Regarding the sources stored in Anonima Castelli's archive, the production files and executive designs, which are the only project documents preserved, are of particular interest.

Until the middle of the 1960s, in the production of furnishing items and systems, the project design generally consisted of an axonometric representation, detailed in intent (for example, the direction of the grain of the wood was indicated), but technically undefined in terms of construction. Under the leadership of the heads of carpentry, the model makers translated these "formal intentions" into "real" scale designs on sheets of white plywood, with thicknesses, joints, veneers and hollow cores all indicated. Unfortunately, these models have now been lost.

In terms of the executive designs created with ink on tracing paper, it is worth noting that they still have significant advantages over the digital representation used today, among which are the immediacy of interpretation and the feeling of a "real" object. Another advantage is that the oldest prototypers still know how to read them, and are able to create a model from them, and then a mould from the model.

Other items of great interest are the technical and commercial catalogues, along with the colour charts, which document the original types of upholstery materials or the shades of paints.

A few catalogues from the 1950s are accompanied by sketches of interiors with various situations at work (probably the work of Nerozzi), and they demonstrate the particular sensibility the Castelli company had in its understanding of the office world and its needs, also in terms of organisation of space.

The catalogues from the 1970s, with their sophisticated illustrations, show Anonima Castelli's ability to interpret the emerging markets for domestic furniture and collective spaces, and their need for space and limited resources. They communicated with a young audience, with products such as Plia, Platone, Pluff, Alky and System 61.

Another resource is architecture and design magazines, whose articles, editorials and advertisements constitute a very interesting source of information. A project to scan numerous advertising editorials in the magazine "Rassegna" is currently being started.

Finally, the objects from the collection. With a forward-looking vision, after acquiring the company, Enrico Pavan began to collect many historical pieces from Anonima Castelli's production dating from the 1940s to the 1980s, from collectors, auctions and online sellers.

The collection, which has grown over time, is now made up of over 60 pieces that constitute study material for the re-issue projects. There are also copies of pieces produced in the *Far East* in violation of copyright laws, which are interesting nonetheless, for comparative analyses with the originals.

The intention of this research is that the collection should be photographically documented and digitally transcribed through processes of reverse modelling.

The research project proposes developing a historical and critical investigation that focuses on two goals:

– cataloguing the documents with the aim of digitalising the archive with Linked Open Data;
– a publication that reconstructs, starting from the history of the projects and their production, the events and the context of collaborative design at one of the most important Italian furniture design companies.

Through the study of this varied collection of sources, we expect that it will be possible to grasp the effort made by an Italian design company in tangibly addressing the themes and problems of mass production, and understand how they built, and continue to build a "value chain" that allows many objects designed half a century ago to keep their iconic power alive in the collective imagination.

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3. The 5th conference of the Italian Association of Design Historians, Design Displayed: exhibiting history/the history of exhibitions was curated by Fiorella Bulegato, Maddalena Dalla Mura and Gabriele Monti. The proceedings are in the process of being published: Bulegato, F., Dalla Mura, M. Monti, G. (a cura di), Design esposto: Mostrare la storia/La storia delle mostre, atti del V convegno nazionale AIS/Design (Università Iuav di Venezia, 26–27 novembre 2021), AIS/Design – Università Iuav di Venezia (2022)

4. The reenactment of historical exhibitions is the revival of a past exhibition that allows visitors to relive the experience of an event, which can only be partially understood from photographs. In recent years, the Achille Castiglioni Foundation has reproduced various small exhibitions created by the Castiglioni brothers between the 1950s and 1980s, in the spaces of Piazza Castello (curated by Beppe Finessi and designed by Marco Manzini)
5. With the name Cassina, we are referring to the colourful re-issue of the Cassina Perriand armchair and sofa, and with Nemo, to the Le Corbusier lamps. In this regard, see: Scodeller, D.: Nemo. Le lampade di Le Corbusier. Luce & Design **2**, 8–9 (2017)
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9. Today, the Box chair copyright is held by Italian design company Driade
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