

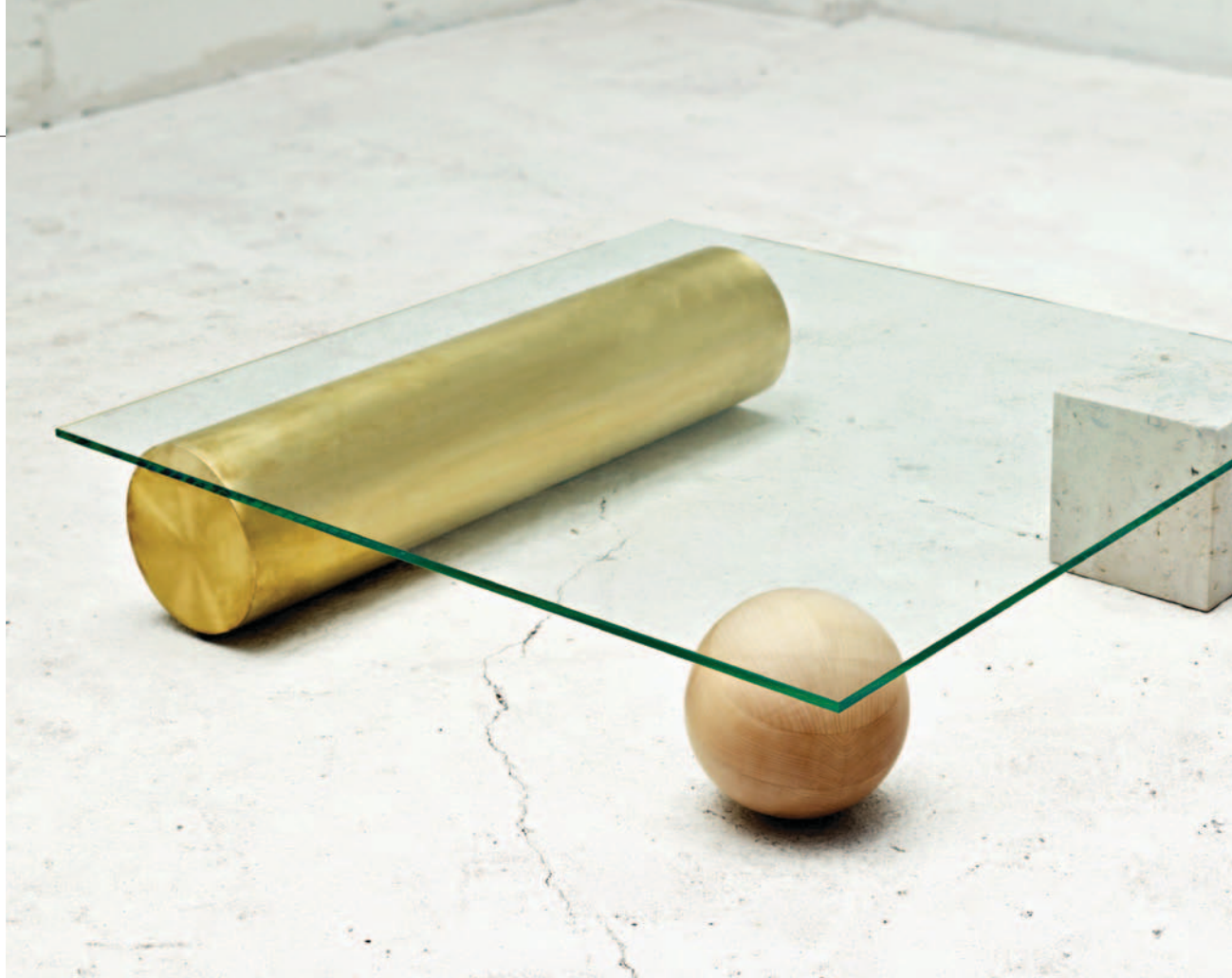
In September, the opening of the Victoria & Albert Museum's major retrospective exhibition, *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion*, sparked a media frenzy. Focusing on one of the most outlandish and visually offensive cultural movements, the show has got everyone talking. Stephen Bayley writes in *The Architect's Newspaper*: 'Immediate impressions? How very bad so much of it is: a revived chamber of horrors.' Yet visitors are still arriving in their droves. Love it or hate it, postmodernism is still a prominent force across our culture and its qualities crop up increasingly in contemporary design.

Prompted by austerity, designers are recreating postmodern aesthetics as a form of escapism. Sleek minimalism and endless tones of beige have been ousted in favour of eclectic interiors, shabby-chic decoration, vintage style, faux classicism and impractical furniture that makes a statement.

To coincide with the V&A show, Stuart Jeffries wrote an article in *The Guardian* entitled *Postmodernism: the 10 Key Moments in the Birth of a Movement*. One of these 'moments' includes the birth of 'late capitalism' in 1973, when two recessions led to the collapse of Fordist industrial production and the increase of short-term contracts and international outsourcing. Jeffries describes this movement as 'post-structuralism'. Fast forward to 2011 and many comparisons can be made between our current recession-bound era and that of the late 1970s. While most furniture design brands, as seen in Milan in April, cast their nets wide with understated aesthetics and more adaptable, usable designs, some are daring to be bolder.

It was in Milan in 1981 that the Memphis design collective was born. Led by Ettore Sottsass and including designers such as Matteo Thun and Michele De Lucchi, Memphis drew influences from pop art and art deco and intended to be the antithesis of modernity. The original Memphis catalogue featured now iconic pieces such as Sottsass's *Casablanca* sideboard and De Lucchi's *Flamingo* table (pictured on p19) — brash, kitsch and fun designs characterised by bricolage, geometric shapes and candy colours.

Washington DC-based Atelier Takagi created the *Bluff City* light (pictured opposite) for US brand



IT'S ELEMENTARY

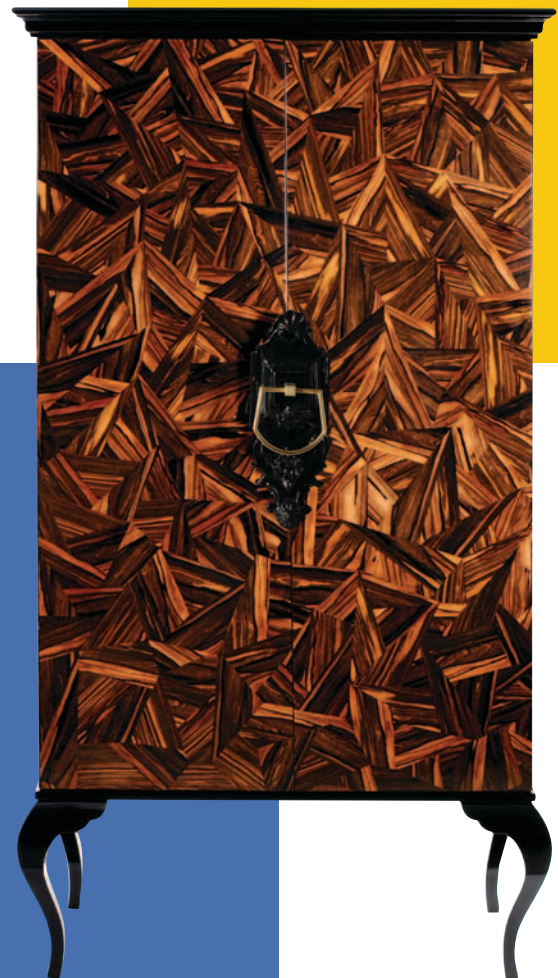
Above: the use of shapes in Faye Toogood's *Element* table echoes postmodern ideas

OLD MEETS NEW

Right: the Guggenheim armoire from Boca do Lobo combines a traditional form with exaggerated pattern

FORM OVER FUNCTION

Below: Bateye's *Silhouette* sideboard fuses different pieces of furniture for purely decorative effect



Roll & Hill in 2010. Its industrial steel cage and copper-plated detailing — combined with the sugary, polished colours — are reminiscent of the pieces produced by Memphis, hence the light's name (Memphis is known as the 'bluff city'). 'The postmodernism ideals of rebelling against stark and cold minimalism is something that I might channel,' says designer Jonah Takagi. 'My work is relatively minimal but there is always an element of playfulness and individualism that has a foot in Memphis. In fact, I named the Bluff City lights after Memphis, Tennessee, because, while I appreciate the movement's ideals, I found their work to be a bit over the top. The Bluff City lights are as close as I am getting to Memphis.'

He continues: 'When I think of postmodern design, I think laminate, totems, animal prints and squiggly lines. Totems are definitely in style these days. While I am not a huge fan of postmodern design, I am a fan of what they were trying to do and what they had to say. It was very subversive and punk.'

Faye Toogood's Element table (pictured opposite), launched as part of her first collection in 2010, represents a chic, 21st-century evolution of this concept. Its sculptural use of shapes and its varied materials (especially concrete,

a favourite of radical early postmodernists such as Ron Arad) could arguably have been influenced by the movement.

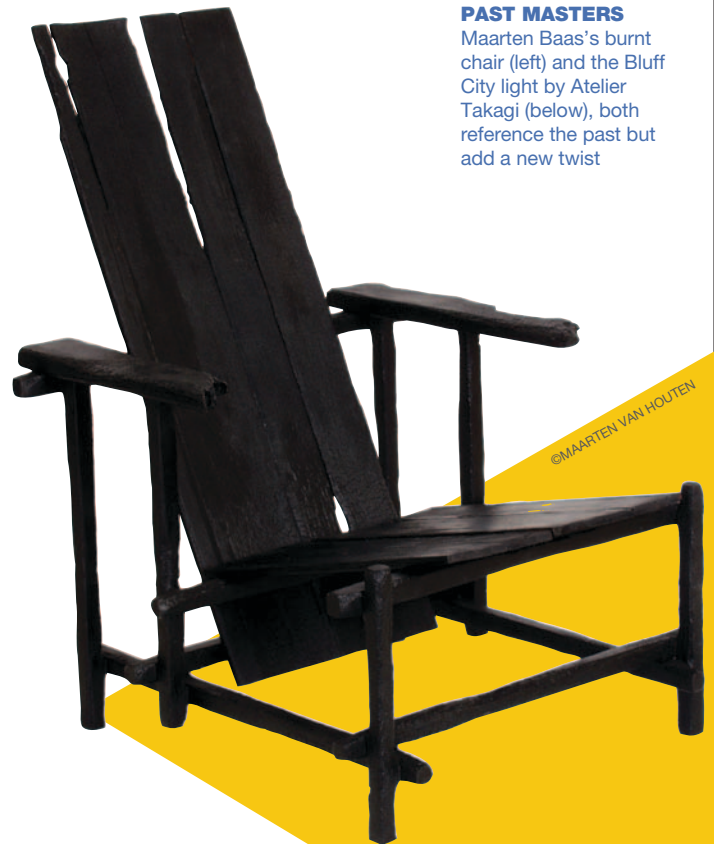
An equally notable first collection is Note Design Studio's Marginal Notes (pictured on p22), which enjoyed a very successful launch at the Stockholm furniture fair earlier this year. It features a spectrum of bright colours, playful details and illogical shapes that intentionally



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PAST MASTERS

Maarten Baas's burnt chair (left) and the Bluff City light by Atelier Takagi (below), both reference the past but add a new twist



© MAARTEN VAN HOUTEN

Pure Exhibitionism

Playful, quirky, subversive and of questionable taste, postmodernism was a reaction to austerity, which is why its aesthetics are relevant today

Words JENNY BREWER

MUSEUM PIECES

Left: the V&A's exhibition Postmodernism — Style and Subversion is pulling the crowds and dividing the critics



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reference postmodern ideas. 'Our focus was to make a collection that showed the joy of creating and let the function of the objects become secondary to expression,' the Note team explains. 'In this process, playing was important. Postmodern design played an important part in history because, in contrast to modernism, it welcomed everybody and showed us that the term "taste" is not objective but subjective.' According to the Scandinavian designers, the style is increasingly popular now because society has become more individualistic and design is expected to project personality.

This is an ethos echoed by eminent British architect Terry Farrell in his recent book, *Interiors and the Legacy of Postmodernism*, published by Laurence King. The book features a stunning portfolio of home, museum and workplace interiors with an overriding theme of eclecticism.

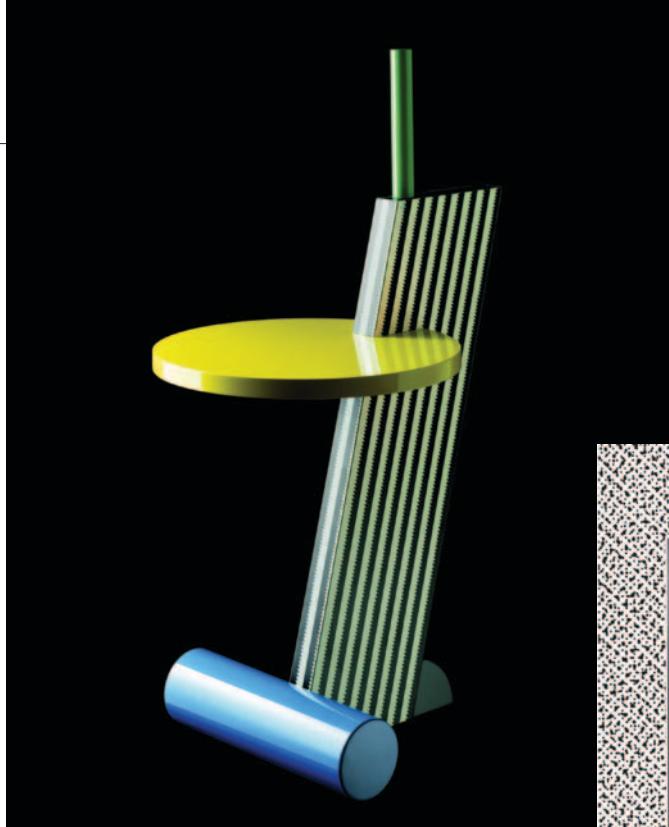
Farrell writes: 'One of the dramatic characteristics of a Postmodern era is the tolerance of different tastes, the idea that homes, interiors, cities are a product not only of a historical variance over time, but also personality types and taste types.' He explains that if modernism celebrated form following function, postmodernist design did the opposite by reacting to its surroundings,

applying new function to buildings and using their 'as found' attributes in new ways. In residential design, it also meant incorporating products and imagery that represented their context and owners. 'This sense of the context of place, of identification with the city around a building, is part and parcel of the postmodern notion of buildings as place-makers,' says Farrell. 'We have moved from the modernist concept of the designed object to a looser notion of a place that must be adaptable, allowing a series of occupants to make their mark on it over time.'

Farrell's architecture is known for referencing classical styles and giving them a modern twist, which is emblematic of postmodernism. In the same way, many of Boca Do Lobo's furniture pieces (such as the Guggenheim armoire, pictured on p16) have traditional forms that are styled with exaggerated patterns and colours.

French designer Lisa Vanho's fantastical furniture (see the Giraffe chair on p22), balustrades and screens resemble baroque woodcarvings with a surrealist twist. The decorative and cartoon-like creatures are depicted in painted white aluminium.

'I am pleased to be considered postmodern because there is plenty of fantasy in my style,' says Vanho. 'I love the art of abundance that is rich in history, inventions and imagination. There is a difference between postmodernism and what I do: the objects of the postmodern focus on one thing, a material symbol, while



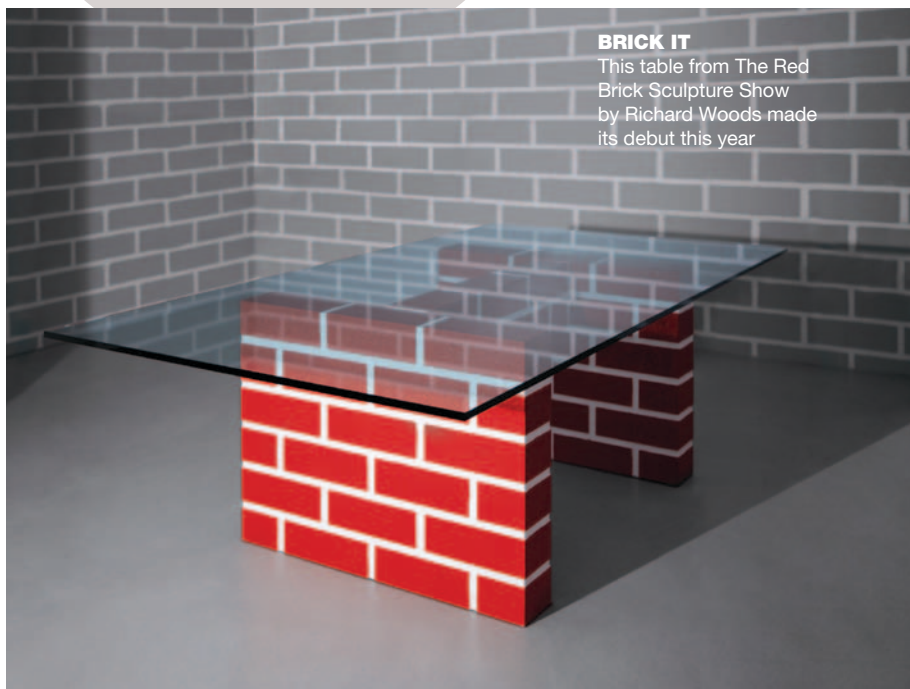
MEMPHIS BELLES

Michele De Lucchi's Flamingo table (left) and Ettore Sottsass's Casablanca sideboard (below) both appeared in the first Memphis catalogue in 1981



KITSCH CUPPA

Left: architect Michael Graves created the playful Tea and Coffee Piazza for Alessi



BRICK IT

This table from The Red Brick Sculpture Show by Richard Woods made its debut this year

my objects tell stories. What I like about postmodernism is the total freedom of form, the humour and the gaiety.'

Baroque styling can also be seen on the Proust chair, originally designed by Alessandro Mendini in 1978 for Studio Alchymia, a radical design group (which he cofounded) that preceded Memphis but shared its postmodern ethos. Mendini was one of the primary Italian designers during the 1970s and this iconic chair is part of the V&A's exhibition, although its success continues today. It is now sold by Cappellini and Mendini's redesign, Proust Geometrica (pictured right), was launched in 2009. He also designed the Byblos Art Hotel Villa Amista in Verona for Cappellini. Giulio Cappellini, the brand's art director, believes the spirit of postmodernism is ever relevant. 'The main visual feature of postmodernism was surprise, not platitudes and the perfect balance of form, materials and colours,' he says. 'The movement instigated a real revolution compared with rational design and, though it is less prominent than it was in the 1980s, its influence is still present. The colours, shapes, details, decorations of today's products would not be such if it weren't for postmodernism. And the concepts of decorum and giving joy to the consumer are still very much alive.'

Maarten Baas took a more brutal approach to historical reference with his Smoke collection, which made its debut at his graduate show at Design Academy Eindhoven in 2002. Baas took well known pieces of furniture, such as Gerrit T Rietveld's Red and Blue chair (pictured on p17), and burned them, giving them a new quality.

Taking a familiar image or idea and giving it new meaning is a strong postmodernist theme. In the foreword to the book that accompanies the V&A exhibition, museum curators Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt say: 'Postmodernism was both an extension and intensification of some aspects of modernism, and a conscious departure from it. Moreover, its practitioners consciously played these two aspects against one another.'

In many ways, architecture paved the way for postmodern product design and, with many architects turning their hand to design, architectural reference was common. Architect Michael Graves created the Tea and Coffee Piazza for Alessi — a small city on a tea tray — which is made to order by the company. He also designed the hugely successful Alessi 9093 kettle, which features cartoon imagery and pop-art influences. In contemporary design, SanPatrignano's Up cabinet, shown at Milan's Salone del Mobile in April, takes its form from New York skyscrapers, reaffirming the postmodern influence with splashes of bright colour and commercial imagery. In a less direct way,



ABSOLUTE 80S

Fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld in his Monaco apartment, furnished by Memphis, in 1981

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

Right: the Proust Geometrica chair from Cappellini updates a design from 1978

ON THE UP

Below: SanPatrignano's Up cabinet takes New York's skyscrapers and commercial imagery as its inspiration



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FLIGHTS OF FANCY

Above left and centre: architect Terry Farrell designed this postmodern family home in Kensington with Charles Jencks. Above right: Farrell's transformation of Upwood House in Cambridgeshire adds pop art colours to a classical scheme.



TAKE NOTE

Left: Note Design Studio's Marginal Notes collection was launched at this year's Stockholm Furniture Fair.

the Silhouette sideboard, launched at this year's Decorex by Portuguese company Bateye, aims to mimic a skyline. It fuses together sections of different pieces of furniture — for the sake of decoration rather than function — and its cut-and-pasted textures could arguably refer to postmodern aesthetics.

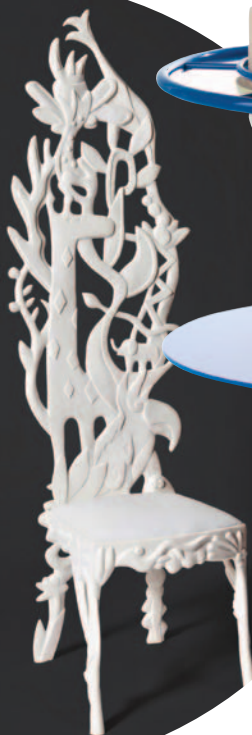
Memphis (now rebranded Post Design) celebrates its 30th anniversary this year and, although most of its original designers have achieved stardom away from the collective, it continues to produce work such as the recent Richard Woods collection, The Red Brick Sculpture Show (table pictured on p19).

At this year's Pavilion of Art and Design London, renowned contemporary design gallery Friedman Benda displayed a never-before-seen collection of Sottsass's ceramics and furniture to much interest. The V&A's spectacular showcase of the era's crazy and colourful history has drawn attention to the fact that postmodernism still has a strong influence on contemporary design. As Adamson and Pavitt say: 'Exhibitionism was a defining characteristic of postmodernism.' In reaction to a recession-fuelled surge in functional, practical products, more and more design is being made simply to be looked at. Although its ideas have evolved, postmodernism remains a resource of impractical and fun concepts that defy convention. *idfx*

Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990 is running at the V&A until 15 January 2012. www.vam.ac.uk

Contacts

»Alessi www.alessi.co.uk
 »Atelier Takagi www.ateliertakagi.com
 »Bateye www.bateye.com »Boca do Lobo www.bocadolobo.com
 »Cappellini www.cappellini.it
 »Faye Toogood www.fayetoogood.com
 »Laurence King Publishing www.laurenceking.com
 »Lisa Vanho www.lisavanho.com
 »Maarten Baas www.maartenbaas.com
 »Memphis www.memphis-milano.it
 »Note Design Studio www.notedesignstudio.se
 »Roll & Hill www.rollandhill.com



EYE FOR DETAIL

Left: Lisa Vanho's intricate Giraffe chair. Right: a colourful room at Cappellini's Byblos Art Hotel Villa Amista.

