COLLAPSE TO EXPAND: ALESSI'S TEA AND COFFEE PIAZZA

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In 1979, a small design company in northern Italy approached eleven international architects to participate in a new industrial design program, sparking that company's transformation from a regional metal-works family business to a global brand: Alessi. The program, for the design of a limited edition silver tea service, was entitled *Tea and Coffee Piazza*. It allowed the participating architects a new avenue for idea exploration, free from the external forces to which buildings are inherently tied, a level of autonomy that characterized the post-Modern moment, explaining Alessi's appeal. Reflecting on the period, Aldo Rossi, one of the participants, said he believed that "architectural concerns [were] to be restricted to unspecified 'small things,' great things [were] no longer possible. Buildings that are realized are always those of the dominant class."[1] Combining with desires for autonomy, the resurgence of typological thinking in the 1970s determined the design approach; the architects utilized the program to design the tea service as small architecture. The title reflects this approach – beyond hinting at the involvement of architects – equating domestic tea service with the urban piazza. The participating architects reduced the discipline's scalar logic, enabling a shift from the scale of the building to the scale of consumer products. Through Alessi, architects, like Michael Graves – now a household brand – engaged product design for the first time. It also marked the launch of *Officina Alessi*, an experimental research and development arm of the corporation, which continues to operate today, regularly employing architects in its subsequent programs from which many of Alessi's best-selling products emerge. Through Alessi with its new position as a global distributor and the creation of industrial design products designed by architects, architecture as a field was expanded in relation to consumer culture, primarily through the introduction of what can be called post-Modern branding – trading on fame for the creation of the architect as label, disseminated through products to a new global public audience.

The program, and its legacy, is a product of the post-Modern moment. Rejecting unifying theory or periodization, post-Modernism saw the fracturing and subsequent celebration of eclectic movements and styles. Related specifically to industrial design, this is witnessed in the shift to post-Fordism, as focus moved from uniform to customized mass production. Fredric Jameson positions post-Fordism as an inevitability in production, illustrating the slow evolution in the production process to incorporate customization dating back to the 1930s. However, in the 1970s, as post-Modernism rose, consumers reached a tipping point in their desire for customization, a point at which the incremental changes in production no longer sufficed, causing a shift to highly flexible production processes that allowed customized products at mass production quantities. Post-Fordism facilitated the general tendency of post-Modernism to attempt the dissolution of high and mass, or popular, culture – until then largely separated by production processes. As architects showed interest in mass culture – analyzing and designing vernacular and commercial architecture – the public's interest also shifted. *Tea and Coffee Piazza* represents a culmination of the public's interest in architecture that started over fifteen years earlier with the commercial success of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture.*[2] The program, with a focus on individual designers with highly disparate designs, was facilitated through post-Fordist production. The resulting product, a ubiquitous tea service, was distributed globally for consumption through museums and retail outlets like Max Protetch.

The Max Protetch gallery in New York, whose opening coincided with the commencement of the program, has been a central gallery in the market of architectural production, starting largely with paper architecture developed by the New York Five, a product of their attempt to escape the politico-economic system. While the Whites explored ever-increasing autonomy, finding their outlet in the art market, the Grays, following Robert Venturi's turn to populism in architecture that had first provoked Peter Eisenman toward autonomy, built with increasing frequency and scale in the commercial building market. However, post-Modern commercial architecture reigned only for a short time before reaching cartoon-like trivialization. Increasingly relegated to the realm of Disney, "this version of post-Modernism could not advance alternative possibilities for architects to participate professionally in the world of buildings."[3] The art production of the Whites didn't fare much better. In a field primarily associated with building, architectural drawing as art was destined for the periphery, occupying only a very small piece of the art market. Both practices were subjected to the modern market characterized by "a simultaneous reification of aesthetics and economics into a single cultural form that becomes the essence of the consumer society. There are only two possibilities for cultural critique in a modern market: reappropriation or marginalization."[4] The Whites' art drawing production was marginalized while commercial post-Modern architecture, trivialized and ignored, was reappropriated as industrial design.

Prior to Alessi's solicitation of architects, the last moment architects engaged industrial design in a substantial way occurred in the Modern period, specifically through the Bauhaus. Just a year before the Bauhaus closed, the Museum of Modern Art established the Department of Architecture and Industrial Art in 1932, reflecting the influence of the Bauhaus which also saw the two fields combined, along with painting, textiles and theater. The anticipation of the school's closing was sealed in 1934 as MoMA established the Design Collection in an effort to preserve and highlight the production that came out of the school, completing the elevation of industrial design to the status of art, smuggled in through its relationship to architecture. However, both the products and the circumstances that facilitated their envelopment by museums differed greatly from the Alessi architect-designed products. The anonymous mass-produced objects created at the Bauhaus were procured by museums, representing a unique moment of reversal from the usual conversion of art into everyday object. Fifty years later, Alessi capitalized on the elevation of industrial design to market and sell mass-produced consumer products.

Figure 1: Alberto Alessi, Achille Castiglioni, Enzo Mari, Aldo Rossi and Alessandro Mendini, 1989.

Alessi was founded in 1921 by Giovanni Alessi as a producer of metal products for eating and drinking. By 1935, Carlo, Giovanni's son and an industrial designer, was designing the entire line of products. However, when Carlo took over general management of the company in 1950, the company started to outsource to freelance industrial designers. In the immediate postwar period, the consumer reigned as companies struggled to keep up with the demand that had built up during limited wartime production. However, in 1963, the Italians elected Leftist Aldo Moro. Radiating through the country, Leftist ideas sparked the creation and proliferation of Anti-, or Radical, design movements by the end of the 1960s. Continuing into the 1970s, these movements, characterized by their aversion to consumers, produced one-offs destined for museum display, designed not to entice consumers but to critique the spread of commercial consumption. Architects emerged at the helm of these anti-consumer movements in Italy, namely Ettore Sottsass and Alessandro Mendini. Sottsass specifically envisaged "a world in which consumerism and the work ethic had no place but provided the launching point for a voyage of imaginative self-discovery."[5] Toward the end of the 1970s, Alberto Alessi, Giovanni's grandson, took over general management of the company. Alberto shifted the focus of the company from modest regional to high-design global thinking as part of a new broad-reaching image policy. *Tea and Coffee Piazza* kicked off the transformation of the company, unique and innovative in both the choice of architects instead of designers and the fact that most were from outside Italy. At the same time, avant-garde groups like Archizoom and Superstudio started to wane. Reflecting this move, most books on industrial design published in this period focused on the late 1920s and 1930s, the Bauhaus era of reveling in mass production. The period of Anti-design was coming to a close. Alessi emerged as a hinge in the shift from Anti-design to commercial (and international) product design. Alberto contacted Mendini to coordinate the program. Although Mendini had been trained as an architect, by the early 1970s most of his work involved industrial design. Straddling the realms of industrial design and architecture, Mendini was well positioned to lead the program. Mendini contacted nearly all the pre-eminent post-Modern architects working at the time. The work ranged greatly across the eleven architects. He celebrated the difference in design approach or formal aesthetic, choosing fame and prominence as the only unifying factor, reflecting the post-Modern tendency to highlight the individual. Carried through the program from initial solicitation to final product and even display, the focus rested always on the architect, down to the stamping of each architects' signature on the product.

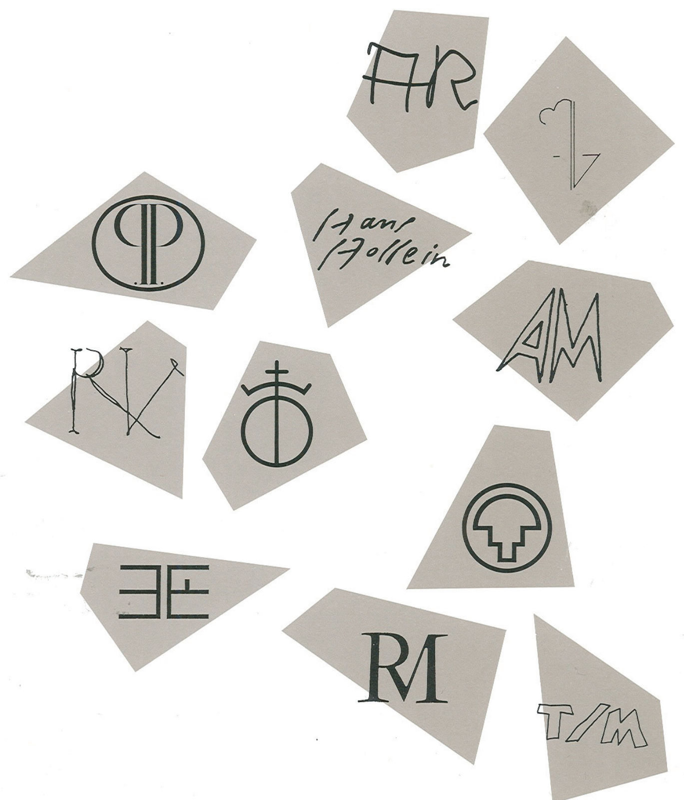

Figure 2: Architect's created trademarks, 1983.

While the Whites and the Grays debate hijacked the discourse throughout the 1970s, the Alessi program emerged quietly, resolving tensions and ultimately exploiting the debate for the consumer market. Alessi facilitated a unique ability for the architects involved to be both autonomous and popular. Each architect worked within their respective firms, communicating with Alessi through a loose communication network consisting of mailed prototypes and receipt of limited feedback. From the beginning, Alessi stressed "free linguistic research" as an essential component of *Officina Alessi's* projects.[6] The design brief was almost non-existent; specifying only that a tea service be produced; functionality, component parts and even materiality, was at the architects' discretion. From the comfort of their own offices, the architects examined not the post-Functionalism of the Whites but the post-Modern populist designs of the Grays. Further, design occurred not through some Modernist abstraction, eschewing of familiarity, but through mundane cultural goods, coffee- and teapots. With Alessi operating as a nearly silent patron, *Tea and Coffee Piazza* transcended the dichotomy of the autonomy of the Whites and the populism of the Grays, most overtly in the participation of architects from both sides: Michael Graves, Robert Venturi and Richard Meier.

Figure 3: Aldo Rossi, Variations on coffee-makers, Texas, 1983.

From its conception, the program reflected the particularly Italian resurgence of typological thinking, utilized by the participants to facilitate a scalar reduction of architecture into a consumer product. Architect Saverio Muratori, one of the first Italian scholars to critically examine Modernism in the postwar period, turned toward typological analysis as a tool for researching and understanding the existing urban environment eschewed by Modernism. Muratori heavily influenced the emerging postwar generation of architects in Italy, particularly Rossi, who employed typology as an operative design tool. As elaborated in *Architecture of the City*, Rossi's type followed Quatremere de Quincy's as a rule for the model which, for Rossi, espoused the form of the traditional city and its contained architectural elements.[7] Reflecting the a-scalar potential inherent in Rossi's autonomous type, the tea sets became "micro-architecture," signaling a "paradoxical promenade urbaine among miniaturized bits of building in the quiet stretches of a domestic landscape."[8] Rossi and Graves's designs constitute the clearest disciplinary reductions of architecture into product design. Rossi's set illustrates a reduction to geometric primitives like cones and cylinders. The platter folds up and over to enclose the set and is capped with a pyramid to create a particularly architectural image, complete with clock embedded in a would-be pediment, formally mimicking his theater projects. Similarly, Graves designs the tea and coffee-pots as if they were monuments in the urban environment: "with legs like fluted pillars, dense and massive forms like marble and travertine claddings, and pyramidal lids like penthouses," creating a kind of compressed Portland building.[9] The typological reduction of forms to those universally understood and easily recognized and comprehended led necessarily to the scale and arena of everyday consumer products. Simple, emotion-invoking shapes are destined for the mass market, countering the marginalization of the art production of the Whites. The continued proliferation of consumer products by architects points to the legacy of the post-Modern aesthetic occurring more through everyday objects than buildings where it persists only in Disney-like context. Searching for a gain in the loss of the building is the creation of the architect as branded figure.

More than typological reductions that evoke emotions, the tea sets testify to changes in practice in relation to fame and branding. Through Alessi's program, "post-Modernism can be understood as the proto-theory of a now pervasive design culture where, in its realization, architecture as building had to collapse in scale."[10] Although Venturi, writing in the 1970s, believed consumer products would effect change on the home more than anything architectural, he failed to anticipate that architects as consumer product designers would alter architectural practice toward the end point of in-house marketing teams, of the conversion of the architect into a brand. Peggy Deamer defines a branding as mass-produced; "it is not associated with the hand, heart, or head of the author," in contradistinction to fame where "the maker is inextricably aligned with what is made, which is intended to be unique."[11] Both fame and branding require recontextualization in architecture, as architects are inherently separate from that which they design and buildings are unique due to factors including size, expense and extended production time. Although fame is more regularly conceived in the field, "any semblance of originality, authenticity, or even exclusivity," historically valued in architecture, "is lost with mass production and coast-to-coast de-

partment store distribution."[12] *Tea and Coffee Piazza* manifests as consumer product what might be considered architecture's first bullet point-like outline for branding: Robert Stern's "Gray Architecture as Postmodernism" released just three years earlier.[13] "While many architects are still obsessed with the determination to 'educate an ignorant public,' brands have long since developed a far more fluid strategy, based on one principle only: the fulfillment of desire.[14]

Figure 4: Aldo Rossi, Tea and Coffee Piazza, 1983.

Expanding out from the built environment, "by the late 1970s, post-Modern architects began to utilize everyday household objects, like the tea set, as avenues for communicating their postmodern theories," facilitated by the obliteration of the memory of the original use-value by exchange value, allowing commodities to take on secondary or ersatz use-values like cultural associations or illusions, as elaborated by Adorno.[15] For Archizoom, Memphis and the like, this meant a chance to incorporate political and social messages into their designs. Yet, the everyday objects they designed became luxury goods produced in limited runs for consumption by elite audiences. By comparison, American architects expanded the use-value to include theoretical expression while commercializing academic architecture, "thereby broadening the consumption of their designed subject" through dissemination at the Max Protetch gallery and sales to museums and collectors.[16] Although the initial program was limited to a production run of only ninety-nine, each fetching close to $30,000, the program diverges from the Italian design groups in the next step, as Alessi and enterprising architects like Graves and Rossi derived cheap mass-produced objects from the program, globally disseminated less than a year later. Unlike drawings that reside in the art market and books or periodicals that comment on and display architecture, the mass production of everyday objects allows an unprecedented level of dissemination and ownership of architectural production. Not only does production become cheaper, but easier to locate and purchase through the retail market. Through Alessi and the bypassing of heavy permanent building materials for more ductile and light metalworker's materials, architecture leaves its locale and is received in the consumer home.

Figure 5: Michael Graves for Target.

Scale-less formal autonomy leads architects to the design and creation of small pieces of architecture in the form of toys, consumer objects, saleable models and the like, as a way to investigate, illustrate and broadcast their ideas. Operating in this manner facilitates autonomy in design, from a position even further inside capital, operating first in the art market and then the broader consumer market. Architecture, formally analyzed to move inward also moves outward toward the global market. In this light, autonomy becomes a condition for immanence instead of existing as an alternative to it. Post-Modern items like the tea set created a new collaboration between commerce, as everyday consumer products, and culture, as architects. In a newly expanded role, the architect as a brand spread into the public sphere en masse, transforming discourse into an accessible, popular commodity along the way.

ENDNOTES

1 A. Lipman and P. Surma, "Aldo Rossi, Architect, Scientist. A Storm of Silence. An Architecture of Alienation," *Design Studies* 7, no. 2 (1986): 65.
2 Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: MoMA, 2002).
3 Diane Ghirardo, *Architecture after Modernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 20.
4 A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh, "Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 22, no. 3 (1995): 249.
5 Diane Ghirardo, *Architecture after Modernism*, 194.
6 Alessandro Mendini, Patrizia Scarzella and Alessi (Firm), *Tea & Coffee Piazza: 11 Tea and Coffee Sets* (Brescia: Shakespear & Co., 1983), 10.

7 Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1982). See also, Anthony Vidler, “The Third Typology,” *Oppositions Reader*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998).

8 Alessandro Mendini, *Tea & Coffee Piazza*, 19.

9 Ibid.

10 Penelope Dean, “Blow-Up,” *Hunch 11. Rethinking Representation* (2007): 83.

11 Peggy Deamer, “Branding the Architectural Author,” *Perspecta* 37 (2005): 42-49.

12 Ibid.

13 Robert Stern, “Gray Architecture as Post-Modernism, or, Up and Down from Orthodoxy,” *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* 186 (August-September 1976).

14 Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2007), 64.

15 Elizabeth Anne Fleming, “Theorization and Commodification: The Production and Promotion of American Decorative Arts in the 1980s” (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 2007), 4. See also, Mike Featherston, “Perspectives on Consumer Culture,” *Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1990): 5-22.

16 Ibid., 10