

## DESIGN AND COUNTER DESIGN AGAINST CONSUMPTION: 1972 "ITALY, THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE" EXHIBITION (1)

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### INTRODUCTION

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers on what it perpetually promises. The promissory note, which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.

Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1969,139)

Architects and designers have debated consumerism and its effect on the production and design of cultural content since Adorno and Horkheimer first claimed in their 1947 essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" that culture and cultural products became commodities of the constant reproduction and legitimization progress of capitalism and industrial society. Nevertheless, the discussions have never been as intense as in the 1960s and 1970s European intelligentsia, when the economic boom amplified the controversial progress of mass production and consumption. One of the first instances of this highly critical and political intellect's dissemination on the other side of the ocean was through the 1972 cutting-edge exhibition "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape" (INDL), held in the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA, NY), which had broad repercussions on the architecture and design circles of the day in both continents; hence has a tremendous impact on that of today beyond dispute. The young Argentinean architect and designer Emilio Ambasz (1943-), the Design Curator of MoMA, curated the exhibition to introduce American society to the rising star of Italian design through "objects" he collected and "environments" designed and produced solely for this exhibition. Identifying Italian design as the precursor of a unique, colorful, sensuous, and "hedonistic" style, Ambasz aimed to "honor" a selected repertoire in New York and analyze the "diversity" behind responses

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developed for solving current socio-cultural problems affecting design (Ambasz, 1972, 11).

For the show, Ambasz riddled the MoMA's garden with one hundred eighty objects of prominent Italian designers, distributed by notable manufacturers, each representing the ongoing commercial success of the Italian consumer goods industry. Nevertheless, the show's reputation was due to eleven experimental environments exhibited inside the galleries, designed solely for this exhibition. American intellectuals first recognized how 'diverse' Italian designers approached the domestic environment through this handful of experimental designs determined by Ambasz's design program limits. All criticized the ideological production of design and architecture as a means of cultural domination in one way or another. Nevertheless, the literature on the exhibition's significance and its hallmark condensed on—though some might consider it a bias—the radical aspect of the event and protesting “anti-design” approaches, representing the extreme Marxist and Leftist mindset behind it (Mutlu Tunca, 2013; Wilson & Curl, 2015).

The 1972 INDL show was Ambasz's masterpiece: the political pessimism of Radical thoughts and the exceptionally provocative and critical discourse impressed Ambasz and his colleagues (Mutlu Tunca, 2013). Since Ambasz was disappointed with the Bauhaus mainstream and the functionalist attitude in industrial design, he searched for a way out that transformed the traditional status of object into a social entity, reshaped by its “larger natural and socio-cultural environment.” Ambasz conceived the Italian case, which had become one of the dominant forces in the creation and criticism of the design, as a “micromodel” offering a “wide range of the possibilities, limitations and critical issues of contemporary design” (Ambasz, 1972, 19). Assertive with the American public's “love” of Italian designers' unique achievements, Ambasz trivialized the eclipse of the hedonistic design world he adored by the severe and provocative discourses of Radical figures, denouncing consumption as the cause of death for architecture and design disciplines (Collard, personal communication with Ambasz, 2012).

Functionalism and the Bauhaus mainstream, the prevailing architectural phenomenon of 1920s Europe, were exiled belatedly to the United States. The immigration of Bauhaus masters coincided with the post-World War II years (1940 to 1970), the Consumer Era period in American history when American society's prosperity and affluence were at their highest level. Nevertheless, the doctrine of “affluent society,” grounded particularly on consumerism—as examined by the economist and author John Kenneth Galbraith in his 1958 book *The Affluent Society*—conflicted with the phenomenon of Functionalism. While the former required an escalating industrial production to satisfy consumer demands, the latter was prone to “reduce the number of objects and implement the optimum ratio between the products and the [user] needs for them” (Koveshnikova et al., 2016, 3287). The conflict between the demands of postwar consumer culture and functionalist ideals swayed the crisis in American architectural and design practice towards a consumption-exalter intellect. Italian architectural historian and theoretician Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994), who contributed to the exhibition catalog with a critical article on Italian design, blamed this state of mind for the “death of architecture” (Tafuri, 1998). Michael Hays, an American architectural historian/theoretician, introduced Tafuri's tragic projection in his seminal anthology, *Architectural Theory after 1968* (1998) as:

[Tafari saw] architecture not as just the victim of demolition work done on cultural codes by functionalism and instrumentalizing methodologies or by commodification and reification, but as inseparable from and indeed, complicitous with quantification by the commodity system that began in the nineteenth century and had arrived fully geared up in the postwar consumer culture of America. (Hays, 1998, 24)

Ambasz had discovered a highly stylistic design practice in Italy, despite the ongoing disputes on consumerism's domination of the very discipline. For Italian art historian and critic Germano Celant (1940-)—referring to his essay “Radical Architecture” written for the “Critical Articles” section in the exhibition catalog—the design approaches in Italy toward consumer ideology were polarized on two diverse tracks: While some glorified the “manufactured object and the constructed building as the sole and inevitable bases for their activity,” a selected body, which he called the Radicals—the activist groups, such as Archizoom and Superstudio—rejected such commercialization and disclaimed any client-oriented approach (Celant, 1972, 380). Demanding structural changes in society, they protested against consumerism, questioned conventional education methods, and self-worshipping architects/designers. They were concerned about the deterioration of environmental issues and the degeneration of society due to capitalist ideology.

The 1972 INDL exhibition was among the first intellectual platforms on the other side of the ocean where the Radicals declared their criticisms to Anglo-Saxon society. Numerous Ph.D. studies and articles have scrutinized the INDL myth and its hallmarks since the late 1990s. As an illustration, Turan (1995, 176), in her Ph.D. thesis *Production of a Discourse*, which resituates Neo-Rationalist discourse concerning the student responses of the 1968 generation politically and socially, argued that via the exhibition, Ambasz's attempt to legitimize Radicals' provocative style as a micro-model for American consumer culture, was the ultimate signal of the critical positions' domestication within the capitalist market. Moreover, Hejduk (2001, 137-8), in *Models of the Mind*, interpreted Ambasz's collection of Italian design as a “coherent whole,” revealing “what types of social, cultural, political, and intellectual ideologies were capturing their imaginations.” Lang (2005) defined INDL as “a blockbuster exhibition..., staging an Italian theme park for a curious American public” in his lecture article on “Superstudio's last stand.” Scott (2007, 118), in her book *Architecture or TechnoUtopia*, “analyzed” the political context of the event and claimed that INDL cast out “specific trajectories within Italian architecture and design” as “critical alternatives to the discursive frameworks and institutional politics of contemporaneous American architectural debates.” Aureli (2008, 81), in his seminal book *The Project of Autonomy*, defined INDL as Ambasz's celebration of “the innovative aesthetic style of radical architecture.” Mutlu Tunca (2009, 2013), in her Ph.D. thesis *Doubling: 'Italy, The New Domestic Landscape' as a Historical Project*, conducted a Tafurian “doubling” of the exhibition by retracing the history and critical theory of American and Italian post-war architecture. She claimed that, rather than objects or environments, the hallmark of the INDL exhibition was its introduction of Manfredo Tafuri's Marxist and critical ideas to American intellectuals through its catalog. Elflin (2009, 179) defined the INDL exhibition as a “blockbuster show” in his thesis *Superstudio and the Staging of the Architecture's Disappearance*, which was an in-depth analysis of “non-tectonic pursuits” of Superstudio's architecture, for providing “the chance to stage their refusal to participate

in the dominant architectural climate in a significant venue in front of a substantial number of viewers." As a result of the exhibition, for Elfline, Superstudio left "the irony-laden magazine works of their immediate past" and started to create "more concrete proposals for how to live a life freed from objects and buildings" (Elfline, 2009, 179). Elfline later published articles on "Radical Bodies" (2015), "Superstudio and the Refusal to Work" (2016), and "Architettura Radicale" (2020), in which he continued to explore how Radical architects expanded the definition of architecture by using alternate mediums and how they criticized the discipline itself for its intimate ties to late-stage capitalism. For Ross (2016, 73), Celant's article on Radical design in the catalog triggered "a spirited debate in the Italian architectural press regarding the term, with most of the prominent actors in the movement disavowing it, the subtext being that once the movement had been identified and named (with MoMA's imprimatur, no less) the radical vitality once there had dissipated." Wolf (2012), in *Superarchitecture*, focused on experimental architectural practices in Italy between 1963 and 1973. Kittler (2014), in "Living Art and the Art of Living," focused on the radical architectural experiments in the INDL exhibition. Rashid (2016), in "Reworking the Past, Displaying the Future," interpreted Gaetano Pesce's environment and criticized the proposals in the 'Environments' category due to the non-humanist dystopic resolutions of the next generation. In *Error Earth*, Halland [Rashidi] (2016; 2018) studied to display "Deep Cybernetics" in *The Universitas Project* and INDL exhibition. In her later article, she analyzed three radical objects and claimed that these objects instigated a new epistemological status of the object, which she coined "unstable." Albon Camon (2020), in "Designing Objectlessness," discussed the problems with object design and its negation in the INDL exhibition, especially the commissions for the Environments section.

Within this wide range of literature, this study revisits the contributions in the Environments section to reveal the signifying traces of the first acknowledgment of the American public from the extraneous intellect behind the Design and Counterdesign dichotomy. The scope is neither to reiterate the radical criticisms nor to recontextualize the significance of their repudiation. The aim is to reappraise the diverse solutions of Italian designers toward environmental problems and unveil the clues of a radical design strategy from an architectural diversity generated by differing political ideas and ideological approaches, criticizing consumer culture, and the deterioration of design disciplines due to mass production.

### ITALY: A 'MICROMODEL' OF A NEW STYLE

Ambasz collected one hundred eighty design objects from manufacturers around Italy and displayed them in glass cases, resembling the miniatures of the skyscrapers in New York City (Mutlu Tunca, 2009). In the Objects section of the exhibition catalog, Ambasz classified the displayed objects under three subcategories: Objects with unique forms, techniques, and typologies, objects which inhabit semantic and cultural references, and objects with adaptable and multi-functional natures (**Figure 1**). These subcategories demonstrated how extensive and diverse the repertoire of the Italian design industry was for Ambasz.

On the other hand, the Environments section was where he theorized the confrontation in Italian design on both conceptual and practical levels. Ambasz invited eleven Italian designers and requested them to design "micro-environments" and "micro-events" that provided possible solutions

to current socio-cultural problems in light of his design program's specific and general considerations. Therefore, the contributors designed eleven environmental installations, particularly for this exhibition, by following the research questions asked by Ambasz's design program. In the Environments section of the catalog, Ambasz classified the submitted micro-environments under three subcategories: "Design as postulation," "Design as commentary," and "Counterdesign as postulation." These subcategories revealed how deep the ideological polarization behind the design approaches was for Ambasz. "Design as postulation" category included physical proposals designed by Gae Aulenti, Ettore Sottsass, Jr., Joe Colombo, Alberto Roselli, Marco Zanuso, Richard Sapper, and Mario Bellini that analyzed the ceremonial functions and behavioral factors of home environments. The designer listed alone under the Design as Commentary category, Gaetano Pesce, on the other hand, designed an "archeological environment," an art installation focusing on environmental problems rather than socio-cultural issues. However, the Radical designers of the 'Counterdesign as Postulation' category, such as Ugo la Pietra, Archizoom, Superstudio, Gruppo Strum, and Enzo Mari, approached Ambasz's design problem in rather an anarchistic and rebellious manner. They refused to design any domestic environment and expressed their political resistance and ideological stance against consumerism and corrupted society with art installations or political texts.

Nevertheless, from 1972 until today, the show's myth continued to spread through its exhibition catalog, edited by Ambasz, entitled identically "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," which was published and distributed simultaneously. The exhibition catalog assembled first-hand information on the proposals of Italian designers. It included historical and critical articles by seminal Italian architectural historians and theoreticians scrutinizing the current achievements and problems of Italian design, which were significant since they revealed the politically provocative context behind Italian design for English-speaking readers. They were for clarifying the discursive and historical context underlying the selected objects and the environments designed for the show (Mutlu Tunca, 2009; 2013). The 1972 exhibition and its catalog contextualized the confrontation of Italian designers under the "Design" and "Counterdesign" dichotomy, which has been the subject of a perpetual debate in the design and architectural world. In 1973, a year later, in a book review on the exhibition catalog published in the journal *Urban Studies*, written by Joyce Lyndon, the exhibition and its catalog were recalled by referring to the prominence of contemporary Italian designers' works in consumer products in Western Europe. Besides the objects and environments of Italian designers, this review focused on the forum the 1972 MoMA exhibition provided for Italian designers, architects, and their critics to discuss and "review their present situation and the troubles, which since 1968 have flared out intermittently" (Lyndon, 1973, 282). Two years after the exhibition, Donald J. Bush, the author of *Streamlining and American Industrial Design* (1974), interpreted the INDL catalog as "a comprehensive review of the current crisis in Italian design." For Bush, the crisis arose from the ethical problem of defining the role of design, exemplifying the controversial responses of designers who, on the one hand, accepted design "as a tool of consumption" and produced saleable products "invested with status meaning," on the other hand, rejected design for propagating political texts (Bush, 1975, 175). As its hallmark, the counter approaches of Radical designers unveil the ideological map of the 1970s Italian design world.





**Figure 1.** Installation view of the exhibition (May 26, 1972–September 11, 1972. The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 1004.204. The Museum of Modern Art Archives. Photograph by George Cserna.)

### **“ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE,” MoMA AND SPECIAL DESIGN PROGRAM**

Ambasz’s analysis of over one hundred and eighty design objects uncovered the absolute complexity of the Italian case. The titles of Ambasz’s categorization, thus, revealed how he interpreted the diverse approaches in Italian design. Further analysis, however, was fulfilled by the Environments section. Ambasz set up a “special design program” for theorizing the provocative figures’ counter solutions regarding the deterioration of the “domestic landscape.” Listing specific and general considerations, Ambasz asked the contributors to analyze domestic life’s

ceremonial and ritual patterns, then propose microenvironments and micro-events for private and/or communal use in fixed and/or adaptable nature.

Under specific considerations, he limited the role of users to binary options. The microenvironments were supposed to function either for a young couple with low or middle income who needed both communal and personal spaces, "a fusion of the Italian stanza and camera" (option 1), or for a couple with children who only required collaborative spaces (option 2). Designed either for the former or latter option, Ambasz required the following ceremonial functions: 1- Living: conversation, relaxation, work, play, reception, and entertaining; 2- Cooking, eating; 3- Sleeping. Ambasz also notified the designers about dimension and material limitations due to shipping and sponsor demands. Due to the shipment regulations by sea, the dimensions of a container limited the maximum dimensions of environments to 4.80 m width x 4.80 m depth x 3.60 m height. They were supposed to be cost-effective industrial prototypes that explored the potential of synthetic materials such as plastics and fibers. Ambasz planned to exhibit the microenvironments in a matte-black exhibition hall. He also asked the contributors to envision the proposal's lighting.

Under general considerations, on the other hand, Ambasz addressed far more universal problems regarding the appreciation of the domestic landscape as a place for "urban society," "as a family environment," or "as a private domain," which for him, resulted in ideological ambiguities worldwide. Identifying the domestic environment as a "theatre" where external "forms and scripts" re-enacted and modified the private domain of domesticity into a social one, Ambasz valued the expansion of home culture for its capability to rebuild new stereotypes of urban patterns (Ambasz, 1972, 139-43).

Considering the formal and ideological claims of radical figures in Italy, Ambasz invited several designers and design groups to develop unique solutions for "new" domestic landscapes, as identified by his "special design program" (Ambasz, 1972, 12). He also attached his 1969 article on "Manhattan: Capital of the Twentieth Century," first printed in *Casabella*, XXXV, no. 359-60, 1971, to encourage the designers, in his words, "to make incursions into [an] imaginary realm." In this article, Ambasz analyzed Manhattan's infrastructure with "all the complexity of its physical organization, the capacity of its input-output mechanisms, and the versatility of its control devices" (Ambasz, 1972, 147). Rather than being a technologically revolutionized urban artifact best representing American culture, Manhattan, for Ambasz, had an autonomous infrastructure for a metropolis; even if liberated from its context and placed somewhere else, it remained insufficient without its superstructures. Therefore, he thought that the designers need to concentrate on "man" and uncover "the perennial state of the transaction between the fears and desires underlying the individual's aspirations and the assembled forces of his natural and his socio-cultural milieu" (Ambasz, 1972,148).

For providing a frame of reference, Ambasz also recommended a reading list, including books on *Environmental Psychology: Man and his Physical Setting* (1970) by Proshansky et al., *The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and Schizophrenia* (1960) by Harold F. Searles, which defined "the present 'state of the art,' as an indication of how much (or how little) is known about the relation of the nonhuman environment to human behavior" (Ambasz, 1972, 146). Other suggested readings were

for generating “a poetical insight into the meanings and images of the domestic environment”: ‘Thanksgiving for a Habitat’ in *About the House* (1959) by W. H. Auden; ‘Existential Space’ in *Landscape* (1966) by George Matoré (ed.); and ‘The Time House’ in *Architectural Design* (1968) by Martin Pawley.

The arrival of microenvironments proved to Ambasz that Italian design’s “contradictory” approaches concealed a more chaotic debate than he anticipated. Therefore, he preferred to simplify the contradictions as per the tendencies of contributors “to design” or “not to design.” The titles of his classification, “Design as postulation,” “Design as commentary,” and “Counterdesign as postulation,” indeed unveiled inverse positions of Italian designers, approaching product design not just as an aesthetic domain but as an ideological concern.

### **Design “Environments” as Postulation or as Commentary**

The categories of “design as postulation” and “design as commentary” gathered physical microenvironments. As the tone of the proposals revealed the neo-science-fiction atmosphere of the time, one can certainly state that the primary motivation was Italian radicals’ disobedience to the demands of the culture industry with an ideological projection of the future. They mainly criticized the transformation of consumers’ so-called reified consciousness and controlled will, digressed by the culture industry, as Adorno & Bernstein (1991, 185) claimed, into the automatic self-reproduction of the status quo by consumption. As a challenge against such expressions of domination, the Italian designers in this category rejected Modernist sanctions and stereotypical productions of the day and “postulated” or commented about microenvironments, either “house” or “mobile,” to deliver solutions for the socio-cultural problems of the day.

A Milanese designer and architect, Gae Aulenti’s (1927-2012) red pyramids were the most appealing yet paradoxically modest “house environment.” As *Casabella’s* former art director and graphic designer (1955-1965) and as a disciple of the prolific writer Ernesto Nathan Rogers (1909-1969), Aulenti completely absorbed Rogers’ architectural tutelage, who was highly critical of Modernism and its devolution. She reduced her domestic environment to synthesize four spatial elements with attributed meanings to eliminate current ambiguities and contradictions in Italian design. Aiming to measure “the process of transformation,” she used the pyramid form because of its connotation reminding the concept of “place,” thus ruler and triangle forms as allusions, gauging “the matrix of everyday mutability” (Figure 2). For encouraging experiences, Aulenti used “fire” as the “allegory,” regarding “a synthetic and comprehensive representation of an idea through images.” Aulenti’s random arrangement of these spatial elements facilitated the domestic environment’s adaptability for diversified everyday life experiences (Aulenti, 1972, 152-3).

The “ugly” wheeled, adjustable boxes of Italian designer and architect Ettore Sottsass, Jr. (1917, Austria-2007, Italy), on the contrary, criticized the unconscious consumption of “good design” and the obsolete codes of collective memory on aesthetics. It was classified as a “house environment” by Ambasz, the mobility of Sottsass’ boxes, functioning as a stove, refrigerator, cupboard, or more, facilitating the configuration of alternative living spaces by multiplying the quantity of ugly boxes in various specific qualities consistent with the changing needs. (Figure 3) As the user’s collection of selected units could vary to provide the most suitable setting



for the drama in progress, Sottsass' boxes neither attempted to create customer attachment, interest, or involvement with the design nor any demand for its aesthetics. "[T]hrough its neutrality and mobility, through being amorphous and chameleon-like, through its ability to clothe any emotion without becoming involved in it," Sottsass' microenvironment disregarded the principles of "heroic design" on purpose. It focused on creating the most convenient setting for any ceremony, which led to "provoke a great awareness of ... creativity and freedom." (Sottsass, 1972, 162-3).

"Total Furnishing Unit" of Joe Colombo (1930-1971), a Milanese industrial designer, on the other hand, composed of white and yellow plastic blocks with smooth rounded corners in 1970's high-tech appearance, proclaimed a surrealist utopia. (Rossi, 2014, 50-9; Banham, 1997, 995). Critically concerned about the complex society, the uncontrolled expansion of cities, and the damage to nature, Colombo intended to correlate "man with his dwelling" by focusing on the variability of user needs in the domestic environment at different time sequences of the day. He proposed an adjustable system with "a series of suitably equipped 'furnishing units,' freely placed within their allocated areas" (**Figure 4**). Offering kitchen, cupboard, bed & privacy, and bathroom functions, Colombo sets the users of his environment free to organize the living environment according to their immediate needs. Colombo's possible allocations of the units, such as attaching a bed and privacy unit with storage, detaching them from the kitchen and bathroom units, or using the bed and privacy unit as a separator between day and night functions, proved the adaptable nature of his domestic environment (Colombo, 1972, 172) (2).

While the house environments of Aulenti, Sottsass, and Colombo offered the ultimate freedom in the organization of interior space, the mobile environments proposed by another group shifted the level of independence from house to urban by liberating the domestic environment from its strict bond with landscape. As an illustration, Alberto Rosselli (1921-1976), an Italian architect and pioneer of industrial design, based his proposal on transporting and expanding space. "Movement" and "repose," Roselli's key concepts, facilitated his' house object to get a compact yet expandable form fulfilling the transportation requirements on the road while satisfying optimal living conditions. Carried by a small vehicle, Roselli designed a "Mobile House," made of a lightweight aluminum capsule. Expandable fourfold upon opening through telescopic runners, hinged floors, and accordion walls, his capsule offered a "Central Area" to be used as a general or dining area with service and closet functions, a "Rear Area" to be used as a private space during nights with two folding beds and closets, and a "Front Area" to be used as a living area during the day and a bedroom with two or three beds at nights (**Figure 5**). Suitable for individual and group living, gathering a series of capsules allowed the fulfillment of a more comprehensive range of uses (Rosselli, 1972, 182-3).

Studio Zanuso, founded by Milanese architect Marco Zanuso (1916-2001) and his partner, German designer Richard Sapper (1932-2015), on the other hand, thematized their mobile environment as "complete and fully equipped habitations, easily transportable and ready for immediate use." Rather than aiming for "mobility at the family level," Studio Zanuso chased after "mobility at the urban level" by supporting "the immediate transport of communities and living quarters to any part of the world by conventional means of transport." In this context, they decided to

2. As Joe Colombo died suddenly a year before the exhibition's opening, Ignazia Favata, who later in 1988 wrote a book on *Joe Colombo and Italian Design of the Sixties*, completed his design (Brown, 2016, 96).

function industrial containers for transatlantic freight into mobile houses for at least two persons. (**Figure 5**) Once transported to a site, Zanuso's container expanded by sliding out two large plastic alcoves stored inside: one containing the bed, the other for the kitchen. Considered "a component element of a housing scheme," its vertical or horizontal augmentation enabled the accommodation of more persons and allowed the assembly of temporary living quarters for communities. Conceived for the immediate use of any user group, Zanuso's site-free and portable containers offered the necessary temporality of land use with maximum respect to the natural surroundings (Zanuso, Sapper, 1972, 192-3).

Milanese architect and designer Mario Bellini (1935, Milan), who was the vice-president of the *Association for Industrial Design* (ADI) and the chief industrial design consultant of the Olivetti company, debated further on "the meaning of moving." Bellini (1972, 202-3) reinterpreted the classic "auto-mobile" and designed Kar-a-Sutra as a "human space in motion," or in Bellini's terms, as "a new territory, visiting around and having people involved with this adventure." With its large windows and flexible interior, the large green vehicle undertook to liberate its users from any automobile-conditioned behavior by facilitating the routine ceremonies of daily life inside a car, such as face-to-face conversation, eating and entertaining, sleeping, and so on. With a load capacity of twelve people without baggage, Kar-a-Sutra offered ultimate freedom to its users through its flexible plastic cushions. Enabling any rearrangement in case of demand, Kar-a-sutra was an expostulation against the ordinary design manner in the automobile industry that lacked incorporation of human will. Bellini's design criticized "the parameters of the automobile-man system," dominated by the automotive industry and its rapid consumption, symbolizing the status quo (Bellini, 1972, 202; Neira, 2017) (**Figure 6**).

All were unique expressions of Italian Radicals who postulated design as a means of a revolt against the domination of the cultural industry, imposing the mutual interaction of mass production and consumption. Architect and industrial designer Gaetano Pesce's proposal, or in his words, "habitat" in the Design as Commentary section, exhibited in Centre Pompidou today, however, sought the possible way to say "no" to the design problem. The Counterdesign as Postulation section was a distinctive category that introduced a provocative counter stance towards design to the American audience.

### **Counterdesign "Environments" as Postulation**

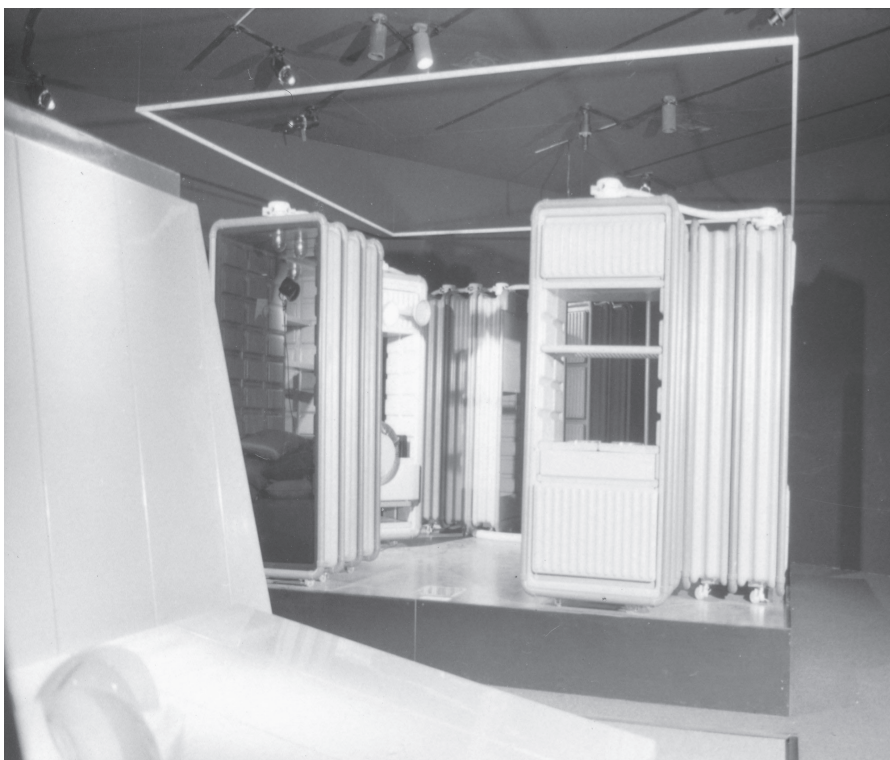
If the design is the only motivation to consume, then we must reject the design; if architecture is the only way to legitimize the bourgeois model of ownership and society, we must reject the architecture .... Until then, design may disappear. We can live without architecture.

Adolfo Natalini, Lecture Notes, Architectural Association School of Architecture, London, March 1971(Natalini in Adjustments Agency, 2018)

The "Counter Design as Postulation" category gathered designers' proposals who demanded radical structural changes in society. These radicals chose "not to design" a domestic environment. Instead, they preferred to voice criticism towards the deterioration of society, consumerism, uncontrolled information, and communication media, towards the official culture, repressing the patterns of religious, aesthetic, cultural, and even environmental behavior, thus towards the orthodoxy of the architectural and design world. The activism of designers, represented



**Figure 2.** Gae Aulenti's Domestic Environment, installation view



**Figure 3.** Ettore Sottsass' Domestic Environment, installation view (The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 1004.108. The Museum of Modern Art Archives. Photograph by Leonardo LeGrand.)





**Figure 4.** Joe Colombo's Domestic Environment from the exhibition catalog (Colombo,1972, p.175)

**Figure 5.** Alberto Rosselli's Mobile House on the right, Marc Zanuso and Richard Sapper's Domestic Environment on the left, installation view (The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 1004.204. The Museum of Modern Art Archives. Photograph by Leonardo LeGrand.)

by the installation or action art, stood unique and radical, dissenting to be labeled within the codified boundaries of the architectural and design world, or better called, to be signified as a compulsion of, in his terms, the system, promoting ultimate consumerism.

As an instance, Ugo La Pietra (1938- Bussi Sul Tirino), who defined himself first as an artist, then an architect and designer, transformed "the domicile cell" into "a microstructure within the information and communication systems" and submitted a series of comprehension models, respectively called *Immersion*, *The New Perspective*, *Microenvironment*, *Audio*, and *Audio-visual microevents*. La Pietra's 1967 *Disequilibrating System*, a theoretical "refusal to work within the system" or a "subjugated" art or architecture profession, was the basis of the first two aesthetic operations: *Immersion* and *The New Perspective*. They were to provoke the users into alienation from distorted reality in private refuge towards a "new perspective." In *Comprehension model A: 'Immersion'*, for instance, the visitor got into a cylindrical instrument, a separation displacing codified forms of



**Figure 6.** Mario Bellini's Kar-a Sutra, installation view (Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photograph by Leonardo LeGrand)



privacy, disconnected from reality and experiencing a crisis between the ultimate desire to be isolated from the context and the aspiration for “an unbalancing inclusion in the system.” In *Comprehension model B: ‘The New perspective,’* La Pietra pointed out the necessity “to repropose the problem of direct awareness of reality (overcoming the ‘barrier’ of the ‘instrument’ that acts as a mediating filter between us and reality).” Creating a kind of camera obscura without the mirror tilted at a 45° angle and the lens, he eliminated the filter and the manipulator to enable the visitor to see reality directly. The other models were editions of La Pietra’s fantasy for the domestic environment: a private space equipped with information and communication media tools yet keeping them “under control.” La Pietra’s proposal criticized the meaning of attempting to rediscover the domicile cell in its most innovative form. Instead, Pietra designed a “living” cell to endorse the “barrier” created between the people and reality posed by the use and dominance of telematic devices over the urban privacy system and society. Later named a “Telematic House” (*Casa telematica*, 1971), he equipped the cell with Ciceronelettronico and Videocomunicatore — sound and video transmitter— connecting private space and urban fabric (ugolapietra.com). Expressing his regret for the incoherence of his scope during the INDL exhibition, La Pietra reinterpreted the “domicile cell,” symbolized by the elementary form of a triangle, as a station for real-time processing and redistribution of public information in private space and vice versa (Pietra, 1972, 226-7) (**Figure 7**). All criticized illusionism, created by information and communication systems.

On the other hand, the Florentine design group of Andrea Branzi, Gilberto Corretti, Paolo Deganello, and Massimo Morozzi, named *Archizoom Associati* (1966), created an environment that displays the power of “programmed electronic media” causing the efficacy of older paradigms’ loss. Concerned with product design, architecture, and interior design, Archizoom best presented its polemical activities in its 1966 *Superarchitettura I* and 1967 *Superarchitettura II* exhibitions. Embracing consumerist culture as a radical criticism of capitalism, Archizoom, primarily due to the cultural impact of Manfredo Tafuri’s 1969 essay “Toward the critique of architecture ideology,” approached design as a critique of the mass production/consumption of objects. Moreover, they considered the design process a symbolic and political phenomenon that must be changed drastically (Hershon et al., 2020, 206; Molinari, *Radical Pedagogies*).

For the INDL show, *Archizoom Associati*, as described by Scott, proposed an installation that imitates “the logic of capitalism as to short-circuit somehow its operations” (Scott, 2007, 142). Identifying “violent conflicts, uncontrolled disorder, and spontaneous growth of means of communication” as “short tactics” adopted by the city to impel citizens “to integrate within consumer society,” Archizoom created a “precisely calculated assimilation” with audio and audio-visual tactics. Refusing to build an environmental model to live in, as described by Ambasz’s design program, Archizoom proposed a “hollow space,” in their terms, an empty white cube purged of any image to avoid picturing a domestic environment. However, via a sound system, this “hollow space” conditioned people with “words,” allowing them to adopt different “meaning” and “values” to the very concept and to imagine as many versions of it as they could because of the narrated stories by audio devices (**Figure 8**). Archizoom proposed “[n]ot a single utopia, then but an infinity of utopias, as many as there are listeners. Not just a single culture



**Figure 7.** Ugo la Pietra's microenvironment, installation view (The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photograph by Leonardo LeGrand)

but one for each individual". For Archizoom, the problem was beyond seeking freedom for man in a reality that lacks meaning (as a system that is "meaningless" in itself produced that reality). Nevertheless, the problem was seeking liberty, for the free will in possessing man's capability to obtain his own "right to act, modify, form and destroy the surrounding environment" (Archizoom, 1972, 234). By describing the rituals Ambasz identified with words, Archizoom emphasized the power of "word" and criticized the dominating control of audio communication on the user politically. According to Archizoom, "Violent conflicts, uncontrolled disorder, and the spontaneous growth of means of communication are the shock tactics that the city adopts to compel the citizen to integrate himself within consumer society" (Archizoom, 1972, 237).

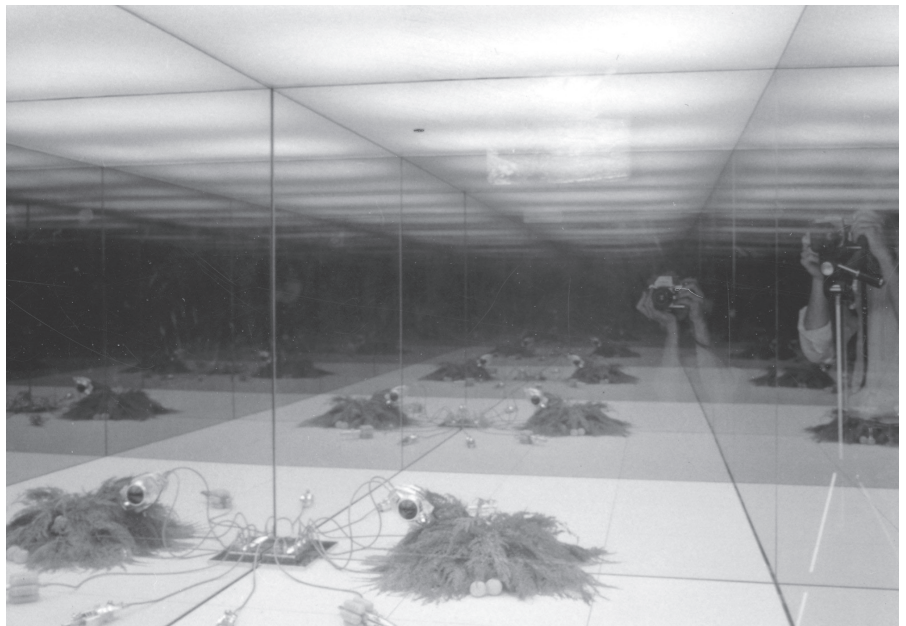
Another Italian Radical Architecture collective, Superstudio, approached Ambasz's problem in an analogous yet propagandist manner. Identifying themselves as a "situationist movement" rather than a group, Superstudio (active between 1966-1986), consisting of Piero Frassinelli, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Alessandro Poli, and Cristiano

**Figure 8.** Archizoom's environment, installation view (The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 1004.108. The Museum of Modern Art Archives. Photograph by Leonardo LeGrand.)



Toraldo di Francia, “used architecture’s traditional instruments (drawing and projects) to criticize not only architecture and its trends but also society” (Natalini in Byvanck, 2005, 25). As “real avant-gardes,” the group, for Natalini, “tried to destroy the existing system, free divisions, cultural colonialism, violence, and consumerism” for “the utopia of a free world and a life free from work, a life without objects” (Natalini in Byvanck, 2005, 25). They refused to design a domestic micro-environment and presented “an alternative model for life on earth” (Superstudio, 1972, 242). In a black room, contoured by thin luminescent lines, Superstudio displayed the model of a square plate. Placed in a rotating turret built of polarized mirrors in the center, this plate “produc[ed] the illusion of infinite space inside a small cube with a ‘supersurface’ in a plastic grid, populated by technological devices as life supports and abstract-vegetal creatures” (Quesada, 2011, 23). (Figure 9)

**Figure 9.** Superstudio's environment, installation view (The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 1004.108. The Museum of Modern Art Archives. Photograph by Leonardo LeGrand.)



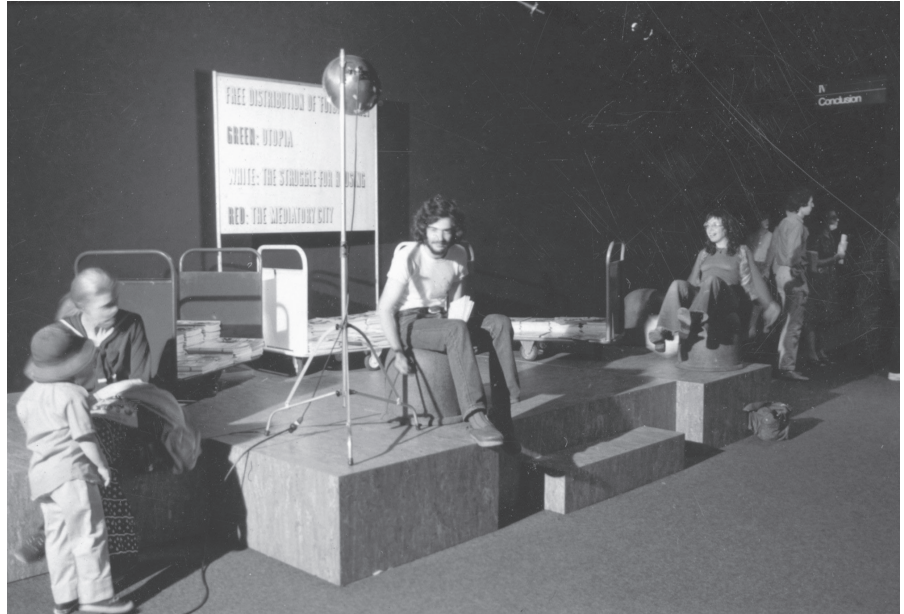


With the help of a little machine connected to a T.V. screen, they projected a three-minute documentary on the model in various natural/work situations and meteorological events such as sunrise, storm, clouds, and night on the ceiling. This installation symbolized Superstudio's utopia of a "life without work and a new 'potentialized' humanity, ... made possible by a network" (Superstudio, 1972, 242). Superstudio's pop collages and the Cartesian squared Supersurface, "visual-verbal metaphor[s] for an ordered and rational distribution of resources," represented a grid with nodes that would provide instant shelter, food, and communication tools for nomadic inhabitants (Elfline, 2016, 67). Superstudio rendered, for Quesada, an everyday life in the interstices of "supersurface" that lacked to "propose a definitive setting for the future, but an exercise in momentary liberation, an ephemeral act of freedom" (Quesada, 2011, 23). Superstudio's "elimination of all formal structures, [their] transfer of all designing activity to the conceptual sphere [grid], ... [their] rejection of production and consumption, rejection of work" were to liberate inhabitants from the subjugation of city and of consumer culture (Superstudio, 1972, 244).

Another Italian radical design group participating in the Environments section was Gruppo Strum, the Group for Instrumental Architecture (Turin, 1966-1975), founded by Giorgio Ceretti, Pietro Derossi, Carlo Giammarco, Riccardo Rosso, and Maurizio Vogliazzo. Opposed to the functionalism of the International Style, the group pioneered the development of the antidesign and radical architecture movements with their theoretical work (Cooper Hewitt Collection, n.d.). For the INDL show, they neither designed a physical environment as reformists nor proposed an art installation, as Archizoom and Superstudio did. They approached the problem rather literarily and preferred to criticize the problems in society on an intellectual level. Setting up a stand in the exhibition, Gruppo Strum distributed "photostories," pamphlets in white, green, and red color, addressing significant aspects of design the collective underscored. The white-colored booklet, for instance, focused on "the struggle for housing." It contended discussions on how these struggles "reshape[d] cities by attacking and defeating the capitalist organization of the territory together with the symbolic values that formalize it" (Gruppo Strum, 1972, 254). "UTOPIA," the green photostory, rendered Gruppo Strum's dream of a technological world for happy people. For Strum, utopia "as a means of intervention, directly linked with the organization of struggles against the programmed reorganization of capital" was "an act of provocation, and ... a negation of the objectivity of the present-day system of production" (Gruppo Strum, 1972, 255). The red pamphlet, "The mediatory city," contented "five realistic examples of precarious living conditions and struggles on the boundaries of ruling class legitimacy. The common matrix [was] the rejection of the established order as a limit to creativity" (*ITALY/ GRUPPO STRUM*, 1972, MoMA Archives, NY). The photostory analyzed "the patterns of behavior, imposed by the bourgeois city, and provoked new patterns of resistance against the impositions of a capitalist system" (Mutlu Tunca, 2009, 149) (**Figure 10**).

The last refusal to design came from Enzo Mari (1932). Inspired highly by communism and the idealism of the Arts and Crafts movement, Milanese artist and furniture designer Mari founded the Nuova Tendenza art movement in the 1970s (Museum of Modern Art Collection, n.d.). For the show, he solely submitted a text clarifying his philosophy of the environment in which he compared the diversity of communications in the Objects and Environments sections. For Ambasz, Mari's article





**Figure 10.** Gruppo Strum's stand  
(Photographic Archive, The Museum of  
Modern Art Archives, New York. IN1004.58.  
Photograph by Leonardo LeGrand.)

revealed that “the only valid sphere of action for the designer is that of communications, and that the only honorable strategy open to him is that of renewing language—the alphabet included” (Ambasz, 1972, 262).

As for Mari, communication was the primary determinant of “social relations and their evolution,” the protest of artists against class struggle, consumer culture, against ideological and political compulsions required a “language research” with “true” Marxian ideals for regenerating communicative and linguistic tools. For Mari, the liberation of “research dialectics from all mystifying superstructures” necessitated imposing a code of behavior— for artists who credited class struggle as the only way to resolve social evolution, who considered artistic activity solely as an instrument of collective action. This code of behavior facilitated the revision of false justifications, regarding Marxian values, even in dialogue with the ones maintaining antagonist standpoints. Rather than abstract assertions, detached from the daily practices in the profession, the artists of the day, for Mari, were responsible for designing critical works with realistic motivations, clarifying their free ideological choices. Therefore, the communication of their own artistic or critical activity incorporated the “[e]nunciation of his own utopian vision of the development of society,” a strategy with tactics to achieve this ideal and the synchronization of research with those tactics (Mari, 1972, 264-5). Admitting that any attempt to reject subjugation might enfold manipulation and the ignorance of others, Mari singled out such ignorance due to “their avowed adherence to the dominating class, as their feigned adherence to the class that is dominated” (Mari, 1972, 265).

Regarded by Marcos Parga, assistant professor at Syracuse University, as the crime scene of Radical architecture, the INDL exhibition provided the initial international recognition of the movement (Parga, 2015, 14-5). The counterdesigns of Radical Italian designers, thus, exclaimed a crisis of project to resist the compulsions of modernity. They, in a way, showed consumer society that design had facilities other than producing consumer goods. Rejecting to design a house environment, they deconstructed conventional recognition of design to reveal its power to resist ideological

compulsions. For awareness of social and political problems, antidesign manifestos, approaches, and proposals attempted to reconstruct design as a tool to criticize consumerism, mass media, the uncontrolled disorder in cities, and capitalism. Moreover, they condemned “high art” and “industrially produced consumer art,” mesmerized under the “stigmata of capitalism,” as proclaimed by Adorno in his famous book on *Culture Industry*.

Nevertheless, as a prominent architectural theoretician and historian with a Marxist mindset, Manfredo Tafuri, in his article “Design and Technological Utopia” — one of the critical articles added by Ambasz at the very end of the catalog — regarded such analytical studies on the theory of communication as naive proclamations that undermined “the indissoluble links between technological aesthetics, the theory of symbols, and the capitalist theory of development,” therefore devoided to become “an ideology of compensation.” He criticized such unjustified suggestions, analyzing the “relations between communications and consumption, and between the theory of technological and linguistic innovation.” For Tafuri, since design was “an extensive information system directly involved with advertising,” the designers exploited its potential to compensate for “distortions in consumption” by recovering its “social, humanitarian and revolutionary role.” Tafuri claimed that “semantic restructuring,” influenced by ongoing semiological and structuralist discourses of the 1970s, was a “convenient alibi” for designers within such scope; yet the endeavors “to ‘resemanticize’ the object” for recovering its “myths” dragged the discipline into a surreal, ambiguous, and “gratuitous” sphere. The historical paradox witnessed in Italy was due to the challenge of these gratuitous endeavors, exemplified by the ironic works of Aulenti and Sotsaass, which Tafuri defined as esoteric and anguished, to “the ideological ‘frenzy’ of radical design” (Tafuri, 1972, 393-4). Tafuri, however, considered both as theatrical acts that criticized the former functionalist utopias but created “new utopias” “in which ‘plays of anticipation’ are performed with conscious detachment” (Tafuri, 1972, 394). For him, both sought to “redress the ethical ‘distortions’ of the technological world by modifying the system of production or the channels of distribution.” Nevertheless, these “intellectual anti-consumer utopias,” Tafuri coined, either by design or not, underestimated the unbreakable link between production, distribution, and consumption in a capitalist system.

## CONCLUSION

Consumer culture and consumer society were among deliberate discussion topics in the architectural debates of the 1970s, as it is today. Studies have shown that 1972 and Ambasz’s “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape” exhibition marked a critical threshold for American architecture and design society. About two years after the exhibition, Diane Agrest, one of the most promising academics at Princeton University, invited Manfredo Tafuri to lecture at the “Practice, Theory and Politics in Architecture” conference. For the first time in the United States, Tafuri presented a speech on the latest tendencies in American architecture and discussed “a typology for different approaches to criticism” (Hays, 1998, 291). Just after the seminar, the editors of *Oppositions*, the renowned journal of IAUS, published the text of Tafuri’s lecture under the title “L’Architecture dans le Boudoir” (*Oppositions* 3, 1974), which highly surpassed the impact of his first English article, “Design and Technological Utopia” (1972). From its selection

as either the first or the last article by reputable architectural theory anthologies, one can understand the influence of "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir" on the transition of American architectural discourse toward a more critical state. Two years later, Agrest (1976, 49), in her article "Design versus Non-Design," published in *Oppositions* 6, where her interest in Tafuri's theories and the design / counter-design debates became apparent, proposes "non-design" as the counteract of "design." While design, for Agrest, is characterized as an institutional and settled social practice with a set of sanctioned rules and norms specified by normative writings and written texts of architecture, non-design retains no defined limits and specificity, therefore, allows "the inscription of sense in a free and highly undetermined way." In her text, theorizing non-design as the articulation of "a complex social text, a semiotically heterogeneous object," signified by different cultural systems at the level of codes, Agrest referred to Manfredo Tafuri's article in Italian on Giovanni Battista Piranesi and his architecture as a "negative utopia" (Giovanni Battista Piranesi; L'Architettura come "Utopia negativa"), as if confirming that Ambasz's show triggered a series of interactions instigating a linguistic turn towards criticism in the architectural debates.

Besides instigating a linguistic turn, designs and counterdesigns of Italian radicals, displayed in Ambasz's INDL show, or as Halland (2016, 2640) claimed, the "utopias and dystopias" they proclaimed, set an ideal for the "making" or "unmaking" of "... our ultimate environment, the planet earth." In other words, the "utopias," listed under the Design as Postulation category, refuted the paradigms of Modernism and the sway of consumerism, attempted to demolish the judgment of "good design" in consumers' minds, and reconsidered socio-cultural and ideological sanctions before designing domestic environments. The "dystopias," listed under the Counterdesign as Postulation category, contrarily reinforced the supremacy of design's representative power, dissociated the design act from industrial management, and attempted to revolutionize the planning phase. The radical attempts of counterdesign advocates engendered the disclosure of political and ideological criticisms against capitalism and mass media. Through artistic creation, they criticized the malaise in cities and expressed their pessimism towards the redundancy of professing architecture unless structural changes in societal terms occurred. Both endeavors encompassed unique criticisms of Marxist and Leftist designers against environmental and sociopolitical problems aggravated by consumer culture. The differences in their liberal criticality about restructuring society and spatiality uncovered the most novel opposition of that time, denouncing capitalism, mass production, and consumption as the causality of the design discipline's deterioration.

The institutional crisis of architectural and design practice in Italy that day, which even provoked Italian radicals to the point of not designing, simulates the "catastrophic" condition of architecture and design today. Increases in the symptoms of the culture industry produced different consumption patterns that demanded the social reorganization of the masses and their spaces, transforming the stability and permanency of the paradigmatic domesticity to instability and impermanence. Hence, while this study has focused on the diversity of architectural solutions in the INDL exhibition, be it design, counterdesign, or any deed within the boundaries of architectural practice itself, what remained unchanged is the shared theoretical concerns underlying all postulations with environmental, societal, ideological and therefore architectural dilemmas

we face today. Current challenges in all those spheres modify a particular content of our disciplinary perplexity and disorder; thus, concerns on the climate emergency, Anthropocene, migration, pandemics, quarantine period, as well as natural disasters we have lived through, such as the 2021 Aegean forest fires and 2023 Turkey- Syria earthquake, aggravate the symptoms of malaise, scrutinized by Ambasz once as if testifying their enduring significance over and above the disciplinary objectives at hand. Therefore, this paper reiterates Italian radicals' critical conception of domestic space and consumption as the means of re-evaluating, re-elaborating, and re-elucidating the people's association with their environment today over an ideal once foreseen by the participants of the INDL exhibition.

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**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Radikal tasarımcılar, tüketimcilik, seri üretim, tüketim toplumu, çevreler ve karşı çevreler.

## TÜKETİME KARŞI TASARIM VE KARŞIT TASARIM: 1972 “İTALYA: EVE AİT YENİ BİR PEYZAJ” SERGİSİ

1960’lar ve 1970’ler Batı Avrupa’ında, mimarlık teori ve pratiğini Avrupalı tasarımcıların seri üretim ve tüketime yönelik radikal eleştirileri şekillendirmeye başlamıştı. Ancak, dönemin en provokatif ve ses getiren itirazı, bazı İtalyan Radikal tasarımcılar tarafından okyanusun öteki tarafında bulunan New York Modern Sanat Müzesi’nde Emilio Ambasz tarafından 1972 yılında düzenlenen bir mimarlık sergisinde dile getirilmişti: “İtalya: Eve Ait Yeni bir Peyzaj” (INDL). Bu sergi, Çağdaş Tasarım Tarihi’nde önemli bir eşik oluşturmuş ve mimarlık söylemlerinde artarak tartışılan tüketim karşıtı yaklaşımın bir simgesi olmuştur. Sergi için, Ambasz İtalyan imalatçılar tarafından üretilen 100’ü aşkın “obje” seçmiş ve bunları bahçe alanında özel tasarlanmış vitrinlerde sergilemiştir. Ayrıca, çevresel psikoloji, yerellik, kentsellik, mikro ve makro ölçekte konut, tüketim kültürü ve seri üretim gibi “özel tasarım programı” tarafından belirlenen kavramları yorumlayarak benzersiz “mikro çevreler” tasarımları için on bir İtalyan tasarımcı davet etmiştir. Müzenin bahçesinde sergilenen “objeler” büyük önem arz etse de etkinlik, İtalyan tasarımını Amerikan kamuoyuna tanıtan ilk örneklerden biridir- bu çalışma, çağdaş mimarlık teorisinde hala etkin bir konu başlığı olan “tasarım” ve “karşı tasarım” diyalektiğinin arka planında yatan tasarım felsefesini anlamak için Ambasz’ın belirlediği tasarım problemine karşı İtalyan tasarımcıların verdikleri karşıt yanıtlara odaklanmaktadır. Bu sebeple, “tasarım” kategorisi altında derlenen, altı tane İtalyan tasarımcının eklektik ve postmodern yaklaşımları ile “karşı tasarım” kategorisinde bulunan Radikal tasarımcıların provokatif reddedişleri analiz edilmektedir. Amaç, serginin görünür kıldığı bu söylemsel karşıtlığın, sonrasında tasarımcılar arasında artan tüketim karşıtı yaklaşımlar ve alternatif metodoloji arayışları üzerindeki etkisini daha iyi anlamaktır.

### **DESIGN AND COUNTER DESIGN AGAINST CONSUMPTION: 1972 “ITALY, THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE” EXHIBITION**

In Western Europe, the 1960s and 1970s covered the radical criticism of some European designers against mass production and consumption. Several Italian Radical designers raised the most compelling objection at an exhibition on the other side of the ocean: “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape” (INDL), curated by Emilio Ambasz in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1972. INDL marked a significant moment in contemporary design history. For the show, Ambasz selected more than a hundred “objects” produced by Italian manufacturers and displayed them in specially designed cases in the garden area. Moreover, he invited eleven Italian designers to create unique “microenvironments” by interpreting concepts assigned by a “special design program,” such as environmental psychology, locality, urbanism, micro and macro-scale housing, consumerism, and mass production. Although the “objects” displayed in the garden were of great importance - since the event was one of the first instances of Italian design’s introduction to the American public- this study concentrates on the contradicting responses of Italian designers, under headings “design and counterdesign as postulation” for understanding the design philosophy behind the appearance of “design versus non-design” dialectics of that era, which is still a recognized topic in contemporary architectural theory. This study, therefore, analyzes the eclectic and postmodern approaches of six Italian designers in the “design” category and the provocative denials of Radical designers presented under the “counterdesign” category. It aims to understand better the impact of this discursive opposition made visible by the exhibition on the anti-consumerist approaches and the search for alternative methodologies, which subsequently increased among designers.

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