

# *(inside)*

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# ciao italia

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In an ever-changing world, where power shifts, allegiances wax and wane and empires crumble, it is perhaps comforting to see that Italy is still the undisputed global powerhouse of design. Since its first ambitious forays into creative manufacturing as a cultural recovery program after the ravages of WWII, Italian design has had a seemingly supernatural ability to harness the creative talent of locals and foreigners alike, plucking ideas like ripe fruits from across the globe and turning them out as polished, desired and traded items. Many a designer has made a hopeful trip to this land of opportunity, longing to be discovered, nurtured and immortalised by the creative talent and marketing might of the leading Italian design houses.

Italy itself has produced some of the greatest design minds of the modern period, from Sottsass to Castiglioni and Scarpa to Magistretti, and it is not as if these great designers were ever short of a few ideas. It is inspiring then to note that from the beginning Italy chose to create discourse with other cultures and nations, to foster collaborations and perhaps accidentally to gradually construct a global web of interaction and conversation that singularly enhances and reinforces the importance of the Italian position today.

These conversations, the discourse, communiqués, sketches and arrangements that travel across the world between designers and Italian manufacturers recently became the focus of an exhibition hosted by the Italian Trade Commission in both Melbourne and Sydney. The exhibition aimed to illustrate the significant role that Italy has played in the careers of many of Australia's best designers, Susan Cohn, Denton Corker Marshall, Marc Newson, Steven Blaess, Tom Kovac, Berro Pandolfo and Helen Kontouris, to name just a few.

This exhibition aimed to illustrate the extent of the conversations currently burning across the ether from the north to the south and back again, and incorporated products from firms as diverse as Alessi, Cappellini, Magis, Moroso, B&B Italia, Samsonite, Flos, Edra, Oluce, Konikalini, Progetti, Arteluce, Outlook and Design Italia.

The task of documenting and designing this diverse exhibition, and of generating a cohesive polemical journey from each of the finished design artefacts to be included within it, fell to curator and design journalist Heidi Dokulil. Dokulil set about her task in a personal fashion, encouraging each of the designers to contribute sketches, letters, diary pages, photographs and prototypes so that a layered, interwoven series of glimpses were allowed to create an overall panoramic view.

In collaboration with her colleagues at the Parcel Group – architect Richard Peters and graphic designer Graeme Smith – Dokulil literally threaded the collected articles together by sealing the available material in a series of identical plastic bags and suspending them along a continuous custom-made suspension wire.

The resulting exhibition is joyous in its simplicity. It allows the viewer to leaf through the exhibit, randomly accessing photography, sketch or anecdote, along with quotations and short interviews from some of the most influential Italian manufacturers.

The simple display device, which elegantly suspends, connects and packages this exhibition, illustrates a brave approach to so much precious cargo from the curators. One is left with a feeling of involvement, of having thumbed through the taxonomy of Australian successes, of which there are sure to be more to come.

In heat-sealing her valuable cargo in a plastic tube, Dokulil takes the public into a retail discourse with the show, and has created an easily stored and reconfigured exhibition that was a highlight of the recent St Margaret's Architecture Festival hosted in collaboration with Sydney's Object Gallery. It illustrates the strength of influence that the Italians still exert over us, drawing us into their arms, yet in response this exhibition also illustrates the great richness of ideas and inspiration that spring from the remotest places and keep the Italians flush with new products to offer the world, ideas which often just need a visionary industrialist or two to allow them to become a reality.

*The rich and varied communiqués between Australian designers and collaborators in Italy, still the undisputed world design capital, is revealed in this diverse and engaging exhibition.*