



**Vico Magistretti - Elegance and Innovation in Postwar Italian Design**  
by Vanni Pasca  
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## Vico Magistretti - Elegance and Innovation in Postwar Italian Design

Reviewed by Adrian Stokes

IN RECENT TIMES THE DESIGN world has seen an unhealthy scramble to foist fame and stardom onto the shoulders of those whose work offers neither scope nor consistency. To properly judge a contribution, the picture needs to be broadly drawn. In this context, this study of Vico Magistretti and his work is a timely one - an output spanning 45 years is broad for sure.

The book is nicely conceived. It is a simple mix of pictures, sketches, comment and analysis, backed up by a thorough sequential record of his work in the final sections. Recent attempts by commentators to elevate the design process to a rarified intellectual level are laughable and it comes as some relief that the author, Vanni Pasca, has avoided the traps of wordiness and pomposity. The balance of the content in favour of the products is reassuring and in keeping with the approach Magistretti has as a designer.

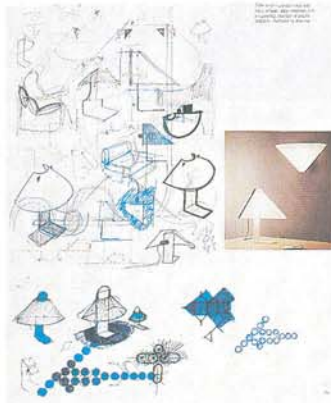
I've always had mixed feelings about Magistretti. He is predominantly a light and chair man, something of a specialist and, in comparison with others such as Bellini, Sottsass and Le Corbusier, I have found his work wanting in scope and scale. To a certain extent, having read and looked at this record, this general view is confirmed.

Magistretti works to a code formed at an early stage in his career by the influence of his family (who were architects) and his early architectural tutor, Ernesto Rogers who, he says, 'opened your eyes, not to architecture but to culture'.

This simple observation is key to his career. He draws on a vocabulary which includes information assembled widely, absorbed and used appropriately. His work is often an amalgam of a contemporary industrial process used to achieve a design



Magistretti down the years sketches and finished versions of the Porsenna lamp from 1976 (left) and the Vidun table (above) from 1986



inspired by a traditional object or culture. However, the Atollo lamp designed in 1977 is the result of another process which is wholly intuitive at the outset but brought into focus by a collaboration with a manufacturer who had the skills necessary to realise his original concept.

Both the author and Magistretti stress the themes which affect the designs. Rejection of the Modernists' desire for renewal in favour of 'gradual reform'; an interest in observing and gaining inspiration from traditional objects which are unaffected by any 'conceptions of style'; an open-minded acceptance of the possibilities represented by technical processes; a fondness for simplicity and trust in his own intuitive skill in achieving the balance he requires in his final objects.

The opening essay sets out an honest picture of a deceptively straightforward designer. I say deceptively because, as the author points out, Magistretti takes his observations about the process of design and the birth of his own designs none too seriously.

Talk of communicating designs down a telephone and being unable to produce technical specifications are nice anecdotes but remain at odds with the objects themselves, which are always finely tuned.

Running through the chronology of his work and placing it in the time it was con-

ceived is enlightening. His earliest work in 1946 for the RIMA exhibition in Milan is innovative and functional, simple and, for its time, modern. His work through the sixties is driven more by process, but in context is wonderfully creative.

The seventies demonstrate growing maturity and self-confidence. Porsenna Nemea and Atollo are simple, timeless and perfect examples of a 'less means more', unstylised approach. Other work, particularly outside the lighting field, seems transitional. Moving into the eighties with the Sindbad chair, the objects achieve just the combination of influence, process, intuitive skill and sensitive detailing for which the previous two decades seemed a testing-ground.

The recent series of objects for De Padova are outstanding - totally unpretentious with great sophistication and quality.

But still the doubts remain. Architecturally he has taken on and produced some neat cameos but he has always worked on his own terms. But if he had to move beyond his preferred field and tackle some really large-scale briefs, he might, I feel, produce questionable results. A contemporary, Mario Bellini, would relish the challenge and has demonstrated he can produce significant work across the board. It is this, despite a glorious career, which raises a question mark about Magistretti's standing.