

Design Is One: The Icon Massimo Vignelli (1931 - 2014)

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Two years since his passing, we remember a man, a friend, and a great designer who left behind traces of Italy throughout New York. Massimo Vignelli worked in a wide range of fields, in interior design, environmental design, package design, graphic design, furniture design, and product design, and his clients at Vignelli Associates included high profile companies such as IBM, MTA, Poltrona Frau, Knoll, Bloomingdale's and American Airlines.

The first time I interviewed him, I entered his home gingerly, almost afraid, having imagined the



house would be a temple of design. Turns out, it was a temple. The light poured through a huge window and extended into an elongated living room. I will never forget it. The silence was profound but it was as if music had just been playing in the background, maybe Mozart.

At the end of the room, on the left, was a big black desk. There was a metal sheet, the kind used to cover roadwork in NY... only he could have thought of using it to draw on. Seated around his desk, we taped our first interview. It was there – though I didn't know it yet – that we would have other long, timeless chats...

That day I began by asking why he'd left Milan. "It was too small," he replied, quickly and without hesitating, as if he had thought about it so many times, "too provincial. The ceiling was too low. I came to New York thinking that the ceiling would be higher here, only to discover that here the ceiling doesn't exist at all!"

His answer marked the beginning of our friendship. Now I know. In a few incisive words Massimo helped me understand my own decision to live in New York. It was a short (regrettably) but intense relationship. I spent a lot of time with him as his friend – an honor for me – and as a journalist. That's how I had the good fortune to realize some of the conversations that appeared periodically, fragments of which here follow.

Design vs. Vulgarly

"Good design is responsible design. It expresses intellectual elegance rather than the contrary, vulgarly," Massimo Vignelli used to say, without a trace of aloofness or snobbery. He was punctilious, yes, but never boring. He "believed" in discipline but not in dogma; he was disciplined and dynamic, flexible and coherent, even if he spoke his own language. He championed the cleanest, simplest approach to design.

I vividly remember talking to him about a change he made to his own house. I find analyzing the personal choices of a designer is the best way to fully investigate his thinking. Books covered his living room table. Lots of books. I was stunned to discover that Vignelli had figured out how to restore order to that space "with a beautiful hidden bookcase" he'd seen at Ikea! No high-end designers? I asked. Just a piece of furniture from Ikea that anyone can afford? "Yes," he answered. "You can find excellent design pieces there! Good, clean designs made with a minimum amount of labor and great modularity. That's how you do design."

'My style is minimalist'

Here I am, remembering – not a little nostalgically – the time I stood in front of his hidden bookcases, in a space where every contour had been thought out, including the profile of its owner and architect.

"Beautiful, huh?" said Massimo. "My style is minimalist. Every language has its own rules; everyone has his own style and rules. That's why every house is different. My style is more minimalist. You need to keep subtracting until you're left with something." The bookcases from Ikea were a case in point.

'Design Is One'

Everything about the house of Massimo and Lella Vignelli suggested a life devoted to design, an intellectual journey culminating in his famous slogan: "Design is one." What does that mean in laymen's terms? I asked. "Design Is One was the title of my lecture," said Vignelli. "The idea goes back to the Viennese [Adolf] Loos, who believed that an architect must know how to make everything, from a spoon to a city. Loos was against specialization because specialization led to entropy and entropy led to the end of creativity. Indeed, you must be able to design everything—furniture, graphics, packaging, agendas, books, even the clothes I'm wearing."

Vignelli shared that belief with his lifelong companion, designer Lella Vignelli, whose masterpieces have yet to be properly recognized. "Lella has designed amazing jewelry," said Vignelli. "We designed what I'm wearing. I designed the watch too. We've designed everything in our house, the chairs, the tables; I designed the books I often read. I live in a space almost completely designed by me. With few exceptions."



From Europe to America

"I love my work because 'design is one,'" he used to say with an unmistakable smile. "It's one profession, one attitude. As Italians, we have a long history of codifying design in this way. It has existed for centuries. It was the same for Leonardo da Vinci. In Italy, after the war, we had to do everything... architects like myself did everything..."

The discipline was the same. The way of thinking, coming up with solutions, was always the same. The mental process was the same and the mental process was discipline. This didn't exist in American culture. American culture is a culture of specialization. Ours, on the other hand, is a culture of generalists. Specialists didn't arrive in Europe till later. So in 1977 America, architecture faced a crisis. In Italy we thought, 'But in Europe architects do everything! Not just houses but furniture!' That's how I got my start in America, doing the same thing we did in Europe."

Educating Clients

And did that notion give rise to the concept of coordinated images, on which you based your relationship with clients? "Yes, the total coordination of an image is essential. One image for everything, from the logo of a museum to its catalogues to the exhibitions. Or for a company. You begin with the logo to get to the product, the letterhead, the packaging, the store, the displays." In Vignelli's opinion, a system of visual identity allows something to differentiate itself and become unmistakably recognizable. Not many clients caught on when Vignelli first explained this notion to them. Today it's become common wisdom.

Designers, Not Artists

I once asked him what the difference was between an artist and a designer. "[Artists] are the opposite of designers. Design is always bound by its relationship to others. Self-expression is the job of artists. The artist answers to no one. The designer always answers to someone. A client, the public. If you want to make a fork, you have to make a fork someone can eat with, not one that makes it impossible to eat. You can't make a knife that's just a blade or just a handle, because striking the right balance of blade and handle is essential to using it. The first part involves the object itself, the next involves who is making the object. That doesn't mean that there's no room for invention, of course, but there are restrictions."

Traces in New York

New York speaks Massimo Vignelli's language. Many will remember the famous subway map he designed for the MTA in the 1970s, whose rigorous features could not be superimposed on a map of the city because its stops didn't correspond. (It was replaced by a more realistic if less elegant drawing years later.) But there are plenty of other places in New York – to say nothing of museums – that speak Vignelli's language, including spaces, objects, posters, furniture.

One important trace can be found in Soho's Italian design district, where Poltrona Frau's showroom produced many works, including the very famous and still modern "Intervista" chair, commissioned in the late '80s by TG2, then a budding

news show on Italian TV whose first set Vignelli designed. As he himself tells it: "It became the famous Studio 10: pearl-grey with a zinc floor, 32 monitors and two red armchairs in the foreground. This was a new invention, a new way to broadcast the news (and a departure from the anchorman format). The armchair was called "Intervista"; an evolution of the bucket-style chair, it was carefully designed for maximum comfort and a posture that does not alter tone of voice. It is an example of how a project can morph into a communicative, not to mention political, tool."

Designers, not Stylists

I'm pleased to conclude with this brief (too brief!) remembrance of Vignelli with another answer that struck me deeply when I first heard him tell it and speaks volumes about his rigor.

When asked about the difference between designers and stylists, he replied: "Everything depends upon method. For example, when a fashion designer creates a style, he doesn't follow a designer's method. He follows a stylist's. Styling is futile, disposable. Design is not. Design is timeless. And that's why it's facing a crisis, not design itself, but the mechanism behind it... A lot of young people



think they're doing design when they're really stylists. They don't understand the mental process of design. They think the answer to a situation is to restyle it."

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