



Exhibition Review

What Things We Are (*Quali cose siamo*)

Triennale Design Museum, Milan, March 27, 2010–
February 27, 2011

Reviewed by Pierluigi Salvadeo

DOI: 10.2752/204191211X12980384100238

Pierluigi Salvadeo lives and works in Milan. He is Assistant Professor, Department of Architettura e Pianificazione, Facoltà of Architettura e Società, Politecnico di Milano (Italy) and a member (from 2009) of the Ph.D. Board in Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design, Politecnico di Milano (Italy).
pierluigi.salvadeo@polimi.it

Museum or ongoing installation? ... The Milan Triennale Design Museum began in 2007 with the idea of having a changeable, dynamic, and constantly evolving museum, always with a differently designed installation. Now it is presenting a new interpretation of the very idea of “design.” “*Quali cose siamo*,” the title of this latest version, is the brainchild of the highly inventive Alessandro Mendini, and this version was supported by the foresight of the museum’s director, Silvana Annichiarico. The installation is by Pierre Charpin, while the graphic designer is Jean-Baptiste Parré.

Broadly speaking, now that museums have outgrown their nineteenth-century “classification” phase and stopped slavishly reproducing familiar and (more or less) history-rooted patterns, we have become comfortable with the idea that curating policies can vary independently of the museum’s own architecture. The Milan Triennale Design Museum’s space changes periodically as its curators decide, and the museum does not restrict itself to its geographical location but offers its own materials as belonging to a broad array of “deposits” (the curators’ word) available



Figure 1

Platform C. Front: Suit of “Totò,” model dress “Saraceni,” 1940.
Outside: Horses, “Splendart,” 2007.

in its surrounding territory: public and private collections, company museums, specialist collections, and small single-theme museums. All this material is shown in rotation in the Triennale’s rooms, which helps to generate dialogue between its own things and those from other museums. This museum is conceived as an ongoing process



Figure 2

Platform B. Bottom: The ideal city, Guglielmo Mozzoni, 2000–10.

of innovation arranged in a nonlinear, disconnected labyrinth that embraces the intermittent and the exceptional, participation and exchange, breaking out and invading the surrounding territory. Mendini's selection goes beyond any ordinary classification to give objects new interpretative possibilities, unconstrained by evaluation in terms of their main purpose. Avoiding the formal series-bound presentation of institutional design, he shows fantasy objects, gaily multicolored, with more than one shape or function. Objects belonging to tales of everyday life, from working tools to useless things, from aesthetic objects to ugly or tacky ones.

The museum offers new scenarios, new scope for the imagination, new juxtapositions, new ideas on how to use or look at things. Even techniques and materials – the domain of the designer – appear to make way for spectacle, represented by the parallel world of objects and their unseen design. The museum/installation thus becomes a stage set, a performance space, a theater. So, Charpin's space, rather than an arrangement for exhibiting things, puts them on stage. Broad horizontal surfaces accommodate the objects like tables laid for dinner; and, as in real experimental theater, the visitor is drawn into a captivating play of logical reversals between real space and the scenographic space of the imagination. The exhibition's lack of hierarchical ordering generates spaces that spread and overlap, their boundaries no longer physical but mental. In this shape-shifting layout, objects tell their story aloud and a willing spectator can join in.

Objects in Mendini's version are no longer what they seem, but experienced from new angles providing unexpected dialogs with the visitor. As we move among the objects exhibited, and especially as we notice their unusual – sometimes even casual – juxtaposition, we wonder what kind of things we live among. What, really, are the things that cross our lives? What role does design have, when things can ignore it? According to Mendini “we are things among things”; but that poses the question, what things are we? This is the drama enacted by usable objects – by used objects, especially – through which this exhibition helps us understand what we are: it is as if we were actually unable to separate the things in which we live from what we really are.

As Mendini himself explains in one of the show's guide panels:

It is important to engage with objects not as things in themselves, but in relation to each other: to invent or discover relationships between things; not in the obvious sense of two things that go together like train and track, but when putting two independent and “unrelated” objects side by side creates a disconcerting tension that is actively creative. Two objects which are quite ordinary on their own become powerful presences when juxtaposed (a Richard Ginori figurine and a Geox shoe, for instance).

This obliges us to use our imagination. The display provides no answers, but tirelessly generates questions. From these things we make up stories, reconnect fragments, dream of future possibilities, make plans, and as if driven by an inescapable creative tension move around freely, bouncing from object to object, encountering a counterfeit Gucci leather handbag, then bumping into the perfect “Black ST 201” cube designed for Brionvega by Marco Zanuso and Richard Sapper; then, further on, into a box full of debris from a house that collapsed in the Abruzzo earthquake, disconcerting and unavoidably arresting. Then something in the distance catches our eye: “Ines,” the robot/video created by Denis Santachiara for Kartel – but now a sudden desire to go back to the start makes us notice the intriguing model of Guglielmo Mozzoni’s ideal city we missed earlier, and we retrace our steps and realize how different everything we have already seen is if looked at from another viewpoint: we pick out Franco Albini’s “Cicognino” (Little Stork) with painted patterns by Andrea Sala, a model boat made by a tramp out of tinplate, the Barilla pasta shape designed by Giorgetto Giugiaro to hold sauce better than other kinds of pasta – a paean to the taste of Italian cooking; it matters little what route our footsteps take, in what order or direction: the essential thing is to go on imagining.

DECODENCE: Legendary Interiors and Illustrious Travelers aboard the SS *Normandie*

Seaport Museum, New York, February 2010–January 2011

Reviewed by Daniella Ohad Smith

DOI: 10.2752/204191211X12980384100274

Daniella Ohad Smith is an independent design historian and writer.
daniellaohad@gmail.com

The stark contrast between the touristic experience offered at the Seaport district of New York today, a destination known for mass tourism, and that offered in the 1930s by the extraordinarily elegant ocean liner the SS *Normandie*, the subject of an exhibition shown at the Seaport Museum, can be matched by the contrast between the lives of the millions during the Depression and that fantasy experienced within the magnificent spaces of the luxurious SS *Normandie* (Figure 1). It had it all. Not only was it the largest, heaviest, and fastest, but also the most celebrated ocean liner of the Jazz Age – a floating magnificent palace with interiors designed by the best minds of French Art Deco, such as René Lalique and Jean Dupas, to name just two (Figure 2). The ship captured the imagination of its generation, and in that age of nationalism the SS *Normandie* came to be a source of pride for the French people.



Figure 1
The First Class Vestibule Theater of the SS *Normandie*. Courtesy of Seaport Museum New York.

The exhibition “DECODENCE: Legendary Interiors and Illustrious Travelers aboard the SS *Normandie*” has brought the quintessential icon of Art Deco afloat to life, focusing on the style and design of what became the ambassador of the best of French design. Promotional pamphlets, travel posters, photographs, and surprising



Figure 2
The Grand Dining Room. Courtesy of Seaport Museum New York.

artifacts such as furniture, china and crystal, interior renderings, and souvenirs from the ship's maiden voyage, displayed in four spaces at the museum, all showcase its magnificence and remind us of the brief moment the *Normandie* celebrated its heyday at the forefront of the world's stage. Curated by internationally renowned ocean liner and cruise ship historian William Miller, the artifacts come from the private collection of Mario J. Pulice. But the story of the collection and the collector should have been included in the narrative of the exhibition. Additionally, the collection will soon be dismantled and offered for sale, a fact that brings into question the legitimacy of the show and its presentation in a museum setting. While the collection is destined for the market, it appears to contradict the code of ethics of American museums, and as such a show might act as a facilitator to increasing the values of the artifacts.

The SS *Normandie*, named after the French province, was built by the French Line, the *Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*, and launched in 1935. What seemed at first like the right moment – the height of the Golden Age of travel, when the world had completely recovered from the tragedy of the *Titanic* – turned out to be a threatening political time. It brought the *Normandie* to its tragic fate and inglorious end. Although not a tragedy of the type that caused the demise of the *Titanic*, the SS *Normandie* was confiscated by the USA after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. It was converted into a military vessel, with most of its decoration stripped away. A year later, the ship caught fire on the Hudson River and became scrap metal.

At the entrance to the exhibition is a film identifying the special place the *Normandie* and its fate has and will always have in the memory of New York City. The film begins with a close-up image of the Statue of Liberty as seen by elegant, chic women and stylish men standing on its deck, marveling at the New York skyline. Photographs of some of the celebrity passengers, such as Bob Hope, Cary Grant with Marlene Dietrich, Salvador Dali, Joseph Kennedy with his son Joseph Kennedy Jr, who reveled in the sumptuous decor and refined cuisine, further demonstrate the appeal and glory of its voyages.

While photographs of the SS *Normandie* have been reproduced for years and surviving artifacts have received exposure when appearing in museum collections and in the marketplace, viewing the full range of those objects is a revealing experience. It is the first time an American museum has tried to reconstruct the ship's splendor and, perhaps, come to terms with the role America played in the demise of the liner. Detailed drawings highlight the various public spaces reconstructed in the show: the famous Grand Salon (Figure 3), the Dining Salon, the Grill Room, the Children Playroom, and even the Deauville Suite, the most lavish of all, composed of four bedrooms, a living room, five bathrooms, a servant room, and decorated in shades of yellow, rose, and blue. Among the pleasant surprises are tea services designed for the first-class passengers by

**Figure 3**

The Grand Salon. Courtesy of Seaport Museum New York.

Luc Lanel and manufactured by Orfèvrerie Christofle, and a baby grand piano from the Deauville Suite, not typically known.

Unfortunately, the quality of some of the artifacts is not as high as one expects in such a show, and some of them are not as splendid as one would have hoped. Adding objects from other collections might have saved the show and could have better illustrated the glamour of the SS *Normandie*. For example, if the small glass panels on display, taken from the legendary *verre églomisé* (reverse painting on glass) mural titled *The History of Navigation* and designed by the French illustrator Jean Dupas for the Grand Salon, had been replaced or at least supplemented with the much larger and more complete example of the fifty-eight-panel section from the same mural in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the glory of the *Normandie* might have been better communicated. Also the low-ceilinged galleries of the Seaport Museum clearly undermine the prestige of the *Normandie* and do not represent well the thirty-foot-high ceiling of the Grand Salon. Unfortunately, the galleries do not have the dynamism the show requires. Consequently, the *Normandie* looks more desperate than glorious, more gloomy than magnificent in the spaces. Yet, this was an important exhibition that captured the heyday of ocean liners and the touristic experience attached to them, touching on the complicated relationship between France and the USA during the Second World War that glorified Art Deco as the most magnificent style, recalling the golden age of French design and decorative arts.