

The New York Times

Living with Freaky Furniture

An exhibition of Italian Radical design showcases household objects that energetically defied good taste.

By Karrie Jacobs
March 12, 2020



Archizoom's 1966 Superonda sofa, made of two versatile puzzle pieces, could be configured in many ways. Credit... Dario Bartolini/Centro Studi Poltronova Archive

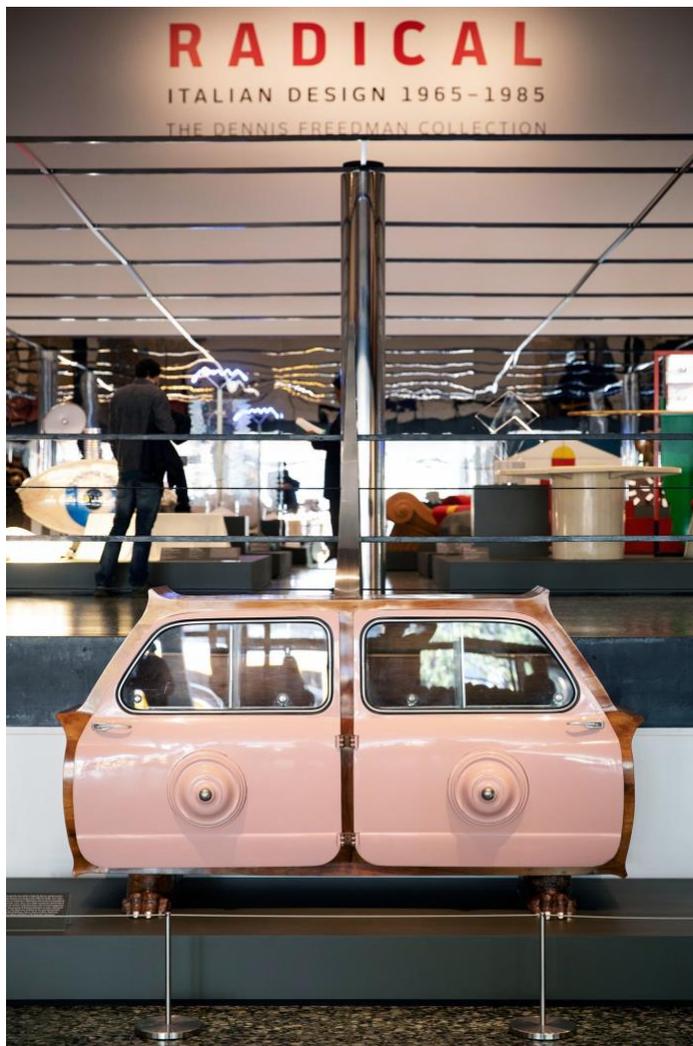
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The tumultuous period remembered as the '60s (although it extended well into the 1970s) was half a century ago, as far removed from 2020 as World War I was from Woodstock. Nonetheless that era's cultural awakening — an unwieldy hodgepodge of social, political and aesthetic insurgencies — has begun to seem fresh again, relevant (as they used to say) and potentially of practical use for navigating the turmoil of our present moment.

So it is entirely apropos that the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has mounted an exhibition called “Radical: Italian Design 1965-1985, the Dennis Freedman Collection.” (The show runs until April 26 and will travel to Yale University's School of Architecture in 2021.)



The show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, includes a 1964 sideboard with Fiat doors by Fabio De Sanctis and Ugo Sterpini of Officina Undici. Credit... Todd Spoth for The New York Times
Mr. Freedman, a New York-based creative consultant to fashion

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houses, publications, galleries and museums, has made it his life's mission to immerse himself in the output of the Italian branch of the counterculture.

The movement, in which young graduates of architecture schools in Florence, Milan and Turin organized themselves into collectives with comic book names like Superstudio, Archizoom and UFO, offered a means for expressing boundless political outrage through aesthetic contrarianism. The passions that famously drove the Bauhaus, a love of mass production and functionalism, were anathema to this generation.

Andrea Branzi, a founder of Archizoom, based in Florence, told the exhibition's curator, Cindi Strauss, in an interview for the catalog that his compatriots were "snobs and Stalinists" with a profound desire to undermine Modernist rationalism with a pop sensibility and replace the notion of "good design" with a messy irreverence. Franco Raggi, who had worked in Milan with Alessandro Mendini at Casabella, the leading publication of the Radical moment, recalled that the goal was to "destroy bourgeois culture and thought" and force a re-examination of the "capitalistic nature of society."

The Radicals worked in every possible medium to advance their ideas. They generated conceptual drawings of ethereal imaginary cities, staged happenings (like one in which Mr. Mendini set fire to his Monumentino da Casa, a chair atop a stepped pedestal) and tried, through an educational effort called Global Tools, to reinvent basic concepts like work and design. However, much of what remains of the Radicals' output is in the form of furniture and light fixtures, which would be bourgeois if it wasn't all so outré.

The work of the Radicals is curiously confounding. While the movement rejected the industrial aesthetic associated with the Bauhaus — and the very idea of mass production — it embraced industrial materials, most notably foam rubber and plastic. And most of its work appears to be in calculated defiance not of capitalism, exactly, but of good taste.

Take, for example, a 1964 sideboard called Cielo, Mare, Terra, a claw-footed walnut cabinet topped with a metal spike and, instead of the customary glass doors, a pair of pink Fiat doors (equipped with mounds that resemble breasts). It seems to reside in no explicable aesthetic universe but makes a certain amount of sense if you are trying to shake up the world by throwing out the rules.

In 1998, Mr. Freedman made his first purchase of Radical design, a big hunk of polyurethane foam shaped like the top of an Ionic column. The Capitello, by Studio 65, a group of art and architecture graduates of Turin's Polytechnic University (who also edited the magazine *Working Class*) was intended as a lounge chair.

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Dennis Freedman, whose collection is featured, wearing a Riccardo Tisci for Givenchy jacket with details derived from the technology of sound. Credit... Todd Spoth for The New York Times



The Capitello, by Studio 65, is a hunk of polyurethane foam shaped like the top of an Ionic column and intended as a lounge chair. Credit... Brad Bridgers/The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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Mr. Freedman was attracted to, among other things, the work's patina, a quality not generally associated with foam rubber. "The age creates a surface that is not unlike porcelain," he said, describing the effect of a polyurethane-specific varnish called Guflac. "It develops a crackle finish that is stunningly beautiful."

While the Capitello has a cartoonish appearance, Mr. Freedman says he believes its political and philosophical message is unmistakable: "Literally your ass is on one of the pillars of classical Greek architecture. It's an act of defiance."

What philosophy can be expressed by squishy column fragments, or sideboards with car doors, or gargantuan blades of polyurethane grass meant to be used as a free-form lounge chair? It is hard to see this as Stalinism or even something more avant-garde, like Dadaism. Instead, it appears to represent a broad, indeterminate approach to making trouble, one object at a time.

If there was consensus among the Radicals about the nature of their collective undertaking, it had something to do with mutability. The Radicals seemed to agree that we should all be able to alter our personal environments however we would like. There is a broad swath of the Radical thinking that was dedicated to the power of rearrangement.

In the landmark 1972 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," a precursor of sorts to the Houston show, the Radicals were largely represented as designers of conceptual environments. Ettore Sottsass, for example, the Milan-based polymath who later became famous as the progenitor of Memphis design, contributed a residential interior consisting of a set of nearly identical multipurpose "containers" that satisfied all possible household needs and could be endlessly moved around.



The Chiocciola, or snail, chair followed the Capitello. Individual units could be lined up to create "a never-ending sofa." Credit... Todd Spoth for The New York Times

Much of the Radical furniture advanced the idea that you could live anywhere and create your own environment.

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Inflatables were popular (for seating and also for protest props). And Archizoom created the 1966 Superonda sofa, a pair of lightweight, wave-shaped, configurable puzzle pieces, often photographed outdoors, as if they were part of the landscape.

Such furnishings signaled “a liberated lifestyle, a freedom,” suggested Andrew Blauvelt, the director of the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. More than a decade ago, he set out to mount a show for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where he was then a curator, on the Italian Radicals. That exhibition ballooned into a much broader 2015 survey called “Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia,” in which he traced countercultural projects across borders.

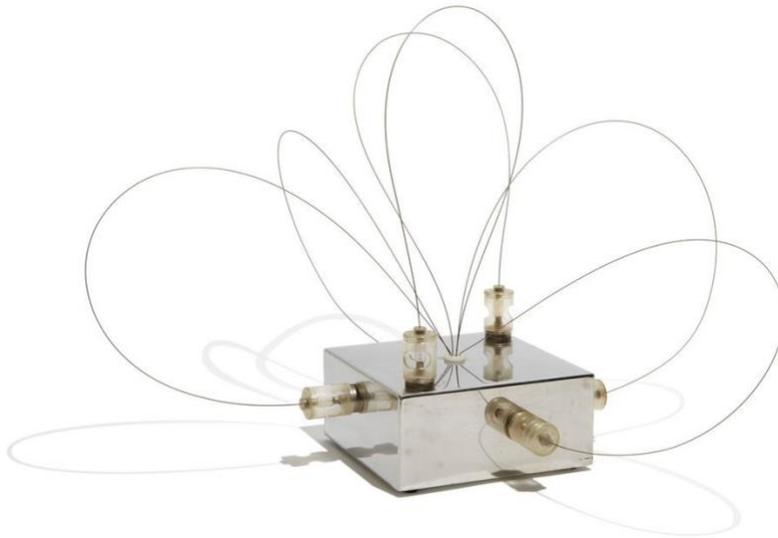
Mr. Blauvelt’s own interest in the Radicals was driven by the connections he saw between that movement and today’s socially minded designers. The way they worked, the fact that they were “very multidisciplinary and very nonhierarchical” with artists, architects and technicians commingling, is particularly inspiring for creative troublemakers today, he said.

There’s another aspect of the Radical approach that today’s aesthetic insurgents might find rousing. While other 1960s rebels were going back to the land and immersing themselves in nature, the Italian Radicals took the fruits of capitalistic society, the synthetic materials that were everywhere, and repurposed them to furnish their own little cosmos, not a world that was more in harmony with nature, but one that felt more natural to them.

A new generation of radical designers might easily do the same, appropriating today’s technologies, like those intended to optimize, to make everything smoother and more predictable, and subverting them to craft an aesthetic that accentuates the bumps, surprises and outrages.

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B.T.2, Studio A.R.D.I.T.I., 1971

In Italian, the studio initials stand for Association of Totally Integrated Reactionary Designers. Opposed to consumerism and capitalist society, it vowed to make design more democratic. This table lamp was an experiment with low-voltage lights; magnets hold tiny bulbs in place. Credit... Kent Pell/The Dennis Freedman Collection



Pratone, Gruppo Strum, 1971

An oversize patch of polyurethane greenery, intended as a free-form lounge chair, it is a work of pop art with a serious side. The manufacturer Gufram describes it as "temporary, unstable, always to be conquered due to the elasticity of the material." Credit... Kent Pell/The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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Quaderna 2600, Superstudio, 1970

The grid (here a laminate applied to a wooden table) was central to the vision of Superstudio. Dennis Freedman described Quaderna as a visual representation of egalitarianism: “The thing about the grid is that every point on the grid is equal to another.” Credit... Kent Pell/The Dennis Freedman Collection



Mies Chair, Archizoom Associati, 1969

This ultraminimalist steel triangle, with a rubber sling seat and cowhide pillows, has been in uninterrupted production by Poltronova since its debut. The idea was to ridicule the truism that “less is more” by pushing minimalism to the extreme. Credit... Kent Pell/The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

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Zabro, Alessandro Mendini, 1984

Alessandro Mendini, who died in 2019, championed Radical design from his position as editor in chief of Casabella. His Zabro design is a more recent work, usually regarded as an example of postmodernism. The round back flips down, transforming the chair into a table. Credit... Brad Bridger/The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

A version of this article appears in print on March 15, 2020, Section F, Page 16 of the New York edition with the headline: Form Follows Freaky.

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