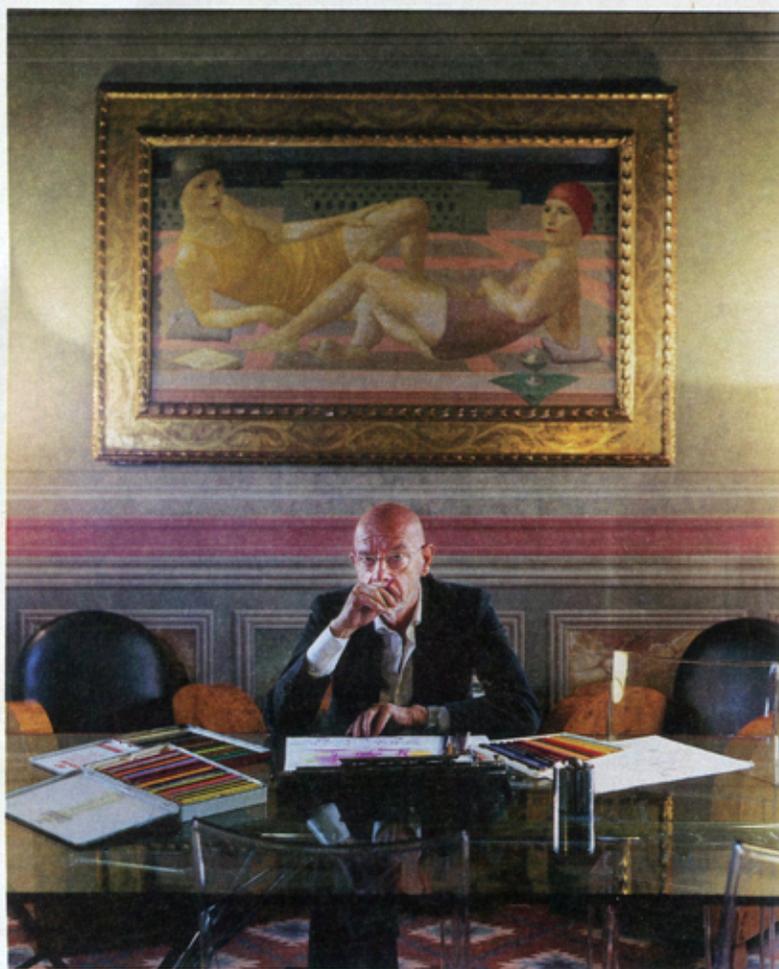






Molto Mario THE 19TH CENTURY MEETS THE 21ST — AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN — AT THE ARCHITECT MARIO BELLINI'S MILAN PALAZZO. FEDERICO CHIARA TAKES IT ALL IN. **Photographs by** JASON SCHMIDT



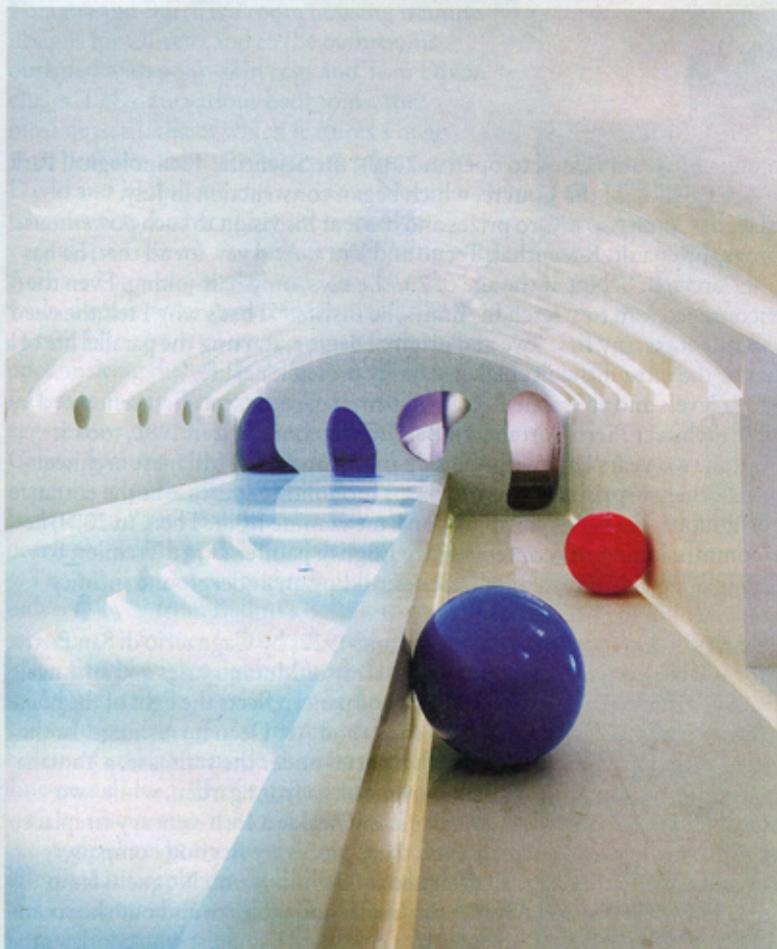
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the center of Milan, just a few steps from Via Montenapoleone, where Prada and Gucci beckon, and down the block from Armani, is the 19th-century neo-Classical palazzo that Mario Bellini calls home. Inside its thick stone walls, the cacophony of conflicting aesthetics is overwhelming — melancholic paintings from the 1920-40 Italian Realismo Magico and Novecento schools, frescoed vaults, Alvar Aalto chaise longues, dhurrie rugs and zebra skins, an ornate

dressing table by Gio Ponti, some indoor palms, a 1930 crystal floor lamp or two. The word “fusion” does not begin to describe it; “eclecticism” doesn’t cut it, either. Rather, it feels like the past and the present, the minimalist and the baroque, all squeezed together and then exploded in a Big Bang of styles, giving birth to a new design universe. “To me, design simply means style,” Bellini says, “the sum of hundreds and hundreds of styles.” And because all of those styles are, as he puts it, “the expression of our material culture, which is more and more global, more and more complex and always changing,” he simply can’t get enough.

Next April, the Triennale Museum in Milan will dedicate a major exhibition to Bellini, who is one of the last great protagonists of Italian design. The show will be an occasion to explore his half-century in all of its seemingly disparate, always changing fields: furniture and interior design, architecture and master planning, writing, technology and photography. His is a successful career twice born. Bellini’s first incarnation was as a designer in Italy’s booming ‘60s; the second time around — after his 1987 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, whose collection includes 25 of his works — as an architect. Milestones in the road of contemporary design include his 1965 P101 electronic desktop computer for Olivetti; the 1970 Totem stereo system with detachable speakers for Brionvega; the 1977 412 Cab chair for Cassina; and the 1972 Le Bambole armchair for B&B Italia. His current architectural projects include Turin’s new cultural center, which will house the main public library (due for completion in 2011); the new Deutsche Bank headquarters in

Layers of history Previous pages: inside his 19th-century palazzo in Milan (left), Mario Bellini (with Gae Aulenti) added a monolithic staircase that leads up to a library and frames a doorway to the living room (right), where furnishings by Bellini, Alvar Aalto, Norman Cherner and others mingle with 20th-century Italian paintings and state-of-the-art speakers.



House and garden Clockwise from top left: a 16th-century Aubusson tapestry hangs in the bedroom; the staircase and mezzanine-level library, part of the Bellini-Aulenti collaboration; a pivoting silver-leaved wood panel separates the home office from the foyer, with Ettore Sottsass's *Le Strutture Tremano* table at right; the indoor swimming pool, with its plastered barrel vault and stone walls and floor. Opposite: a view toward the house from the lushly planted garden.



Art and commerce Above left: the atrium in Bellini's architecture and design studio, a former industrial space in Milan's Navigli area, was designed by the architect in zinc-coated iron. Above right: the main studio space, across the atrium from Bellini's office.

Frankfurt; the City of Bologna Museum (slated to open in 2010); the Scientific Technological Park of Genoa; and the Islamic Art Pavilion of the Louvre, which began construction in July.

Bellini has been awarded eight Compasso d'Oro prizes and has lent his vision to such powerhouse brands as Heller, Flou, Yamaha, Renault, Rosenthal, Tecno and Vitra. And yet, for all that, he has never seen himself as having "arrived." "Not at the age of 73," he says, only half-joking. Even the MoMA exhibition only encouraged him to stretch his limits, he insists. "That's why I felt the need to get back in the field of architecture, my first love and original degree, starting the parallel life of a 'young architect.' It was maybe the most difficult challenge of my professional life."

The house, which is on four levels and abuts the Brera's botanical gardens, was first renovated in 1930 by the famous Milanese architect Piero Portaluppi. Bellini, who bought it in 1982, took it through a structural renovation two years later with the help of his friend the Milanese architect Gae Aulenti, creating, among other surprising interventions, a monolithic staircase at the entrance to the living room and a vertiginous, Escheresque library on a mezzanine floor. Then, in 2004, he tinkered with it yet again, commissioning the contemporary English painter David Tremlett to create abstract murals to complement the Portaluppi frescoes, adding an underground infinity pool and steam bath, and redesigning the bedroom suite.

In the foyer, visitors are greeted by three paintings from the mid-1920s by Cagnaccio di San Pietro, an Italian maple and parchment table from the 1940s, a colorful array of Murano vases and an Angelo Lelii floor lamp from the 1950s. To the left, a silvered, rotating wood panel reflects the light of the home office, with its Norman Foster Nomos tables, Eames office chairs and Art Deco furnishings. In the living room, which one enters with dramatic effect through a portal under the staircase, a Yamaha special edition grand piano (one of the longest ever made) overlooks a front garden, while two giant electric-blue stereo speakers by Avantgarde Acoustics stand beside a 15th-century fireplace, currently occupied by a huge plasma television screen. And these pieces are in good company: Vortex vases, Basilica tables and a Via Lattea sofa, all designed by Bellini; Isamu Noguchi lamps, a Carlo Mollino table, Paolo de Poli enamels, and Alvar Aalto chairs and tables round out the room.

Clearly, the palazzo is an encyclopedia of design, amassed by a cultivated humanist who conflates the scientific and the philosophical, with particular heed to semantics. "I don't believe in the easy formula 'design follows function,'" Bellini explains. "The shape of an object must relate to its symbolic function. This is the only way it can appeal to the human sensibility and relate to today's space and

Shifts in scale Bellini's current architectural projects and classic product designs, clockwise from top left: the Museum of the City of Bologna; the Bambole sofa for B&B Italia; a cultural center for Turin; the P101 computer for Olivetti; the Scientific Technological Park of Genoa; the Cab chair for Cassina; the Islamic Art Pavilion of the Louvre; the Totem stereo system for Brionvega; the Deutsche Bank headquarters in Frankfurt.

culture. To me, a chair is not only a chair, but what a chair means in constant relation to its historical and anthropological roots."

The aforementioned stairway leads up through the library mezzanine and then on to the dining room, where the Tremlett murals carve out bold geometries on the ceiling and walls. Four white marble Colonnato tables, designed by Bellini in 1977, with their 20 column legs, form an island in the middle of this abstract aquarium, his Vol au Vent chairs creating a reef around them; the Cab settees navigate the sitting area like boats, with 1930s Gio Ponti floor lamps as spinnakers.

Off a long hallway, adorned with works by Fontana and Burri, is a room housing Bellini's designs for Olivetti and to the bathrooms outfitted with pony-skin rugs and Tom Dixon chairs. There are various bedrooms, the most outstanding of which features a huge 16th-century Aubusson tapestry with King David and Bathsheba and a sinuous Norman Cherner armchair for Plycraft from 1958.

And then there is the indoor swimming pool. Accessed by a narrow staircase, the barrel-vaulted space seems even bigger than its 52 by 16 feet. Nine portholes spurt water into the pool, making the whole thing look like a typical Italian fountain. The ceiling is coated in eggshell-colored plaster; the walls and floor are Calizia Spanish stone. "It's a sort of living material: it looks soft like a skin and invites to be caressed," says Bellini, who calls this area beside the infinity pool "the beach."

The house is a short taxi ride and yet a universe away from Bellini's design studio, which is in a former industrial space in Milan's bohemian Navigli neighborhood. The building is a hive of activity — three open floors centered around a grand atrium with walkways, banisters and stairs made of perforated, zinc-coated iron. "I enjoy the center of Milan, with its fascinating historical features, while in the studio I enjoy the Navigli's younger, more informal atmosphere," Bellini says, reflecting on the contrast between his studio and his house. "This arrangement allows me to extend myself, my 'persona,' and create an echo within different spaces," he continues, adding with a grin, "I'm not schizophrenic." ■

