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KONSTANTIN GRČIĆ
*with his wooden 360° chair prototype,
featured in the DAMN^o exhibition*

PROPHETS & PENITENTS
CONFESSIONS OF A CHAIR

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARIK LEVY FOR DAMN^o MAGAZINE





Rethinking Cities

Turin & Seoul: World Design Capitals

If you judge expectations by media coverage, then the inaugural World Design Capital of Turin had things covered, both nationally and internationally. Twelve months is a long time to maintain momentum, just look at the way biennial fatigue sets in, and while the sheer volume of activities ensured impact, when talk comes to legacy and fully exploiting the strategic innovation value of the project, there remains questions that the next Capital destination, Seoul, will have to answer - albeit against an economic background that even politicians are calling 'challenging'.

text VIRGINIO BRIATORE

A year of design? A year of cinema? A year of culture, music, fashion, gastronomy? A year is a long time for a festival but can be short-lived for a city project. If, as it seems, within 40 years 80 per cent of the world's population will be living in metropolitan areas, it is a sensible idea to devote great care and collective intelligence to these powder kegs suspended between cohesion and explosion. To understand how the Turin experiment went off, as the first World Design Capital in history, the overview of Enrico Morteo is telling. As one of the four members of the Turin World Design Capital (TWDC) Scientific Committee he is a relatively free man, detached from the power centres and able to express an independent judgement. As Morteo says, 'It was no party but a job of work a whole year long. It wasn't one or two weeks of excitement, like fairs and design weeks where firms and designers showcase their products for citizen viewers. In Turin there was participation, it mobilised the active, involving over 45 communities: from the elderly who play bocce, to Peruvian, African and Romanian immigrants, [and] those who look after parks, public transport, schools and hospitals. Design culture has deep roots in Turin and Piedmont; it's not an aesthetic issue. For example, if we

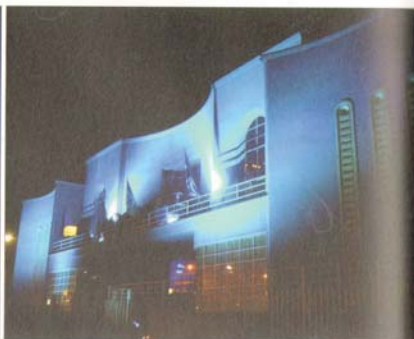
talk about food design it's not a question of teaspoons, glasses or finger foods, but agriculture, animals, wines, cheeses, chocolate and coffee, meaning the creative culture of basic products. The most interesting developments, finally, were those that went beyond the array of events, large though it was. It was the dozens of small self-produced events, the hundreds of firms of creatives that opened their doors to the public; it was the shops and galleries that illuminated their windows especially for the occasion, the spontaneous energies that were set to work. Today we leave the city with a far stronger awareness of a discipline that is much more than just chairs, lamps or cars.'

Process of Transformation

Sights are now firmly fixed on the Capital's next destination of Seoul in 2010, yet it's worth remembering the seeds of the concept. In 2005 the Icsid (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) launched the World Design Capital project: an international contest to identify cities and regions that get leverage from design, using project research and innovation as factors for development. The World Design Capitals are cities in transformation, using a

One of the green containers that hosted events in Piazza Castello on 31 December 2007 (top)
photo: Stefano Fassano

A view of the Chiesa del Santo Volto designed by Botta (bottom, both images)
photo: Stefano Fassano



An image of the initiative 'Design with light' organised in Piazza Castello on 31 December 2007 (jibco)

photo: Antonio Turino 2008 World Design Capital

Bombay Sapphire Award (left)
photo: Virginia Britton

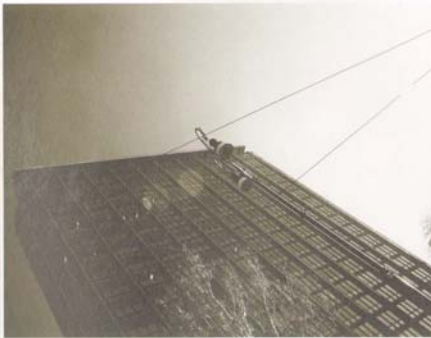
new equilibrium to redesign a more widely shared and sustainable future. The appointment of Turin as the first Capital in 2008 amounted to recognition of a successful process of transformation, in which the city and the whole Piedmont region had been involved for years. The objective for the end of 2008 was to leave Piedmont a legacy, both physical and cultural: in other words to contribute to the growth of skills in the local system, through the creation of an international network capable of transferring both specific design-related know-how and a new design mentality applicable to all fields, from businesses to the public administration.

There's no space, or need, to describe the numerous individual events or conferences that took place during Turin year's in the spotlight. However, it's notable that many of the vessels of its programme were in themselves extraordinary, like the former penitentiary known as Le Nuove, the venue for Flexibility. Design in a Fast-Changing Society or the Palazzo di Venaria (a residence of the House of Savoy since 1679, 10km from the city centre, comparable in expansion to the Palace of Versailles but built earlier), which hosted the 400 designer objects of the Compasso d'Oro collection, with the aim of combining tradition with current relevance. Director Alberto Vianelli: 'We combined history, art and the present by immediately inviting Peter Greenaway to animate the historic interiors of the palace with audiovisual projections of previous lives, Lella and Massimo Vignelli to design the restaurant and Giuseppe Penone to install the 'Garden of Fluid Sculptures' in the park. The public rewarded us: the Compasso d'Oro exhibition lasted four months with 40,000 visitors and in 2008 the Palace as a whole received no fewer than 950,000!'

There was a lot of interest in the mass of graphic material produced for TWDC, commissioned not from a single hand but a number of graphic designers, while the involvement of many leading figures on the design scene was significant. They ranged from the Campana brothers to Ross Lovegrove, Patricia Urquiola, Jasper Morrison, Naoto Fukasawa, Piero Lissoni, Peter Lang and Giulio Iacchetti. Hundreds of designers, obscure or famous, interlaced for hundreds of days with the life of the city. It is hard to imagine this unprecedented and titanic experience producing no effect at all! There were some amusing and instructive upsets that the community imposed on the original projects. The oldsters at the bocce club were not interested in new outdoor furnishings but a system for colouring their bowls, because uncoloured metal bowls all look the same on TV and this bars bocce from becoming an Olympic discipline! So good old Marti Guixé and the Saporiti firm tested a new system of colouring bowls, either with a bus-relief surface, in the alloy itself or using an on-court machine capable of coating the bowls temporarily before each match. Likewise, the foreigners weren't bothered about making the home or workplace more comfortable. But the Peruvians thought up better ways of holding a barbecue in the public parks, the Albanians wanted a magazine of their own and the Africans set up a radio station to provide the big African community in Turin with information and music, assisted by the cyberpunk writer Bruce Sterling, the 'total' designer Odoardo Fioravanti and the long-established local Radio Flash.

Highs & Lows

With 330 initiatives (122 exhibitions, 23 workshops and 70 major events and conferences), it's fair to say that Turin achieved its principal objective of fostering a new awareness of design potential applied to the city's



life. But with the inevitable Olympic analogy of legacy, and perhaps more fairly, that of the Cultural Capitals, how long and deep that will last is open to the time test. So what can Seoul learn from the virgin capital? We put the question to some of the protagonists of Turin's culture and economy. Federico de Giuli, architect, realtor and publisher of *Cluster*, honed in on the global aspirations of the project: 'Turin has succeeded in reinventing itself by gaining leverage from culture, creativity and innovative production. As it has always done in its history, the city did not hesitate to accept the challenge of change, and it is this vision, so distant from the Milanese design matrix, strongly conditioned by the furniture industry and its professional and editorial setting, that makes Turin's achievement original. The calendar of events, by contrast, was definitely not up to the role it was assigned and the city failed to show itself capable of becoming a global stage of the international design community.' The reason it failed to achieve a global dimension emerges from the comments of Giuseppe Lavazza, marketing director of the family business: 'the project was attractive and evocative. It involved many of the players in the city's life. This prize awarded to Turin set the seal on a 20-year transformation of a city that has succeeded in re-converting and revitalising large areas of the urban fabric abandoned by industry. But far greater resources were needed to sustain the interest and quality of a year-long international calendar. Perhaps, because this was a first, the city underestimated the duration and the global responsibility of what it was undertaking.'

That some of the players, the banks in particular, failed to grasp the potential for technological and strategic innovation inherent in the event and interpreted it in terms of entertainment and urban marketing is truly

regrettable. Davide Tronzano, marketing manager of Martini & Rossi and the Bombay Sapphire brand, notes the absence of any big popular celebration for the inauguration of the kind that was held for the Winter Olympics in 2006. But here fate played a hand. Just a few days before the date set for the opening party, a fire in a steelworks caused the appalling death of seven workers. Turin, a city with a long working-class history, cancelled the celebrations as a sign of respect. Nevertheless, Martini/Bombay events were among those that aroused the greatest interest, with hundreds of people thronging to hear the lectures of the 'rock stars' Sagmeister and Lovegrove, presented in the spectacular art nouveau swimming pool dating from the 1930s.

Culture-nomics

Seoul is of course a different city on a different continent, and Mayor Oh Se-hoon has already been generating plenty of attention. Often described as a 'dynamic young leader', in an interview that he gave with *Newsweek* last December he spoke of his desire to develop a 'creative city administration' and firmly lined up his goals: 'It's impossible to promote economic growth by creating a culture that doesn't exist. Fortunately, Korea and Seoul have a long history, and we have a lot of cultural assets. So far, however, we haven't been able to take advantage of those assets. I try to market these so that the world recognises Seoul as a city of culture. Korea heavily depends on trade with the outside world, and the products we export with a touch of culture will be sold at a more expensive price. We call this 'culture-nomics'.' That 'design is a growth driver of the Seoul economy', was also highlighted by Oh Se-hoon in his acceptance speech in October 2007, 'We have surprised the world with the Miracle of the Han River and advancements in the IT sector. Now we would like

The FIAT skyscraper by Piretti
Susa (2006)
photo: Stefano Passoni

Participants in the Design
Workshop in Piazza Castello (left)
photo: Archivio Torino 2008 World
Design Capital



The Led Throwers (above) and Zeytin (right) both attractions of the Design New Year in Torino
photo: Archivio Torino 2008 World Design Capital

to bring global attention to Seoul with strong design.' So whereas Turin could draw on the sponsorship, collaboration, knowledge and experience of more than 50 regional and national industries like Lavazza, Pininfarina, Fiat, Seat, Martini, Alessi, Abet Laminati, Serlungra, Magis and Artemide, in Seoul the names of the brands have a different ring to them: LG Electronics, Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo, Hello and Kia, for example. According to the report of the jury, whose members included Marc Newson, Patricia Urquiola and Dr. Peter Zec, president of Icsid, it was this transforming process that looked towards the 'far-reaching impact of design on the social, cultural and economic development of the city' that impressed and sang in tune with the WDC's aspirations. Unlike Turin, which was the designated pilot city, Seoul beat off rival nominations from cities such as Singapore, Dubai and Toronto and an impressive budget is being talked about – although given Seoul's size and population it's all relative. The major projects already under development include the Seoul Design Olympiad, U-Design International Competition, the construction of the Zaha Hadid-designed Dongdaemum Design Plaza, the city's participation in the IDA World Design Report and a Youth Design Creative Camp, but observers will also be looking to the various initiatives 'to encourage citizen participation' to judge the breadth and depth of Seoul's framework. However, all this happened before the world's economy was rendered unconscious by a barrage of failures, collapses, bail-outs and corruption, and while even the analysts find it difficult to know which way to hedge their hedge fund bets these days, whether the impact is real or imagined, South Korea will not be immune to the fall-out. What this could mean to Seoul's programme of activities remains to be seen, maybe the shift will be more perceptible in tone?

Back in Turin, one of the most conspicuous signs of the event was on the city's taxis, branded with the TWDC's green circle. Rarely ones to refuse to have the last word, the drivers' comments were nearly all spot on: 'There were more people in Turin, above all in summer, a lot of foreign visitors who would never have come without the appeal of design.' Conclusion: the Taurinum of the Romans is still a splendid city, standing where four rivers meet at the foot of the Alps. History, architecture, contemporary art, restaurants and esotericism are all flourishing, and design is also to be found, where it has always been: 'Everywhere and nowhere.'

www.worlddesigncapital.com

P.S. From December 17/08 to January 5/09 we tried four times to speak for five minutes on the phone to Turin's mayor... In the end we would even have been satisfied with a short-hand e-mail from his secretary's office, but his trusted spokesman always replied that 'The mayor, as you will clearly appreciate, is very, very busy!' We never doubted it.