

Matteo Thun

Publication

Publication  
Metropolitan Home (USA)

Page  
111 / 112

Language  
English

Issue  
September 2008

Product / Project  
Matteo Thun Portrait



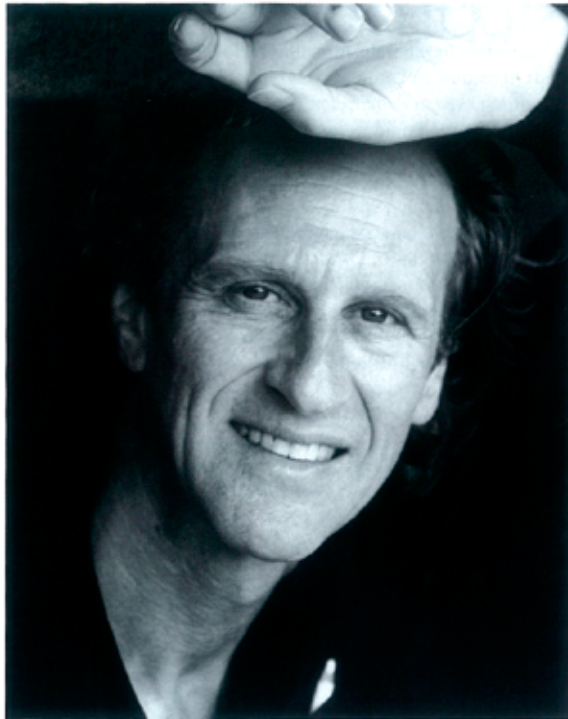
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## TEN QUESTIONS



Matteo Thun designed these watches for Swatch while he was serving as its creative director from 1990 to 1993.

# Matteo Thun

THE MERCURIAL—AND STILL PROLIFIC—MAESTRO EXPLAINS WHY HE NOW BELIEVES “DESIGN IS DEAD.” **BY ARIC CHEN**

In the 1980s, the celebrated Milanese architect Matteo Thun helped found Memphis, the rebellious design movement known for its excesses. Since then, he has served as creative director of Swatch while designing everything from the iconic Illy espresso cup and new bath fixtures for Rapsel to the forthcoming Missoni hotel in Kuwait City. So what's next?

**1** You helped found Memphis under Ettore Sottsass, who died last December at age 90. What was the biggest lesson you learned from him?

It has to do with the love story he created between objects—even with stainless steel, which is cold, but with him, it became very warm. And why it was warm

was because it was very simple. The Sottsass language was always different, but it was always brought down to the simplest shapes.

**2** Memphis designs are simultaneously among the most admired and ridiculed of the 20th century. Why?

Memphis was an explosion against the Bauhaus, which had become a total disaster of missing emotions. So we reacted by inventing this story of Memphis. It was like building a manifesto to find out how far you can go with materials, colors, and exploding the iconography of a chair, a lamp or whatever. It was totally misunderstood, but we were happy that the reaction was very strong and very emotional. It was polarizing.

**3** Around that time, you wrote a manifesto called “The Baroque Bauhaus,” which argued against functionalism. Two decades later, where do you see us now?

In that period, I proposed skyscrapers called Heavy Dress: The light dress is what you put on in the morning, the heavy dress is what you put on a skyscraper. I understood that everybody

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Thun's designs include a global master plan for Missoni retail stores (far right), the molded polyethylene *TamTam* stool for Magis (UnicaHome.com) and (below)

the *Lavasca* bathtub for Rapsel, made of Duralmond—a composite of crushed almond shells and resins—which weighs only 143 pounds (AFNewYork.com).



This year Thun worked with Riva 1920 on a collection that included the *Malibu* table (left), which is made from sustainable solid woods, is formaldehyde-free and is finished in natural oils (Riva1920.com).

hated my approach. But now, 20 years later, with Frank Gehry or Zaha Hadid, it is all about dressing up architecture.

### 4 ■ Recently, you've declared that "design is dead." What do you mean?

The way design is pushing unnecessary consumption was best understood after September 11. There was a big crash in consuming: consuming travel, going out to restaurants, buying a new chair. All these unnecessary activities disappeared for a while. And I think several designers came to understand that the game is over.

### 5 ■ But you're known for designing chairs and hotels. How do you reconcile that?

I design only missing items. Let's say you ask me to design an office chair. I would investigate your brief and then probably

tell you there are enough chairs and there is no reason to do a new one. Unless you have a brief that fills a necessity and improves the comfort of life.

### 6 ■ Is your forthcoming invisible Bathroom line of bath fixtures for Rapsel an example of zero design?

Totally. It is not styled. It has to do with eliminating any language from the bath. Why should you buy a design statement from the '90s or 2008 for a washbasin if you are simply going to change this fashionable, time-related statement a few years later?

### 7 ■ You were an early proponent of sustainable and prefabricated architecture. What do you make of their trendiness now?

First of all, sustainability is not about these "Save the Planet" and Al Gore games, but is instead about "Can I afford it?" So this is the first reason why prefabrication [which is potentially lower-cost and more eco-friendly] has to be devel-

oped. If it's not affordable, then it's not sustainable.

### 8 ■ What project of yours excites you now?

At this moment, we are converting a whole farm village in western Switzerland into a hotel. These farmer houses are empty [because of urban migration], and so this is maybe the most sustainable architecture we are building right now, because we are not building anything new or disturbing the landscape.

### 9 ■ It's hard to pin a style on you. Is that conscious?

My style is no style. Because in architecture as well as design, the *genus loci*—or soul of a place—is different. If you build in downtown New York or the Upper East Side, or design flatware for Alessi or WMF, it's completely different. You cannot use your language in the same way.

### 10 ■ What would you like to do that you haven't?

Solve the problem of time. ☹