

Giancarlo De Carlo and the Industrial Design

Industrial design, Interior, Domestic, Modern, Custom

/Abstract

Giancarlo De Carlo is best known for his attention towards themes such as participatory design, the concept of project as a series of attempts, the questioning of the modern tradition in the wake of the last CIAM and of the experience gained with Team Ten, his uncertain and painful anarchic stance, the study of ancient architecture and his sensitivity towards regional and spontaneous modes of construction.

It's important therefore to go beyond a simple understanding of the foundation of his professional experience as an architect, to also grasp the rationale behind the formal outcomes of his work, with their technological and material implications, and behind a workflow that was not only supported by logical thinking.

Still a hundred years since his birth, GDC's professional experience highlights a very modern approach that requires new investigations to be completely understood, as his work spanned from projects for whole urban environments, to the curation of small constructive details for spaces or objects.

The centenary of GDC's birth is also an opportunity to investigate sections of his complex experience as a designer of places, cities, buildings and furniture, that have not been entirely explored yet.

The aim of the paper is to investigate the role of GDC as a designer of objects and furniture, the relation with the production and the industry, the accuracy in detailing and solving construction problem related to industrial design products. The text explores three main episodes of the career of GDC as designer: the debate on modern living with his proposals for the Triennale di Milano, the original design carried out for Arflex and the specificity and universality of the urban lamp for Urbino, Mazzorbo e Colletta di Castelbianco.

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Since 2019 he has been involved within a research on the figure of Giancarlo De Carlo. His more comprehensive reflection on figures of "minor" masters is also expressed by the portraits of emblematic characters such as Bruno Zevi and Giuseppe Samonà, published in collective books. He gained experience in archival research, in particular at the Archivio Progetti IUAV in Venice and the Triennale di Milano archive.

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Introduction

Giancarlo De Carlo (GDC from now on) is mostly known for his contribution to the debate of the city, generally, for his peculiar interpretation, in anthropological strain, of the places, as a design principle. As a professor, GDC has never conformed with the academic currents and dynamics, bringing his experience and his research methods to the universities where he was invited to teach.

The issues accomplished by GDC are multiple, but the most relevant are the participatory planning, the project as a “process of attempts”, the questioning of modern tradition in the past years of the CIAM and in the Team Ten’s experience, his uncertain anarchic position, the study of ancient architecture and the sensibility towards local traditions and spontaneous ways of constructing.

GDC, an intellectual activist and a prestigious designer, has performed his works following overall a political, social and moral, commitment¹.

However, there is a consistent part of GDC’s experience that has not been considered. It’s a further aspect compared to his side contribution already mentioned, as “the end of architectures”² theory, or the defense of the social and community role of architecture against the danger sorted by too authoritarian or selfish approaches.

According to GDC, architecture is referred to the interactions with people, but not in terms of efficiency or influenced by the logics of capitalism.³ This is accompanied by the comparison between the issues of shapes and geometries, about the materials and building techniques. GDC thinks that architecture is a complex discipline that depends on many factors, and the concept of a shared project is only a part of these. GDC professional experience as an architect,⁴ already analyzed, can be further developed to clarify his complete thought in the formal material and technological aspects of the results of his works.

A further chance to know more about GDC – on the centenary of his birth – refers to his ability and his method to analyze two project scales at the same time: from the city space to the attention to smallest details in the environments and in the objects.

According to GDC, the planning of the project, consists in the transposition of the concept of the idea to different spatial configurations.⁵ This can be made by working on different levels, as GDC does showing to feel comfortable by working on the urban and architectural scale as well as on the scale of the objects and details, that are a resource that someone might have forgotten.

1 Giancarlo De Carlo and Livio Schirollo, *Gli spiriti dell'architettura* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1999).

2 Giancarlo De Carlo, “È morta l'architettura: Viva l'architettura!,” in *L'architettura della partecipazione*, ed. Sara Marini (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2013).

3 Marco Biraghi, *L'architetto come intellettuale* (Torino: Einaudi, 2019).

4 Margherita Guccione, “Giancarlo De Carlo. Le Ragioni dell'architettura,” in *A partire da Giancarlo De Carlo*, ed. Federico Bilò (Roma: Gangemi, 2007).

5 Christian Norberg Schulz, “La terza Alternativa,” in *Giancarlo De Carlo Architetture*, ed. Lamberto Rossi (Milano: Mondadori, 1988).

At the end of the Second World War, the Italian architects who took part to the economic and cultural reconstruction have usually focused on industrial design projects, together with other type of projects. Architecture compared to the art schools was more prepared on this topic, due to a deep partnership with industry and craftsmanship.

At the end of 19th century the technical and technological progress involved in the branches of knowledge and they were succeeding in the evolved industrial production. Traditionally architecture is related to the production that deals with the use of spaces and with living.

The issue of living is one of GDC's most important interests in the different stages of his career always looking for innovative approaches.

Each active architect in industrial design took advantage of the opportunity, according to materials and techniques, offered by the industrial progress following his own objectives and his favorite issues. Many, GDC included, found in the possibility of using industrial production, to serve architecture and design, a way to take action on social issues.

Elena Dellapiana tried to reorder the complicated scene of architects/designers, she came up with two concepts: industrial approach and decorative approach. On one hand the logical research using the newest technological discoveries, on the other hand the attention for the meanings and the results of crafting practice with Marco Zanuso and Gio Ponti in order to embody the two points of view.⁶

GDC is involved in the debate between these two concepts, that don't fully represent the context, as it was better shown in the "Triennali" from the end of the war to the 1950s. There might be a third point of view that involves many designers, for example Carlo Mollino, Roberto Gabetti, Aimaro Isola and Vittorio Gregotti. GDC takes part in these alternative positions with an artisanal approach, but also with attention for technical and technological innovations, both in the materials and in the process. GDC doesn't consider himself a specialist and deals with these projects as if they were cultural issues on the basis of space. He doesn't work as a designer, an architect or an urbanist, but as a profession compared to the project's ranges, trying to find the ideal unification, from the organization of the spaces to the definition of the details. This underlines GDC's specificity compared to the designers who affirmed their own professional personality throughout the quality of the elements and of the finishes. Giancarlo Frattini and Carlo De Carli, G. Ponti's collaborators, are significant, they've worked for Cassina (chair "683" of C. De Carli, first price "Compasso d'Oro" in 1954, and sofa "836" of G. Frattini chosen for the "Compasso d'Oro") or Tecno (the chair "Balestra" presented during the eleventh "Triennale" in 1957 is awarded of Gran Prix). GDC usually worked on a project on pieces of furniture in architectural projects, so he had a way different job. GDC wants to highlight

⁶ Fiorella Bulegato and Elena Dellapiana, *Il design degli architetti italiani* (Milano: Electa, 2014), 9-31.

the connection between the objects and the architectural/urban projects. “*Luca-nia*” chair, for example, wasn’t meant to be a specific project based on ARflex’s commission, but as a part of the project that focuses on the interior design of the homonymous ship.

GDC’s activity relates to a continued trial according to the principles, both theoretical and operational, of architecture, in parallel with the researches towards other topics. His works related to industrial design have a constant theoretical thought and express a new elaboration of the process of production, rising in order to reach the other design experiences. GDC’s accuracy while he designs or place objects in an environment is sophisticated as the precision that he spends to build a new structure in an ancient urban context. The buildings and the furniture are heavy and are made with respect and enhancement in regard of the specific framework.

The basis of this approach come from the experiences that GDC has lived during his career, that can be divided in three significant parts: the years of his vocational training and the relationship with Casabella, the critical revision of the International Style with the Team Ten, the season of Urbino.⁷ The comparison between the tradition of the Modern Movement with the issues of the house and of the new standards of living is a universal factor (fattore trasversale), that has always escorted him.

His career began in Milan, thanks to his commitment in the Resistenza with Giuseppe Pagano. His beginnings took place in Casabella, in fact with Pagano he started working on the rural buildings in Italy. After that he was involved in the 8th edition of the Triennale in Milan (1947). The director, Pietro Bottoni, had strong social impact on the exposition, that focused on the issues of modern art, both decorative and industrial art. GDC has participated in a project on internal design, with Franco Albini, presenting design elements created by a group. He presented a set that contained a chair and a music stand, both in tubes and metallic foils, made by a design agency Veronesi. These two objects are significant for the new projects, both for the material and technical aspects which are formal.

During the 8th Triennale he made new friends: Luisa Castiglioni and Franco Albini, two important people in the first stages of GDC’s job.⁸ It was a very intense period of his life, he spent a lot of energy and time on the issue of living: from his participation to the Triennale, to the two national competitions for the buildings in the QT8 district in Milan, one made in 1946 for the ministry of post-conflict assistance and the other one in 1947 organized by the Triennale in collaboration with the Italian association “Ostelli della Gioventù”. The project includes building residential blocks in the Comasina, as a part of the Fanfani plan.

7 Marco De Michelis, “In forma di introduzione,” in Gian Carlo De Carlo. *Immagini e frammenti*, eds. Angela Mioni and Etra Connie Occhialini (Milano: Electa, 1995).

8 Fabrizio Brunetti and Fabrizio Gesi, *Giancarlo De Carlo* (Firenze: Alinea, 1981).

In the 9th Triennale in 1951, the convergence between decorative art and design was obtained.⁹ GDC was in charge, together with Giuseppe Samonà, Ezio Cerutti and Albe Steine, who will than help with the graphic identity of the city of Urbino, of a part of the exhibition. It merges with a more specific research on spontaneous architecture, made by Giovanni Michelucci, Luigi Piccinato, Roberto Pane and Edoardo Caracciolo. In their work there clearly were some traces from Giuseppe Pagano's research for the Triennale of 1936 based on rural architecture and on common use objects: this is what we would call "design without a designer" or anonymous design.

The interweaving of recurring themes between the first and the second half of the 20th century, characterized both the formation and GDC's professional success.

This essay introduces a bigger research about GDC who made transversal projects compared to the projectual scales, focusing on the issue of industrial design.

GDC is always in the centre of the reasoning. As an architect, apart from being an urbanist, an intellectual and a professor, he also expressed himself in terms of interior design and of the objects, out of a specific professional skill. The research underlines his approach analyzing design from an involved point of view, but still unknown.

If on one side existent publications give us the known outlines of GDC's profile, to insert his experience in industrial design and deepen his figure as a designer we have to, on the other side, retrace the stages and the results of his job. The archive's documents are, and will be, the support on which we will create a critical reflection on the meaning of all of these aspects, both on his professional activity and on the history of architecture, more in general. As an exemplified title we have reported three specific episodes of GDC's activity.

De Carlo ante De Carlo – Francesco Testa

In 1947, after the end of the second world war and after the republican uprising, Italy was a country that was hardly working to provide itself new rules and a new horizon. In this fertile and sparkling context was organized the T8 (the 8th *Triennale di Milano*). Giancarlo De Carlo, at the time, was a young man that was running his training both in professional and in academic field: in the years between 1945 and 1948 he made an experience to upgrade his preparation at Franco Albini studio, at the same time he was an editor of *Domus*, and, just an year later in 1949, he completed his studies in architecture.

The 8th *Triennale di Milano* cannot be considered like the other Triennale exhibition, it was the *Triennale of the Liberation*, the *Triennale of the expression of*

⁹ AAVV, "1951. IX Triennale di Milano Esposizione internazionale delle arti decorative e industriali moderne e dell'architettura moderna". <http://archivio.triennale.org/>

needs and expectations of a country that deeply will to rebuild itself, so the T8 must be considered as a cultural opportunity that grab on its shoulders these needs, trying to give them a critical interpretation.

The experience was rich in instances, the T8 wants to represent an Italy that reacts to a complex and aristocratic past, proposing itself - no longer- as an interpreter of desires of the upper bourgeoisie class or the nobility, but as agent of the middle and popular classes which have rediscovered, even if they are still provided of limited economic resources, their growth stimulus and their ambitions, after an historical period of enormous financial difficulties and limited opportunities for cultural expression.

The 8th *Triennale* aims to overcome the usual definition of the architect as *arbitrator elegantiarum*, its goal was to bring back the role of the designer to the most original one as the interpreter of the reality of a country that deeply needs competence, knowledge and high skills in the use of materials. The main point about the theme of living and housing design in the T8 was architecture as essential, as expression of primary needs. Even in this youthful phase, Giancarlo De Carlo expressed his receptivity to this way of reading of the role of architect and he will demonstrate in his long career how he was fine tuned to these themes.

This premise on the essential architecture includes, obviously, the need to produce new furnishings to complete the interiors of the new architectures. New furniture must reach everyone, through the simplicity of choices and technical awareness of the use of material. The new goal was to raise the quality of furniture for the common people too. To get that point the most significant factor was the fast development of the industrial sector of furniture manufacturing. This phenomenon supported the diffusion of an higher standard of quality both in terms of design and product reliability level. Another key aspect of the new furniture manufacturing was the great decrease of wastes: this typical aspect of industrial production shaped a relevant gap in the reduction of costs if compared to the traditional artisanal way of craft furniture. This feature of sparing resources was very more relevant in an historical period in which raw materials were rather scarce.

Expressed the basic environmental and cultural principles, it's important to underline how it was decisive, in this "renaissance" contest, defining also design aspect as physical representation of these expectations, that's the reason why the projects' aesthetic was so central. Authors must express themselves and projects were, at the same time, challenges to the principles of physics and the to the formalism of bourgeois culture. Single pieces must have their own autonomous dimension, a physiognomy that emphasizes the intrinsic reasons of their design.

The exhibition, in its furnishings section, was divided into two parts: in the first the individual elements were exhibited singly, the second section exposed samples of compositions of furniture single or based on design purposes of some QT8 houses.

In the section dedicated to individual elements, Giancarlo De Carlo exhibits a chair in iron tube with sheet metal seat (Veronesi production), and in the section "single furniture composed in groups" he exposed a lectern, even that piece was made with iron tube legs, with book support in double chance of finishing: sheet metal in nuance color with the support or in wooden thin panels. [Fig. 1]

The common feature of objects designed by De Carlo for the T8 is the use of a structural system in iron tubular, in both cases the author proposes to minimize the use of the raw material, he intentionally avoids using anything that might be not strictly necessary. For both pieces of furniture the loads distribution is on three points: here it's clear, once again, the will of use the minimum static-geometrical balance configuration. De Carlo takes full advantage of the physic characteristics of the object, he makes his design choices optimizing everything and avoiding wastes.

The use of tubular as a furnishing material has its roots in a rather recent past, for that time, and it was a turning point; again in this case, after about 30 years from the first use, nearly totally in custom furniture, the material of modernity move from the use for the furniture of bourgeois living rooms to the more simple furniture for the houses of the post-war Italy. This transition to the use of tubular has its roots in the late 1920s, the most significant example is probably the one of Thonet factory which acquired, despite his high reputation and professionalism in the bent wood furniture sector, the Standard-Möbel company (to which Breuer had ceded its furniture copyrights in 1929) and in 1930 began the production of tubular steel furniture. So 70 years after the presentation of the "model 14" in bent wood the Frankenberg factory creates a new complete collection in tubular steel having great success, one the most successful sample is the S 32 cantilever chair that's the Thonet best seller.¹⁰

This attitude to optimization seems to underline how the formal lightness and the use of simple materials, common design choices for the chair and the lectern, they are requirements that have their roots in the difficulties of a recent past, it's a clear metaphor of the sufficiency of the minimum, it's a conclusive of the minimum to spread objects to everybody.

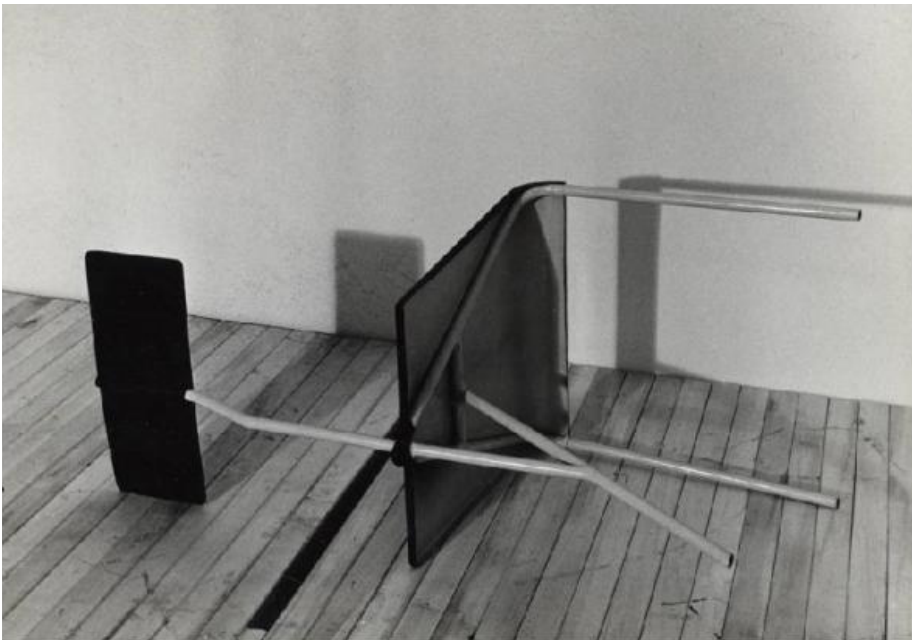
It's interesting, going deeper in architectural reading of the project trying to go beyond the metaphorical aspects, to underline an interpretation of Giancarlo De Carlo works in technical key, under that lens he shows the will to demonstrate



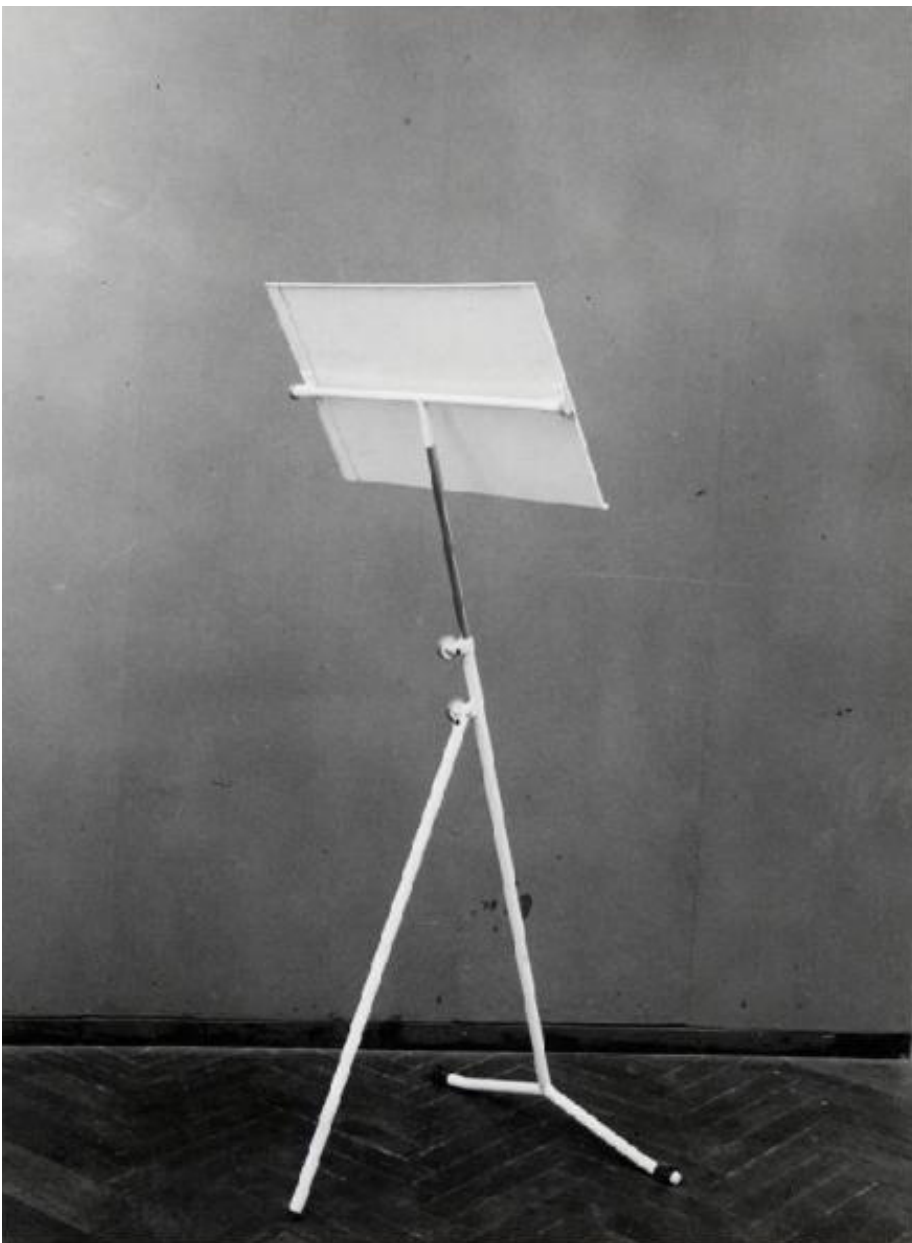
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Fig. 1
Side view of the tubular and metal sheet designed by Giancarlo De Carlo (Veronesi production), exhibited in 8th Triennale furniture section, part one, single furniture divided by function. (ph. N.D.) source: <http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3u040-0000128/>

10 <http://it.thonet.de/ispirazioni/magazine/thonet-la-storia/i-mobili-in-tubolare-dacciaio-di-thonet.html>



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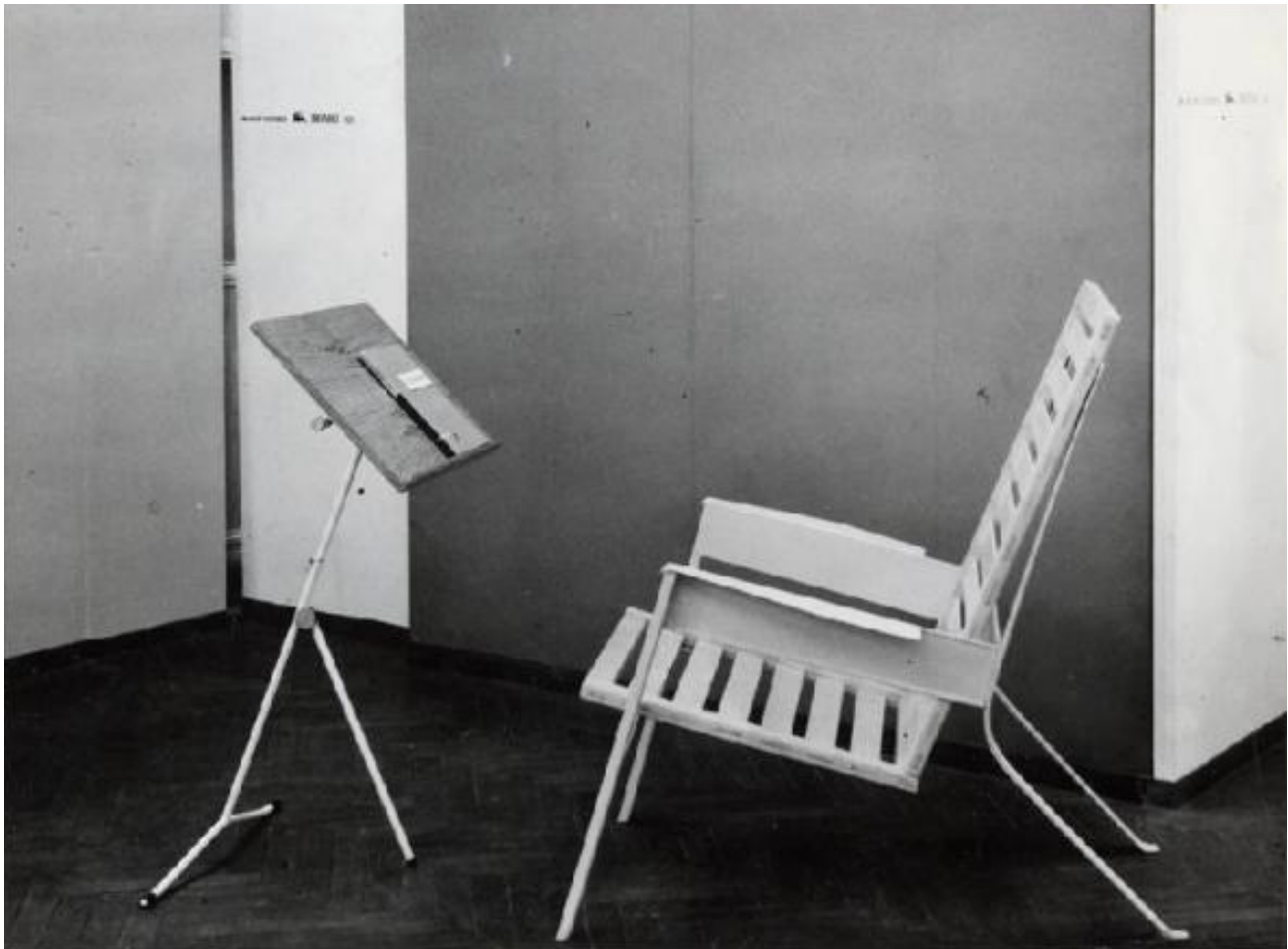
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Fig. 2

Bottom view of the tubular and metal sheet designed by Giancarlo De Carlo (Veronesi production), exhibited in VIII Triennale furniture section, part one, single furniture divided by function. (ph. N.D.) source: <http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3u040-0000129/>

Fig. 3

Front view of the lectern designed by Giancarlo De Carlo, exhibited in VIII Triennale furniture section, part two, single furniture composed in groups. (ph. Casali - S.E.M.) source: <http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3u040-0000180/>



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the extreme confidence he has with the laws of physics, the impression is that of the search for a formal composition that is pure material expression of the use of the chair.

The tubular frame is organized according to the ergonomic rules of the seat, the position of the unique cross-bar, under the seat, is the one on which the weight of the user is concentrated and it transfer the loads to the ground using the only rear leg. The backrest, very simple is made, as the seat, by a metal sheet sustained by a single tubular, connected in two points to the rest of the structure, the first on the rear vertex of the triangle of tubular on which it encloses the seat and the other half of the rear leg, to which the back is fixed centrally. [Fig. 2]

Even the lectern design is perfectly consistent with the philosophy of the essential composition used for the chair design. The lectern is composed by a main structure that has a compass opening, which can be adjusted by a knob that prevents, using friction, the two legs spreading; to get the third contact point with the floor De Carlo provided a bent crossbar at the end of the frontal leg. [Fig. 3-4]

This solution avoids possible unbalance, for example in case of floors that are not perfectly flat a straight beam might be reason of lack of stability, this precaution is perfectly consistent with De Carlo attitude pursuing very practical approach to design objects. Another peculiarity of the lectern is the adjustable

Fig. 4

Side view of the tubular and metal sheet designed by Giancarlo De Carlo (Veronesi production), exhibited in VIII Triennale furniture section, part one, single furniture divided by function. (ph. N.D.) source: <http://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3u040-0000128/>

height of the support for the books. This feature has been got using a chromed steel terminal, the element, that has a smaller diameter than the tubular of the main structure, move inside the structure giving to the user the chance of an height regulation.

The Original design of the Arflex seats and custom furnishing for the Urbino projects – Stefano Passamonti

Since the early 1950s, GDC was busy on several fronts in the industrial design field, as well as in custom furniture projects, both intended as a direct answer to the issue of modern living.

In 1952 GDC was in charge of the refurbishment of the 1st class cabins of the Turbine-powered ship *Lucania*, on behalf of a well-known Neapolitan ship owner. GDC took care of redesigning all the areas above the hull, in other words the domestic components.¹¹

The *Lucania* ship project is emblematic of the search for a suitable compromise between novelty and the existing environment. For this work, GDC meticulously designed every interior detail, down to the scale of construction detail and the decorative accessories. Moreover, the project highlights its modern attitude to the total project, based on the idea of crossing over visual and applied arts. Already the previous IX Triennale of 1951 placed at the center of its field of interests the issue of the "Unity of arts", with the express purpose of put in contact researching arts, represented from the latest abstractionist tendencies, with the architectonic culture as well as with the design culture in general.¹² In fact, the exhibition "Form of the Useful," allowed everyday objects, furnitures and more to step into the limelight with the use of new materials and genuine industrial processes.¹³ In other words, the display was overtly aesthetic in nature, showing how beautiful the design of functional goods could be.

As a matter of fact, for the Ship *Lucania* GDC involved the French artist Fernand Léger to work on the living room wall decorations. This relationship with the painter was crucial to bring all the perceptive components of space back into play in a consistent operation of deconstruction and restructuring.¹⁴ GDC designed and built every component with meticulousness and accuracy, choosing the more suitable materials for the specificity of each environment, adopting a cross over approach to the project equal to the more celebrated attitude of his masters (Albini) or interlocutors (Rogers), and aiming to a clear formal and aesthetic characterization. The projects range from the design of a veranda with corrugated sheet ceiling and gray rubber floors to beds, chairs and a wall-mounted secretary desk. For the boardroom, GDC designed tables, furniture

11 AAVV, "Interni della *Lucania*," *Domus*, 287 (Ottobre 1953).

12 Agnoldomenico Pica, *Storia della Triennale 1918-1957* (Milano: Edizioni del Milione, 1957).

13 Alberto Bassi, Raimonda Riccini, Cecilia Colombo, ed., *Design in Triennale 1947-68: Percorsi fra Milano e Brianza* (Cinisello Balsamo (MI): Silvana editoria, 2004).

14 Lamberto Rossi, "*Giancarlo De Carlo Architetture*". (Mondadori, Milan: 1988)

and a chair that bears the name of the ship. The work includes the project of the *Lucania* chair, which was exhibited in 1954 at the X Triennale di Milano.

The research relating to interior design as well as the attempts in housing proposals reveal a deep engagement and devotion towards the problem of *living*, especially if connected to new residential standards. As shown through transversality and complementarity of the projects presented at the 1947's Triennale, the urban figure of the building and the typology are related aspect of the interior dimension of the domestic environment. Unlike Rogers or Albini, GDC is less interested in creating useful and wonderful objects but focused on designing significative spacial events able to express and translate into dimensional values the *zeitgeist*. A proper principle applicable to urban occasions, buildings and objects.¹⁵ The physical quality of space is the design material for the "poor" exhibition set of the VIII Triennale with Albe Stainer as well as for the physical support of the short-film presented to the Triennale of 1954. In fact, the X Triennale is the most important occasion for GDC to exemplifies his ability to range from the urban plan to objects and details. Indeed in 1954 he worked on one side to the exhibition design of the Urbanist show and on the other one on single piece of furniture showed with the prototype of the Lucania Chair. This transversal and multi-scale approach, related to a strong ethic of the design process, is what characterizes the modernity of GDC. As he himself declares, the design process related to the production chain of industrial furniture isn't interesting for the operational aspects but much more for the cultural implication as a phenomena whose understanding can help in reading architectural and urbanistic problems.¹⁶

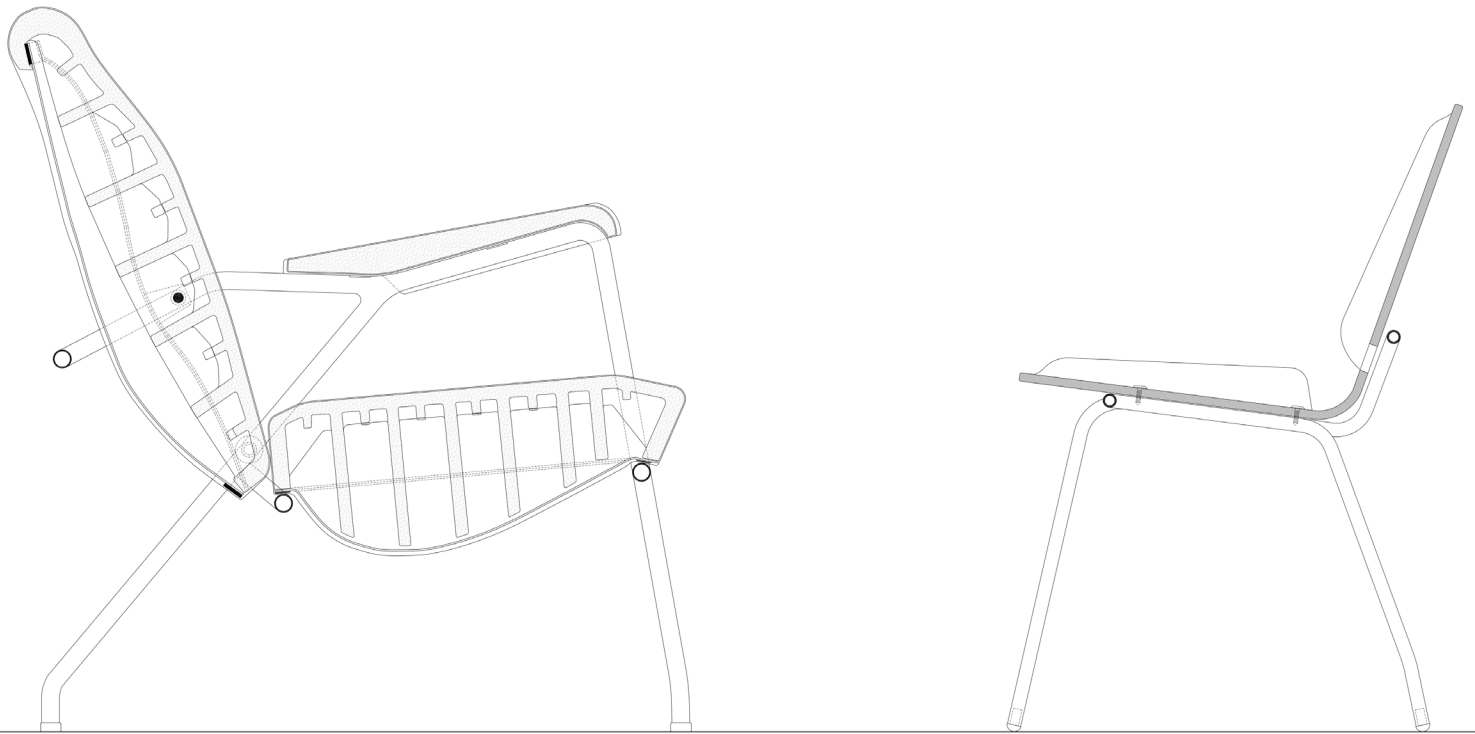
The Lucania upholstered chair, designed in 1952, became part of the Ar-flex catalogue, in the collection following the first series of pieces, made in collaboration with Marco Zanuso.

Ar-flex (in Italian, short for 'flexible furnishings'), later Arflex, was born in 1947, when Carlo Barassi, a Pirelli engineer, together with Renato Teani (from Pirelli's financial department), Pio Reggiani and Aldo Bai, involved a young Zanuso to test the first models of seats, innovative for the use of foam rubber in the padding and of elastic tapes. Then, in 1951, Zanuso designed the famous Lady armchair, consisting of a metal frame and a polyurethane foam padding, with a polyester upholstery, putting Arflex in the international spotlight. From 1952 the company started to work with other relevant designers in order to expand its collection. They involved an impressive roster of professionals, from Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, to Franco Albini, Bbpr, Carlo Mollino, Roberto Manghi, Joe Colombo, Ettore Sottsass, Angelo Mangiarotti, Cini Boeri.¹⁷ Among those,

15 Franco Bunčuga, ed., *Conversazioni su architettura e libertà* (Milan: Elèuthera, 2014).

16 Giancarlo De Carlo, *Dibattito sulla produzione del mobile in Italia*, dattiloscritto originale (Archivio Progetti IUAV, fondo Giancarlo De Carlo, Venezia, 1962).

17 Irene de Guttry and Maria Paola Maino, *Il Mobile Italiano degli Anni 40 e 50* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 2010).



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GDC was asked to design a new serial production of the Lucania chair and armchair, respectively from 1954 and from 1957.¹⁸ [Fig. 5]

The Lucania chair, currently out of production, is an extraordinary synthesis of formal consistency, technical awareness, ergonomics, aesthetics, materiality. It's characterized by a spartan but sophisticated aesthetic. The Arflex's edition of the Lucania Chair is a lighter re-elaboration of the robust original patent used to refurbish the motorship Lucania. A project that GDC finalized in partnership with Ezio Mariani, which consists in a structure made of black painted metal pipes, molded curved plywood shell, brass, foam rubber and fabric for the textile covering of the pillows.

The most important constructive characteristics of the Arflex chair is the seat and back in one piece of bent plywood: the structural body and tuboplast elements of the legs are fixed to the seat with brass clamps. The cushion of the back is held up by a band of easily washable fabric attached to the backrest, through a hole that allows to place and fix the covering. The lower part of the shell is padded with a cushion. Keeping the same structure and dimensions (width 43, depth 52, height 75; seat height 49), the chair can be produced in many variations of colors, wood and fabrics.¹⁹

At the beginning of 1960s GDC is aware of the international industrial design panorama and on the role that industrial design played in the cultural regeneration of many countries. In fact Scandinavian and American production, that gained importance precisely for the Triennale, are the references to which GDC looked critically and that was able to interpret in the context of the Italian production. GDC used plywood with in mind the masterpieces made by Alvar

Fig. 5

Technical drawing of Chair and Armchair Lucania, reproduced from Original work drawings by GDC.

Source: Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, fondo Giancarlo De Carlo

18 Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio Progetti, fondo Giancarlo De Carlo.

19 Elena Bellini, Enrico Morteo and Marco Romanelli, "Storie di Sedie Italiane del Dopoguerra," *Domus*, 708 (Settembre 1989).

Aalto, Arne Jacobsen, Charles and Ray Eames²⁰ or - just to stand into the Italian context - with the series of Carlo Mollino around 1950²¹ or Vittorio Nobili²². However, the attitude of GDC is substantially different, in the sense that he was less interested in realizing a precious authorial piece and more focused on the social interpretation of the new technique of serial production. In fact, GDC intended the Italian furniture production more as a cultural mandate than as a professional task that wink to a specific social class. For GDC design it's not about stylistic acquiescence or a work linked to taste but a process connected to the practical reasons of furnishing pieces.²³

With the Lucania Chair GDC combined the wood shell with the metal support and in particular folding the wood piece following three direction in order to determinate a form which needs to be completed by the foam cushion. This essential and efficient chair is a perfect example of the sensitivity and the honesty of GDC's vision, in which nothing is superfluous, redundant, or formalist. His attitude, as he declares²⁴ underling the gap between author design and furniture's project, comes from the honest interpretation of the production chain, without any rhetoric and that looks to a wider and opportune idea of *living*. A skinny chair, it has essentiality as its main strength. As in any other GDC project, also in this single piece of furniture, you can feel a specific idea of the world and the city. A city before and behind, an inner city that sums up the human effort for life.²⁵ [Fig. 6]

The chair was followed by the Lucania armchair, presented for the first time at the 11th Triennale, as a section of the International Home Exhibition that took place in Parco Sempione in 1957. The armchair, which was shown in the pavilion dedicated to single furniture components, has a size of width 77, depth 90, height 99 (seat height 42). The main structure in lacquered brass supports a pressed metal sheet from which a single piece element of backrest and armrests is created, in a basin-like shape. The seat, which works as an independent frame, is placed and fixed in position, already covered with cord belts featuring padding and lining – thus appearing like a flying cushion. The basin is equipped with a series of hooks the cord belts of the spring system are fixed on (to support the backrest), and with an external liner that covers the foam-rubber padding. The liners of both seat and basin can be easily removed in order to be washed. The different parts are secured to one another through the use of expansion screws.²⁶ [Fig. 7]

20 Christopher Wilk, ed., *Plywood. A Material Story* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017).

21 Lisa Licitra Ponti, ed., "Nuovi Mobili di Mollino," *Domus*, 270 (Maggio 1952).

22 I. Guttry, M. P. Maino, *op.cit.*

23 Giancarlo De Carlo, *Conferenza sull'arredamento a Venezia*, dattiloscritto con note (Archivio Progetti IUAV, fondo Giancarlo De Carlo, Venezia, 1959).

24 Giancarlo de Carlo, "Il Salone di tutti i Saloni," in AAVV, ed., *Scritti per Domus* (Rozzano (MI): Editoriale Domus, 2005).

25 Stefano Boeri, "Oltre le forme urbane. Una conversazione a Palermo fra Giancarlo De Carlo e Giuseppe Samonà," in *Gian Carlo De Carlo. Immagini e frammenti*, eds. Angela Mioni, Etra Connie Occhialini (Milano: Electa, 1995).

26 AAVV, "Una nuova poltrona," *Domus*, 336, (Novembre 1957).



Materiale: compensato curvato, tubo metallico verniciato, ottone, gommapiuma e tessuto.

Caratteristiche costruttive: sedile e schienale in un unico pezzo di compensato piegato; le gambe sono due elementi in tuboplast; fissati al sedile con mazzetti in ottone. Il cuscino dorsale è sospeso da una banda di stoffa fissata allo schienale.

Dimensioni: l. 43; p. 52; h. 75; hs. 49

Notizie: la sedia in una versione più robusta è stata utilizzata per gli interni dell'aeronave Lucania progettata da G. De Carlo con E. Mariani. La sedia fu presentata alla X Triennale di Milano, 1954, sezione «Il mobile singolo».

Bibliografia: G. Perini, «Le armi della Lucania», *Domus*, 287, 1953; «Il mobile e di serie: Arflex-Italia», *Stile Industria*, 16, 1956; *Architecture and Building*, 3, 1959.

Materiale: molded plywood, painted tubular metal, brass, foam rubber and fabric.

Constructive characteristics: seat and back in one piece of bent plywood; the legs are two tuboplast elements, attached to the seat with brass clamps. The cushion of the back is held up by a band of fabric attached to the back.

Size: width 43; depth 52; height 75; seat height 49

Notes: a more robust version of the chair was used for the furnishing of the motorship Lucania designed by G. De Carlo and E. Mariani. The chair was presented at the X Triennale in Milan in 1954, «Il mobile singolo» section.

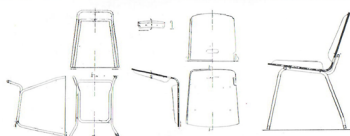


1952 PROGETTO 1954 PRODUZIONE

MODELLO:
Lucania
sedia imbottita / upholstered chair

PROGETTISTA:
Giancarlo De Carlo

PRODUZIONE:
Arflex, Limbiate



6 |

With the prototypes for the Triennale and the Arflex's original series GDC expressed through product design the transformation of the Italian society, starting from the courage and enthusiasm of the post-war time, to the lightness of the spirit that marked the years of the economic boom. Without any complacency towards the market or the cult for refined furniture, the approach of GDC was characterized by the right detachment and the lucid critical quality. A frank interpretation of society and industrial progress connected to production techniques, without any trace of rhetoric.

Roughly in the same period of GDC's collaboration with Arflex, he also started working on the project for furnishing and equipment of the University of Urbino, with the complicity of Rector Carlo Bo. He designed every element with great care, from the joineries of the portals that framed parts of the city, to components like blackboards, hangers, mailboxes, seats, tables, and signs.

In this vein, an example of a project that stands in between the concepts of custom and authorial furniture is the Comet armchair. GDC took care of every detail related to the experiences of studying and living, from desks for students to the stately and solemn one of the professorships (formica Domus competition), also including a special chair for the professors' offices. The Comet reclining

Fig. 6
Descriptive page of Lucania
Chair. Source: Domus 708,
September 1989

Una nuova poltrona

Una nuova poltrona prodotta in serie dalla Arflex è la poltrona Lucania, disegnata dall'architetto Giancarlo De Carlo.

La struttura della poltrona è in lamiera stampata: schienale e braccioli formano un corpo unico, una conca; il sedile è un telaio indipendente, e viene collocato nella sua sede già finito, cioè già ricoperto — su nastri cord — di propria imbottitura e fodera, e ha quindi l'aspetto di un cuscino volante.

La conca è provvista di una serie di ganci cui vengono fissati i nastri cord del molleggio (per lo schienale) e la fodera esterna che riveste l'imbottitura di gomma-piuma.

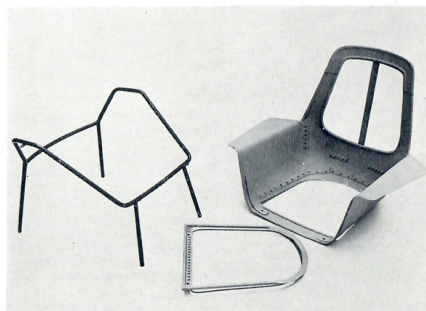
Le fodere sia del sedile che della conca si possono togliere assai facilmente per la lavatura.

Il fissaggio delle diverse parti è ottenuto con viti ad espansione. Questa poltrona è il secondo pezzo della serie Lucania disegnata da Giancarlo De Carlo; il primo è la ben nota seggiolina Lucania in compensato curvato.



Fotogramma

la poltrona Lucania della Arflex disegnata da Giancarlo De Carlo



38

foto Clari

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armchair is derived from the reworking of a backrest seat originally used on British airliners and features a tubular iron structure which supports a plasticized cardboard, combined with leather-covered sheet metal armrests.

In the graduation room, an exedra serves as a backdrop for the space dedicated to teachers, while the stalls are furnished with Chiavari chairs, a significant episode of Italian craftsmanship, which were chosen by GDC and Bo in a joint effort.²⁷ On the second floor, inside blue ceramic floored aula magna, antique pieces of furniture are juxtaposed with Lucania chairs.

GDC played a decisive role as an intellectual in the debate regarding the specificity of disciplines between architecture and urban planning, but he also consistently acted as an all-round designer, in accord with the modern tradition.

The list of examples of his articulated professional activity is extensive: from the street lamps for Urbino, Mazzorbo and Colletta di Castelbianco,²⁸ to his

27 Tiziana Fuligna, "Il progetto Urbino," in *L'università di Urbino 1506-2006*, ed. Stefano Pivato (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2006).

28 Luigi Mandraccio, "Original vs. anonymous design: a light for villages", following section of this article.

Fig. 7

Descriptive page of Lucania Armchair.

Source: Domus 336, November 1957

collaboration with Albe Steiner for the graphic identity of Urbino, including interior design and custom furnishings of houses and shops, as the one he curated in Bari in 1954, in partnership with Massimo Vignelli. The organization of the store's main space takes place through an 'infrastructural' system made up of three metal tracks – inserted into the layout of the vaulted spaces. A sort of "exhibition machine" tuned with the season in which "architects on the one hand, stylists and brands on the other join forces to express ideas of personal, social and cultural identity"²⁹, and solved just through three simple metal tracks, which intersections distinguish the areas of display from the study and dressing room.³⁰

The centenary of GDC's birth is also an opportunity to investigate sections of his complex experience as a designer of places, cities, buildings and furniture, that have not been entirely explored yet.

Original vs. anonymous design: a light for villages – Luigi Mandraccio

«There is always the sun in Colletta»³¹ is the adage commonly repeated by the dwellers of Colletta di Castelbianco – the Ligurian settlement reconstructed by Giancarlo De Carlo in the 1990s. After the sunset, a very special street-lamp lights the village [Fig. 8]. Though, that special lamp was born in Urbino, a very different context, in the 1950s. Notwithstanding its birthplace, it does not look as a stranger nor for the Ligurian village or for all the other contexts in which it is set.

The present essay aims at giving an interpretation of the design of this special street-lamp – both as an autonomous object and in relation to three different contexts in which it is set – and it also tries to suggest how the paradigm of this public furniture/device can express clearly the point of view of GDC about the industrial design.

Shortly later his arrival in Urbino, GDC has been asked to redesign the public lighting system within the historic center of Urbino. The street-lamp was born – between 1954 and 1957 – following this specific assignment [Fig. 9]. The context in which it was born has marked the nature of this lamp, but finally it was not designed as "in adaptation" to the context,



8

Fig. 8
Street-lamp within Colletta di Castelbianco. Photo by Luigi Mandraccio, 2019

29 AAVV, "Domus e la moda", in AAVV, (online) https://www.domusweb.it/it/notizie/2017/06/12/domus_e_la_moda.html.

30 AAVV, "Giancarlo de Carlo, Massimo Vignelli. Un negozio a Bari", in AAVV, *Domus* 292 (Editoriale Domus, Rozzano: February 1954).

31 Ole Wiig, *Colletta di Castelbianco: From the 13th century to the present day* (Albenga: Rivierahouse, 2019), 17.



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but as a part of it. In the GDC way of designing, to belong to a context does not mean being the outcome of superficial expedients or ephemeral analogies, but it means to materialize a shared cultural matrix: far from every kind of “in style” reproduction – as sample of that way of designing we can consider the greater part of the nineteenth-century lanterns that fill our historical city centers – the GDC street-lamp is a “modern” object. It is designed with a modern language – and it could not be otherwise – but at the same time it is aware of the place in which it is set and conscious of the community’s feelings that lives that place, by showing in this way great margins of flexibility.

The street-lamp designed for Urbino is a rather simple object: a bracket-structure, supported by an arm composed of four sections made by flat iron profiles³², where the light source is enclosed in a transparent white blown glass³³ shade for the upper half and frosted in the lower half. The top of the vitreous bubble is closed by a perforated sheet. All metal parts are fire-painted with a matt black finish.

32 The iron bar is 30 mm wide and 2.5 mm thick. The original drawing can be found in Giancarlo De Carlo, *Architettura Città Università*. Disegni (Florence: Alinea, 1982), 65.

33 Overall dimensions: diameter 350 mm, height 380 mm. The original drawings can be found in Rossi, *Giancarlo De Carlo: Architetture*, 49.

Fig. 9

The street-lamp in Urbino, its original context. Photo by Stefano Passamonti, 2019

The composition of the parts is a well-balanced design of forms and materials. It is in continuity with what GDC reports, about the stables of *Palazzo Ducale*, as a pivot that supports the whole urban identity of Urbino: «Francesco di Giorgio had surely defined all the measures of this using as base scale the *divina proportio* [*sezione aurea*], something that the Renaissance architect always did, it was their meter, the use of the *divina proportio* [*sezione aurea*]»³⁴.

The street-lamp is surely an autonomous object, but at the same time it is naturally harmonized in its contexts as the result of the designer's work, first of all about the references. The street-lamp, even as first look, appears as clearly inspired by an ancient oil lamp, but it is not only because of a formal similitude. The oil lamp is an object that has been usual and familiar in everyday life, especially in the Italian province – out of the big cities where the electricity has been diffused less rapidly – where it was integral part of life, knotted also with farmer culture. Therefore, this kind of lamp can be considered as one of the progenitors of the category of lamps, including the development of electricity-supplied ones. Furthermore, its original cultural context must not be considered as a limit to bind that to the birthplace, but rather a way to define a kind of place and a type of community the lamp belongs to. The “*borgo*” is, in both cultural and physical senses, its preferred habitat.

Defined and understood the main cultural values, the GDC project of the street-lamp created for Urbino acquire «the Uncommon Beauty of the Common Things.»³⁵ The everyday objects – such as an oil lamp or a pole lamp – are often “anonymous.” “Anonymous” as a qualifying feature,³⁶ referring to a set of features that contributed to the affirmation of these objects for their function, beyond the authorship of their design or branding.

The nature of these objects – function, form, accessibility, etc. – guarantees intrinsically their fortune. «Remarkable traits ... are useful, so useful that they have become necessary ... are affordable ... are ingenious and innovative in the way they proposed new solutions or altogether new types of objects ... all these characteristics make them beautiful.»³⁷ The features of the anonymous design are part of the traditional values that the oil lamp transferred to the GDC street-lamp project.

The *ensamble* of cultural and material references is the result of the process of “reading” the context too. It is a fundamental part of the GDC design method: the street-lamp underlines the importance of the methodological role of reading operation because it enlarges the range of results and the design scales that took their genesis from that.

34 Giancarlo De Carlo, during the conference “L'architettura tra innovazione e tradizione”, held at the Scuola Normale in Pisa on March 13, 2003.

35 Sergio Polano, *Achille Castiglioni: Tutte le opere 1938-2000* (Milan: Electa, 2001), 10.

36 Alberto Bassi, *Design anonimo in Italia* (Milano: Skira, 2007).

37 Paola Antonelli, *Humble masterpiece: 100 Everyday Marvels of Design* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 1-3.



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Since the “reading” process goes beyond a specific place by embracing a broader social and cultural environment, the resulting object acquires a less rigid and specific character.

The street-lamp is used by GDC in two projects after Urbino. The project of a new residential complex in Mazzorbo, commissioned by IACP (*Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari*) of Venice in 1979, born from the idea of creating a close dialogue³⁸ with the adjacent settlements of Burano and Mazzorbo. The housing project – following GDC’s intent – performs «a gentle invasion»³⁹ of the agricultural landscape of the island. The first group of thirty-six houses – the only ones built until now – are designed as a reproduction of the Burano’s

38 The analysis about the built environment of Burano and Mazzorbo was so intense and structured that details and elements were registered into a “vocabulary”. This approach expresses a precise intellectual project, interpreting the vocabulary not as a tool for reproduction, but for invention.

39 Giancarlo De Carlo, *Tra acqua e aria. Un progetto per l’isola di Mazzorbo nella laguna veneta* (Genova: Sagep Editrice, 1989), 26.

Fig. 10
An example of the placement of the floor version of the street-lamp in Mazzorbo. Photo by Francesca Berni, 2019.

sequences of one-family-house chains – marked by the interruptions of *calli* and *campielli*. The idea of continuity for GDC lies in the interpretation of urban fabric's structure as the mirror of the spirit of the village and of its social structure. This settlement strategy is also the antidote to avoid the danger of falling back into vernacular style.

GDC employs in Mazzorbo the original version of the street-lamp created for Urbino, but there is also a variant: it is a pole version, fixed to the ground instead of being installed on the wall. The new type of support was originally designed as divided into three supports, but finally it was simplified as a single metal pole. The other parts of the lamp – the glass bubble that shields the light source – are instead unchanged [Fig. 10].

In Mazzorbo, the street-lamps fit perfectly with the specific design line defined by GDC for the whole settlement. They contribute, through their symbolic values, to build the sense of continuity with the context of the island. Meanwhile, they are “contemporary” objects, exactly like the whole architectural design approach.

Moreover, the first version of the pole-model gave a further declination to the issue of continuity, by rethinking the use of the typical Venetian Lagoon chaining points, realized by three large wooden poles joined at the top. It could have further demonstrated the flexibility of this object.

Finally, Colletta di Castelbianco is the third “geography” of the street-lamp. Colletta⁴⁰ is an ancient village in the Pennevaire valley, in western Liguria, originally devoted to farming activities. The perspective of a minimum subsistence economy drove the village to the complete depopulation. The refurbishment of Colletta started from the purchase of all the parcels of the village by private investors, who later gave the full project assignment to GDC that – thanks to that circumstances – could work on the design of the complete village.

The interpretation of the character of the place was the starting point for the design process.⁴¹ Indeed, everything in Colletta begins with the ruins. If the renovated village has been built from the ruins of the abandoned village, the street-lamp that lights the pathways is bounded to the dwellers' community both in terms of spiritual heritage and everyday practices. The reuse of the lamp within Colletta takes place into an extremely different context in respect to the previous samples, in many ways. The positive adaptation to the background confirms how it belongs deeply to the system of relationships, conceptual or concrete, recognized in the settlement and in the community.

The street-lamp is relevant due to its potential replicability. It can be duplicated without losing its specificity. A repeatability that comes directly from the anonymous archetype of the oil lamp, which is not aesthetic or stylistic, but formal and conceptual.

40 “Colletta” is a village in the municipality of Castelbianco (SV). The recovery/transformation (1993-1999) was promoted by Sivim srl, a company based in Alessandria, formed by Franco Riccardi, Gabriele Saggini and Alessandro Pampirio.

41 Giancarlo De Carlo, “Colletta di Castelbianco,” *Places*, 16 (2004).

This remarkable state is not fortuitous, nor the result of “neutrality” understood as a lack of personality or identity. It is not a matter of making the street-lamp “disappear” within the context. On the contrary, to insert something in a framework GDC works on each project in order to create an authentic relationship between it – each parts or components – and the context. This added value can be found in every GDC project, spanning from urban planning to industrial design objects.

Within the debate on the industrial design of the post-war period, GDC established its own original approach: the complete correspondence, also to this scale, with the other leitmotifs of his theoretical reflection and its professional activity. GDC interprets the industrial design project – which is inherently capable to give a result of immediate clarity and efficacy – as a theoretical device, in a way that allows him to complete the expressive forms of its thought, even in this perhaps neglected key.

So, the interdisciplinarity of themes and values proposed by GDC is underlined by prototypes, small series of furniture for specific projects and objects designed in collaborations with prestigious companies.

GDC, as a furniture designer, proves the strength of his philosophy and of his method. His objects verify his approach to the small scale of industrial design, and at the same time give new energy and tools to the critical reading of his general approach. Through industrial design projects, GDC has implemented and partly enriched his experience, so they are not something that is to be evaluated as an extemporaneous circumstance, but on the contrary like something that perfectly fits with his way of thinking.