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How the Memphis Design Movement Made a Comeback

Why the 1980s design phenomenon, named for a Bob Dylan song and an ancient Egyptian city, still appeals to every generation.

By Deyan Sudjic
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Ettore Sottsass with his Park Lane coffee table and Euphrates vase, both 1983. Credit...Vittoriano Rastelli/Corbis, via Getty Images

To call an armchair or a bookcase “revolutionary” might seem like a stretch, but for the design world, the original show of the Memphis design movement was as genuinely shocking as the first Sex Pistols performance. But unlike his revolutionary punk predecessors, Ettore Sottsass, this design moment’s founder, certainly knew the rules he was breaking when the Memphis group debuted in Milan 40 years ago.

He was as enthusiastic about designing businesslike computers and typewriters for Olivetti as he was about producing phallic-looking ceramics. There had been nothing quite as disruptive in the design world as the Memphis collective since Walter Gropius opened the doors of the Bauhaus over a half-century earlier.

What Sottsass could not have foreseen was that decades later, there would also be another upstart version of the movement.

The movement’s revival exists in the echo chamber of social media, where it has taken on a life of its own, continually refueled with fresh injections of celebrity and nostalgia — an essential ingredient for the all-purpose media blender that strip-mines the recent past for imagery.



The sitting room in Cara Delevingne’s London apartment, including Sottsass’s Carlton bookcase.
Credit...Skyler Smith

The first Memphis wave had come and gone long before Cara Delevingne, the English actress and singer, was born. But when Architectural Digest published images of her London house, designed by the architect Tom Bartlett in 2018, it wasn't that much of a surprise to find Sottsass's Carlton bookcase and his Callimaco floor lamp in her sitting room. They seem seductively cute in this context, rather than dangerously subversive.

Like Ms. Delevingne, Raquel Cayre, who has a popular Instagram account that she named @Ettore Sottsass, is not yet 30. Just before the Covid lockdown, she produced an image-building pop-up for a photographic gallery start-up in a space on Canal Street in New York that was partly populated with Memphis furniture; she included such entirely non-Memphis designs as Norman Foster's Nomos table and a pair of chairs by René Herbst from 1928 — a promiscuous mix that echoes her Instagram account.

Memphis is also popular on the wildest shores of the decorating industry, as witnessed by Sasha Bikoff's design work for the 46th Annual Kips Bay Decorator Show House in 2018. She left the place looking like the aftermath of an explosion in a paint factory.



Sasha Bikoff's Memphis-inspired stairwell at the 2018 Kips Bay Show House in New York. Credit...Emily Andrews for The New York Times

To remind us that there is more to Memphis than social media posts with a hazy grasp of history, Sottsass has become the subject of a series of serious-minded museum retrospectives. The latest, "Ettore Sottsass: The Magical Object," opened at the

Pompidou Center in Paris this month. (It follows recent Sottsass exhibitions at the Triennale design museum in Milan and the Met Breuer in New York.)

The key message for the Pompidou's curator Marie-Ange Brayer is that there is more to Sottsass than the Memphis patterns and colors that have become part of an all-purpose nostalgia for the 1980s. Ms. Brayer shows the depth and range of Sottsass's work, not only as a designer, but also as an artist, a photographer and an architect.



Beverly sideboard, 1981, from the exhibition "Ettore Sottsass: The Magical Object" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Credit...Adagp, Paris/Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI

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In the exhibition, she has included Sottsass's Beverly, a piece of furniture from 1981 that encapsulates the elements of Memphis by combining a sideboard with a built-in light fitting in the form of a bare bulb projecting from a chromed steel tube.

Back in 1981, at least 2,000 people tried to cram into a kitchen showroom near the Duomo in Milan, which had been cleared out for the first Memphis exhibition. Some managed to get a glimpse of the furniture designed by Sottsass and his young collaborators, including Michele De Lucchi, Nathalie Du Pasquier, Aldo Cibic, George Sowden and Matteo Thun. They were backed up by contributions from a couple of veteran postmodernists: Michael Graves and Hans Hollein, as well as Peter Shire, the maverick artist from Los Angeles.

Technologically, there was nothing new about the brightly colored and eccentrically shaped tables, chairs and sofas, along with a few clocks and even a TV set finished in green-and-black-patterned laminate, that made up the first collection. It relied on humble materials and conventional furniture-making techniques for what was nevertheless a powerful assertion of a new aesthetic approach. For Sottsass, Memphis demonstrated that there was more to contemporary Italian design than polite good taste.

Memphis was trying to have things both ways, mixing high art and popular culture; the name was a reference to both Bob Dylan's song "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again" and the ancient Egyptian city.

What was most shocking at the time was the palette: brash combinations of sweet-toothed nursery colors mixed with patterns tattooed onto every available surface. Depending on the cultural disposition and the age of the observer, it seemed either mildly threatening or wildly liberating.

"It sent shock waves through the academic world in Europe, for sure," Jasper Morrison, one of the more sober and successful designers of his generation, who was at the birth of Memphis as a 20-year-old student, told *Domus* magazine. "Suddenly you could say: 'But why can't I do it this way, it's valid, if that's what is going on.'"



Karl Lagerfeld in his Monaco apartment, 1983, furnished with Memphis objects and furniture. From left: Ettore Sottsass, Suvretta bookcase; George James Sowden, Unknown table; Michele De Lucchi, Riviera chairs; Ettore Sottsass, Treetops floor lamp. Credit...Jacques Schumacher



Also in Karl Lagerfeld's Memphis collection, from left: George James Sowden's Oberoi chair; Masanori Umeda's Tawaraya party ring; Martine Bedin's Super lamp. Credit...Jacques Schumacher

A tidal wave of publicity followed the debut. Suddenly, Memphis was everywhere, from the fast-fashion shops in Australia and Germany to Karl Lagerfeld's new home in Monte Carlo, which he filled with pieces from that first collection. Sottsass decorated a boat for the collector Jean Pigozzi and built houses for the art dealer Bruno Bischofberger in Switzerland; the architect Maya Lin's husband, the photography dealer Daniel Wolf, in Colorado; and the Silicon Valley designer David Kelley in California. David Bowie became a collector. After his death, Sotheby's auctioned his Memphis furniture along with his art, and even his bright red Sottsass-designed Valentine portable typewriter, which went for \$65,000.

Memphis had entered the language of popular culture and advertising. Its emergence coincided with architectural postmodernism. But Sottsass never considered himself a postmodernist. He saw himself as going beyond style, and reaching back to the fundamentals of architecture. He recruited Michael Graves and Arata Isozaki, who really were card-carrying postmodernists, to demonstrate the global reach of what he dryly called "the New International Style" in reference to Philip Johnson's first exhibition for

MoMA. But Sottsass was personally much closer to Shiro Kuramata, whose contribution to Memphis was an exquisite and refined table made of terrazzo.



Sottsass lamps and a Damien Hirst painting at the “Bowie/Collector” auction at Sotheby’s in 2016.
Credit...Astrid Stawiarz/Getty Images

For Sottsass, the Memphis aesthetic of 1981 wasn’t necessarily meant to last. His aim was to free design from the burden of the Modern movement mantra, to demonstrate that form doesn’t have to follow function, and then to move on.

He left Memphis in 1986. “Every strong idea lasts a very short time,” he said later. “Strong ideas are strong, but they cannot be developed, they are what they are. They come down like bolts of lightning, they are there, but finite.”

Sottsass could not have predicted the unstoppable tendency of fashion to consume itself and every other form of creativity in search of visually arresting imagery. When a fashion brand is at full throttle, pouring out five collections a year, it’s hard to do anything else in the relentless pursuit of newness. The brand is reduced to ransacking everything for source material: art, architecture and design.



A gallery assistant poses with Sottsass's Ashoka lamp during the press preview of the "Bowie/Collector" auction at Sotheby's. Credit...Kate Green/Anadolu, via Getty Images

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Memphis has been an important element in the fashion food chain ever since Miuccia Prada used a vintage Nathalie Du Pasquier print for her Miu Miu collection in 2006. Memphis became a source of inspiration, delivered with greater or lesser skill by designers ranging from Bill Gaytten for Dior's 2011 Autumn Winter collection, as worn by Katy Perry for the MTV Video Music Awards, to Anthony Vaccarello's collaboration with Memphis for Saint Laurent this year. It included sneakers with a microbial pattern transplanted from a Sottsass lamp, and a Sottsass silk pocket square.



Anthony Vaccarello's Memphis-inspired collection for Saint Laurent includes this lace-up sneaker. Credit...Saint Laurent

Even though there have been no new Memphis designs since 1989, the company is still in business and manufacturing the original pieces. These were never editions and are relatively affordable. Sottsass's financial backer for Memphis, Ernesto Gismondi, owner of the lighting company Artemide, kept control of the Memphis name after Sottsass left, later selling it to Alberto Bianchi Albrici, who had been his managing director and now operates under the brand name Memphis Milano.

For the British-born Mr. Sowden, one of Sottsass's collaborators, it is the freedom to experiment that Memphis offered that matters the most and gives it longevity. "There is no such thing as Memphis style," he said. "Memphis is an attitude."

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