

Out of Context

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Abstract

In 1980, the Italian product company Alessi invited eleven historicist postmodern architects to design tea and coffee sets. The assembled architects deployed architectural quotations to add signature to small-scale utilitarian objects, transforming products into miniature buildings, and elevating them into “art”. Significantly, this exercise in formal citation was divorced from scholarly writing and drawing, taking place outside the academy and within industry. Quotation was not a technique solicited by the architectural historian, or even by the practicing architect, but by an architecturally aware businessman, in other words, a client. This paper focuses on the ways in which Alessi’s commissioning of architects to design tea and coffee sets was an exercise in using quotation for unlikely ends: namely the production of a niche market for luxury products. It shows how architects—ranging from Michael Graves to Stanley Tigerman— injected signature (via quotation) into typicality (the mass-produced object) and argues that their collective efforts enabled the Alessi company to shift its status from a local workshop into a global company. Quotation was not only the means to diversify products; it was also a means for market elevation. While Alessi’s embrace of architectural quotation was certainly indebted to a rising consumer culture driven by a demand for individualised choices, at the same time it evidences the passing of quotation as a disciplinary concern into a commercial strategy: from establishing historical tradition to expanding product visibility; from making connections to articulating product differences. In this regard, Alessi offers surprising lessons for quoting out of context, for turning academic convention into market opportunity.

Out of Context

*In every good architect, there is a tendency toward naturalism—in other words, a tendency to reproduce what exists.*¹

In his introduction to *Officina Alessi's Tea & Coffee Piazza* catalogue (1983), Alessandro Mendini described the Alessi company's commissioning of eleven architects to design tea and coffee sets as an opportunity to "put forward experimental methods, forms and typologies in the thick of the current debate on neo and post-modernism" taking place in new Italian and international design.² Indeed, the invited architects—Michael Graves, Hans Hollein, Charles Jencks, Richard Meier, Mendini, Paolo Portoghesi, Aldo Rossi, Stanley Tigerman, Oscar Tusquets, Robert Venturi, and Kazumasa Yamashita—represented the chief protagonists of the historicist postmodernist set, all of whom (with the exception of Mendini) had been identified by Charles Jencks as working with syntax, irony, semantics, symbolism, metaphor, or decoration in the revised and enlarged 1978 edition of *The Language of Post Modern Architecture*.³ Most had participated in the 1980 Venice Biennale, "Presence of the Past", curated by fellow *Piazza* designer Paolo Portoghesi and by Mendini's own admission, it was "a relatively homogeneous group of architects" adding their signatures to small runs of domestic objects.⁴

These "signatures" would rely heavily on quotation: not of words, but fragments of buildings; not at one-to-one scale but reduced dimension, not verbatim but by approximation. In fact, quoted content would transgress mediums and domains, passing from architecture into industrial design, out of the academy into industry. The translations would account for the market success of the new Alessi products that acquired the status of art objects, exhibited at the *Chiesa di San Carpoforo/Centro Internazionale di Brera* in Milan and the Max Protetch Gallery in New York, and bought by wealthy collectors worldwide.⁵ As art, *the Piazzas* elevated the company's standing into international stature. Good quotation was apparently good business.

Alberti Alessi had conceived of the high-end line of products in 1980. His invitation to Mendini, who in turn invited the post-modern architects, originated within the company's new "Officina Alessi" workshop, a studio dedicated to formal and stylistic innovation but not committed to mass production. That activity remained under the purview of Alessi's existing factory, which specialised in making restaurant and household products ranging from coffee pots, to trays, pans, cutlery, tongs, wire baskets, fruit bowls, serving dishes, ice buckets, shakers, condiment sets, and butter dishes, *en masse*. In the rarefied context of Officina Alessi, architects styled design tea and coffee services in limited design runs (up to 99) in sterling silver. There, quotation was served on a silver platter.

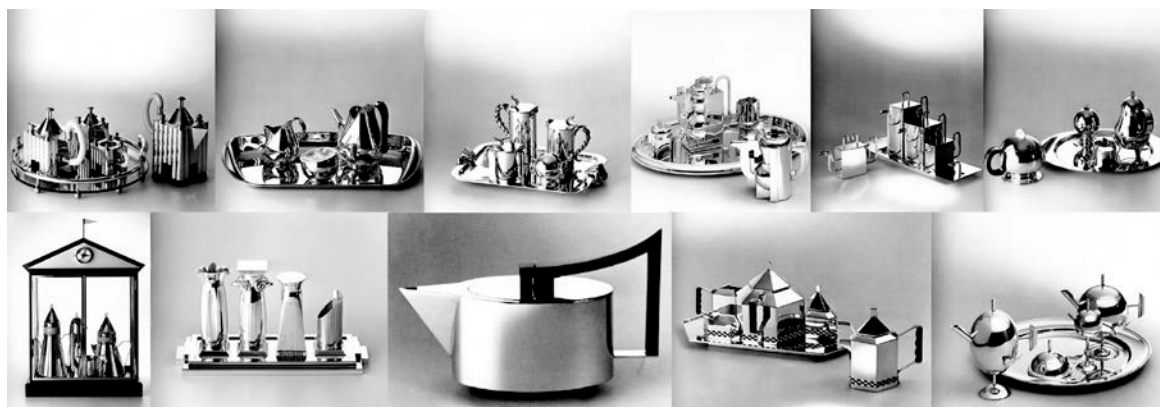


Figure 1. *Alessi Tea & Coffee Piazzas, 1980-1983.* From left to right: row one, Michael Graves, Oscar Tusquets, Stanley Tigerman, Richard Meier, Kazumasa Tamashita, Robert Venturi; row two, Aldo Rossi, Charles Jencks, Hans Hollein, Paolo Portoghesi, Alessandro Mendini.

The commission extended a long tradition of partnerships between architects and industry, but under changed economic circumstances. For example, with its limited editions, designer “signatures”, and emphasis on handcraft, the workshop emulated the ambitions and atmosphere of the *Wiener Werkstätte*. Yet the timing of Officina Alessi’s interest in postmodern signature was not about the repudiation of mass production as it had been for the *Werkstätte*, but heralded an engagement with image culture at the height of rising cult of personality. Further, the commissioning of architects to design products channeled the AEG’s hiring of Peter Behrens to design teakettles in 1910. Yet Alessi’s brief, which eschewed the AEG’s invitation to a single architect to design diverse objects, for invitations to many architects to design a single object, was symptomatic of the demands of mass consumerism. The swerve inevitably generated a different kind of unity among objects: for Officina Alessi, unity was achieved through eclecticism; for the AEG, it had been achieved through standardisation. Finally, by placing Officina Alessi alongside Alessi’s regular factory, the company simultaneously invoked the oppositional positions of the *Deutscher Werkbund* debates: if Muthesius’s standardisation characterised Alessi’s primary activity since the 1950s, van de Velde’s individualisation was the *raison d’être* of Officina Alessi. The co-existence of both ideologies signaled a shift in economic ambition: from establishing national identity through mass produced objects to establishing an international one in parallel through artistic signatures.

In this regard, Officina Alessi owed much to two contemporaneous Milan-based design studios exploring the larger relationship between design culture and consumer society: the collective Studio Alchimia, launched in 1976 by Alessandro Guerriero with Alessandro Mendini, and the Memphis Group, founded by Ettore Sottsass Jr. in 1981. In both studios, small production runs and unique prototypes existed *alongside* or even before mass production, not in opposition to it.⁶ Studio Alchimia was a post-radical workshop conducting research into the aesthetic possibilities of everyday environments through popular imagery, pastel colors, and visual copying; Memphis was a collaborative seeking to add emotive expression to domestic objects, furniture, and interiors. Here Alessi’s *Tea and Coffee Piazza* brief channeled Sottsass’s understanding of “expression” as the primary task of the invited architects, which perhaps explains the paradoxical pairing of Sottsass’s optimistic approach with that of his more pessimistic alter ego, Mendini.

As a collection, the *Tea and Coffee Piazas* prioritize the disciplinary concerns of architecture—form, scale, and typology, building morphology—over the challenges of the series-made industrial object.⁷ Three kinds of content are referenced across the eleven designs: building parts, body parts, and other teapots. In different ways, formal quotation introduces and re-enacts architectural content to, and within, product design.

For example, the services designed by Graves, Jencks, and Rossi all cite building parts. Graves’s six-piece service with its square, sectioned bodies and rippled surfaces referencing fluted columns, approximate elements from classical buildings. Legs to each vessel are capped with truncated, black Bakelite pedestals, top corners adorned with blue lacquered aluminum baubles, lids shaped into truncated cones, and handles composed of “mock ivory” in elliptical curves. Graves’s clunky set looks like an awkward group of buildings—a micro architecture for the table. Here quotation undermines monumentality.

Jencks’s five-piece “columns” service, an ironic take on the classical orders of architecture, is strikingly similar to, if a petite, version of Paolo Portoghesi’s *Strada Novissima* entry for the 1980 Venice Biennale. In this copy of a copy, stout columns, now emptied of a supporting role, adopt the characteristics—not proportions—of the orders: a Corinthian coffee pot, an Ionic teapot, a Doric milk jug, and a broken-sugar-bowl column. The columns, devoid of spouts, handles and bases, descend in chronological sequence on a stepped stylobate tray.⁸ Other than the implied hierarchy of purpose provided by the orders, the column-pots are primitive in utilitarian terms. Indeed, Jencks’s service

quotes and empties the columns not only out of structural context but also of usefulness. What is quoted is contradictory to use. Quotation dissimulates and disguises.

Rossi's teapot and coffee pots share truncated cone bodies capped with blue enameled bands and conical lids surmounted with quartz spheres, a self-referential quotation of Rossi's earlier *Teatro del Mondo* (1979). The sugar bowl is cylindrical with a domed lid. The six-piece service is housed in a glass cabinet, replete with a black iron socle, blue-glazed pediment, pitched copper roof, pennant, and working clock. The tiny cabinet, alluding to a building in its tripartite elevation, rescales architecture into petite furniture. The quotation of platonic solids serves to de-familiarise the domestic objects environment.

By quoting human body parts at one-one scale, Tigerman's five-piece service swerves product design toward the anthropomorphic by personifying the type-object. Like Rossi, Tigerman deploys platonic objects for the vessel forms—generic cylinders and spheres—but he humanises their spouts and handles: coffee pot, teapot, and milk jug spouts as pursed lips; handles as braided pony tails (pots); decapitated ears (sugar bowl); and amputated fingers (the rectangular tray).⁹ Here quotation takes on a more ironic if macabre tone, the object itself becomes part human, another domestic inhabitant: a human-object for the human-user.

In contrast to deploying "parts", Portoghesi's and Venturi's services pay homage to "wholes", and in particular tea and coffee pots designed by other architects. For example, Portoghesi's hexagonally extruded objects, with their pyramidal handle proportions and lid knobs, bear striking resemblance to Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann's coffee service (1903–1904), but compactly aggregate to form a "mini-citadel"—a petite fortress held neatly in place by a tight-fitting silver tray.¹⁰ Here historical quotation seems to be in search of a footnote. Portoghesi's pots are treated as found objects, but then liberated to write another story about agglomeration.

Similarly, Venturi's voluptuous oval pots recall the globular shape of English designer Christopher Dresser's teakettle (1877) while their ornamental, single-stemmed flowers and gold-plated petals adorning an emu-egg-like teapot, evoke Josef Hoffmann's later floral patterns. The domestic, formal references are obscured by a bold Alessi insignia, also gold plated, embellishing one side of the bulbous coffee pot, and re-situated into a metaphoric city on an oval tray engraved with the twelve-point radiating star of Rome's Piazza del Campidoglio.¹¹ Here quotations are superimposed at different scales producing an unlikely palimpsest of product and city.

Significantly, formal quotations play themselves out in ways that preserve the tea and coffee pots' constituent parts. With the exception of Jencks's columns, all *Tea and Coffee Piazzas* retain their functional components—bodies, handles, spouts, and lids—as separate design elements. To these parts, architects apply an additive aesthetic. The result is a product architecturalisation (or personification, in the case of Tigerman), a Beaux Arts Ball for products. Alessi's *Tea & Coffee Piazza* catalogue affirms this combinatorial approach in its technical labeling of each product part: "ovaloid", "truncated cone", "cylinder", "column", "sphere", "square section", "spout", "handle", "lid", and "feet". Architecture *becomes* product design through a logic of constituent parts. When quoted elements are proportionally scaled down and grafted onto various pots, architecture makes its representational appearance as product design via a process of shrink-to-fit. As if in anticipation of Reyner Banham's 1988 condemnation of postmodernism as "not architecture, but building in drag", Alessi's *Tea and Coffee Piazzas* offer *teapots in drag*.¹²

This method of design represents another swerve from earlier twentieth-century formal and stylistic approaches to teapot and coffee pot design, which had generally accentuated formal simplicity and geometric abstraction—e.g., Hoffmann's coffee sets designed between 1903 and 1904—or expression—e.g., Behrens's nickel-plated brass electric teakettle designed for the AEG in 1910—in

line with modern architectural values of utility, efficiency, and material economy. In contrast, the late twentieth-century recall of historical precedent with its emphasis on formal articulation and linguistic communication were symptomatic of changed cultural and economic demands. The role of image now trumped function, and a user's emotional relationship with an object was more important than the utilitarian one.

Indeed Alberto Alessi repressed the role of "function" in the commission.¹³ He openly professed to prefer working with architects over industrial designers who, in his view, "depend a great deal on details and how things are made", as opposed to architects who "are much less interested on the detailed level, and are more involved in producing a general effect".¹⁴ His emphasis on "general effect" gave the historicist postmodern architects the perfect alibi to focus entirely on new forms of architectural representation. In fact, this appears to have been exactly what he was after: "It does not matter if some of these coffee-pots look more like buildings than coffee-pots", Alessi declared in 1983.¹⁵ The resulting objects said more about image function (architecture's newfound historical role) than utilitarian function (design's assumed obligation). As product design gave architects freedom to quote out of context—their postmodern liberty—by stripping it of functional obligation, the architects freed design from its former commodity-function into experience-image.

As Andrea Branzi later reflected, the rise of various consumer markets had pushed Italian industry to devise production strategies that relied less "on the drastic semantic reduction that typified classical design but rather on a new and violent acculturation of the product; the product, that is, must actively select its own user, promote itself to a particular social group".¹⁶ In this context, Alessi's embrace of architecturalised products was an attempt to reach an elite group of consumers through an elite line of products. While it is true that most architects were simply applying their historicist techniques of architectural design to product design, their disciplinary techniques served different purposes outside the academy. In industry, historicist quotation provided a way to differentiate products, to splinter markets, and for a company to modernise itself through new kinds of images.

The call for international architects to bring "expression" and "a general effect" helped the Alessi company *upgrade* traditionally mass-produced products into luxury items. As Italian design historian Fulvio Irace put it, the historicist postmodernists projected back into the products the very signs of signification that had been erased by the dominant abstract of mass industrialisation.¹⁷ An injection of signature (via quotation) into typicality (the mass produced object) elevated the status of products to what Jencks later labeled as "symbolic objects" in an essay of the same name, published in a special 1987 issue of *Art & Design*.¹⁸ For Jencks, symbolic objects lay in the bandwidth "somewhere between the mass-produced item and the art object, the throw-away and the antique".¹⁹ The application of quoted features pulled the Alessi products closer to art; architecture's use of history transmuting product design into art, without the means of art itself.

The bandwidth of utility also altered the object's status. If Jencks had identified an appearance line between the art object and the mass-produced design object, Nikolaus Pevsner had earlier described the utility line between "the nearly non-utilitarian to the wholly-utilitarian".²⁰ As nineteenth-century American sociologist Thorstein Veblen argued it was precisely an object's reduced utility or uselessness—its conspicuous "wastefulness"—that enhanced its value as an art object of taste. In other words, its value did not depend on how well the object performed its intended function, but rather on the *honorific* function for which it has been purchased (namely, *pecuniary reputability*).²¹ The technique of quotation delivered the honorific aspect, which in turn enabled Alessi to capitalise on the advertising appeal of art galleries (as opposed to warehouses and department stores) to attract a more sophisticated audience. The closer the object was to the non-utilitarian end of Pevsner's spectrum, the more readily the object would be understood as an art object.

Officina Alessi's advance of "high design" formed part of its "general image policy plan" aligning design strategy with business strategy.²² By the late 1970s, homogeneous markets of mass production were disappearing and smaller, more diverse, segmented markets connected to different social and cultural groups were proliferating. Markets were also globalising. As Alessi diversified production into two lines—limited runs of expensive, one-off objects, and multiple runs of affordable mass-produced objects—the company crudely produced two market segments out of one. When the new line entered sophisticated and concentrated markets — a proto- form of mass customisation²³ — the company transitioned from what Vittorio Gregotti identified as "product-oriented" manufacturing into "market-oriented objects".²⁴ The shift enabled Alessi to transform from a domestic manufacturing firm—which until the late 1970s was characterised, almost without exception, as an Italian manufacturing enterprise²⁵—into an international "design" company with links to major galleries.²⁶ Significantly, famous, foreign *architects* brought the *design-art* designation to the Italian manufacturer as late as 1980. It was not so much that products had become the Trojan horse for architecture, but rather that architects would emerge as the Cyranos for an impending consummation of design.

While Alessi's embrace of architectural quotation was certainly indebted to a rising consumer culture driven by a demand for individualised choices, at the same time it evidences the passing of quotation as a disciplinary technique into a commercial strategy: from establishing historical tradition to expanding product visibility; from making connections to articulating product differences. Numerous experiments would follow the Alessi example as architects continued designing tea and coffee services across the world in ceramic, silver, and metal for other companies, and often with explicit architectural references. Yet the Alessi commission remains unique because it offers surprising lessons for quoting out of context from *within and without* the architecture discipline. In both domains, within and without, quotation operates as a *prospective* activity.

From without, the commission shows how referencing building parts, body parts, and product designs *de-familiarised* a line of the company's mass-produced objects by making them eclectic. This eclecticism, which was achieved through tiny product elements, enabled Officina Alessi's products to take on new semantic roles at the height of historicist postmodernism, but for different ends. In product design quotation was not deployed to reactivate an architectural past (as it was inside the architecture discipline), but rather to activate a new company future: new markets, new collectibles, new clients, and a new organisational structure. The whole procedure performed much like Nietzschean genealogy: architects unwittingly used quotation as a clearing operation, unconsciously creating a space for new business opportunities to emerge in.

From within the discipline, the eleven tea and coffee piazzas reveal that the role of quotation was never to substantiate an argument, let alone confirm historicist postmodernism, but rather to undermine, disguise, de-familiarise, personify, urbanise, or superimpose traditional relationships between function and object, object and city, city and user, and user and object. The familiarity of the quotation technique paradoxically produced unfamiliar consequences: an alienation of use (any scale of use could be assigned to any historical form) and uncertainty in status (was the utilitarian object design or art?). As quoted content passed from one domain (architecture) into another (industrial design), as it changed scale, medium, and context, it raised new conceptual stakes for architecture's future development. Quotation was simply an act of design.

Endnotes

¹ Aldo Rossi, "These Projects," in Peter Arnell and Ted Bickford, eds., *Aldo Rossi: Buildings and Projects*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 10.

² Officina Alessi, *Tea & Coffee Piazza* (Milan: Shakespeare & Company, 1983), 10

³ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, revised and enlarged ed. (London: Academy Editions, 1978).

⁴ Alessandro Mendini, "Alessi," *Domus*, 623 (December 1981): 44.

⁵ Several first prototypes were exhibited to the public during their development: "*Provokationen, Design aus Italien ein Mythos Geht neue Wege*" (Hannover, 1982); "*Design Formgebung für Jedermann. Typen und Prototypen*" (Zürich, 1983); and "*Design Experimenta*" (Todi, 1983). See Officina Alessi, *Tea & Coffee Piazza*, 4.

⁶ Andrea Branzi, *The Hot House: Italian New Wave Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984), 141.

⁷ Fulvio Irace, "The Days When Coffee-pots Had Legs," Officina Alessi, *Tea & Coffee Piazza*, 18.

⁸ In a letter addressed to Mr. Alessi dated July 29, 1980, Jencks apologizes for the sketches of his set remaining "at so primitive stage" and not providing any detail for conventional "spouts, handles, bases etc." He writes that he hopes there is enough information for the Alessi company to work "through the technical problems." The sketches were taken to production without handles, spouts etc. Jencks, to Alberto Alessi, July 29, 1980. Alessi Archive, The Alessi Museum, Crusinallo, Italy, Folder: Jencks, no. 319.

⁹ Tigerman's hand-drawn sketches show fluids dripping from "lips" and contain references to "embossed hair." His prototypes are titled "the crying (weeping) teapot," the "sugar puss" sugar bowl, "hot lips" (tea and coffee), and "cold lips" (milk) for spouts. Alessi Archive, The Alessi Museum, Crusinallo, Italy, Folder: Tigerman, no. 989.

¹⁰ While there are four iterations of the basic shapes of Hoffmann's coffee service, I am referring to the first group, which were numbered S288, S290-294, designed 1903-1904, and produced in 1904.

¹¹ The final prototype is a significant diversion from Venturi's earlier schemes. Pencil-drafted plans and elevations drawn at 1:1 scale and dated October 1980 through December 1980 show early designs for a pantheon tea pot replete with pediments, columns, and a dome lid (version C2); a coffee pot designed as a miniature medieval castle (version C1); and a sugar bowl designed as a miniaturized cottage including window, door, and roof (version C4). The realized prototype (dated August 1981) abandons the architectural references in favor of more traditional forms with applied surface ornamentation. Alessi Archive, The Alessi Museum, Crusinallo, Italy, Folder: Venturi, no. 1009.

¹² Reyner Banham, "A Black Box, the Secret Profession of Architecture," in *A Critic Writes, Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 293.

¹³ Remarking a decade after the *Tea and Coffee Piazzas* were completed, Alberto Alessi stated, "In our century, no one was able to invent a new typology . . . almost all the functional problems had already found a solution, we are working much more on expression." Quoted in Rowan Moore, "The Psychoanalysis of an Alessi Kettle," *Blueprint* 99 (July-August 1993): 12.

¹⁴ Alberto Alessi quoted in Steve Speller, "Milan's New Mood," *Blueprint* 30 (September 1986): 33.

¹⁵ See Alberto Alessi, "Manufacturer's Note," in Officina Alessi, *Tea & Coffee Piazza*, 5.

¹⁶ Branzi, *Hot House*, 142.

¹⁷ Irace, in Officina Alessi, *Tea & Coffee Piazza*, 18-19.

¹⁸ Charles Jencks, "Symbolic Objects," *Art & Design* 3, 3/4 (1987): 63-66.

¹⁹ Jencks, *Art & Design* 3, 3/4 (1987): 66.

²⁰ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Visual Pleasures from Everyday Things: An Attempt to Establish Criteria by Which the Aesthetic Qualities of Design Can Be Judged* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1946), 10-11.

²¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), 115-116. First published in 1899.

²² Alessandro Mendini, introduction to Officina Alessi, *Tea & Coffee Piazza*, 10.

²³ As business thinker Stan Davis noted, segmentation was not a particularly refined way to differentiate markets. Segmentation became more sophisticated as niche markets were carved out, and, later, when markets were mass customized. For a cogent description of market evolutions during the 1980s, see Stan Davis, *Future Perfect*, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 150-197.

²⁴ Vittorio Gregotti, "Italian Design, 1945-1971" in *Italy, The New Domestic Landscape: achievements and problems of Italian Design* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972): 325

²⁵ Alberto Alessi, "Tea & Coffee Towers," in Alessandro Mendini (ed.), *Tea & Coffee Towers*, (Milan: Mondadori Electa S.p.A, 2003), 7–9.

²⁶ Several have observed Alessi's transformation into an international design company; for example, Max Protetch commented, "Back then, Alessi still wasn't that known, even in Europe, for making much more than stainless products for restaurants." Protetch quoted in Aric Chen, "Pot Shots," *I.D.* 50, no. 2 (April 2003): 40; and Ettore Sottsass Jr. also remarked that Alessi's call for world-renowned architects to internationalize its image was "truly an operation which modernized Alessi in a single blow and made it what it is today." Sottsass quoted in Heather O'Brian, "It's a Family Affair," *Graphis* 53, 311 (September–October 1997): 44.