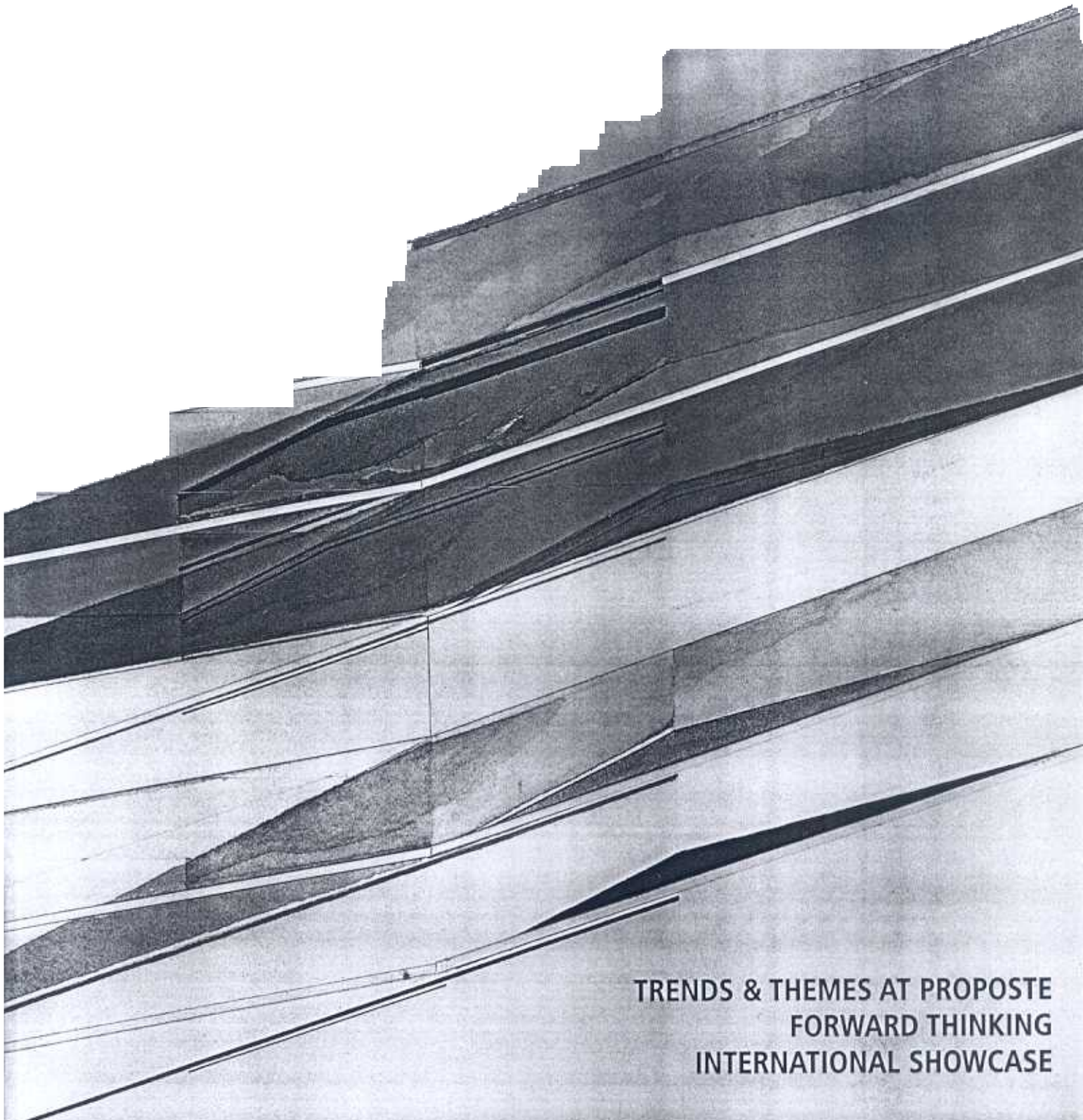


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TRENDS & THEMES AT PROPOSTE
FORWARD THINKING
INTERNATIONAL SHOWCASE

Architect As Author



Fabio Novembre is the most-talked about architect/designer under 40 in Milan. His intensely personal style – mixing objects that are conventionally associated with “bad taste”, colour, and lots of curves – has been seen as spear-heading the long-awaited post-minimalist revolt, though the designer sees such categorizations as banal.

Fabio Novembre’s provocative projects include the giant, gravity-defying spiral “And” seat designed in 2002 for Cappellini – which compels guests to do anything but sit down. Then there’s his innovative design for Florence’s Una Vittoria Hotel with a swirling, floor-to-ceiling floral mosaic based on a Florentine brocade in the reception area. Here, Novembre has challenged his contemporaries to place hotels in their historic/geographical context, without being afraid to leave their personal stamp on the design.

Novembre’s flamboyant persona (his web site contains a portrait of the naked designer shaking hands with another version of himself, this time fully clothed) has also attracted more than its fair share of media hype. But no one who meets him in the flesh could claim that he’s lacking in substance.

Talking to Novembre in his untidy, object-crammed studio in Milan is like encountering a modern-day Messiah for contemporary design. With his long curly hair and beard and dark, intense gaze, his passion for everything – life, women, his work – is abundantly obvious. “Architects have to be authors,” he declaims. “Our work mustn’t be confused with that of anyone else. It must be the continuous work of a single person in a new language, like that of Warhol or Picasso. If you can’t do that, then you’re not an architect, you’re a problem solver.”

But, he stresses, that doesn’t mean that he’s an out-and-out egoist, anxious to leave an impression wherever he treads. “I’m a passionate person and I want to do the things I want to do – I don’t care whether I leave an imprint,” he clarifies. “That’s just a side-effect. If you create something great, it will remain, but that’s not for you to decide!”

Novembre says he fell into architecture almost by accident. After graduating in architecture at the Politecnico in Milan in the early 1990’s, he headed to New York to study film direction. There, he met Anna Molinari, the designer for Italian fashion label Blumarine who asked him to design the

escape, hotels must be a place in time. I’ve tried to give the Vittoria historic roots,” he says. “As well as the floral mosaic at the entrance, there’s a huge, wave-shaped table in the restaurant, inspired by the refectory tables in Tuscan convents, there are paintings on the bedroom doors, resembling the portraits in Tuscan museums, while the rooms themselves take inspiration from Florentine boudoirs. But new hotels also have to be contemporary –

so there are details like wireless internet connections in the restaurant, and fibre-optic lights.”

Used in the rooms, the fibre optic lights twinkle like little stars covered in fuchsia, Kvadrat weaves, or black leather, on the walls and ceilings around the bed. But Novembre says that he only uses textiles when they are essential to his design.

“Fabrics are part of the soft, feminine part of architecture

which I don’t have much sensitivity for,” he says. “To me architecture is about the control of space – I think it goes back to the primitive male hacking his way through the jungle to clear the way. I don’t like decoration for its own sake, and think fabrics have to be a part of the architecture. For instance, I chose Kvadrat’s Hallingdal fabric for the spiral ‘And’ seat because it has a vast range of colours and a strong grip, which means that people don’t slip down the seat.” Other “architectural” uses of fabrics include white, cotton curtains, drawn over the beds at Li Cuncheddi in Sardegna to separate the head zone.

Novembre says that he took on both of these projects because he was given carte blanche. “I only work on two projects a year, chosen out of perhaps 50, and will only take them on if the client leaves me totally free and agrees to my mad conditions,” he says.

Currently, Novembre and his small design team are spending the bulk of their time on a large “creative district” for a major fashion brand (whose identity is a secret) to house employees, and to incorporate a restaurant built around an existing ancient villa.

During the Milan Furniture Fair in April 2004, they’ll be presenting their other on-going project: a new studio/living space for Novembre and his wife in Via Perugino. While Novembre doesn’t give much away about the complex’s details, he does reveal that his flat contains a crystal-walled shower which looks straight into the living room and kitchen. “I am man without false modesty,” he says. “Transparency, a lack of false modesty and a lack of prejudice runs through everything I do. ■



Above left and above: Examples of interiors by Fabio Novembre: mosaic feature in Una Vittoria Hotel, Florence; Hands on treatment at the Shu restaurant in Milan. Photographs by Alberto Ferrero. Left: Fabio Novembre.

interior for her new store in Hong Kong. “I don’t know how to draw and went at it like a workman in a trance,” says Novembre. But the store was a success, and other commissions – including the Café Atlantique and Shu bars/night spots in Milan – soon followed. In 2001, he began designing furniture for Cappellini, and has since produced a piece a year (though in 2004, the furniture producer’s financial difficulties have led to an enforced pause). At the same time, he began to work on larger interior design projects.

The Una Hotel Vittoria in Florence is not his first venture into the hospitality sector. In 2000, he designed the interiors for the Li Cuncheddi beach hotel on the sheep-rearing island of Sardinia – using stuffed toy lambs in back-lit niches in the lobby to remind guests of exactly where they are. But the Florence project gave him a new impetus to fight against what he sees as a global take-over by an overwhelmingly bland international style. “We’re in a period of history in which hotels have become the centre of the project-creating universe,” he explains. “For the past twenty years, everything has been centred on fashion and entertainment, but now it’s shifted to hotels. Hotels demand a huge investment, and Schrager, Starck and Putman were the first to put them under discussion. But what you notice now is that there’s an international style. As long as it’s white, clean and attractive, it counts as a ‘design hotel’.”

In Florence, he says, he has created an antidote to the “existential jet-lag – of not knowing who I am, or where I am” that afflicts him on his frequent travels. “Unlike bars and places of entertainment, where you go to