

Memphis

RESOURCE PACK

This Memphis resource pack aims to give students an increased knowledge and understanding of the methodology and aesthetics of the 1980s Italian design group. It also provides students with inspiration for their own design projects. The pack is suitable for teaching students at Key Stage 3 and above. It is part of a series comprising resource packs on the following subjects:

← **Innovation**
Verner Panton
Chairs
Memphis

Packs are supplied in photocopiable loose-leaf format and are designed to be interchangeable, so that common elements of each may be combined. In this way it is possible to assemble packs on:

Designing
Innovation
Manufacturing & materials
Ergonomics
Handling collection
– creating your own Design Museum
Activities



The Design Museum is the world's leading museum of 20th and 21st century design, and the UK's largest provider of design education resources. Its network of contacts in industry and the design world make it a bridge between the design profession, industry and education.

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Designed by Pencil
Cover: Carlton cabinet by Ettore Sottsass, 1981

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for teachers' notes

Using this Resource Pack

The Memphis group was formed as a reaction against the Modern movement, which favoured clean, undecorated lines and industrial materials. It was short-lived and in many ways did not achieve its stated aims but was influential in changing attitudes to design in the 1980s. Memphis products helped bring about the wide-ranging mixtures of materials and influences which characterise post-modern design.

Aims and contents

This Design Museum resource pack is for teachers and students from Key Stage 3 upwards. It aims to enable students to draw inspiration from Memphis to generate new and exciting ideas and to understand in simple terms how Memphis influenced the development of twentieth-century design.

Students will gain an insight into the character, practice and inspirations of Memphis from the following sections:

Designing
Manufacturing & materials
Ergonomics
Innovation

Activities and design briefs for different ages and abilities are included. Suggestions for assembling a Memphis handling collection for use in the classroom complete the pack.



Ashoka painted metal table lamp by Ettore Sottsass, 1981

The different sheets directly relate to each other and the information and ideas on them sometimes overlap. Sections from other Design Museum packs can also be combined with the contents of this pack to form a comprehensive resource.

“We are all very sure that Memphis furniture will soon go out of style.”

First Memphis exhibition catalogue, 1981

See D for designing for more detail on Modernism

Background information

The enormous social and cultural changes of the 1960s and 70s – the rise of feminism and mass communication, for example – led to a reaction against Modernism and a move amongst designers to embrace popular consumerism and youth culture. Rather than accept the Modernist principle that form should be dictated by function, designers wanted to experiment in the manner of artists to define a new language for design.

Italian designers were more inclined than others to adopt this approach: after the Second World War, Italian industries had developed in

Timeline: INFLUENCES ON MEMPHIS

1903	1906	1913	1919	1925	1934	1945
Wiener Werkstätte crafts movement founded in Austria. The founders admired the simplicity of the work of designers such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh.	Deutsche Werkbund founded in Germany to bring together artists and manufacturers to improve the quality of German design.	Fordism – Henry Ford introduced the first production-line system in his US factory to manufacture the Model T Ford motor car.	Bauhaus art school established by architect Walter Gropius in Germany in an attempt to unify the arts and industry and create designs for mass-produced articles.	Art Deco – the Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels exhibited furniture and interiors influenced by Cubism and African art.	'Machine Art' exhibition at Museum of Modern Art, New York.	World War Two ended. Italy, Japan and Germany began to revive their devastated industries with US help.



Letraset fabric by Ettore Sottsass, 1983

the artisan tradition, with skilled craftsmen in small-scale workshops using batch-production methods. Mass manufacturers produced well-designed goods with a strong popular appeal, such as the Vespa motor scooter.

The designer Ettore Sottsass was exasperated by the inflexible and patronising attitudes of the international design community. At the same time he was inspired by cultural, emotional, philosophical, ancient and contemporary influences. These included design movements and technological advances as shown on the timeline below, and a variety of other influences such as science fiction films and African textiles. With Michele De Lucchi and Alessandro Mendini he established Studio Alchymia in 1979, drawing inspiration from fashion, the media and everyday materials. Sottsass eventually fell out with Mendini, however. He founded Memphis in 1981 with De Lucchi and other designers to explore a visual language for design based on popular culture and kitsch.

Their photogenic products attracted immediate international attention, and young designers flocked to Milan from all over the world to work for

them. Memphis produced a wide range of products and interiors in a variety of materials, including textiles, furniture, glass and ceramics. They used expensive materials side by side with cheap everyday ones such as plastic laminate. Despite their intention to produce prototypes for industrial production, however, Memphis products were only ever manufactured in small numbers for an educated and wealthy few.

Memphis members were convinced that design should be short-lived, a part of the fashion process. In fact, their ideas were absorbed into mainstream international design and became part of the development of post-modernism.



Grand floor lamp by Michele De Lucchi, 1983

Activity guidelines

Activities 1–4 are appropriate for students across a wide age range (Key Stage 3/4) and can be used as preparatory work for a design project or as discrete classroom or homework tasks. The animal theme in Activity 1 could be used as the theme of a project for younger students (Key Stage 3). Other themes which work well are Logos, Space, The Sea and Food.

Activity 5 is for older students (Year 12/13) to gain an understanding of the use of past and present influences to inspire their work.

Buzz words

- Affluent** – rich.
- Anarchic** – chaotic, without rules.
- Art Deco** – design movement of the 1930s which used simple geometric forms and luxury materials.
- Atomic** – based on atoms, the smallest particle of an element that can take part in a chemical reaction.
- Batch production** – the manufacture of a specific number of products, from as few as a dozen up to thousands of articles.
- Consumerism** – the idea that high spending on goods and services is the basis for a sound economy.
- Culture** – the range of activities and ideas shared by a particular group of people at a particular time (often relating just to the arts).
- Feminism** – the belief that women have the same rights as men (for example, to work, or vote).
- Kitsch** – over-colourful, tasteless or sentimental art.
- Laminate** – a material made by placing thin layers one on top of another.
- Manifesto** – a public announcement of a set of beliefs, aims, etc.
- Media** – channels of communication that reach people quickly, such as television, newspapers and radio.
- Modernism** – a movement favouring design based on function, without unnecessary decoration.
- Patronise** – to act towards someone as if you are better than they are.
- Photogenic** – looking attractive in photographs.
- Post-modernism** – a movement favouring the self-conscious mixing of a wide variety of styles and materials.
- Radical** – Groundbreaking, revolutionary.

1950s

Consumerism developed worldwide. Growth of a style-conscious, affluent society in Italy. Atomic forms and cheerful colours widely used.

1960s

Pop culture exploded in fashion, music and art. Influence of the 'space race' between the US and the Soviet Union, feminism and youth culture.

1966

Archizoom group in Italy explored radical or 'anti-design' through exhibitions and manifestos.

1970s

Punk reacted against the Pop and hippy movements with violent and anarchic imagery, mixing a variety of materials and motifs.

1979

Studio Alchymia founded by Ettore Sottsass and Alessandro Mendini to question the relevance of Modernism and experiment with pattern and colour. 'The Banal Object' exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

1981

Memphis established by Ettore Sottsass to redefine the language of design.

1980s

Post-modernism – designers are inspired by Memphis and similar movements to experiment and rediscover playful elements of design.



for designing 1

Where Memphis came from

Memphis was part of a reaction against the rules of the Modern movement in architecture and design, which considered that products should reflect their function, should be simple and unadorned and should use the materials best suited to the purpose.

Before Memphis

Modernism itself grew out of an early twentieth-century rebellion against elaborately decorated nineteenth-century products, which frequently tried to disguise their functions. After the First World War, a far-sighted architect called Walter Gropius set up the hugely influential Bauhaus art school in Germany, where architecture, art and design students lived and worked with artists and craftsmen with the intention of producing designs for industry.

Teachers at the Bauhaus included the Modernists Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer, who wanted to design for the 'machine age',

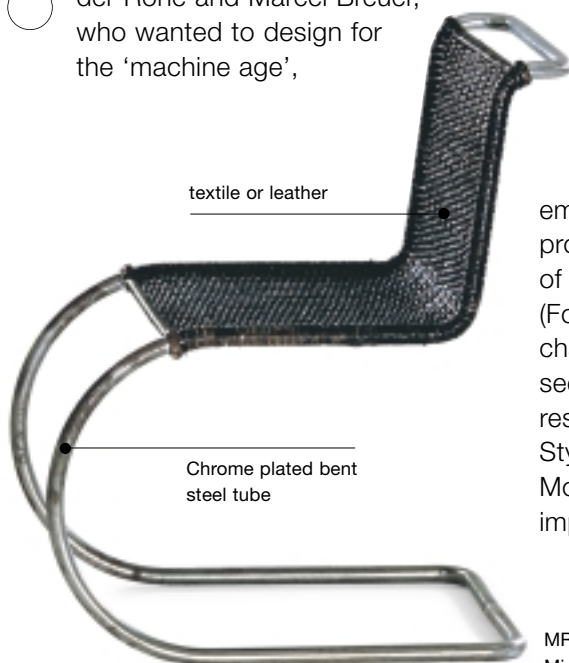


Teapot by Nawn Slutsky, 1924

“Less is more”

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,
Modernist architect and designer

embracing new materials and processes and stripping products of all superfluous decoration. (For Marcel Breuer's cantilevered chair based on these principles, see the Design Museum's Chairs resource pack.) The International Style, which grew out of the Modernist movement, was cool, impersonal and functional.



MR10 chair by Ludwig
Mies van der Rohe, 1927

Buzz words

- Banal** – lacking originality, commonplace.
- Collaborate** – to work with others on a joint project.
- Contemporary** – existing at the same time; following modern ideas or fashion.
- Crude** – not showing care or skill.
- Ethnic** – characteristic of a group of people, linked by race, culture or other factors.
- Kitsch** – over-colourful, tasteless or sentimental art.
- Laminate** – a material made by placing thin layers one on top of another.
- Legacy** – something handed down from one age to another; a gift left in someone's will.
- Machine Age** – the period between the Industrial Revolution and the Knowledge Age, which began with the widespread use of computers in the 1990s.
- Pewter** – a bluish-grey mixture of tin, lead and sometimes other metals; tableware is often made out of pewter.
- Post-modern** – favouring the self-conscious mixing of a wide variety of styles and materials.
- Punk** – a youth movement of the 1970s, rebelling against authority, and especially associated with fast, aggressive music and customised clothes.
- Rigorous** – keeping to strict rules.
- Signature** – a distinctive mark or feature that identifies a person or thing.
- Superfluous** – more than is necessary.
- Typography** – creating and arranging alphabetical characters for printing.

Links ...

Websites:

Alessi:
www.alessi.com

Design Museum:
www.designmuseum.org

Memphis:
www.memphis-milano.it

Marc Newson:
www.marc-newson.com

Books:

Alberto Alessi, *The dream factory: Alessi since 1921*, Könemann, 1998.

Brigitte Fitoussi, *Memphis*, Thames and Hudson, 1998.

Barbara Radice, *Memphis*, Thames and Hudson, 1984.

Barbara Radice, *Ettore Sottsass: a critical biography*, Thames and Hudson, 1993.

The roots of Memphis

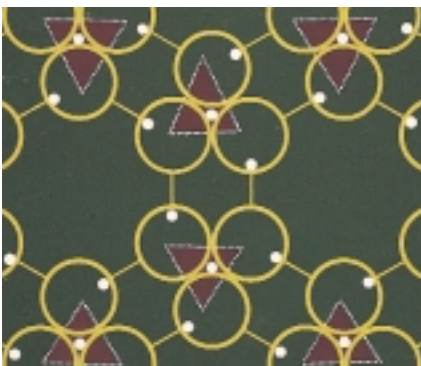
In Memphis designs we recognise many influences, including:

- the Wiener Werkstätte, which was typical of many early twentieth-century organisations of artists and manufacturers working together to improve standards in design



Wiener Werkstätte desk set in mother of pearl and ebony by Josef Hoffman, 1910

- the geometric forms and novel combinations of materials typical of Art Deco
- the designs of the 1950s, such as the Vespa scooter and Olivetti electronic office products
- the colourful, mass-produced kitsch items of popular culture
- the Pop Art era, which challenged the barriers of accepted taste
- the punk movement, whose practitioners combined materials in unexpected ways and made banal and everyday items into art
- the bizarre combinations of costumes and sets in science-fiction films such as the 1979 classic



1950s design: Festival of Britain fabric by W.J. Odell, 1951



Punks, 1970s



Pop art: Jimi Hendrix poster by Michael English and Nigel Waymouth, 1967

Mad Max, which heralded the post-modern movement.

Memphis had a multi-disciplinary approach; that is, most of its members worked in more than one area of design. This attitude can be seen to have its roots in the Renaissance tradition that celebrated people who were accomplished in more than one field of learning. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), for example, was a painter, architect, scientist and inventor. This tradition continued to influence designers and craftsmen in the twentieth century. Ettore Sottsass, the group's leader, designed plastic laminates, textiles, furniture, silverware, glassware and lighting.

Biography: ETTORE SOTTASS

Born 14 September 1917, Innsbruck, Austria.

Education Studied architecture, Turin Polytechnic College, 1935–1939.

Career

1939–1958 Worked as a freelance architect and designer.

1958 Became design advisor at the electrical equipment company Olivetti.

1975 Founding member of the Milan design group Global Tools.

1976 Founding member of design group CDM, also in Milan.

1979 Founding member of design group Studio Alchymia in Milan.

1980 Established the architectural design partnership Sottsass Associati with Aldo Cibic, Matteo Thun and Marco Zanini, later to become Memphis group members.

1981 Left Alchymia and became a founding member of Memphis, with a group of like-minded designers and architects.

1985 Left Memphis at the height of his personal fame and returned to architecture at Sottsass Associati.

1985–2000 Continued to work for Alessi as their most frequently employed designer.

2000 Designed new Milan airport.



Kitsch: Roberts radio Model R50, 1964. Bakelite with fake leopardskin case.

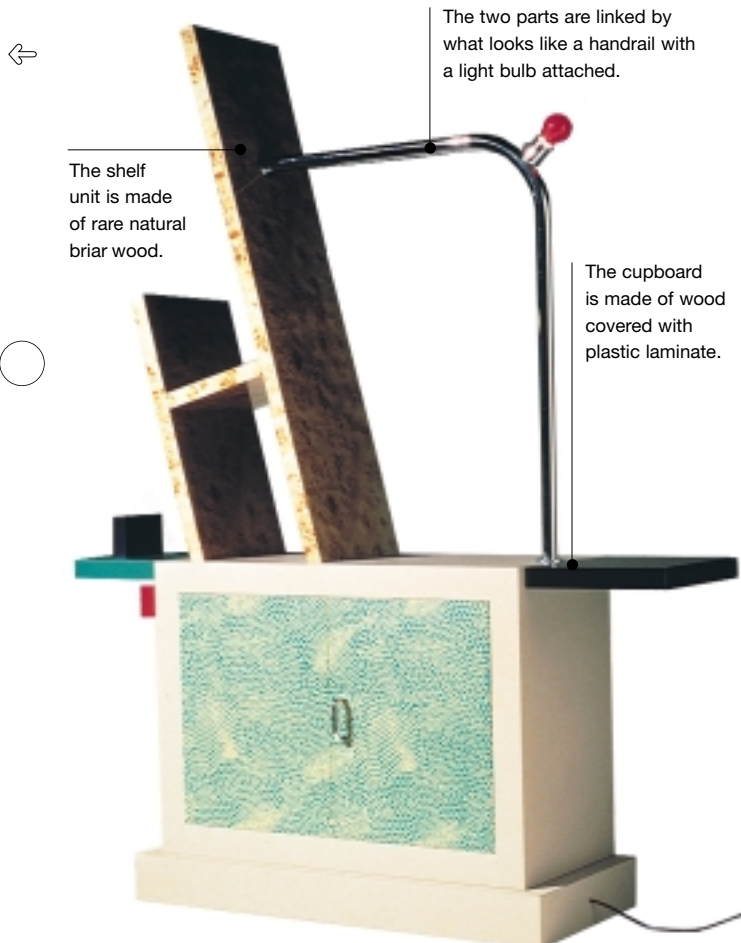


for designing 2

The influence of Memphis can still be felt today

Ettore Sottsass set up the Memphis Group to experiment with design in the way artists do. He wanted to explore new and exciting ways of using materials, and to bring a wealth of historical, cultural and artistic influences, including contemporary references from film, sci-fi and computer games, to design.

See I for innovation for examples showing the range of Memphis' work



Beverly Sideboard by Ettore Sottsass, 1981

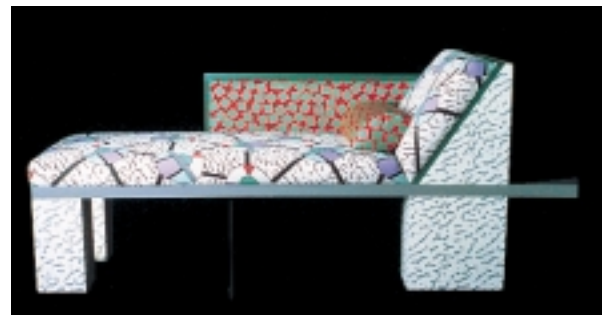
This strange piece of furniture is an example of Memphis' practice of using the rare and the commonplace together.

“Less is a bore”

Robert Venturi, post-modern architect

Case study: Royal Couch

Nathalie du Pasquier, one of the founding members of Memphis, was responsible for many of the distinctive textiles and plastic laminates produced by the group.



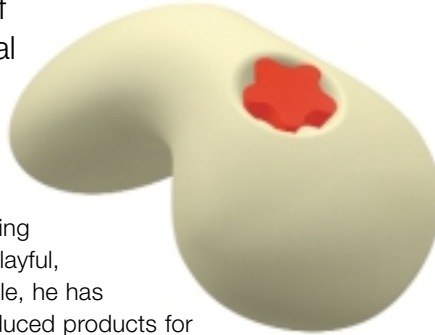
This multi-coloured couch is made from plastic laminate and cotton. The patterns on the plastic – one of Memphis' signature materials – and the fabric covering the main body of the sofa, featuring variations on the same animal print-like pattern, were designed by du Pasquier. Her designs show the influence of, amongst other things, Art Deco, African textiles and 1950s kitsch. In this instance, she collaborated with another member of the group, George J. Sowden, who designed the red-and-green fabric featured on the armrest and cushion.

Case study: Rock Doorstop

This doorstop is the work of Marc Newson, who is typical of the generation of designers who have been influenced by Memphis.

Newson is one of today's most exciting industrial designers. Known for his playful, but technically rigorous, futuristic style, he has designed everything from mass-produced products for Alessi, Nike and Tefal to a long-range jet and a concept car for Ford. He cites his influences as space travel, extreme sports, Italian design and Stanley Kubrick films.

The Rock doorstop was designed in 1997 by Marc Newson for Magis. Bottle-manufacturing technology is used to make a blow-moulded polyethylene container which is filled with water to form the doorstop. The design reminds us of the manufacturing process and is a favourite form which Newson had used previously in the Orgone range of furniture.



“the marketing of Memphis as almost ‘works of art’ seemed incredibly modern”

Marc Newson, industrial designer

Case study: Alessi

Alessi was established in the seventeenth century as a pewter-making factory. After the Second World War, Alessi decided to employ designers from outside the company to design batch-produced articles at affordable prices. These included Memphis designers such as Ettore Sottsass, George J. Sowden and Michael Graves. Other well-known names include Philippe Starck, Frank Gehry and Alessandro Mendini. In true Memphis fashion, Alessi continue to experiment and make design accessible to all.



Philips-Alessi Line kettle by Alessandro Mendini, 1991. The mix of colours and materials shows the influence of Memphis.

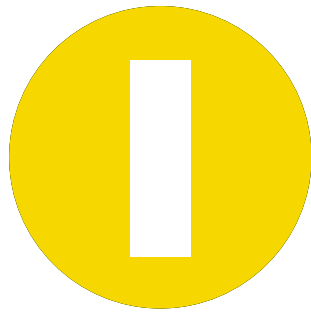
The Memphis legacy

Memphis were not alone in breaking away from the rules of Modernism. The British fashion designer Vivienne Westwood showed her ‘Savages’ collection – based on African and other ethnic garments and fabrics – in 1981, at roughly the same time as Nathalie du Pasquier designed a series of textiles using similar motifs. The Hard Werken design group was experimenting with riotous combinations of imagery, surface decoration and typography. Graphic designers like North American, Gary Panter increasingly favoured crude, hand-drawn designs that were inspired by punk imagery and graffiti.

The long-term influence of Memphis is more difficult to assess. In Britain, as elsewhere in the world, the anarchic legacy of punk could still be detected later in the 1980s in the work of fashion designer John Galiano and graphic designer Neville Brody, among others. Post-modern product design, on the whole, did not adopt Memphis-style surface decoration but there was a new atmosphere of experimentation and playfulness about design. Products of the late 1980s and 90s were notable for their emphasis on form and a healthy disregard for function which could be credited to Memphis.



John Galiano for Christian Dior; haute couture collection Autumn/Winter 1998–99



I for innovation

So what was new about Memphis?

Memphis rejected the principle of functional design and the rules of 'good taste' which had governed design for decades. They saw design as being like fashion, with outrageous styles appearing for a season then disappearing just as quickly. In brief:

- They wanted design to reflect contemporary culture
- They wanted to draw on influences from the past and present and from different cultures
- They wanted to experiment freely with materials, processes, forms, textures and patterns



The original members of the Memphis group, in Masanori Umeda's 'Tawaraya' ring in 1981. Ettore Sottsass (top left), Aldo Cibic, Andrea Branzi, Michele De Lucchi, Marco Zanini, Nathalie du Pasquier, George J. Sowden, Martine Bedin, Matteo Thun.

The birth of Memphis

Memphis was established on the evening of 11 December 1980 during a meeting of designers and architects at the house of the established designer Ettore Sottsass. The group's name was inspired by the title of the Bob Dylan song 'Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again', which was playing during the evening.

This meeting heralded a new beginning: up until that point Italian furniture was mostly neutral in colour and had clean lines; it was considered the epitome of good taste. In complete contrast, Memphis products were colourful, often asymmetrical, multi-patterned and playful.

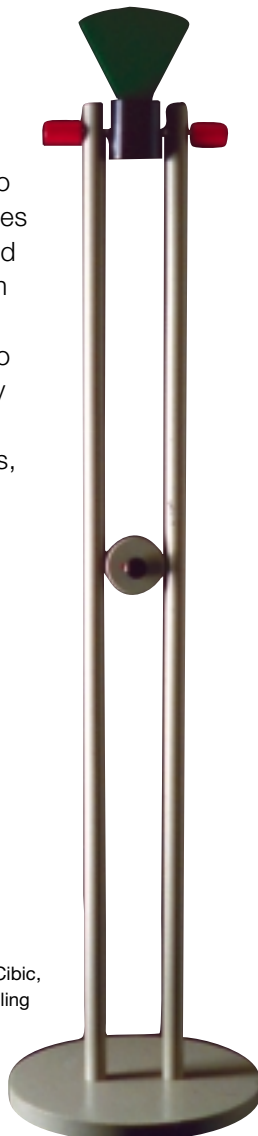
Case study: Super Lamp

Memphis designers were not afraid to use ordinary materials as features of their products. Martine Bedin, an original member of Memphis, used standard components and industrial metal finishes in many of her designs, with surprisingly sophisticated results.

This light can be rolled around the floor on its cheap wheels, which look like parts from a child's construction toy. It is made of fibreglass and rubber and features standard light bulbs which are not covered or disguised. Its semicircular shape is reminiscent of Art Deco objects and the geometric designs of the 1950s.



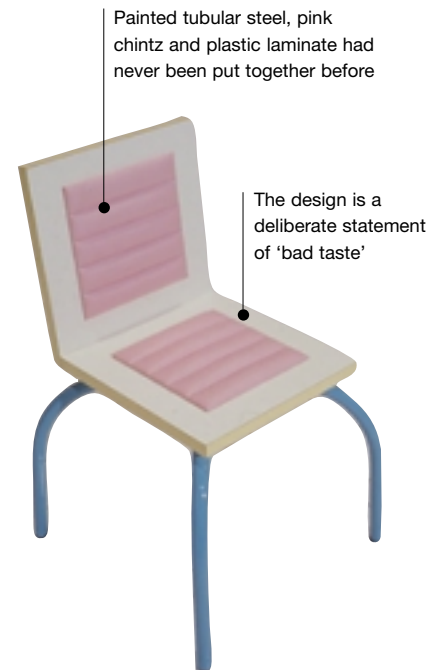
Madison light by Aldo Cibic, 1983. Metal with swivelling halogen light



Case study: Carlton Cabinet

Colourful and playful, the Carlton by Ettore Sottsass is the quintessential Memphis product.

Part of Memphis' first collection of designs from 1981, the Carlton displays the group's signature use of coloured and patterned plastic laminate. What made the piece even more unique was its presentation of this low-cost material in a living room or bedroom setting, rather than in bathrooms and kitchens where it had previously been used.



Riviera Chair by Michele De Lucchi, 1981
This chair uses a typically idiosyncratic combination of materials.

“ Suddenly it was okay to experiment in ways that were iconoclastic and playful – the punk rockers of design – what a release. ”

Colin Burns, industrial designer

Buzz words

Art Deco – design movement of the 1930s which used simple geometric forms and luxury materials.

Asymmetric – not balanced, visually unequal.

Chintz – cotton fabric often associated with old-fashioned 'country cottage' interiors.

Epitome – a typical example.

Fibreglass – a plastic reinforced by threads of glass.

Functional – capable of fulfilling an intended purpose.

Geometric – characterised by simple, regular lines and shapes.

Halogen – a type of light bulb used in low-voltage lamps.

Iconoclastic – destructive of accepted beliefs.

Kitsch – over-colourful, tasteless or sentimental art.

Neutral – colourless; so dull or pale as not to clash with most other colours.

Quintessential – the most typical example of a thing or quality.

Signature – a distinctive mark or feature that identifies a person or thing.



Arizona carpet by Nathalie du Pasquier, 1983

Links ...

Websites:

Design Museum:
www.designmuseum.org

Articles about Memphis:
www.arttech.about.com/
Type 'Memphis' in search

Ettore Sottsass:
www.designaddict.com/collections/designers/designers-base/sottsass.html

The design shows the influence of, amongst other things, Art Deco, African textiles and 1950s kitsch.



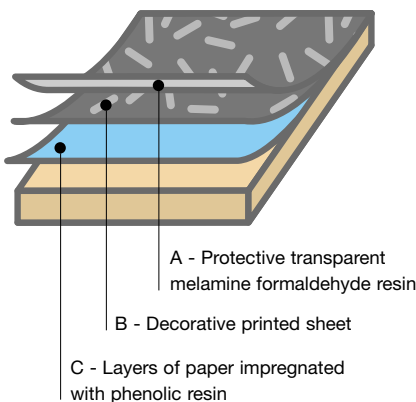
for manufacturing & materials

Mixing craft skills and industrial processes

Memphis ignored ideas of good taste and used materials that had previously been associated with cheap goods or industrial environments, not with high-quality design. Plastic laminate is the most obvious example, but the group's members also used printed glass, zinc-plated and textured sheet metals, neon tubes and coloured light bulbs, and industrial finishes.

Plastic laminate

Plastic laminate is, strictly speaking, the compressed paper material faced with melamine formaldehyde which is glued to plywood, chipboard or MDF to make a cheap, heatproof, hygienic construction board (see Data File for more details). However the name is frequently used to refer to the board itself. This material was and still is associated with cheap, knock-down furniture sold 'flatpacked' by DIY stores. Fake finishes on the plastic surface, such as wood grain and marble, had always aroused the disapproval of design purists, but Memphis used these finishes and 1950s patterns alongside expensive materials such as mother of pearl and rare woods.



How plastic laminate is made

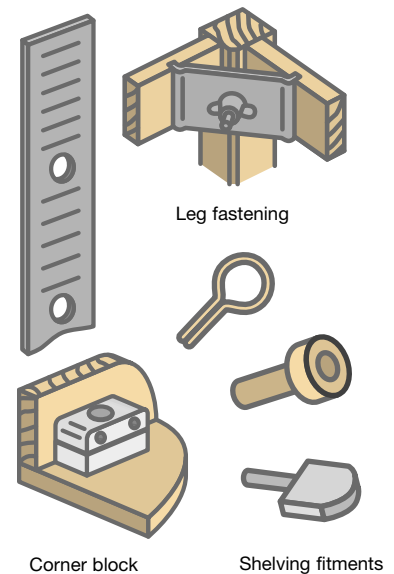
Knock-down fittings

In the past, furniture was usually permanently joined using glued mortise and tenon joints. The key feature of 'knock-down' furniture is that it can be taken apart and put together again using metal or plastic components such as screws, brackets and custom-made fittings. This construction method had formerly been associated with cheap, poorly made goods but the increasing use of man-made boards – which splinter or crumble when cut into detailed shapes – meant that traditional methods could not be used.



Diva mirror by Ettore Sottsass, 1984
Plastic laminate and glass

Manufacturers such as MFI and IKEA spotted an excellent marketing opportunity and developed the idea of flatpack furniture. The customer views the product fully assembled in the showroom, then takes it away in parts in a box to put together at home using the knock-down fittings provided.



There are a huge variety of knock-down fittings to join materials such as MDF and chipboard. A small selection are shown here.

Data FILE: Plastic laminate

→ **What is it?** Layers of kraft paper soaked with phenol and pressed under high pressure and heat. High-pressure laminate (HPL) can be printed with a protective layer of melamine or faced with wood veneers or metal sheet. Often known by the brand name Formica.

→ **Characteristics** Durable, heat-resistant, hygienic, no maintenance, easy to use.

→ **Best-known applications** Furniture and fitted units in domestic kitchens and bathrooms, public buildings, buses and trains.

Memphis and the craft tradition

Like Memphis, the Arts and Crafts movement, founded in England by William Morris in the mid-nineteenth century, aimed to experiment with design and batch-produce artefacts in craft workshops. It had the same broad-minded attitude to influences and worked in a variety of art and craft disciplines, including painting, architecture, textiles, silversmithing, stained glass and furniture making. Unlike Memphis, however, Morris and his group were bitterly opposed to new technology and mass production.



Artichoke embroidered hanging by William Morris, 1877

Memphis designers worked alongside craftsmen to develop ways of turning their unique and often complicated ideas into reality. This could mean using materials and techniques associated with mass production for the batch production of objects. Their ceramics and glassware demonstrate how the skills of the craftsmen were able to realise the strange and complex Memphis designs.

Case study: Vega Glass

Memphis' return to traditional methods of production can be seen clearly in its glassware.

The Vega glass combines tradition and playfulness. It was designed by Marco Zanini and produced in 1982 by Toso Vetri d'Arte, a glassmaking company on the island of Murano, near Venice in Italy. The island is world-famous for its many workshops in which exquisite coloured-glass artefacts are hand made.

Made of blown glass, Vega is colourful and witty: one can use either end to drink out of or as the base. However, these elaborate designs require craftsmen of the highest quality to make them, so they are too costly to be practical.



Buzz words

Component – a part of something more complicated.

Chipboard – a board made from wood chippings bonded together with glue.

Flatpack – a product sold as a kit of parts to be assembled by the customer. The parts are sometimes, but not always, flat.

Knock-down – easily dismantled.

Kraft paper – very strong paper made of wood pulp.

MDF – (medium density fibreboard) a board made from sawdust bonded together with glue.

Mortise and tenon – a way of joining wood, consisting of a wedge (tenon) sticking out of one piece of wood which fits in a slot (mortise) cut in another piece.

Phenol – a hard plastic resin.

Plywood – a strong board consisting of two or more thin layers of wood glued and pressed together, with the direction of the grain alternating.

Zinc – a brittle, bluish-grey metal that becomes covered in a rust-resistant layer in moist air.

Links...

Websites:

Design Museum:
www.designmuseum.org

Formica:
www.formica-europe.com

IKEA:
www.ikea.co.uk

MFI:
www.mfi.co.uk

Books:

Collins Real World Technology, *Working with Materials*, Collins Educational, 1996



for ergonomics

Memphis was an anti-ergonomic design group

Ergonomics has been called 'Human Factors', as it is concerned with the way people fit – body and mind – with others and with their surroundings.

This branch of science has long been of primary concern to industrial designers and architects.

The basic elements of 'good design' as understood by the Modern movement were:

- The product should be fit for its purpose. This made ergonomics an important factor
- There should be no unnecessary detail or decoration
- The most suitable material should be employed in a way which made best use of its unique characteristics. This was often called 'truth to materials'

The Modernists' fondness for clean lines and square shapes sometimes made appliances uncomfortable to use.



Braun electric shaver by Dieter Rams, 1951

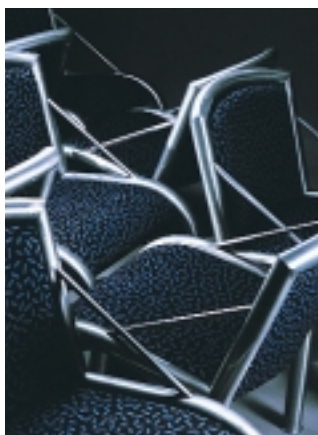
Comfort is a recent concern of designers: in the past it was frequently sacrificed to style.

“Memphis itself is the result of 10 years of anti-design”

Ettore Sottsass, founder of Memphis

Case study: Lucrezia Chair

At first glance, Marco Zanini's armchair may appear to be one of Memphis' more ordinary products: it has four legs, an upholstered seat and is readily recognisable as a chair.



But the designer has succeeded in making aluminium – a metal normally associated with a cool and industrial look – seem almost warm by including a few soft curves. Most radical is the placement of the chair's armrests, which seems to work against the natural position of someone's arms when seated. The armrests were placed diagonally not for reasons of comfort or function but because Zanini thought they looked good that way.



Art Nouveau chair by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1897



Breaking the rules

For Memphis, style and aesthetics were the main concern. They disregarded the Modernist rules which had long been 'set in stone' to make people think again about design. They wanted aesthetics to be as important in design as they are in art.

This couch is part-upholstered and part-marble. This was plainly a decision based on appearance rather than comfort, as a couch with a marble back would be extremely cold and hard.



Agra Couch by Ettore Sottsass and Nathalie du Pasquier, 1982



First Chair by Michele De Lucchi, 1983
The spherical armrests, small backrest and flat seat would make this very sculptural chair extremely uncomfortable.

“Form follows function”

Modernist principle

“Form swallows function”

Fred Baier, British post-modern furniture designer

Case study: Ceramics by Matteo Thun

Matteo Thun's designs are complex sculptures whose function is secondary to their appearance. It is hard to imagine that the Nefertiti teapot (top, left) would be easy to hold or would pour well. The Api ashtray (top, right) is big and cumbersome for its simple function, and the Omega porcelain cup (below, right), which was intended for cocktails, is also extremely large and difficult to grasp. However, they are amusing and challenging and draw on a number of influences such as kitsch and ancient Egyptian forms. The Design Museum Innovation resource pack gives examples of hand-held products designed according to ergonomic principles.



Buzz words

- Aesthetics** – principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty.
- Aluminium** – a lightweight silver-coloured metal that resists rust and discolouration and can be shaped without breaking.
- Modernism** – a movement favouring design based on function, without unnecessary decoration.
- Unique** – the only one of a particular type.

Links ...

Websites:

Design Museum:
www.designmuseum.org
Exploring ergonomic design:
www.brunel.ac.uk/research/exploring
www.ergonomics.org.uk
www.jwpit.co.uk



for handling collection

Create your own Design Museum

The development of a variety of handling collections that enable product evaluation and stimulate inspiration is of enormous value. Product analysis can be a vehicle for the discussion of many issues in the classroom: the research and design of like products, inspiration and creativity, evaluation and the need for modification. It is also an excellent way of increasing knowledge of materials, manufacturing techniques and function.

Creating a Memphis handling collection

This should comprise cheap or easily obtainable products that can be used by students in the classroom. Memphis products are still being made today but they are expensive. An alternative is to collect printed materials and products which reflect the influence or attitudes of Memphis. They could demonstrate a playful and irreverent approach to design

Printed materials

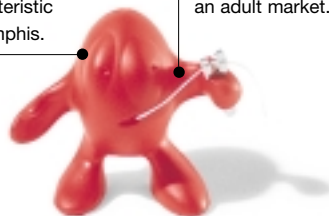
- Design Museum posters (including 'Memphis', 'The Modern Movement', 'Toasters', 'Radios' and 'Verner Panton') available on request from the Design Museum
- Memphis and Alessi catalogues – see *Links for website addresses*
- Alberto Alessi's book – see *Links*
- Other design magazines e.g. *Wallpaper*, *Blueprint*
- Newspaper supplements

Products

- Otto dental floss dispenser by Stefano Pirovano for Alessi
- Bottle openers – Stavros by Marc Newson for Alessi; Diabolix (Little Devil) by Biagio Cisotti for Alessi; Boo and Pac stainless steel bottle openers By Matt Jones for Special EFX
- Soundtrack CD holder by Ron Arad for Alessi
- Dr Kiss toothbrush by Philippe Starck for Alessi
- Dr Skud fly swat by Philippe Starck for Alessi
- Egg Cup by Inflate
- Light by 2pm

The playful arrangement of parts to make products look like animals, people and faces is another characteristic of Memphis.

Many contemporary designers use unashamedly 'cute' images targeted at an adult market.

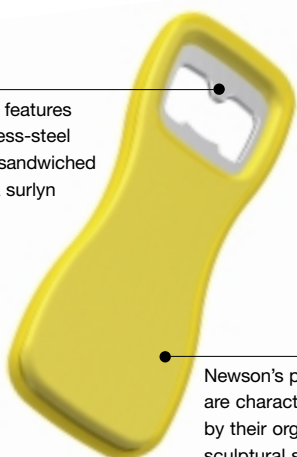


Otto dental floss dispenser by Stefano Pirovano for Alessi, 1998

(for example products by Stefano Pirovano); or an enthusiasm for style and sculptural beauty at the expense of function (Philippe Starck); or the use of cheap mass-production materials and processes to produce high-quality items (Marc Newson).

Alessi produce many small, inexpensive objects which show the influence of Memphis. The items shown in the case studies and the product list on this sheet retail for under £15 and are available by mail order from the Design Museum Shop.

Stavros features a stainless-steel opener sandwiched within a surlyn handle.



Newson's products are characterised by their organic sculptural shapes and their nursery colours.

Stavros bottle opener by Marc Newson, 1987



Diabolix (Little Devil) bottle opener by Biagio Cisotti for Alessi, 1994

Case study: Dr Skud Fly Swat

This fly swat is typical of Philippe Starck's designs, combining humour with aesthetics.

The notion of giving the humble fly swat an air of importance by making it into a free-standing sculpture reminds us of the Memphis group's highly elaborate ceramic and glassware. Unusually for contemporary product design, it also features surface decoration – another echo of Memphis. Many of Starck's designs place form before function, notably his 'Hot Bertaa' kettle, which has become a design classic despite its many practical drawbacks (see the Design Museum's Innovation resource pack).



Buzz words

Aesthetics – principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty.
Analysis – a detailed examination; a method to work out how individual parts of a thing or idea relate to the whole.
Evaluate – to judge or set the worth of something.
Irreverent – not taking something seriously, disrespectful.
Mass-production – continuous production which may run into millions of items. The high initial cost of complicated tools and moulds is offset by the number of identical products which can be made.
Organic – relating to animals and plants; influenced by their actions or forms.
Sculptural – having the qualities of a sculpture.
Stimulate – to provoke or increase (a sense, an activity, etc.).
Surlyn – a rigid translucent (partially see-through) thermoplastic.

Using a Memphis handling collection

Mystery products

Make a selection of interesting contemporary products whose function is not immediately apparent. Another group of conventional objects with the same functions would be useful.

1. In pairs, take a few minutes to guess what each product is for.
2. Choose a product that interests you and test it, if possible. How well does it work? Is it better or worse than a conventional product?
3. Comment on the product under the following headings:

- Function
- Materials
- Manufacturing processes
- Ergonomics
- Style and aesthetics

4. Which product comes out best? State your reasons.

Product analysis

1. Choose a Memphis product featured in this pack which appeals to you and sketch it.
2. List the characteristics which make it different from ordinary products with the same function.
3. Looking at your list, choose a product from your Memphis handling collection which has most of those characteristics.
4. Sketch your chosen product, marking its characteristics on the drawing in the form of notes.

Links...

Websites:

Alessi:
www.alessi.com
 Design Museum:
www.designmuseum.org
 Memphis:
www.memphis-milano.it
 Marc Newson:
www.marc-newson.com

Books:

Alberto Alessi, *The dream factory: Alessi since 1921*, Könemann, 1998.



for activities

Getting into the Memphis mindset

A Activity 1 – Key Stage 3 Animal magic

Look at the picture of the Tahiti light.
What animal does it remind you of?

1. Find a picture of an animal. It can be a drawing, a photograph or a cartoon.
2. Draw the animal, changing each part into a geometric shape. Use both 2D and 3D shapes, e.g. squares and cubes, circles and cylinders, strips and tubes, triangles and pyramids.
3. Model your animal using card, paper, wood and foam.



Tahiti light by
Ettore Sottsass, 1981

A Activity 2 – Key Stages 3/4 Jazz it up!

Many Memphis products use patterns on plastic laminate and fabric. Sometimes the patterns match and sometimes they contrast. Look at the D for designing sheets for examples.

1. On a separate sheet make a collage of patterned materials. You can use fabric, wrapping paper, wallpaper, magazine cuttings and computer printouts. Cut the materials into random, simple shapes and stick them down so that they overlap and there are no gaps.
2. Make a cardboard frame the size of a photographic slide (35mm x 25mm inside measurement). You can staple two 'L' shapes together to get the right size.
3. Look at your collage through the frame. Draw three parts of the collage where the meeting of the patterns works well.
4. Design a piece of furniture using the combinations of patterns you have created.

A Activity 3 – Key Stage 4 Getting it together

Memphis designers used familiar shapes and materials combined in original ways. Look at the Beverly Sideboard on the D for designing sheet. The crooked shelf – supported by what looks like a handrail with a bulb attached – challenges our ideas of what a storage unit should be.

This activity is for groups of four.

1. Each person in the group should take 15 minutes to design a different product for use in the home. It could be a light, a candlestick holder, a stereo, cutlery, a telephone...
2. Now combine the designs to make one outrageous product in the style of Memphis.
3. Present your idea to the class.

A Activity 4 – Key Stages 3/4 Joined-up design

Memphis designers also liked using contrasting materials. They combined plastics, metal, wood, textiles and glass in interesting and original ways. To do this they had to have a good working knowledge of materials and how to join them.

1. On the grid below, draw symbols to show how to join the different materials to each other (e.g. draw a screwdriver to show that you might screw metal to wood). If you are suggesting glue, you must say what kind it is and call it by its correct name – e.g. contact adhesive, PVA, epoxy resin – not a brand name.

Plastic laminate is an exception; it is wood (chipboard or MDF) covered with a thermosetting plastic called melamine formaldehyde. How would you join it to itself and other materials? What other exceptions can you think of?

2. Produce your own grid for materials that cannot be classified easily.

3. Now review your design from Activity 1 or 2. Show precisely the method to use to make each joint between materials, using diagrams and notes.

	plastic	wood	metal	textile	glass
plastic					
wood					
metal					
textile					
glass					

Buzz words

Chipboard – a board made from wood chippings bonded together with glue.

Collage – an image made by gluing a variety of materials on to a ground.

Contrast – to make obvious the differences between unlike things.

Culture – the range of activities and ideas shared by a particular group of people at a particular time (often relating just to the arts).

Era – a period of time with a distinctive character.

Geometric – characterised by simple, regular lines and shapes.

Laminate – material made by placing thin layers one on top of another.

MDF (medium density fibreboard) – a board made from sawdust bonded together with glue.

Mindset – a distinctive way of thinking.

Random – with no set order, haphazard.

Thermosetting plastic – plastics like phenol, urea and melamine formaldehyde, which are formed by heat and pressure (compression moulding) and cannot be re-formed. When overheated they burn. They are used for heat-resisting applications like worktop surfaces and saucepan handles.

A Activity 5 – A/AS level Past and present

Memphis designers were skilled at combining influences from different cultures and eras in the same product.

1. Investigate a past movement in design and an aspect of modern culture. Produce a mood board, report or presentation for each.

2. Combine the two elements in an innovative design using the material of your choice.