

# FRAME

Why opulence  
has a new look

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The Great Indoors

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# The Lap of Luxury

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Colani demonstrates with great aplomb how to use his Meditation chair (1973): 'Do this every day; you'll never have back problems.' When asked whether he uses the chair daily, he replies, 'I don't need to.'

Luigi Colani

Talk

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# Captain Colani

In the fourth in a series of talks with designers who've earned their spurs, Luigi Colani discusses the state of design worldwide in a marathon performance.

Words Katya Tylevich  
Photos Alexei Tylevich

Supporting his signature white attire and puffing on a cigar, Professor Luigi Colani orders a round of cappuccinos for us, which grow cold as the conversation grows more heated. That's day one of our 'blah-blah-blah', as Colani calls it. We sit in the large outdoor patio of the hotel where Colani is staying, some 25 minutes northwest of Milan's city centre and some 500 m from Colani's Milanese studio. I feel as if I'm in a performance-art piece: Colani and Tylevich in a competition of endurance – who will break from this marathon conversation first? 'I could talk for many more hours,' Colani tells me. 'You'll be tired before I am.'

Around us, the entrance patio is lined with Colani-designed automobiles: biomorphic creatures that look fast even though they're standing still; they make the cabbie who drops us off at the hotel whistle in amazement. Cabbie should get a load of Colani's aircraft designs and prototypes of flying boats, or his loudspeakers that nod to contours of the inner ear, or his ergonomic house-painting tools that yield to the shape of the human hand. He should see Bio-City, Colani's urban concept in the form of a human body. *Mamma mia!* – to quote Colani, who claims the two-word exclamation is the extent of his Italian vocabulary. Born in Berlin in 1928, he has lived and worked in numerous corners of the

world, most recently in China, and has an opinion about the state of design in all of them.

Day two: Colani picks us up in a two-door Jaguar and rockets to his studio, where more coffee grows cold as Colani shows me his architectural renderings, the book ('to end all books about design') he's working on, and his sketches for a car ('to end all motor cars'). Here, we are surrounded by Colani chairs; Colani cups, saucers and teapots; 20 statues of naked Olympic athletes, which Colani designed for the Olympics in Beijing; chairs meant to ply the human figure into a meditative state; and, most importantly, Colani's enormous personality. It's no wonder the man's been made into an action figure.

**You've been working in China for the past several years. I didn't expect to find you in Milan.**

I never wanted to come here. Never. Why should I – Colani – come to Italy? They have good designers here already! But they called like mad for Colani. My father is from the Italian part of Switzerland, and I have an Italian name. They want Italian-sounding names here. [Laughs.] I don't speak a word of Italian. This guy – a great Colani fan – had visited me many times. We spoke about a sort of hub for this design-minded city. I gradually made the decision to

come and stay here. And I like it. It is a wonderful country, Italy. Of course, I still have to do business in China. I spend maybe half the year there, and the rest in Moscow, Milano, South America.

**While you were working in China, many of the interviews you gave seemed quite negative about design in Europe and the United States. You found it conservative, compared with what was happening in China.**

I'm of the generation that was very fond of American design in the '50s and '60s. It was the absolute top of the world. Nobody could even think of being half as good as American designers. And those dream cars that came out of their studios! But things fluctuate: what goes up goes down. Even the Japanese, who were very good when I was working with them 20 years ago, have gone blub, blub, blub, down. They have one car recall after another; they have trouble all over the place. *Mamma mia!*

But, yes, I've been very negative about recent American design. America needs a lot of help. All they're doing at the moment is repairing the bad things they've done. The auto-industry bosses are rotten conservatives. Nothing's coming from General Motors. Nothing's coming from Ford. ...

## 'Things fluctuate: what goes up goes down'

A collection of Colani's seating designs includes the infamous Garden Chair, designed in 1967 (foreground).





... Nothing's coming from Chrysler. And so on. It's an enormous pity.

**Is there any way to speak about design in a global sense? Can you pinpoint one or more common themes, or is the subject of design geographically fragmented?**

That's a very complicated question. Today, I see no place in the world where design is at home. Italy is down. Germany was never anything to begin with: Germans are good technicians, but not good designers – and I'll tell you why later. The Scandinavian countries have very good designers, but they are too tranquil. Things are shifting now in terms of money as well. Asia is coming on strong, sometimes too strong. Money, money, money, money, money. Asians were hungry. They had nothing at all. Now they have something, and they want more of it.

**You're painting a very grim picture.**

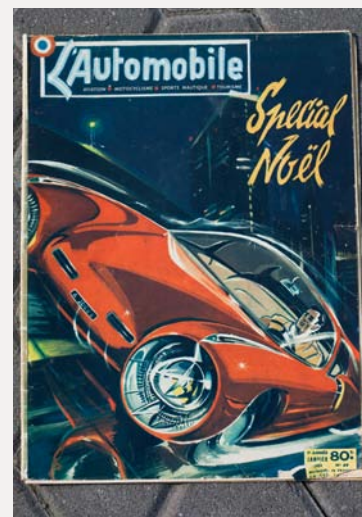
It's not grim. We haven't even started talking yet. Design is shifting in the underground. There is no country in the world that can call itself number one – not Italy, not any place. Design is nowhere today. Nowhere. Having said that, I admit that design is wherever an individual has the guts to step away from the crowd and say: I can do it better.

And there are many, many young people – unknown designers – around the world doing just that. They are very good, very promising, yet having their ideas killed by teachers and professors, of course. Terrific young people with super ideas: in Albania, in Greece, in Africa. The world is utterly positive. Is that clear? There are some dirty forces behind the curtain doing evil things, but the world is utterly positive. Next question.

[Colani looks at the Canon 5D camera my brother, Alexei, is using to take photos of him.] What type of camera is that? Canon? That's a Colani design from 25 years ago. Normally, a designer designs for the present. I design things for tomorrow that nobody wants today. They want them 25 years later. Actually, I do design for today. It's the CEOs who don't accept the ideas when they first see them. They are too anxious and too stupid. So I wait. I am like a woman. I have patience. Endless patience.

**It sounds remarkably frustrating.**

Do I look frustrated? I am very happy. Guys like me would have been burned at the stake in previous ages. They would have killed me, because I don't think like normal people. Drink your coffee – if you can, that is, out of *that* cup. Look at the stupid thing. It's a miracle you can put your finger through the handle.



At the start of his career, Colani provided illustrations for automobile magazines.

You have to be careful not to let it slip. Now if you were drinking out of a Colani cup, that would never happen.

See, a good designer has to consider comfort. The bed in which I lie, the seat on which I sit, the shoes or trousers I wear – all have to be comfortable. When I notice that the need for comfort is not satisfied, the brain starts

The entrance of the ATAhôtel Expo Fiera is festooned with Colani cars.

**'The job of a designer is a very political one'**





Fitted with a BMW engine, the Small Hovercraft (1998, mock-up) – a two- to four-seater AVC (air-cushion vehicle) – is designed to travel at speeds of up to 150 km/h.

working. This is design, and nothing more. I am still doing the same things I did 40 or 50 years ago. I haven't changed, because I know what is good for human use.

**Maybe you haven't changed in 50 years, but surely the environment in which you work has changed.**



Truck based on a DAF chassis. In *Colani: The Complete Oeuvre: The Book Accompanying the Exhibition*, the author questions why Colani's ideas, which he propagated for 30 years, were never adopted by the automobile industry.

No. Manufacturers are as conservative as they were when I started: 'our clientele doesn't want this', or 'this is too advanced', or 'make it a bit different'. That's when I say, no thank you. Bye, bye. I feel lucky that I make enough money to be able to pay for the things I create. I earned this money so that I could fulfil my dreams. And if people reject what I design, I don't care. They will discover it in time.

**Do you work for yourself?**

Not at all. I work for the people. My language is understood in the real world, even if it is not understood by CEOs. Look, I work alongside my employees. I talk to them. I come from a simple family of normal, loving parents, nice brothers and sisters. Lots of laughter. Not too much money, but very happy. I haven't changed. I was lucky to be brought up in a clear-cut and sober way. I don't depend on

anybody. Today, only men like me can tell the truth. Others can't, because their bosses will immediately sack them.

**On the public level, though – apart from CEOs – has public understanding of design changed?**

Yes. Enormously. People are critical. They know how badly they are treated by those at the top. Humans today are victim to a thin layer of rich people and the government, so the job of a designer is a very political one. Think about what happens if I give a country a super design: I am automatically killing companies in other countries with my good design. Imagine that one company builds my truck, which consumes 40 per cent less fuel. Other companies wouldn't be able to sell even one car of a different design. I have to be a very political thinker.

**Do you still have a studio in Berlin?**

No. I've left Germany altogether. Finished. And I'll tell you why. Because Germany is a dirty dictatorship of minimalism that has falsified the original Bauhaus testament drawn up by Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky, and Mies van der Rohe.

After World War II, German designers skipped the pyramid, skipped the circle and put colour away. Bauhaus today is steel, glass, concrete, wood and square. This represents my struggle. I began as a sculptor, and art is integral to my work. But Germans fight against art and against any soft, humanizing touch in design, so I'm their biggest, baddest enemy. I attack Bauhaus: here in Milano, in Russia and in South America. We are working as a neo-Bauhaus. ...





**'I design things for tomorrow that nobody wants today'**

A model aeroplane in Colani's studio. The designer's father – whom Colani describes as 'a super-technician, super-artist, sculptor and painter' – greatly influenced his career.

... Germany threw me out. I'm nothing in Germany, nothing at all, because I told them they are wrong. Those dirty professors fight Colani whenever they can. Look at the bathtubs of today, and the toilets and the bidets and the washbasins. [Sketches squares on a napkin.] I could kill those designers. Inhuman things. Impossible.

The world is round; our blue planet is round. Why work against it? Nature is so wonderful and so much older than this thing we call 'humanity'. We are one of the youngest specimens on the planet, yet we have done the worst things to it. Look at Fukushima, eh? Look at Chernobyl.

#### Are you disappointed in humans?

Not in the simple ones, the common people. I love them. But the ones up top – they didn't get there through knowledge. They got there by sticking their elbows out and pushing others out of the way.

#### When we spoke earlier, you told me your father was a stage designer for film. Do you think he influenced you in any way?

Oh, enormously. He was much better than I am. He was enormous. A super-technician, a super-artist, sculptor and painter. He was sensational. I learned so much from him. I'm the only kid in the world that ran straight home from school. I didn't want to play. I ran home because my father was there, working on small models of stages.

#### What kinds of films did he work on?

Many old famous German films of the '30s, '40s and '50s. The last film he made was with Leni Riefenstahl, *Tiefland*, a famous opera. He made all the designs for the original version of *Titanic*. We still have a box

of cigars from that film – made out of paper. Beautiful! As a kid, I got to be in some of the films. I remember having to eat a big slice of bread with marmalade on it. I always looked at the camera. I can still hear the stage whispers. *Don't look at the camera!*

#### So your first profession was actor.

I was an actor – a small George Clooney!

#### Was that when you started wanting to create things?

No, I started working very early with modelling clay. At my house, we had all the things a graphic designer needs. And I was always inclined to see things in a natural way. When I was a child, I spent lots of time at the zoo, looking at lions, birds, insects – anything that moved. When I saw seals and sharks underwater – *mamma mia!* – those incredible shapes, especially compared with our stupid shapes. [Laughs.] Unbeatable. You can't beat nature. —



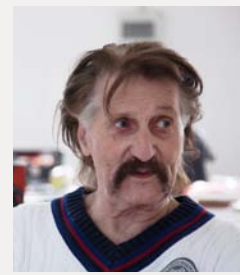
Frustrated with 'stupid' cups and saucers, Colani designed his own. He also developed similarly eccentric egg cups (right).

**'I am like a woman.  
I have patience.  
Endless patience'**



One of 20 statues of nude Olympians that Colani designed for the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games.

Colani talks shop in his showroom-esque studio in Milan.



## Luigi Colani

- 1928** Born in Berlin
- 1946** Studies sculpture at the Akademie der Künste Berlin
- 1948** Studies aerodynamics at the Sorbonne in Paris
- 1954** Starts designing for Fiat
- 1957** Designs Colani Alfa sports car
- 1959** Designs BMW 700 sports car
- 1965** Designs furniture for Asko, Fritz Hanzen, Cor, Kusch+Co
- 1973** Establishes Colani Design Center Japan
- 1978** Presents revolutionary truck, aircraft, car and ship studies
- 1982** Relocates to Japan
- 1983** Professor in Tokyo
- 1986** Designs Canon T-90; founds Colani Design Bern, Switzerland
- 1988** Opens offices in Toulouse and Bremen; professor h.c. at Hochschule für Gestaltung, Bremen
- 1989** Establishes Colani Trading AG in Zürich
- 1991** Sets world record with Colani Ferrari at Bonneville Speedway in Utah
- 1995** Opens new head office of Colani's design works in Cologne; is awarded professorship at Tongji University, Shanghai
- 1996** Presents Bio-City, an architecture concept for Shanghai
- 1997** Designs new piano for Schimmel
- 1998** Starts bank-terminal design project
- 2001** Designs new microscope and camera at Colani Shanghai office
- 2002** Spitzer-Silo presents new Colani truck at IAA-Hannover, Germany
- 2003** Designs TT 62 plane for HPA
- 2006** Completes Colani Supertruck
- 2008** Opens design studio in Beihai, China
- 2010** Opens studio in Milan, Italy
- 2011** Works from studios in China, Italy, Russia and South America