

The Magazine for
New Design Culture,
Creative Visionaries,
Eco Entrepreneurs &
Purpose Driven Economy

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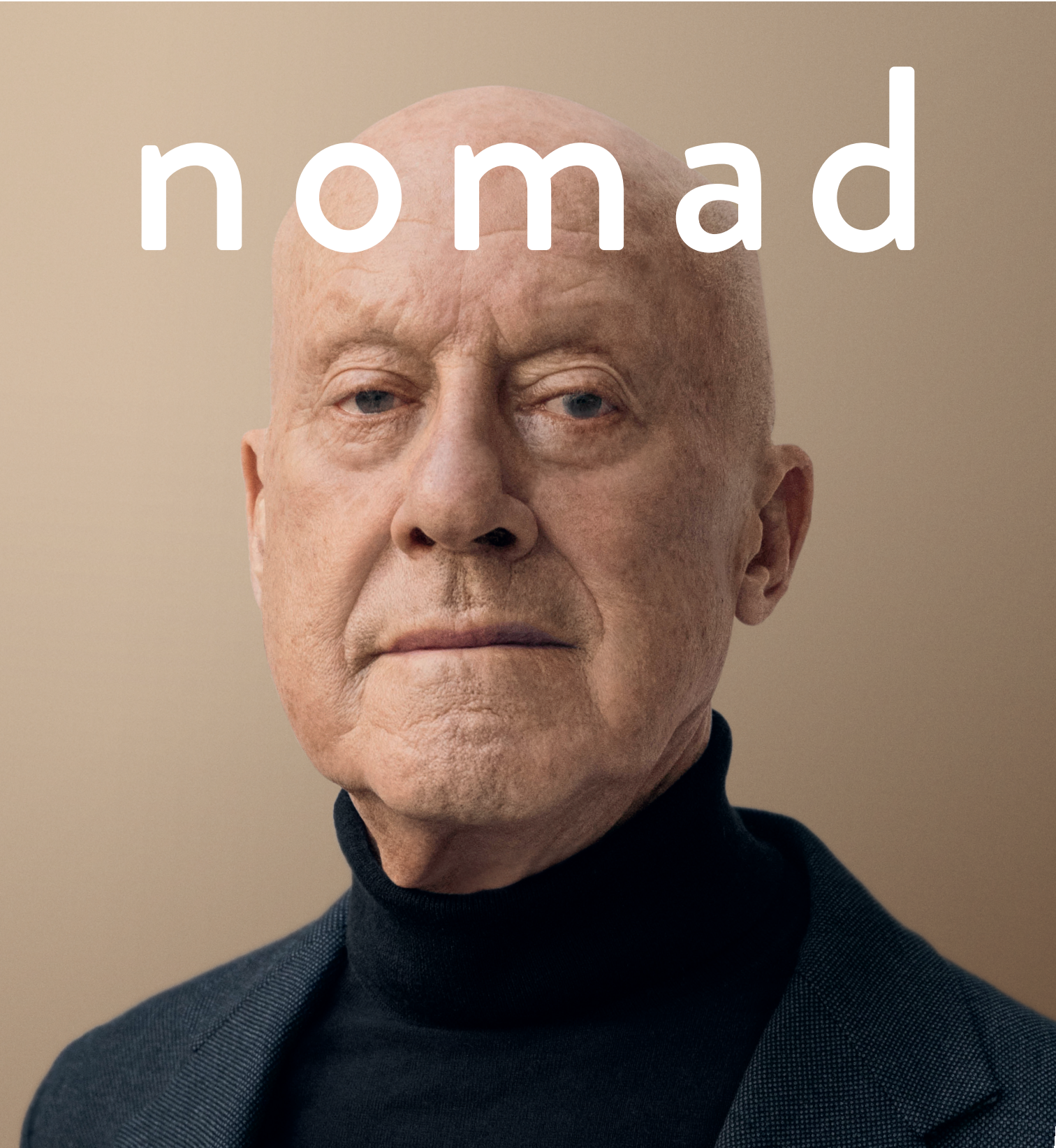
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A close-up portrait of Lord Norman Foster, an elderly man with a bald head and blue eyes, wearing a dark turtleneck sweater. The portrait is centered and occupies the lower two-thirds of the cover.

PHOTOS *by* MATTHIAS ZIEGLER
WORDS *by* OLIVER HERWIG

MATTEO THUN

Matteo Thun is convinced that the world will be changed not by grand gestures, but by the weight of details. A conversation about design.



ARCHITECTURE AND FLYING ARE (UN-)RELATED

Do you experience moments
of nostalgia?

M
T

I have only very occasionally felt I had to turn round and look at where I have come from. The main thing is never to look back with nostalgia; always look forward. That signals optimism about the future, and the belief that tomorrow will be better than today.

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We'd still like to ask you about the past, though. You studied archi-

tecture in Florence and only went
to Milan later. What took you to
Florence?

M
T

I was studying civil engineering, and found it incredibly frustrating because I wanted to be a racing driver. It didn't work out, but at least I got to drive around the racetrack north of Florence. One Thursday after training I went into the city, happened to park in front of the Architecture Faculty and bumped into Professor Leonardo Savioli. He impressed me so much that I asked him straight away whether I could come and

join his course. I promptly moved
to Florence and took the leap from
engineering to architecture.

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And your next leap was ...

M
T

... to Adolfo Natalini, the founder
of Superstudio and a superstar
himself. He was a proponent of the
most radical form of architecture:
anti-architecture, the rejection of
architecture. Natalini received me
and told me there was no point in
finishing my studies because there
wasn't a career for me any more;
architecture was finished.

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How did you react?

M
T

Well, what was I supposed to do?
All I needed was a PhD. Then he
told me I would be better off be-
coming a footballer, but I replied,
*No, I'm from South Tyrol, and we
don't play football there because
the ball always ends up down in
the valley.*

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You refused to give up.

M
T

No, I told him I was passionate
about flying.

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And what did Adolfo Natalini
say to that?

M
T

He advised me to build an airfoil
and demonstrate that it worked.
Like Leonardo da Vinci 500 years
earlier, when he wrote that his fly-
ing machine would cast a shadow
over the towers of Florence. So I
hung my airfoil up in the universi-
ty auditorium to a soundtrack of
Pink Floyd, and was certain I would
be thrown out.

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You played *The Dark Side of the
Moon* as a provocation?

M
T

Yes. The jury, made up of a single
engineer amid a crowd of archi-
tects, said *OK, that's it, enough.*

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But you still completed your
studies with the highest possible
mark.

M
T

Yes, 110. The highest a doctorate
could go. My saviour was Giovan-
ni Klaus Koenig, an engineer who
became famous as a designer of
rail and light rail vehicles for Mi-
lan. He knew how much time and
effort I had spent on my airfoil in
the wind tunnel, trying to find the
right angle that would enable the
thing to fly. All that work was cap-
tured in a film clip, a pretty bad
Super 8 film. Koenig won the jury
over in half an hour and told them,
*Don't throw him out, give him a
summa cum laude!* But the result
was still a disaster.

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Why a disaster?

M
T

Nobody wanted me as an archi-
tect, because I didn't know any-
thing. When people asked me
what I could do, I said, *Well, I can
fly.* But architecture and flying are
fairly unrelated.

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Did you take your provocative de-
sign potential along with you to
Memphis?

M
T

I ran into Ettore Sottsass com-
pletely by chance in Los Angeles,
and he said, *Come and visit me
when you're in Milan.* So I did.

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How did you see Memphis?

M
T

Memphis was a gymnastic exercise
at the outer limits of feasibility.

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And why did it chime with you?

M
T

It chimed with me because the
Bauhaus was too grey.

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You went on to prove that you
were a master of both: ultimate
provocateur with Memphis, and
Creative Director at Swatch.



*A born provocateur, the architect is a fount of pithy statements and bons mots, like those to be found in his new book *STORIES*, accompanied by a wicked grin. But in discussions, Thun is wholly present, associating ideas at quicksilver speed. His impression of approachability is tempered by a courteous distance. Many of his responses provide a glimpse of a classical education, an awareness that his designs are not merely for the moment, but for long into the future. Thun is enthralled by traditional craftsmanship. He has often taken the opportunity to stress the enormous influence of Ettore Sottsass' holistic philosophy on his work. Always radically critical, Sottsass remained a mentor and a genius for his South Tyrolean protégé. Like Sottsass, Thun never missed a chance to turn tasks on their heads and design everyday objects that bring a smile to life — like his espresso cup for Meinl, reminiscent of an inverted fez in a playful reflection on the brand's logo.*

M
T

That was also a provocation, but not a great one from today's perspective.

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Why?

M
T

One watch is enough. Nobody needs ten of them. It's only about fomenting consumption, and that's not smart from our perspective today. And it was also made of plastic.

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Well, at least you don't disparage it by calling it *cheap*. What's your relationship with plastic as a material?

M
T

A negative one. The plastics industry is committing the ultimate in greenwashing. You see these espresso cups here? We could produce them from plastic for a fraction of the price, but then they would have no permanence, no longevity. They'd become a disposable product.

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You coined the term *ZERO Design* for pared-back pieces like this cup here.

M
T

Yes, that's ZERO Design too. No handle. You don't need a handle, but then the cup shouldn't be any hotter than 90 degrees. That's why it has that rounded shape. There's an air-filled gap behind those curves, and air is a good insulator.

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You're now focusing on traditional materials, wood and clay. That raises the question: has Modernism taken a wrong turn and worked against nature and against us humans?

M
T

I think the consumerism of the 1980s was wrong. Most of the land-fill sites around the world aren't necessary.

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But they carry on growing, all over the world ...

M
T

They're growing in the Global South, but we're starting to reduce them.

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Do you collect anything?

M
T

No. I don't want to collect anything. I don't want any possessions, either.

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Have you always felt that way?

M
T

Yes.

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Even when you still wanted to be a racing driver?

M
T

I haven't owned a car since 2004.

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How did that happen?

M
T

I couldn't look myself in the eye any more, and I didn't want to become a greenwasher.

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There's a nice story about Frank Lloyd Wright, that he dismantled the rear view mirror in his car because he only wanted to look ahead into the future, not behind him into the past. Of course, the future looked rather different back then. What can the young generation of today do, the young designers that don't want to design nothing at all?

M
T

I think that we ultimately have to go back to our hands and work with our hands. Handcrafts will win in the end.

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At the moment, the gulf between designers and manufactured products seems to be growing as CNC machine tools are hooked up to artificial intelligence, which churns out texts and generates floods of images. Can you identify a backlash yet?

M
T

Oh yes, definitely. The backlash is already in full swing.



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Is there enough work for hands to do in our collaboratively organised, highly diversified society?

M
T
There's enough work for hands. The question is whether we can afford hand-crafted production in the transitional phase, because series production is still cheaper.

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Is it that we don't want to afford it, or that we can't, because part of the problem is about fulfilling the needs of eight billion people?

M
T
I can't give any definitive answer to that question, but I'd like to believe we can manage it. Aesthetic and technical longevity have to go hand in hand. The aesthetic longevity of, say, a brick building is far more credible and attractive than a brutalist cement building. So many prefabricated concrete buildings have already been demolished because they simply have no longevity, neither technical nor aesthetic.

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What would your alternative be?

M
T
Prefabricated wooden buildings.

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Is there enough wood in the world?

M
T
There's more than enough wood. We have around 40 per cent surplus wood in Germany alone. So we could certainly say: starting from tomorrow, we'll build everything in wood. We architects have to stop claiming any kind of victory over nature. We'll never be able to fight nature and win. Nature always wins.

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How did you move from being a racing driver to a proponent of sustainability?

M
T
By always looking forward and rejecting every tinge of nostalgia (*laughs*). Of course, tradition always goes hand in hand with the benefits of digital technology, of artificial intelligence. But they're only ever crutches, temporary aids. They're not solutions.

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In a talk you gave last year, you stressed the principle of 'learning from the master', the idea that people only truly learn in direct contact with other people.

M
T
I experienced it myself as a student of Ettore Sottsass. He was my role model, my idol. And then I also had the fantastic opportunity to learn from him, to hold the pencil.

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What should I understand by that?

M
T
Sottsass set out his line in his drawings. He put a piece of paper in front of me and told me, *Make me an ice bucket!* Or ice tongs, or a bread basket, or a cruet set.

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And you carried out his design?

M
T
I tried to put myself in his thoughts. And every time I departed from his line, he called me back and told me, *You're not looking carefully. You have to look carefully.* That's all he said. That was it.

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And how do you do it today, in your own office?

M
T
If I have a difficult project, I paint a watercolour and that watercolour forms the basis, the starting-point of the work.

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A watercolour has something light and airy, offering scope for interpretation ...

M
T
Watercolours are less precise than drawings. When I design, I make pencil drawings; in architecture, I paint watercolours. At the moment we're working on a concept for South Korea, and I have a specific idea, which my employees are taking as a basis to build on.

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When was the last time your employees surprised you?

M
T
Pretty much every day. Every time I go into a meeting, there they are, doing it better. They improve on my ideas.

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Like you did with Sottsass?

M
T
Oh, his ideas were virtually unimprovable. The man was a genius.

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What advice would you give on how to handle a genius?

M
T
You have to try and understand what the genius wants to say. A young man in sneakers came into our office and asked whether he could buy the office. *And you'll come over to California. I'll pay anything you want.* But Sottsass had no intention of moving to California. Of course, that young man was none other than Steve Jobs. And then he found someone to design for him; that was Jonathan Ive.

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Matteo Thun's life has taken many different turns, as the artist, designer and creative entrepreneur freely admits. With hindsight, he views his spell as Creative Director at Swatch in the early 1990s in an extremely critical light. Born Matthaeus Antonius Maria Graf von Thun und Hohenstein, the scion of an entrepreneurial family, in 1981 Matteo Thun co-founded the legendary Memphis Group in Milan, creating 'anti-objects' that radically questioned the classic concept of design. Thun's fondness for flying and fast cars and his original desire to become a racing driver fit the image well. As do the facts that he has long since given up owning a car and resigned his professorial post at the Vienna University of Applied Arts after over a decade in order to pursue new challenges.

Matteo Thun has no interest in short-lived commerce. His delight in wood and traditional craft techniques have long found their place in extraordinary hotel projects that appear to have grown together with the locations themselves. Vigilius Mountain Resort in South Tyrol received an award from the WWF and still has the reputation of a sustainable luxury hotel — and not only because of its unique position 1500 metres above the ocean. Among the ten values listed by the internationally operating Studio Mattheo Thun & Partners on its website, which include the triple proclamation of “Reuse, Redevelop, Refurbish”, the ninth place is occupied by a call to end construction in the Alps. A region where — without any finger-pointing — the studio, too, has left its mark.

What do you use your smartphone for?

M
T

Only for taking photos. And I only take photos of things I need for work.

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So a kind of digital notebook?

M
T

Exactly.

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How many photos do you take in a day?

M
T

Absolutely none on some days, but then I might take plenty on other days. For example, I just took photos of the colours of the houses in Burano and sent them to the office for a hotel project in Venice.

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Are you a better designer today than you were in the past? More knowledge, more experience?

M
T

I’m a completely normal architect, and as an architect I make every effort to avoid mistakes. We should always try to make as few mistakes as possible. But then, we’re only human. As an architect

living in Italy, I try to get a grip on space, light and interiors, and if something goes wrong, I can’t blame anybody but me.

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Asked once whether you were a designer, you replied, *An architect*. Why did you say that?

M
T

I don’t know what design is and I really don’t want to find out, because in my perception, design is a fiction. Architects make the best designers. As an architect, you learn what a stone is, what wood means and what laminate is, and that should be enough for small-scale planning.

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But architects have often bitten off more than they could chew by planning gigantic projects, new cities and whole continents — like Atlantropa in the twentieth century.

M
T

There was a phase, political in origin, that believed in urbanity. That was in the 1960s. Some of my professors, all of whom were left-wingers, believed in the salvation of urbanism. I don’t believe in it at all.

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But it looks like these twentieth-century mistakes are being repeated — in Saudi Arabia, for example, with The Line.

M
T

That will never be built. I don’t believe it will ever happen.

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And Masdar?

M
T

Also a fiasco. Nobody wants to live there.

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An example of how architecture is planned without any consideration of the human factor?

M
T

In this case, most definitely without considering the human factor.

That’s the problem with a certain generation of architects. We’re the next generation; we’re the makers and doers.

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Homo faber, you might say?

M
T

Yes, we certainly could say that.

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So don’t architects want to change the world any more?

M
T

I’m convinced that the world will be changed not by grand gestures, but by the weight of details. We are trying to make a small contribution. What’s crucial is that we don’t turn our heads to look back and lose control over where we’re going.

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Does the same apply to designers?

M
T

I don’t believe design has any future. The concept, the word *design* will disappear.

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And what will follow it?

M
T

Architecture. You know, that stuff we’ve been doing for the past 10,000 years. Design hasn’t even been around for a century yet. I

believe that as architects, we work more sustainably than designers making their 150th chair, which is no more than a variation on something that already exists. The question is whether mass production has a future.

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With over eight billion people in the world, it probably does.

M
T

But the question is, what do we need? Do we need that chair? Do we need that table? Do we need this cushion?

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Isn’t that the perspective of the Global North, which can afford minimalism and has now returned to appreciating manual craftsmanship? Does it really have no need for scalable products?

M
T

For eating, perhaps. I’m excited and intrigued to see what lies ahead for us.

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Are you optimistic?

M
T

Yes, I’m optimistic. Very optimistic, in fact. Young people are fantastic. They’re determined to tackle all those things that our generation only talked about.

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Thank you for the interview!