Wild design, everyday use

Italian architect Gaetano Pesce uses silicone instead of mortar between bricks to make light-filled houses. That's only one of his ideas for changing the world.

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Designer and architect Gaetano Pesce knows how to get under the skin of curators.

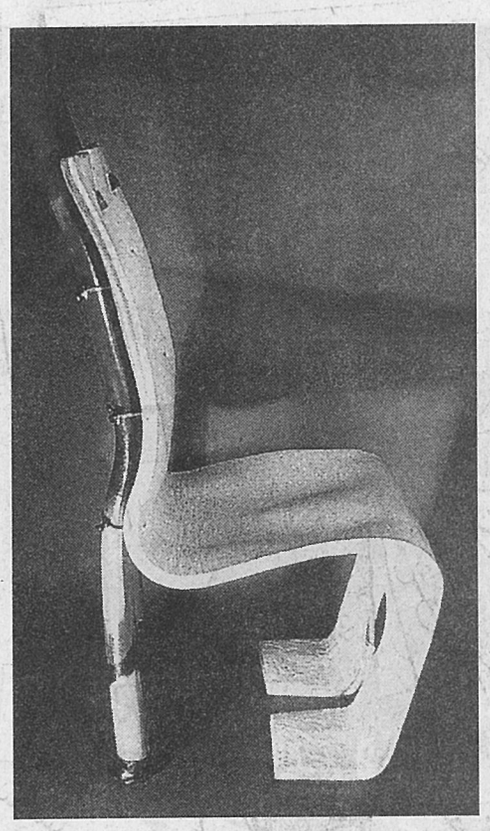
Pesce likes the public to touch his work, to feel the suppleness of, say, the red, rubbery resin wrapped around a door handle he designed, or the bumpiness of his candy-like frosted windows. He is not averse to people testing — much as they would in an Ikea showroom — his high-backed felt chairs. Even though the staff at the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts — where a show of Pesce's work runs until the beginning of January — cringed at setting this precedent, they've resigned themselves to it. "It's Gaetano's show, so . . . ," they say, with a mixture of exasperation and bemusement at the 59-year-old iconoclast.

Pesce also wants the public to see an art exhibit being installed: to watch the artist "hammering in a few nails," as he casually puts it, or repairing a lamp on the day of the vernissage. And when so much poverty exists among artists, he argues, it's perverse to spend a lot of money on displays. Instead, Pesce asked MMDA staff to find some recycled display tables. Not just thrift-shop items, mind you — he wanted them to fetch those strapped piles of cardboard often seen on factory loading docks, awaiting the industrial recycler. They fetched (and fumigated), before depositing them in the exhibition room.

The MMDA, which already owns 60 works by the New-York-based designer-architect, is showcasing Pesce's pieces of the past 10 years, two years after Paris's Centre Georges Pompidou held a retrospective of his work. (New York's Metropolitan Museum and Museum of Modern Art, and London's Victoria and Albert also own several pieces.) Part of a generation of eclectic and daring Italian designer-architects, Pesce carved out his own niche with wildly expressive furnishings and dwellings, structures that used unusual materials in innovative ways.

In Montreal for the show's late-October opening, Pesce smoked and talked enthusiastically about his art and politics during an interview. The designer, whose wild, smiling eyes are reminiscent of the late Surrealist painter Salvador Dali, decided early in life that, like Dali, he could skip past a vast field of realistic contemporaries into the surreal world — a place, Pesce says, "that never tells you when your work is done."

His work, from vases to kids' clothing to architectural plans to wooden wardrobes, is imbued with fun and happy accidents. Profiles of the human face pop up in countless cameos. Drips, spills and messes are celebrated. His sense of wit, as well as his



knowledge of basic dramatic posturing, are evident in works such as *Verbal Abuse*, a lamp with lead feet and a red grate stand that leans over and appears to have struck a pose of admonishment. Those lead feet appear again in another work called *Angel Lamp*, an ethereal red-night sky of a piece, made of shredded plastified paper, with light bulbs woven through, to light its expanse.

An angel with lead feet could very well describe Pesce — he grounds his whimsical tendencies in practical realities. He wants art to have a function beyond the merely aesthetic. In his early 20s, he decided to leave a collective of fellow artists, who were too busy getting lost in old notions about art. "The romantic period ended a hundred years ago," he said, as if he were trying to shake up a new generation of artists whose works are still created for and too often bought only by the rich.

Pesce left Group N (which stood for Nothing) to go industrial, spending time working for typewriter-turned-computer firm Olivetti, then, for many years later, working closely with Italian furniture company Cassina.

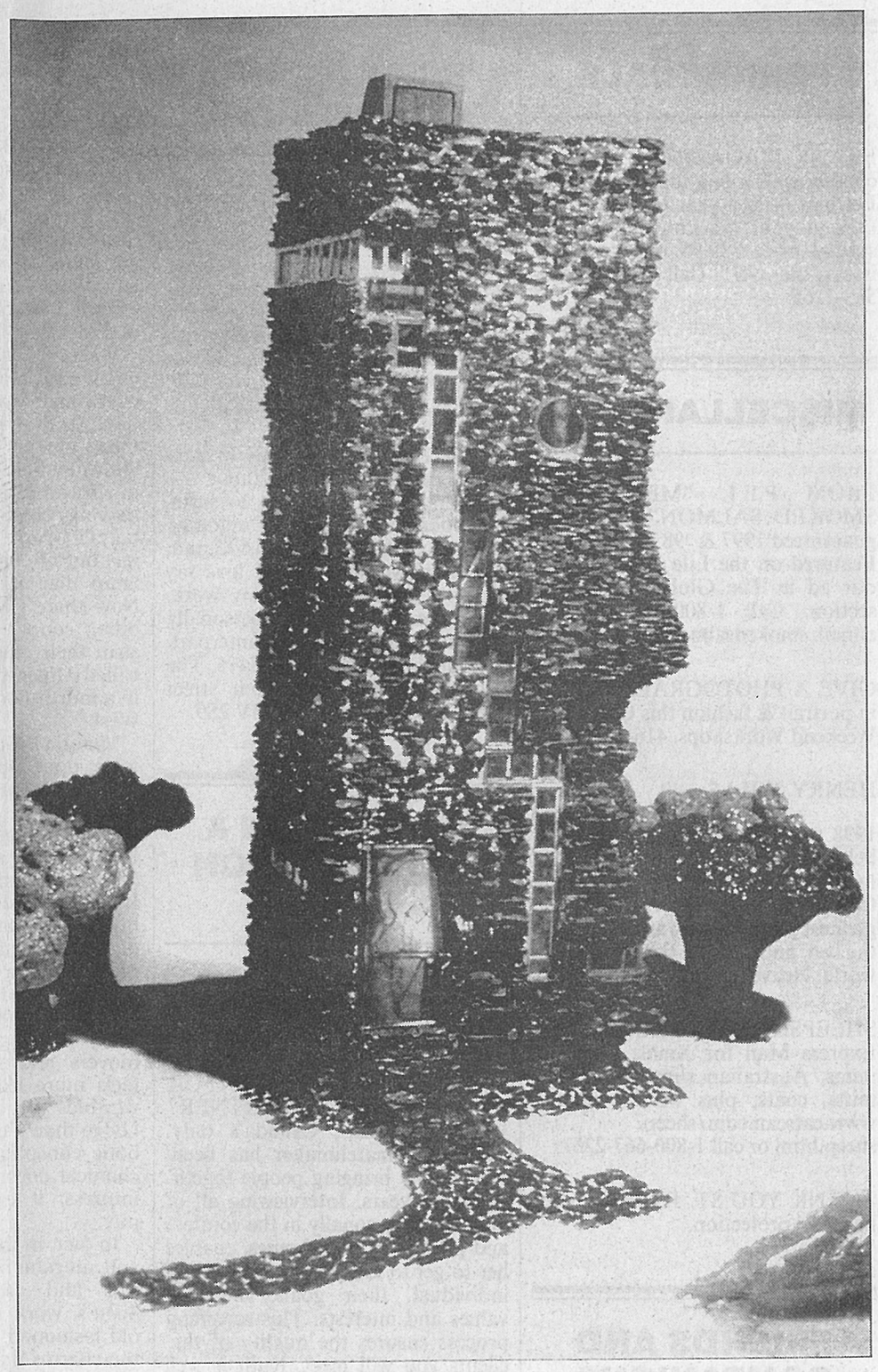
He may have helped [illegible] solve an age-old problem in both art and industry. Can there be such a thing as an affordable, and therefore mass-produced, art piece? Many of Pesce's pieces are just that, especially those coming out of his 12-year-old New York studio factory, which launched the Fish Design label four years ago. Pesce, who can wax poetic and political about factory techniques and building materials, calls a mould "the enemy of difference," referring to the need for manufacturers to pop out product after identical product.

While most tables, chairs and prefab buildings come off lines that could have been run by the minivan plant, Pesce's products possess the individualism of an artistic product yet appease the barons of industry. He uses flexible moulds, coloured resins that can be interchanged by the factory worker, and all sorts of techniques that respect the cost-conscious manufacturing process but make each piece unique.

His critical views of buildings, such as the towering one across the street from the museum, recall his early days when he and some of his fellow architects led the critique of functionalism. "This is totalitarianism," he said, pointing to the bone-white office building; its many storeys, he thinks, reveal few actual stories.

But Pesce knows how to translate his ravings. He observed the same types of nondescript buildings in Hong Kong. Chinese immigrants often lived in them, installing their large families and carrying on many rural customs in the midst of urban high-rises. Using basic woodwork, they turned balconies into extra rooms, blocked off doors and created extra windows. Pesce noticed different textures and colours on every floor.

He cites those Hong Kong Chinese as the influence for one of his apartment-building designs, which used not one but 18 architects for its 18 units. The differing styles resulted in a hodgepodge that worked. The building's maquette is on display among his 65 pieces from the last decade and an additional 37 from the museum's permanent Pesce collection. "Why do we use cement mortar around bricks?" Pesce asks rhetorically, pointing to the museum's outside wall. "Why not use silicone as your mortar?" a technique he employed on a house currently under construction in Brazil. The stones of the two-storey, oceanside building are bonded with translucent silicone, allowing for indoor light to shine out at night; in the day, the sun brings light in through the synthetic mortar. Residents of his many buildings have praised the humanity of the dwellings.



Pesce's Maquette for La maison des invitees (above); Crosby felt chair (left): objects that mix whimsy and functionality.

Pesce's penchant for simple materials has him arguing for natural rubber buildings that could withstand earthquakes, and resin cars that could bounce away from an accident and change colour in the sun.

He loves the machine of industry and the machine loves him back, spewing out a funky office chair or a table with a kissing couple atop it. Compared with Pesce, car manufacturers and building contractors are still cranking out widgets. The question is when will the larger world — the industrial world — be ready to give him his own show?

Gaetano Pesce: The Presence of Objects continues until Jan. 3 at the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts. 514-284-1252.