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INTERDISCIPLINARI**

n. 1

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THE ITALIAN PRESENCE
IN POST-WAR AMERICA,
1949-1972
Architecture, Design, Fashion

Volume 1
Architetture, interni e oggetti
nel passaggio attraverso l'Atlantico

a cura di
Marta Averna

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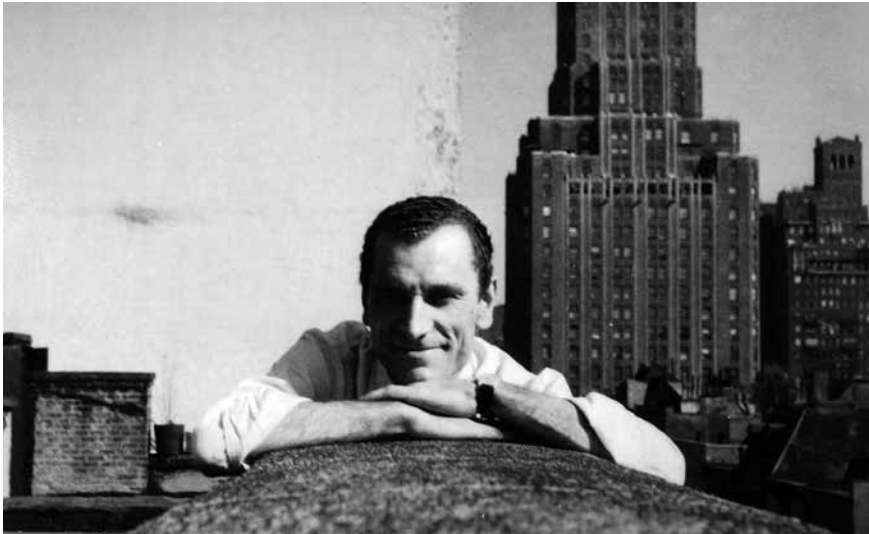


Fig. 04. Roberto Mango a New York.

ALFONSO MORONE¹

ROBERTO MANGO BETWEEN NAPLES AND NEW YORK

Despite a recent and rising interest towards Roberto Mango, the Neapolitan designer is not yet adequately integrated in Italian design history. In actual fact, besides having been a multifaceted designer of some of the most iconic designs of the 1950s, such as the tubular metal and straw Sunflowers Chair, and the extendable T48 table designed for Tecno, Mango was also an Art Director, a graphic designer, photographer, essayist and university lecturer who started one of the first schools of design in Italy, based in Naples. However, one of the most distinctive features of his highly original work for the Italian scene, was his close relationship with the United States. Ties overseas developed between his training years and the debut of his professional activity.

Born in Naples in 1920, he graduated in architecture in his hometown in 1946 and immediately embarked on his academic career as a volunteer assistant in the architectural design department under the former dean Marcello Canino. In 1949 he was awarded a scholarship to complete a two-year postgraduate course in the United States. Roberto Mango set off for New Jersey to deepen his research into building prefabrication at Princeton University Graduate School. Nevertheless, he spent much longer in the United States than expected until his return to Italy in 1952.

At that time, well ahead of Ettore Sottsass, Mango played a mediation role between the structured American industrial design system and Italian interest in industrial design that was developing in the years immediately after World War II. It is no coincidence that one of the most interesting interpretations of the Neapolitan designer, as well as that of his apprentice and collaborator Ermanno Guida, is that of the New Yorker Jeffrey Schnapp. The latter described Mango as the liaison between the US and Europe.

1 DiARC Dipartimento di Architettura, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II.

Roberto Mango's American career began at Princeton University in New Jersey, where he received his PhD on February the 17th, 1949, with a thesis on prefabricated buildings. Subsequently, he travelled around the United States and embraced the many opportunities provided by the cultural, academic, and professional environment of American industrial design. He brought this experience back to Italy as a correspondent from the United States for the Italian magazine *Domus*, from 1949 to 1952.

Over these years, Roberto Mango played an important role in bridging the gap between Italian and American culture, and through his articles from the United States, he was able to innovate the Italian scene with the same processes that affected American society in the immediate post-war period. His position as the sole correspondent for Italy was extremely influential. In fact, the magazine *Domus* was one of the most prominent means of disseminating the emerging design culture in Italy at the time, especially on themes relating to home decor and furniture, which combined design with architecture.

Mango took part in many seminars and conferences during this period and exchanged letters with renowned masters. An emblematic example is his meeting with Walter Gropius when he was head of the Department of Architecture at Harvard. Even more important was his correspondence with R. Buckminster Fuller. This eventually resulted in a meeting at the University of Ithaca, where he presented his prefabricated truss system as well as additional research on building industrialisation, which Mango carried out at Princeton University.

Undoubtedly, his partnership with Fuller was one of the key aspects of Mango's American experience. The outcomes of this collaboration would continue into the early years of his return to Italy.

In 1954, Roberto Mango attended the 10th Triennale di Milano. Together with Olga Gueft, he was responsible for the construction and interior design of two geodesic domes by Fuller for the United States pavilion.

That same edition saw the Triennale of trustees endorse a conference with Mango and Buckminster Fuller. The aim of the conference was to illustrate the great American inventor's experimental research in the field of geodesic dome prefabrication.

In Sempione Park, Mango was responsible for the installation of two cardboard geodesic domes sent directly from the United States.

Fuller had devised these basic structures as an economic solution to the housing emergency in third world countries.

The two dome units were delivered by air to Milan ready for installation, thus simulating a real operating condition. In fact, they only needed to be folded and stapled. Each sheet of paper gave rise to a single three-dimensional element in the form of a quadrilateral. The elements were placed next to each other, once again using metal pins, following an essential, linear geometric grid. This constituted a basic DIY principle, as its installation did not require skilled labour, albeit the result of an elaborate design based on a complex mathematical and geometric approach. As for their interior design, Mango decided to use the smaller model to display ornamental plants, and the other one as a living space.

To furnish the living quarters, which were intended to be used as a weekend getaway in the countryside, Mango used a few selected pieces of standard furniture, including his famous straw cone armchair, *Sunflowers Chair*, and the square T48 table produced by Tecno, together with wooden seats by Borsani. Other spaces, such as the bathroom, were made from prefabricated parallelepiped modules. The aim was to show how a new domestic identity could be envisaged. This identity had the same experimental power as the *geodesic domes* by using standard furniture only.

Back to Mango's US days, he lived in New York between 1950 and 1952 in the same flat at 47 West 8th Street, in Greenwich Village. That very flat had been Le Corbusier's home in '46-'47, while he was planning the United Nations headquarters. This coincidence served as a pretext for him to establish an acquaintance with the Swiss master, who was bound to be another fundamental guiding figure. This cooperation would continue in the years following Mango's American experience. Mango himself said that the small studio he used in New York, which had previously been used by Le Corbusier, was adjacent to the studio of the Italian sculptor Costantino Nivola where Le Corbusier produced two wall paintings. During that period, Mango met the Swiss architect several times, collecting drawings, sketches and studies the Master had left in the flat. Roberto Mango himself collected and archived these drawings. His archives feature photos of the Master at work, original drawings and images of his home in Greenwich Village. The connection between

Roberto Mango and Le Corbusier was undoubtedly enhanced by this coincidental meeting, yet it was clearly visible throughout his career as a designer. Mango was most certainly inspired by Le Corbusier's *Peinture architecturée*, which was based on a conceptual synthetic structure. This desire for abstraction and reduction in Mango spreads from his painting practice to his industrial production experience. For this reason, chairs, tables and lamps as consumer goods, they had to be used and meet concrete needs. Therefore, they had to be cheap, modular and readily suited to everyday life.

Looking further into his American experience, it is worth noting that only a few years after starting out with a simple student visa, Mango went on to hold positions such as Instructor of advanced design at the Whitman School of Interior Decoration and Visiting critic at Columbia University. Alongside his work in American universities, Roberto Mango also became a full-fledged graphic artist at the New School for Social Research in New York. He worked with several American and Italian magazines and institutions at the same time.

Between 1951 and 1954 he served as art director of Whitney Publications Inc.'s Interiors magazine and he designed some of its best-known covers.

Remarkable sensitivity was demonstrated in his photographic reportages, which were published in *Industrial Design*. With a careful and refined eye, he examined the elements that marked New York's street furniture, such as manholes and firescapes.

Also worth mentioning is his role in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and in the studios of Raymond Loewy Corporation Inc. where he worked for six months.

Let us conclude by making a reference that sums up the originality of Roberto Mango's American experience, namely the relationship between localism and cosmopolitanism. This is expressed symbolically in his most famous production: the three-legged tubular metal Sunflowers chair. It symbolizes the integration and shift between American industrial culture and traditional Neapolitan craftsmanship. While the conical-shaped seat model was already part of the production of many designers in Europe and the United States, Mango renewed its overall meaning by attempting to combine artisan techniques with the grandeur of mass industrial production. The first version of the cone was in the same wicker

used for the fishermen's pots from the Sorrento peninsula, while the structure was made from a distinctively industrial material, such as an electro-welded wire mesh. The blend between age-old craftsmanship techniques, which enhance local traditions, with advanced, high-tech and low-tech solutions, illustrates Roberto Mango's American experience perfectly.

Mango's American years were to remain an essential reference point for the rest of his career. Most importantly, they provided an example of a dialectical confrontation with a world that he crossed voraciously but without awe.

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