

# UTOPIA, NIGHTMARES AND MONSTERS

## An encounter with Alessandro Mendini

Considered the last great master still operating at full speed of an unsurpassed generation of Italian design, Alessandro Mendini, born in 1931, was editor of the magazines Casabella, Domus, Olio and Modo, created avant-garde design groups, from the Radicals in the 1970s to Alchimia in the 1980s, expressing his thinking on the social and political role of the architect and the designer. He has had an enormous influence on aesthetic trends in international design with his works and his theoretical writings. His projects range from architecture to industrial design, artistic one-offs to performances.

"Nowadays I don't like the violence connected with major migrations, applied to extremely distressed people who are treated very harshly by the Europeans. And then the African problems. And the killings. This is the horrible dominant of our time, and I don't like it... Taken to a more refined social level, in our occidental society, I don't like the aggressive, extremely hard, greedy attitude that cannot make room for people who are living difficult lives. Who are actually the majority of people in our societies.

Architecture and design can undoubtedly play a role in changing the world, though clearly a partial one. Since architecture and urbanism determine the structure of the territory, they can help or hinder, clearly under the sway of political choices; and design, in a smaller way, can facilitate the quality of our way of being in our own spaces. Today this is the big distinction between the design of the home, which is prevalently one of small industry or crafts, and the great growth of virtual design with the consequences of the general planetary spread of information. For me and many other designers, our social and political responsibility concentrated in the belief in what I call beauty, or the utopia of design, makes sense if it is developed with great care inside its own enclosure.

One should try, in the most exact and profound way possible, to make the choice of one's own way of operating, according to one's own specific abilities. And ethics should be the basis of our profession." Today a book, Codice Mendini. Le regole per progettare (Electa, 2016, by Fulvio Irace), retraces Mendini's intellectual itinerary and its fallout for contemporary design.

Utopia is a recurring crossover theme along this path. "I too have various utopias. I'll say just one, so naive as to be impossible to achieve. I have the idea of thinking that my objects and my works of architecture can be conceived and designed just as nature created and designed flowers [...]. But how can I claim to copy the fresh fragility of flowers? Where do I get the nerve to have such an ambition? Yet that is what

I do, even though I know I will fail. But this is my tension, my fate, my testimony. And this utopia of mine is a humanistic utopia."

In 2010, back for a year at the helm of the magazine Domus, Mendini produced a limited series of eleven issues, a small collection entitled "The New Utopia." In the editorial of the first issue, no. 935, he specified the meaning: "Utopia: the mythical model towards which to strive. What is important is for it to be unreachable."

In 2013, in a lecture in Seoul, he praised Utopia not just as a way of understanding design, but also as a way of understanding life itself. Alongside a "pragmatic utopia" capable of achieving its results, the "humanistic utopia" to which Mendini refers is the poetic expression of a sentiment that at times crosses the border into the mystery of art: for a moment, it frees design of the bonds of its functional limits, and opens it to the world. It is an ideal, not a place or a no-place. It is neither scientific nor rational: instead, it is personal and existential, because "everyone can formulate the hypothesis, the hope, the fantasy of imagining their own theoretical island, their own original and alternative proposal."

"The people who have influenced me most in an empathic way are people I have never met: Thomas More, for example, who lived in the 1500s, or Nietzsche, or Kierkegaard, or the Futurists, or the Surrealists... people who have empathic relationships with me. If I think about a person who has not influenced me, but with whom I sense a great rapport, it would be Gio Ponti, a very charismatic presence for the short period of our contact."

And it is precisely Thomas More, at the time of the 500th anniversary of the publication of the book Utopia, to whom Mendini dedicates the piece he has written, Favola Urbanistica, read in public in Milan in 2015 when he received the European Prize for Architecture assigned by the European Centre for Architecture Art Design and Urban Studies and the Chicago Athenaeum: Museum of Architecture and Design.

"Born if an ideal thrust - writes Fulvio Irace in Codice Mendini - Utopia is suffocated by the death by beheading of Thomas More: but only for a moment, because the head of the prophet is the metaphor of a universal condition, in which dream and nightmare, life and destruction are intrinsically connected. Ready, therefore, to be reborn and to die according to the rhythms of history and life."

"I have made many projects, of all types, large, small, industrial, one-offs, forms, art, and every so often I have nightmares about the many things I have done. I believe I have also made plenty of mistakes. I have to come to terms with my nightmares!" Maybe this is why he recently made "I Mostri" (The Monsters), a collection of 26 drawings with abstract signs and figures that dwell in his design nightmares... BY PATRIZIA SCARZELLA



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UTOPIA



Utopia Island, Margaret E Thomas More, 2015. Artwork mix media on paper, cm 21x30



## A Tale of Urbanism

Once upon a time there was an island known as Utopia. The word Utopia was invented by the English philosopher Thomas More in the 16th century. He envisioned a fantasy island in the ocean, with an outline similar to that of England. And he used this word, Utopia, which in a somewhat Greek and rather English synthesis means “the happy place that does not exist anywhere.” So More christened his theoretical island, and his famous book written in Latin. It was the tale of a traveler. The map of the island was drawn by the German painter Hans Holbein. It was the hypothesis of a pacific philosophy.

Fifty-four cities, a port, identical houses, without hierarchy but with the rules of geometry. The society of the island of Utopia was agrarian, and it was perfect. There was no money, no property, competition or commerce. Instead, there was religious tolerance, as well as freedom of speech. Everyone had the privilege of cultivating the earth, on a rotating basis. Craftsmen brought their objects to warehouses where people could go to help themselves, and children could go to find toys. Consumption, but no market.

Every person worked for just six hours a day, and then focused on cultural ideals and recreation. Men who betrayed women were shackled with gold chains, because gold was worthless, except for its great symbolic value. It was a formula of religious communism obtained by precisely overturning all the parameters of the corrupt politics of the Tudor dynasty. More was also the leading, authoritative statesman of Henry VIII, but due to his inflexibility

he had a very difficult life. England was under a cruel dictatorship. When More opposed the Anglican Scism urged by the king, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. After a very harsh trial that lasted one year, the king sentenced him to death by beheading. He was convicted of treason precisely because he did not want to betray. In prison he wrote many letters with charcoal to his daughter Margaret Roper. At the start of his incarceration, he wrote: “I counted, Margaret, full surely many a restless night, while my wife slept, and went that I had slept too, what peril was possible for to fall to me, so far forth that I am sure there can come none above.” On the last day of his life he walked calmly, dressed in gray - today that garment would be orange - the 200 paces separating the Tower of London from Tower Hill, the place of execution.

He gave the executioner a gold coin for his trouble, and told him: “Pick up thy Spirits, Man, and be not afraid to do thine Office; my Neck is very short, take heed therefore thou strike not awry for having thine Honesty.” He placed his head upon the block and asked the executioner to wait until he had put his long beard aside, because “that had committed no treason.” He was 57 years old. His head was displayed at London Bridge for some months. His daughter Margaret managed to purchase it, and closed it in a lead box, to keep it as a relic. The Catholic Church made him a saint. Thus may an urbanist lose his life, and thus may a new word come into being: Utopia.

BY ALESSANDRO MENDINI