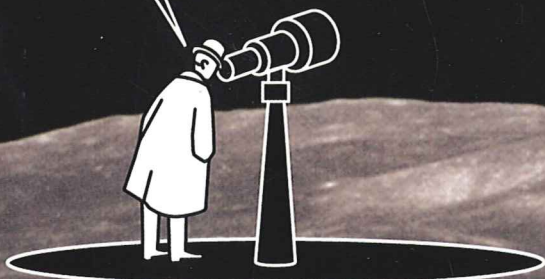


*Holy cow,  
its a ...  
M-A-G-I-S!*



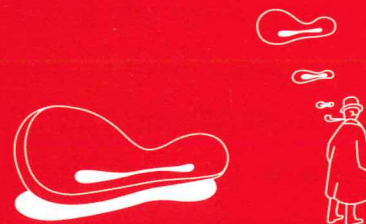
april/aprile 2004

agendamagis3



two days in munich:  
a collage of notes on  
konstantin grcic

*by Patrizia Scarzella*









In Munich, cyclists are much respected. Konstantin arrives on a bicycle, a beautiful bicycle. Years ago, when he was asked in an interview (by Ana Mir for *Intramuros* magazine), "What is the most interesting object of the last fifteen years that deserves a prize?", he answered: "*The bicycle*. It has had an incredible evolution in design and performance, and it is the most beautiful and modern of tools serving mobility."

*Grcic's parents transmitted their love of art to him. That's a great gift to receive - there is gratitude in his voice.*

In the summer, after having travelled around for work all year, he takes trips to different cities to leisurely see the things that attract his interest: the Venice Biennial, exhibitions in London...

He talks of these things on this warm, informal summer evening while we go from place to place around the city. Tomorrow, in his studio, we will get down to business.

His *basic biography* is known: Born in Munich in 1965, he studied at London's Royal College of Art. In 1991 he began working for different furniture companies, many of them Italian: *Driade*, *Flos*, *Cappellini*, *Authentics* and *Magis*, of course. His *Mayday* lamp, produced by *Flos*, belongs to the MoMA's permanent collection in New York, and also won the 2001 *Compasso d'Oro*. Overcome by excitement when the award was handed to him, he dropped it and the *Compasso* was dented. Later, while he was polishing the gold, it turned into silver!

Biographers describe his work as an effective mix of stern essentiality of Teutonic derivation and functional pragmatism of the Anglo-Saxon type (see *Designboom* web site).

I read that a while back he was asked, "What did you want to be when you grew up?" "Since I was a child, the thing I like most is making things. I love my work because I make 3D objects in my studio. I have the profession I wanted as a child, even if I didn't yet know the word "designer". So really, it could have been a precocious vocation...", laughs Konstantin.

Another thing we know is that Achille Castiglioni held him in high esteem, considering him one of his few spiritual successors.

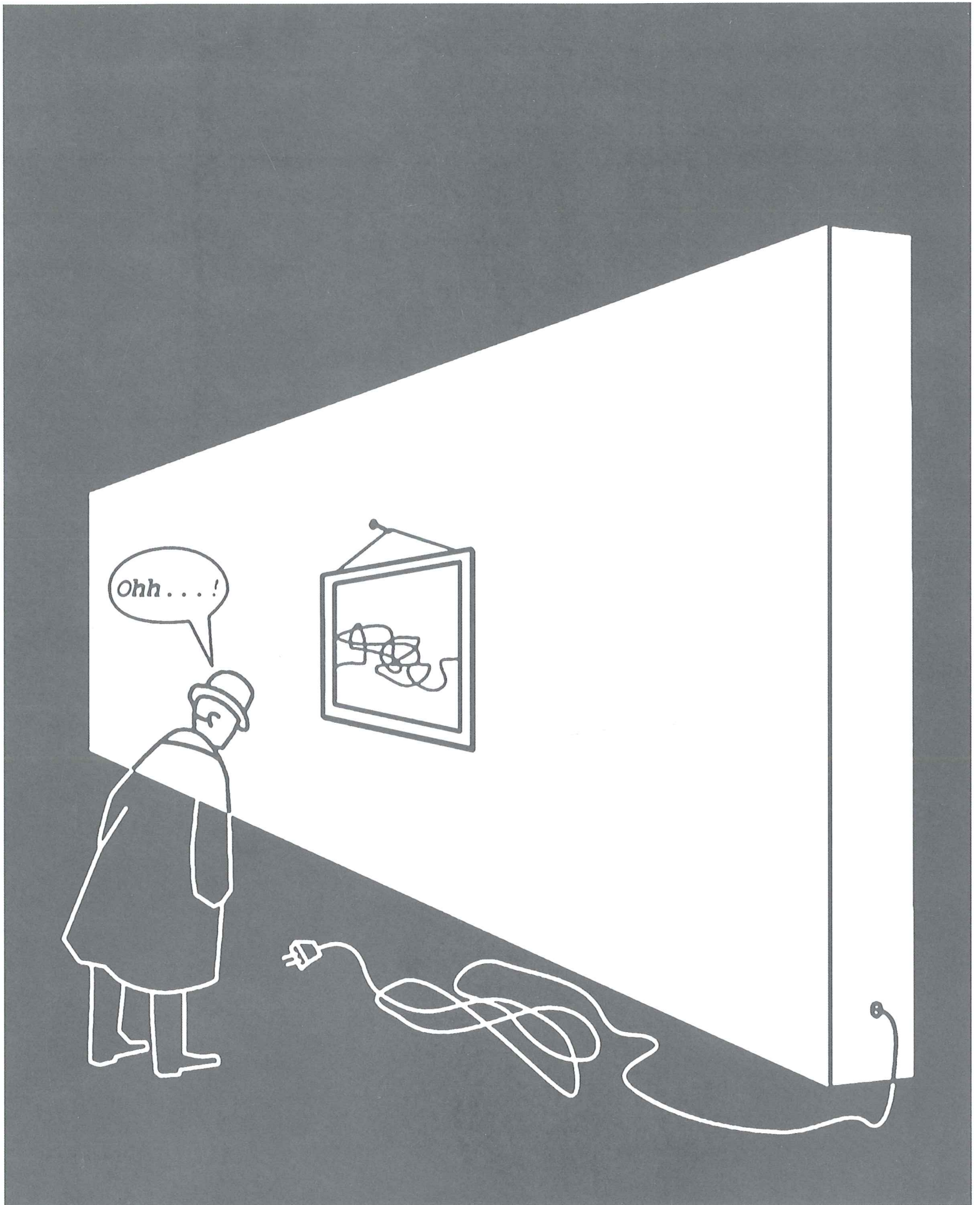
Schillerstrasse 40, third inner courtyard, *his studio*. Total absence of aggressiveness and stress, a harmonious ambiance, a true design workshop. No space separations, no conference room. Grcic's small international team works together. There's a tool bench: that's where they build the first prototypes. There's a terrace for breaks and relaxing, a little kitchen in the corner and prototypes everywhere.

*Grcic and Magis*. "In the beginning I said no to *Magis*. I couldn't see where I could place myself within the company to not do something similar to what the other designers had already done. I talked about it with *Eugenio Perazza*, and he calmly explained that I could even work with aluminum and that I shouldn't think that *Magis* = plastic. That was the magic word and I said yes, because I saw a space of my own opening up inside *Magis*. To work well, I need to get to know a company, I need to like it and appreciate the people that work there... When I start a rapport with a company, I think of a long-term relationship - and you don't marry

someone you dislike or can't stand! Besides, I don't want to repeat similar projects for different companies, so I have to find a specific space all my own, a well-described identity within the company. I also need the possibility of diversifying my projects."

*Chair\_One*. "We made the first prototypes of the chair's basic version here in my studio, first in cardboard, then in iron, welded and all, an actual working chair. It's a fun way to work on a project, there is the joy of creation, the manual labour that contributes to visualising the idea and its evolution in full scale." In Konstantin's work there are two phases: the first is serious, fundamental and very intense in order to resolve problems, define the details and finalise the idea of the product. At the end of this long process, there is the recreational, ironical phase "à la Castiglioni", meaning joy-play-fun. It's studying how to animate the project, how to show it so that it has the power of communicating with people in an interactive way. This is where he plays and experiments with the piece to develop its communicational aspect.

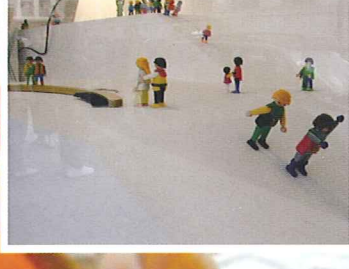
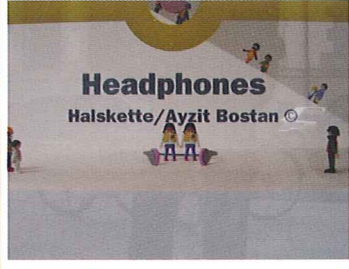
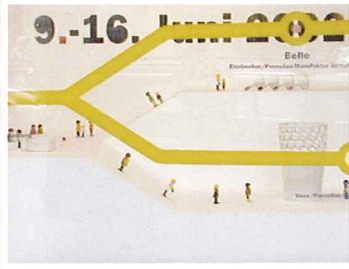
We discover another, almost private side to Konstantin's work: *small playful projects*, not industrial design but *installations* and displays for exhibitions and store windows. They are the ironic and amusing domestic tales he constructs for the *Nymphenburg Porzellan* company using their traditional porcelain statuettes of animals, different characters, trees. They are placed in landscapes of modern and realistic design: city streets, homes. The classic porcelain figures come to life and animate real-life stories. In the same way, Konstantin built the *Lifestyle* exhibition in the *Lebensart* store of Munich - a surreal landscape made up of porcelain objects and plastic *Playmobil* characters.

















This attention for the little objects of daily life is a recurrent theme in his work. "*Oggetti Quotidiani*" was the title of a beautiful, small exhibition that was not much publicised. It was held at the Goethe House in Rome (Via Del Corso) and Konstantin was its curator. He had been invited to select objects from the vast archives of objects that used to belong to the poet, who was a great and passionate collector. The Goethe collection in Weimar is made up of fifty thousand objects: sculptures, medals, stones, cameos, botanical species and more. Konstantin disregarded the valuable items, and "... true to his vocation as a designer, chose the domestic ones: small paper boxes, mother-of-pearl buttons, paperweights, basting thread, a teaspoon... He extracted the simplicity of the poet's daily life from the sensational collection and put it back into his former house in Rome. Each object, carefully laid upon its original piece of tissue-paper wrapping, displayed its fragility and, above all, delicacy. The boxes that contained the objects were left partly open, like an unclosed door offering a partial view of the private world of another room. Like a long necklace, there was an illuminated rubber cable connecting all the containers in the exhibition to each other." (from the review of the exhibition by M. Ansolini for Designboom).

*Grcic's House.* He and fellow designer Karim Rashid were invited by the Cologne Messe to build their visions of the ideal house of the near future for the *Ideal House exhibition* (January 2003). Grcic's representation was of *the house* being a personal memory box, a giant virtual filing cabinet. The installations highlighted the great contrasts between the two designers' different worlds: the poetry and expressive language of their

projects lie far apart; organic shapes and high tech materials are Rashid's points of reference; clean lines, gridded surfaces and few materials are Grcic's. These characteristics establish him as one of the most prominent exponents of a new rationalism that embraces design aesthetics. His house is a fascinating conceptual abstraction: not a table, chair or bed, no functional objects. The eleven-metre high walls are constructed using a variety of textured materials and a structural shelving system. One can go up to different levels with a platform similar to the ones used by window cleaners. The house is crowded with books, photos, souvenirs, compact discs. The result is a radical representation of the contemporary domestic environment, a container of memories picked up along life's paths, which increasingly bring us away from home. The project was beautiful but risky. It was a difficult concept to communicate to harried spectators in such a high-speed walk-through location (the trade fair), leaving Grcic unsatisfied.

He offers me a copy of *the book* "Konstantin Grcic for Classicon", compiled in one weekend that the authors spent in Grcic's studio. It's a curious collage of anecdotes, photographs, newspaper clippings, sketches, project notes and a freewheeling series of questions and answers on every possible subject. The motif running here and there throughout all the pages is the line drawing of a little man in a hat and raincoat with subtle humour that has become the designer's trademark. In the myriad of details an outline is sketched of an uncomplicated and natural designer who does not need to impress people with excess, extravagance or a paste-on façade of an exceptional kind of personality. The true nature of the

serious and complex profession of industrial designer is exposed, as is Grcic's credibility. This is the "what you see is what you get" self-image that Grcic likes to transmit.

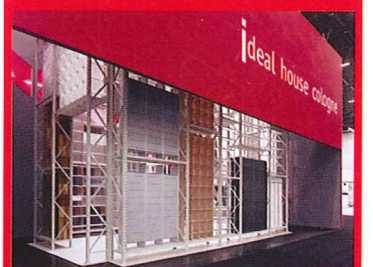
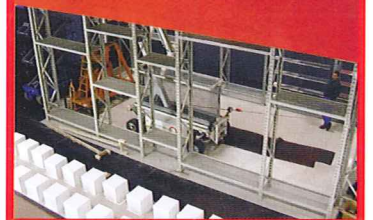
*His reservedness* is the side of his personality that I like best. A rare trait nowadays, and an unknown one to the majority of his fellow designers. It is Konstantin's strength, and he is building his solid professional reputation with his projects, one brick at a time, without needing to resort to "special effects" to attract attention. The delicacy of his manner, naturally soft-spoken and kind, is yet another precious element of his character.

"*The greatest freedom is hidden in the greatest restraint.*" According to Niklas Maak, a German journalist that knows Grcic well, the motto used by poet Paul Valéry is perfect for Konstantin.

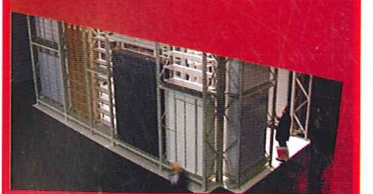
About *the role of designers* in our society: "The most important virtue of a designer is to remain faithful to his or her convictions and not think too much about other people's expectations," (from a 1994 interview). Today: "Industries will give designers more and more responsibility, not only for their creativity, but for their ability to turn ideas into products and give complete answers to specific needs."

About *young designers*: "After visiting the Salone Satellite in Milan, I was amazed how undaunted the young are about showing what they do. I would like to see not finished projects, not this in-your-face professionalism, but ideas that are still susceptible to development. I think that's what companies would like to see, too: the discovery of something interesting to develop. They should say, "I can do this, give me work, here I am!"

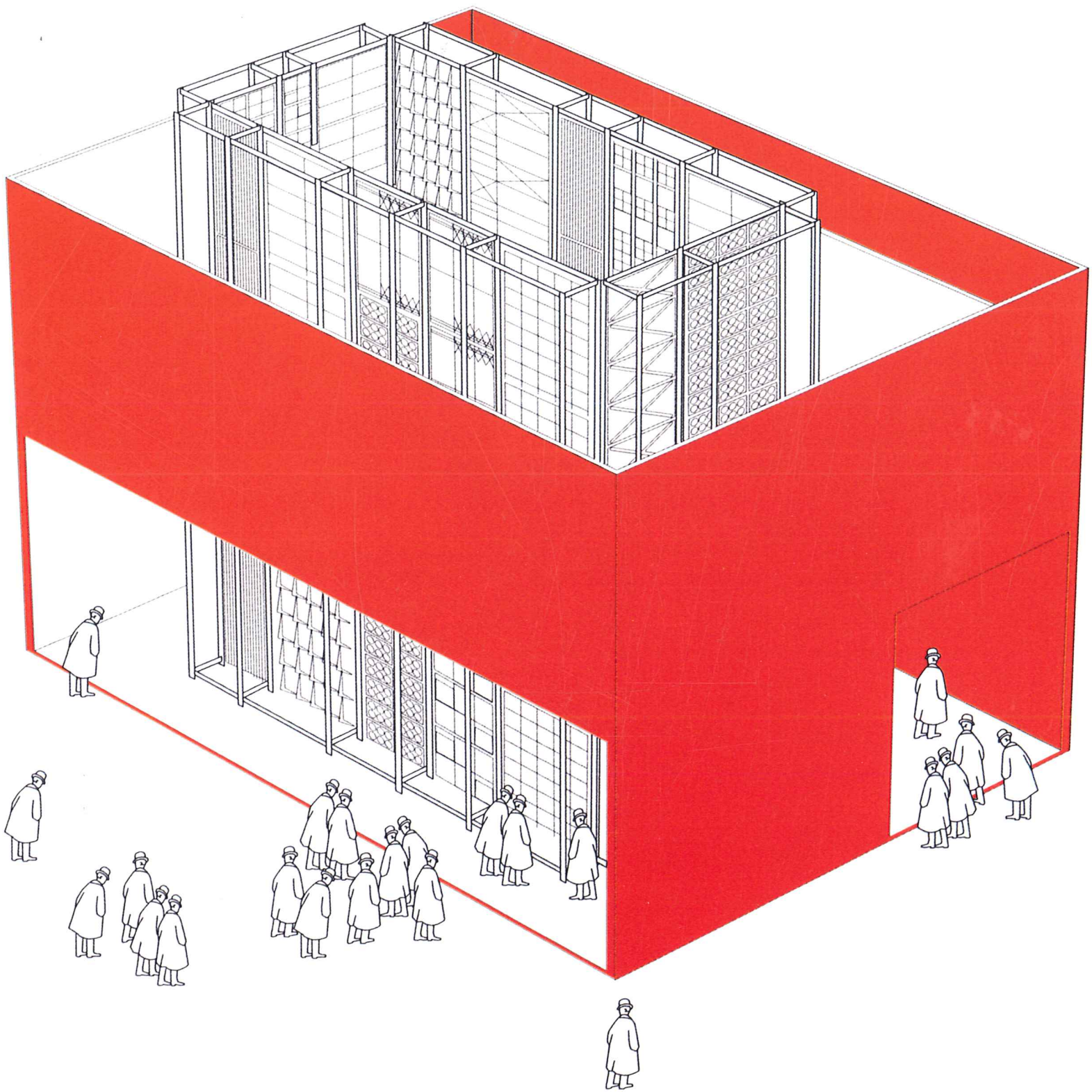




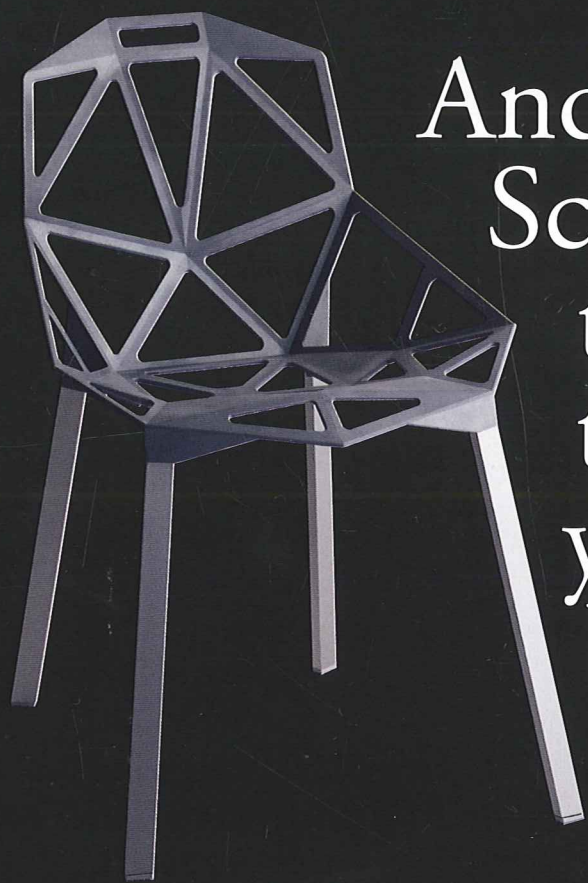
ideal house cologne











And should you ever  
Schillerstrasse 40, third  
the morning, remember  
there are delicious fresh  
young designers of  
butter and hot tea.



happen to pass through Munich,  
courtyard, around 11 o'clock in  
that every day at that hour  
*bretzels* bought by one of the  
Grcic's studio, served with salted

