

# Italian Architecture and Design Experts Share Their Experiences As Lockdown Eases

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By Osman Can Yerebakan



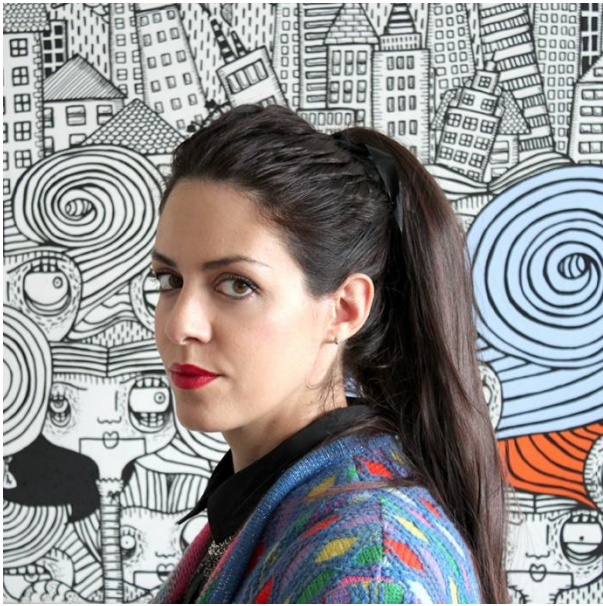
Teca House by Federico Delrosso. Photography courtesy of Federico Delrosso.

The lack of in-person gatherings due to containment efforts of COVID-19 since early March has taken its toll on industries with such experiences at their core. Architecture and design are undoubtedly among trades in which the human element spans the entire process, consummating in tactile inhabitation. Living in an interior, or applying an object to it, completes the maker's vision, breathing life to function through feeling. Interiors' and objects' dependence on the human element is a romantic albeit capitalizing foundation of design, be it a large-scale building or small kitchen utensil. Therefore, the rapid removal of the social trait from the industry has shaken all segments, from factory workers to store owners to designers.

Milan has been an epicenter of financial and social decline since Northern Italy became a European hotspot of the virus. Since early March, shuttered store windows has been facing emptied *loggias* where, not long ago, fast-paced Milanese marched the streets in sharp suits and high heels with a fervor replaced now by unrest. The cold shower, however, has brought the city's firmly cemented creative community closer, urging makers—from small studio owners to CEOs of industry giants—to unite with the incentive to survive the unforeseeable with the least damage. After Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced continuation of strict lockdown through early May, the leaders of nine Italian industrial design brands came together for a manifesto, titled "Design Doesn't Give Up." Signed by CEOs of powerhouses such as Poltrona Frau, Boffi, Cappellini, and B&B Italia on April 8, the four-page statement made clear that design is one of the three economic pillars of production in Italy, where the manufacturing rate has declined since 2017, urging factories to reopen as soon as possible to sustain the future of its 20,000 companies and 130,000 employees. The group's plan also included proposals sent out to showroom landlords across the globe for 50 percent rent reduction until December, 2020. In a statement about the manifesto, Poltrona Frau CEO Nicola Coropulis applauded the Italian government's efforts to support the country's "industries of excellence," and added that "companies will discover the benefit of acting together in a more systematic way to defend the undisputed excellence they stand for." The leather upholstery giant reopened its Tolentino production facility in the last week of April under safety regulations; however, the company continues to operate its offices remotely. The morning of May 4 in fact saw commuters gushing in and out of the city's Centrale train station, returning to work as the Italian government began easing regulations on the quarantine.

*Interior Design* talked to visionaries from Milan's architecture and design scene to catch up on their current observations, struggles, achievements, and plans amidst these testing times. A running thread among architects and designers operating in a broad range of scales is a restored belief in artisanal craftsmanship and unmistakable trace of human emotion in creation and product. Many have their eyes on late May to go back to full operation, while others still choose to take cautious steps before reopening their facilities. Technology has proven to be instrumental to maintain internal and external communication, prompting future investment in enhancement of digital tools for design and production. Read statements from architects and designers who have been operating at different capacities, all from home, in and around Milan since March 9.

Elena Salmistraro, founder, Elena Salmistraro Studio



As a team, we have understood that work is not a constraint but a part of who we are. Personally, I must admit that working from home has not been absolutely negative. In theory, I can manage my time better, devote myself to my family, and reflect on future projects. However, there is usually a gap between theory and practice: I recently became a mother for the second time and time is never enough. My team is familiar with working remotely because of my work-related travels. Currently, we lack a space equipped to carry out specific activities, such as models and prints, but in any case, it is an effort we can endure. Safety and health have absolute priority, but we plan to return to normal after the summer.

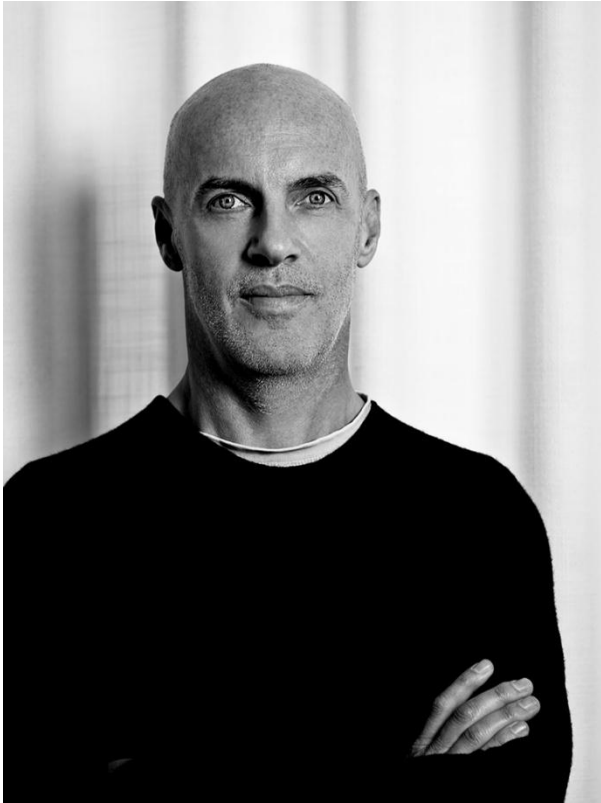




Elena Salmistraro designed an installation for Nike's Zoom x Vista Grind shoe. Photography courtesy of Elena Salmistraro.

I have observed larger design companies having greater difficulty in the management of this unusual scenario. They are technologically better equipped, but these companies have a production system strongly linked to import and export, which I believe will be absolutely inexistent for a long time. Regarding smaller studios, cancellation or postponement of projects will create a financial gap, but at the same time it will open new perspectives for flexibility. We have seen that certain remote projects can be developed and communicated through available technological means. If we, as designers, can further this very important step, we will certainly have incredible environmental and economic returns. However, I believe Italy is unfortunately far behind the digital. If used correctly, digital is an imperative resource. Currently, we are evaluating how to launch or if we should launch the projects made for the Salone del Mobile. Le Corbusier once said, "The house should be the treasure chest of living," which should be our guideline and focus on the design for tomorrow to come.

Federico Delrosso, founder, Federico Delrosso Architects



I believe we might continue using in-demand digital tools, such as Zoom and Skype, in the future. We are already planning to transform our workplace into a “virtual studio,” reserving the physical space for scheduled meetings and reviews. It is also essential to maintain a part of human relationships, so we will be opening the studio shortly but with a new vision for reorganizing the future system of working. A sudden jump from working in the studio to home meant complete stop on the construction sites, production, and other daily activities of architecture and design companies regardless of their sizes. Running a small studio has granted me flexibility for easy modification. Larger studios, I think, might gradually realize their model in today’s time is no longer necessary. The clients perhaps will no longer seek the large quantity but levitate towards dedication to quality of services in the most optimal manner.



Teca House by Federico Delrosso. Photography courtesy of Federico Delrosso.

On a personal level, I've been reflecting on true values of what we do. I've learned to make the best use of time, working not only from the studio but also from home or on vacation. It's too early to gauge the longterm effects of this experience on architecture in general, but, undoubtedly, some consolidated stereotypes will collapse. Opportunity for something more authentic and necessary will arise. Rather than directly affecting perception of architecture, the current crisis will influence the perception of people for their homes and eventually the importance architecture plays in the service of humanity, simple, modest or luxury. Marketing has already become almost totally online, so this aspect will be further enhanced. The architecture and design industry will learn to work more on the details than wasting time in meetings, especially in large studios. We are working on some new residential projects along with some product design. At the moment, the projects in hand are confirmed, but we expect a slowdown on construction activities. We want to grow by taking advantage of the current situation and see it as an opportunity, with the objective of optimizing the resources to improve lives. Those with the good fortune to live in well-designed and built houses have experienced this period as a holiday; those who have never given importance to space, materials, or light feel imprisoned.

Gabo Guzzo, founder, Gabo Guzzo



I believe this crisis is calling for a new consciousness towards our collective wellbeing and the health of our planet. Following the pandemic, we will want to be surrounded by meaningful things, produced in a meaningful way. I think design will slow down to put more emphasis on the quality of the idea and product itself—companies will need to reevaluate their pursuit of unsustainable growth. By shifting our production strategies with consideration to long-term wellbeing, the design industry can educate consumers to embrace wiser shopping habits and to privilege genuine creativity, quality, and experience. We always need to prioritize the health of our artisans, craftsmen, and designers. While we all hope to return to our factories and ateliers as soon as possible, returning prematurely risks exposing people not only the virus, but also a tense climate of concern.

I entered luxury in 2017 with a very clear idea in mind: more art, less production. My goal was to bring my background as an artist to my design of couture handbags, and I've adopted a nearly identical creative approach. Like a work of art, each handbag is unique, made in limited quantities and respectful of the planet's natural balance and the customer's individuality. The aesthetic of my designs has also been driven by the audacious idea of creating timeless lines and shapes to avoid the brief lifespans of seasons and trends. Our current social and economic crisis has reaffirmed my initial decisions to create season-less design, avoid the frantic fashion calendar and create collections that prioritize thoughtful design and outstanding craftsmanship.

Although the economy as a whole is in a tenuous position, we've chosen not to alter our strategy at this point. We successfully launched a new collection of one-of-a-kind handbags embellished with fine jewelry at Lane Crawford's department stores in Hong Kong this month. When I started my venture into luxury leather goods, I had to acknowledge the endangered status of artisanship in Italy. I was mainly surprised by the sad speed of the trend. With the rapid pace of the fashion industry and few artisans passing along their trade to new generations, the future of luxury leather goods, as well as the centuries of expertise and knowledge around its craft, is in peril. The pandemic has put these people and immense



cultural heritage under an alarming threat. We can't discount quality artisanship's contributions to economic progress, product innovation, and great product experience. We should all organize our projects to promote local economies and their communities of production. I believe regional craftsmanship is a more sustainable way of manufacturing—it fosters healthier economic growth and better redistributes wealth. I'm determined to support my craftsmen in Italy, France, and the United Kingdom. The handbags at Lane Crawford, for example, were made in Florence by master leather good artisans and goldsmiths. Just before the pandemic's outbreak, we also started to work on a new collection for Bergdorf Goodman. When the lockdown is over, we will resume working on it, with energy and a new vision of the world.

Cristina Celestino, founder, Attico Design



My new spacious studio, which we recently moved, is close to my home, so I've basically moved some materials, color swatches, notes, and other work essentials to my living room where I am currently sharing the table with my six-year-old daughter. I try to never lose contact with my team, which has responded quite well to work-from-home. We still eventually suffer the lack of direct and personal communication, because in-person will never be totally replaced, especially in our field where creativity needs dialogue, not monologue; to touch, not only to look at. Things are getting better, and I am happy to reopen my studio on May 4.

I don't think this situation is different for a large or small studio as long as they are well-organized. The key point is to have strong team work and never losing track of everyday targets. One question has become apparent: what do we really need? During isolation, making objects and furniture has become more valuable not just in terms of function, but particularly in emotional and aesthetic ways. They have become more precious than before, not only in luxurious sense. A reasoning on the quality of the products is a duty for designers and companies. Were we producing too much? Sustainability is now



even more valuable, in terms of local productions and reuse of waste materials. Entire design system is about rethinking of how to show new collections and tell stories in effective ways. We need fresh ways to think about the design system's connected aspects, such as shows, exhibitions, or communication. Improving digital resources beyond a temporary moment of forced distancing is necessary, but we must also remember that design and architecture need to be touched with hands and seen with eyes—they are made to be lived.



In Celestino's reading nook, Joe Colombo armchairs pair with her first-ever collecting purchase: a 1965 floor lamp by Luigi Bandini Buti for Kartell, found on eBay. Photography by Valentina Sommariva/Living Inside and production by Alice Salerni/Living Inside.

Currently, the studio is concentrating on less urgent projects as well as those in development. A project is based on relationships and exchange, not only with the team members, but also with customers and suppliers. Physical distancing has made people closer in a conceptual way. We now have a strong and traumatic mutual experience, and without any doubt, our lives have changed both from a professional and human point of view. I have seen the strong coming out to help the weak or the unfortunate. Solidarity has never been so powerful and alive. This has taught us that somethings cannot remain the same for too long. Small businesses might be in more fortune at this moment, because it's easier to reopen. In this sense, there may be return to small artisanal production. One thing for sure: production will look more to the quality than the quantity.

Marialaura Rossiello Irvine, art director, Studio Irvine



I am lucky because my house and studio are next to each other, so I never left my headquarters in Milan. I feel like a captain of a large white ghost ship. I can see the computers moving with current projects, but the team is safely at home. We are working on shared screens. I will try to keep this situation as long as possible to be completely safe. Health first of all! The studio is quite small, so we can be very flexible. At the studio, we trust each other and don't need a lot of words to explain concepts and ideas. We really are a team. Now, we just have more time to focus on the projects. It's time to make long lasting products with sensibility towards the quality of the products. We have finally learnt that we can also work from home, but in my personal experience, alone with two children, I would need a capsule to isolate myself even more. We continue working on product development with companies. The process is slow but there is more time to ponder the solutions. For the artistic directions, I am studying alternate communication

strategies where the story and the research behind a project is the protagonist. The problem is the closed construction sites, and I imagine larger architecture studios have bigger problems to manage it.

After almost two months of lockdown in Milan, I learned to trust my intuition. Before, I did not have time to "listen." Every experience has a constructive meaning. My work or design position has not changed; every project we do is part of a long industrial process, from briefing to development, from investments to the communication, from sales to logistics. Our role as designers is to be aware of the costs and of everyone working on the process. The main protagonist is the product, not the designer. For the future, we must avoid egos and create ideas with a real sense in terms of respect for production processes and for the environment. As creative people, we are called to help the community with intelligent and quality consumption.

In 2020 Milan Design Week, I was the art director of an exhibition called *Timeless.Thonet* at Palazzo Litta in central Milan. I wanted to focus on the significance of notions like durability, originality, and expertise in terms of sheer ethical economy. The exhibition of timeless chairs extended an invitation to pause and ponder the beauty of things well crafted, while forgoing passing fashions. Now, we are experimenting with ways to make archetypal products of the past contemporary, for example by widening the possible uses of the S5000 sofa designed few years ago for Thonet. The goal is to work on extending existing products in an intelligent and economical point of view. It will be ready by the end of this year. Art direction for a brand new company called Forma Cemento is a postponed project. The goal is to create a concrete domestic landscapes by working on colors, textures, and shapes. My imaginary concrete world starts from the study of our traditional roots to give a contemporary mood both in terms of texture and production. The main collection is called Fusto and is a column concept that can be used as the base of coffee tables, bookcase systems, consoles, or pedestals. Around Milan, there are hundreds of specialists on products, a rich concentrated know-how which is difficult to find in other parts of the world. From my side, I would like to assist a revolution from a communication point of view. We have to be craftsmen also in how we communicate the product.

Giulia Molteni, Head of Marketing and Communication, Molteni Group



We're called to respond to a hard challenge, however, these moments create opportunity for innovators, breaking new grounds and finding new chances for creative solutions. We are pushing work-from-home as much as possible, since we understand it is a wave of digital innovation that will be increasingly adopted even after the virus. Since the beginning of the lockdown, our logistics, sales and marketing activities have been operating from home, and we re-opened all our production units on April 27 based on healthcare measures. The flexible working method is evolving rapidly and will surely be improved and adopted in Europe even after the emergency, similar to the U.S. and U.K. markets. In this hyper-globalized world, artisanship is a treasure that should be guarded. That is why I believe every company, besides their size, is boosting their creativity to find new solutions. Design is constantly evolving and we are confident businesses, from large architecture companies to smaller studios, will be able to adapt to the new needs dictated by the current situation.





Dada's VVD Kitchen by Vincent Van Duysen. Photography courtesy of Molteni Group.

We take this moment to improve our processes quickly, by encouraging connection with our consumers through innovative digital channels, such as *Molteni@Home*, a new project of online consultation, which enables clients to schedule digital appointments with our teams and stores worldwide. The platform supports them through live video conferencing, meetings, and screen sharing. We set up online trainings with our specialized teams for our trade community in order to keep them updated with the latest news and changes. The goal is to provide a qualitative human experience. Digital is a synonym of innovation and constant evolution. As for now, I think it is the most powerful tool that enables us to convey our identity, passion for beauty and heritage to consumers globally.



Molteni Group has launched Molteni@Home for online consultation. Photography courtesy of Molteni Group.

We have learned how the world could change in the blink of an eye. The situation made us rethink every branch of our business, from production to logistics, by adopting new safety measures, protocols and arranging a whole new routine. We are implementing widespread flexible practices, as well as technologies allowing our teams to work remotely while being effective after the lockdown as well. If design is to improve the quality of a place and the experience of the people living in it, now every environment has new needs and demands. Our interior ideas are evolving in order to respond with functional solutions. Our typical idea of home is changing, from a calm and quiet retreat to a place

<https://www.interiordesign.net/articles/18079-italian-architecture-and-design-experts-share-their-experiences-as-lockdown-eases/>

where it is fundamental to be productive. For this reason, we have enriched our collection with new ways of conceiving the home environment and create solutions unavailable before. The need for a workstation is paramount, not only to enable us to work, but also to make the most of everything the multimedia universe offers around the clock. For example, our range includes a series of desks designed like modern workstations, functional and self-sufficient, such as Secretello, Note, LessLess, as well as modern and contemporary living systems such as 505, Pass-Word Evolution, Grid which are marked by the growing presence of multimedia entertainment systems or working from home, alongside the more traditional objects such as books and ornaments. Furthermore, this year we will present the home version of the Touch Down Unit by UniFor, a self-contained innovative mobile workstation designed to meet the needs of dynamic, activity-based workers.



The Secretello desk by Molteni&C. Photography courtesy of Molteni Group.

We have partnerships with international designers such as Michael Anastassiades, Rodolfo Dordoni, and our Creative Director, Vincent Van Duysen. This year we present a new range of products for kitchens,



among which a new functional and flexible system where every accessory is within easy reach, designed by Francesco Meda. The company is renewing its headquarters in Giussano. The Molten Museum, which we inaugurated in 2015, has the training center, the Compound, where we have a project, designed by Ron Gilad, called "Quality Hub." The project aims to welcome visitors from our international network of architects, interior designers, clients, and journalists with whom the company promotes design culture.