

It's All Because of That Ceiling. For you Massimo, Wherever You May Be

Letizia Airos (May 29, 2014)



I remember you as if we are still conversing together. Because although you've left us, you're still in my life. And you'll always be alive in this New York that you have made more Italian than anybody else ever.

ARTICOLO IN ITALIANO >>> [2]

The first time I interviewed you, I stepped into your home, what in my imagination was a temple of design, almost afraid. And it certainly was a temple. The light seeped through a huge window and proceeded through an elongated living room.

The silence was deep but it as if music had been playing in the background, maybe Mozart...

At the end of the room, on the left, a big black desk. A metal sheet, one of those used to cover road



works on the streets of NY, that only you could have thought of using in this special way... to draw on.

Seated around that table we had our video interview and right there – but I didn't know it yet – we would have other long timeless chats...

I started off by asking you why you had left Milano. "It's too small – you said – too provincial. The ceiling is too low. I came to NY thinking that the ceiling would be higher here, only to discover that the ceiling here doesn't exist at all".

This reply marked the beginning of our friendship. Now I know. In a few incisive words you made me understand my own choice to live in NY.

Our association started pretty much straightaway, in fact on that day when you, during an official presentation, decided to broadcast that same interview on a big screen. It took me by surprise. I knew the contents were good, but I dreaded your aesthetic judgment. Yes, I was truly afraid of you. When I saw you introducing it with such pride, seated in a corner of the room I cried happy tears.

Timeless conversations. This is what I would call our afternoons spent talking. We talked about design, but not only. And it was normal for you. Design was in every breath you took, your scrupulousness touched every topic.

'Scrupulousness', a word that could sound boring, but it was never such with you. Your pencil would draw it, with those precise hands that I'll never forget. There was order and also the chaotic order, that part of you that you slowly unveiled to me. The famous 'Canone Vignelli', that formula, so fundamental for the new generations, those rules that instead of compressing creativity helped developing it.

I had a pure intellectual in front of me, with an approach to life dense with curiosity, with continuous desire to study, to go below the surface, always and in any which way. With that push to consistently do better, even the same things, but better...

We talked and I had the impression that my questions would not only be answered, but would themselves give you something in return. You asked me all sorts of things, your curiosity growing exponentially as soon that a technological topic would come up. I remember when I handed you my iPhone to touch a QR and watch a YouTube video. Your eyes, your smile, your voice, turned into those of a child amazed at the latest discovery. Steve Jobs, you so loved talking about him...and then the computer and all that had to do with it... Even with the troubles you said you encountered using it... but maybe that wasn't the problem. Maybe it was just that the pencil simply ended up prevailing. A battle you couldn't win. But I remember clearly when you stood next to Mauro Sarri while he was transferring your drawings onto the computer... How much attention looking for accuracy in what he was doing. And then, always beside you, your MacBook Air, your iPad, your iPhone.

It's true, the pencil always prevailed. Something else that surprised me once was a piece of paper abandoned on your desk before you were due to leave for somewhere. A list of what you needed to bring with you. A list that was not written, but drawn with extreme detail, from the underwear to the iPad charger.

Massimo, you supported our editorial project like few have! And you did it with endless generosity, by following it closely, but at the same time with respectful distance. You saw our magazine coming to life, advising us on how to simplify the graphic, presenting us with a new logo, discussing its contents with me.

There have been two moments when you grabbed your pencil suddenly, in your usual manner, and you did for us, in front of us.



I'll never forget those moments: when you started rethinking our logo and when you designed our car, our Fiat 500. The pencil, that black and white drawing, and those pastels to colour it. Fascinating. The initial insecurity of your hand, so beautiful, searching for direction, looking for the perfect traits. Then soon after the confidence of your mind that knew the right path.

And you never stopped interacting with us, asking for our advice...

A tricolour 500? It could have been aesthetically dangerous. You Massimo knew that from the very beginning. You wanted to design it yourself, and that's why you said: "Letizia I can't let i-Italy drive around NY in an ordinary car. You'll see, it'll stand out and it will be beautiful."

And how can I forget the day you saw it realized?!

We drove it to your doorstep and you started walking around it. Ten times? At least. You liked it, even though the red wasn't exactly what you expected. But you liked it. And the evening of the 'La fondazione' Gala you chased me saying: "Listen Letizia, I want to go back home with you, in the little car!"

The editorial staff of i-Italy adored you. You're in everybody's heart. When we worked together, filming, you'd interact with everyone, you'd remember their names, one by one. You wanted to find out more about them and Iwona, our photo reporter, who loves Italy and writes about it, was probably your favourite.

We have many memories of you Massimo, even though we've only known each other for three years. And now that you're not with us anymore, I can't think of anything else but those hours spent together in your home. We won't have any more of those moments.

I remember with how much anticipation you waited for the arrival of new furniture to hide some books that distracted your eyes in the living room. Anyone would expect Massimo Vignelli looking for an expensive designer solution...

But the man that I consider - without the slightest doubt - the greatest contemporary designer, could also love IKEA. You told us with firm conviction how fantastic and economical you deemed some of the solutions the Swedish brand proposed. And sure enough you picked one of those for your books.

And I then realized that the intellectual had once again taken over. You studied her, you studied her disease, you studied her mind. You asked your intelligence to help you love her even more.

Lella. A few months ago you issued a tribute to her. Amazing. Elegant. Unique. Design by Lella, an overview of the work you have produced together, not only design, but interiors, furniture objects, set-ups, fashion, jewellery. An electronic book that summarizes your whole life together, but that, above all, celebrates Lella and women. Women in the design world. All women.

I know that distributing in an electronic format was a conscious choice of yours. Your acceptance that the net has won over the paper - paper that has been fundamental in your design - but I sincerely hope that it could soon be published, for it to become a book that we can touch. Women, young people, children, couples at work together. They were all important reference points for you. You respected the feminine universe in a way only few know how to. You loved the young, in a way that was critical and constructive at the same time. You were extremely close to children.

It was very easy for you to empathize with other couples. And it happened to me when you met my partner. You welcomed him into your life. You two would talk about politics, not one of my favorite topics. You gave us plenty of advice which I hope we'll be able to follow.

I'm about to conclude this recollection of you, addressed to you before anyone else. And I'll do it by publishing one of your emails that revealed to me, once again, your greatness, not just intellectual,



but also human.

“ Thank you for sending me the copies of the i-Italy magazine and especially for the space dedicated to me. You truly are a darling. The magazine is improving and becoming increasingly more real... in the text of the interview there is a big interpretation and translation error, but don't worry, the readers won't notice....You translated 'scala' (scale) with 'scalinata' (staircase). The point is that I wasn't talking about staircases, but about scale as an intangible value. In Italian you'd use the same word, and it's the context that changes the meaning. If you replace 'staircase' with 'scale', you'll see everything will be right again. I wasn't talking about staircases, really not...! Try and read that paragraph again and you'll see the difference. As I said don't worry, it's not a scientific publication, otherwise I would leave a bad impression, here no one will notice...(at least I hope).”

The greatest contemporary designer. I regret that Italy, once again, hardly realized it.

I know, you said it Massimo: it's all because of the ceiling!

Massimo. Massimo the Great.

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