

Jasper Morrison Designer

“Atmosphere is also a function”

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For legendary British industrial designer Jasper Morrison, good design is not about the special, eye-catching or showy; rather, he creates objects that are remarkable for their simplicity, practicality and unobtrusiveness. Icon visited his London studio in the lead-up to Salone del Mobile to discuss his philosophy and latest work.

ICON When discussing your work you often talk about modernist principles like function and usefulness, but you also mention more abstract ideas like ‘atmosphere’. How do you reconcile these seemingly contrasting values? And what exactly does ‘atmosphere’ mean to you?

JASPER MORRISON Well, I think atmosphere is also a function. When you bring a chair into a room, it changes the

atmosphere and that’s an important effect of a product, because we feel different in different atmospheres. I’ve kept pretty much the same goal [since the beginning of my career], which is the idea that objects should create an atmosphere. In my head, there’s a certain ideal atmosphere, so I’m always designing for that imaginary space or mood, and looking for shapes or solutions that achieve this. It is hard to put into words, but I think you know what I mean if I say there are certain rooms you walk into where you feel good or inspired.

ICON You have used almost Darwinian language to describe design – for example, you’ve said if an item isn’t fit for purpose it won’t survive in the long run and that your work builds on the ‘evolution’ of typologies over time. Do you think of design as a natural, intuitive process? ▶

OPPOSITE Morrison in his London studio, with the All Plastic chair for Vitra





“I don’t feel particularly creative, in the sense of making forms”



JM It sounds like I’m treating the object world like an offshoot of the animal world. Yes, I’m very interested in how things have developed and where things come from. I don’t feel like I’m particularly creative, in the sense of making forms – if there’s creativity involved, it’s in observing all the things that have happened before and trying to summarise all that history in an object that still looks fresh.

ICON That sounds like quite an egoless way of designing. In general, the design industry resembles the worlds of art or fashion, where it’s important for products to be authored by named individuals.

JM Well there is that going on, but there’s also a lot that’s the very opposite – younger designers, especially, are very against all that signature stuff.

ICON In that context, do you think the Salone del Mobile, which is just around the corner, is still as important as ever?

JM It’s even more important. In 1979, there were probably 100 journalists paying any attention and most were writing for trade magazines; today there are 300,000

visitors and many journalists – there’s no comparison. Salone kind of recalibrates the whole design scene. It might be only ten pieces that do it, but those are the pieces that redirect the crowd and, from a designer’s point of view, that’s the appeal: to be one of those.

ICON But do you think the sheer volume of production that the design industry is engaged in at the moment is sustainable?

JM I think it’s a waste of time, more than a waste of resources – so many pieces just don’t sell, including some of the good ones. You would think people would learn but there’s an optimism in human nature that keeps them trying. The Salone is probably a minor ecological disaster, but there is a market for furniture – it’s going to be made anyway, so hopefully the better things will kick out the less good ones.

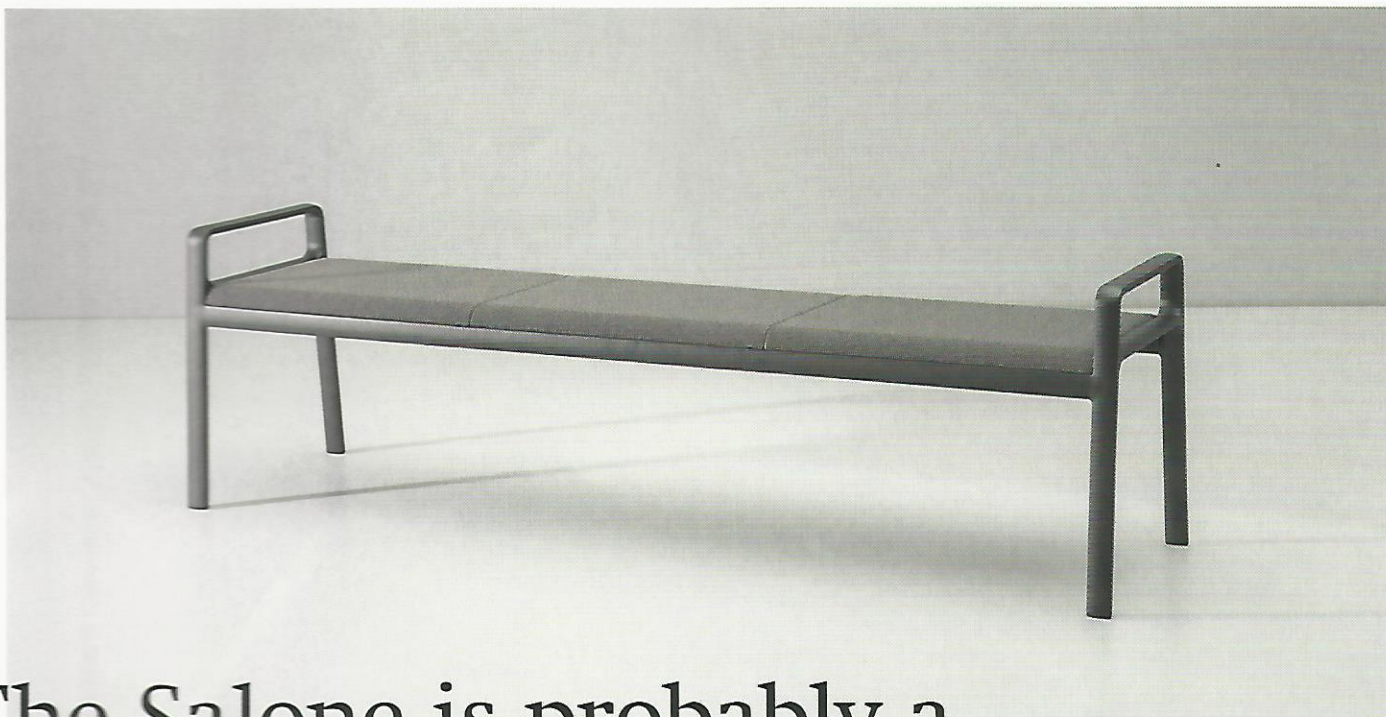
ICON Could you tell me about the designs you are launching in Milan?

JM We’ve probably got more products there than ever before. For Vitra, we have some tables, a sofa, a lounge chair and the All Plastic chair (APC). Of these, the ►

TOP RIGHT AC01
alarm clock for Punkt

TOP LEFT Bankside
sofa and armchair,
Morrison’s first
designs for B&B Italia

ABOVE XL December
Lounge chair for
Nikari



“The Salone is probably a minor ecological disaster”

longest running project was the APC, which took about two years and will join the Vitra Standards series: a collection of multipurpose chairs designed to work in various environments, from a kitchen to an office canteen to a bar.

If you make a chair out of one piece of plastic, there are limitations in terms of comfort and visual expression. With the APC, the idea was instead to use individual pieces for the structure, the seat and the back, which allows you to use the plastic in more complicated ways. For example, we developed a pivoting action for the backrest, so when you lean back, instead of hitting the sharp edge of the top of the chair, it tilts back and keeps the comfort.

We are launching several other items, including an outdoor furniture collection for Kettal, a sofa for Cappellini, armchairs for Emeco, an armchair and sofa for B&B Italia, and a writing desk for Molteni, which is a very old project originally designed for its subsidiary company Unifor.

ICON Do you prefer to work with brands you have long existing relationships with, like Vitra, Cappellini or Alessi, or do you actively seek out new collaborations? Which gives you more creative freedom?

JM They both do, in different ways. It's nice not to just go for companies that have huge distribution, but also ones that

have another kind of skill or quality. For example, I did a wood and leather chair for a tiny company called Nikari, which I couldn't have done with Vitra. But I couldn't have done the APC with Nikari.

ICON At the moment you are working on the restaurant at the new Tate Modern. Could you tell me about that?

JM We are responsible for the furniture – the chairs are wooden ones we designed for Muji almost 10 years ago, which aren't so well known outside Japan. They fit into the architect Herzog & de Meuron's idea of interiors, in the sense that they are quite normal-looking, rather than design chairs.

ICON You spend a lot of time at your Tokyo office – you're only in London about 30 days a year. What about the Japanese design philosophy appeals to you?

JM It's hard to explain. I like being there – I find it relaxing, probably because I don't understand what's going on. To be a stranger in a place and not understand everything is quite nice – you feel sort of light. The Japanese are fascinating – they have such a different approach to projects: much cooler, much less emotional, but still with something very human about it. I'm pretty detached from the British design scene – I'm just not in London enough to be part of it. ♦



FROM TOP Park Life bench and Riva chair, both for Kettal