

# Fun and functional

The exuberant designs initiated by the Memphis Group in the 1980s are back in vogue, writes *Jennifer Krichels*

At New York's furniture galleries and design shows, bare wood and brass abounds. The materials conjure visions of bucolic weekends in the countryside and farm-to-table meals in expansive Brooklyn lofts. But not everybody can relate. "I grew up in a glass apartment building in Midtown," says designer Rafael de Cárdenas, an unapologetic user of vibrant colour and bold pattern (not to mention déclassé materials such as gaffer tape): "The more divorced from the natural world, the more interesting it is."

Anyone who followed design in the 1980s might feel a twinge of nostalgia at those words. That is when the brazen character of the Memphis Group first made waves. Founded by Italian designer Ettore Sottsass, the group is said to have borrowed its name from a Bob Dylan song, "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again". In a new monograph of Sottsass's work (Phaidon Press, 2014), the designer is quoted as saying: "When I was young, all we ever heard about was functionalism, functionalism, functionalism. It's not enough. Design should also be sensual and exciting."

The shortlived movement left a big impression – its founding members debuted their work at Milan's Salone del Mobile in 1981, with products including Sottsass's eccentric Carlton bookcase, with angled shelves and bookends in primary colours and posing an underlying question: why does a bookcase need to look a certain way? Above all, Memphis was meant to provoke conversation.

While other postmodern collectives focused their attention on questioning the staid rules of modernism, the Memphis Group revelled in bright colours and exuberant designs.

The look is back in vogue: on album covers and in fashion lines. Just this spring, Memphis founding member Nathalie Du Pasquier lent her bold patterns to fashion brand American Apparel, and to a new collection of textile patterns called Wrong for Hay, a partnership between British designer Sebastian Wrong and Danish brand Hay. And at the Milan furniture fair in April, an exhibition of original Memphis furniture showed at Fondazione Stelline, spurring a host of new comparisons to work by young designers

showing across the city more than 30 years after the style's debut.

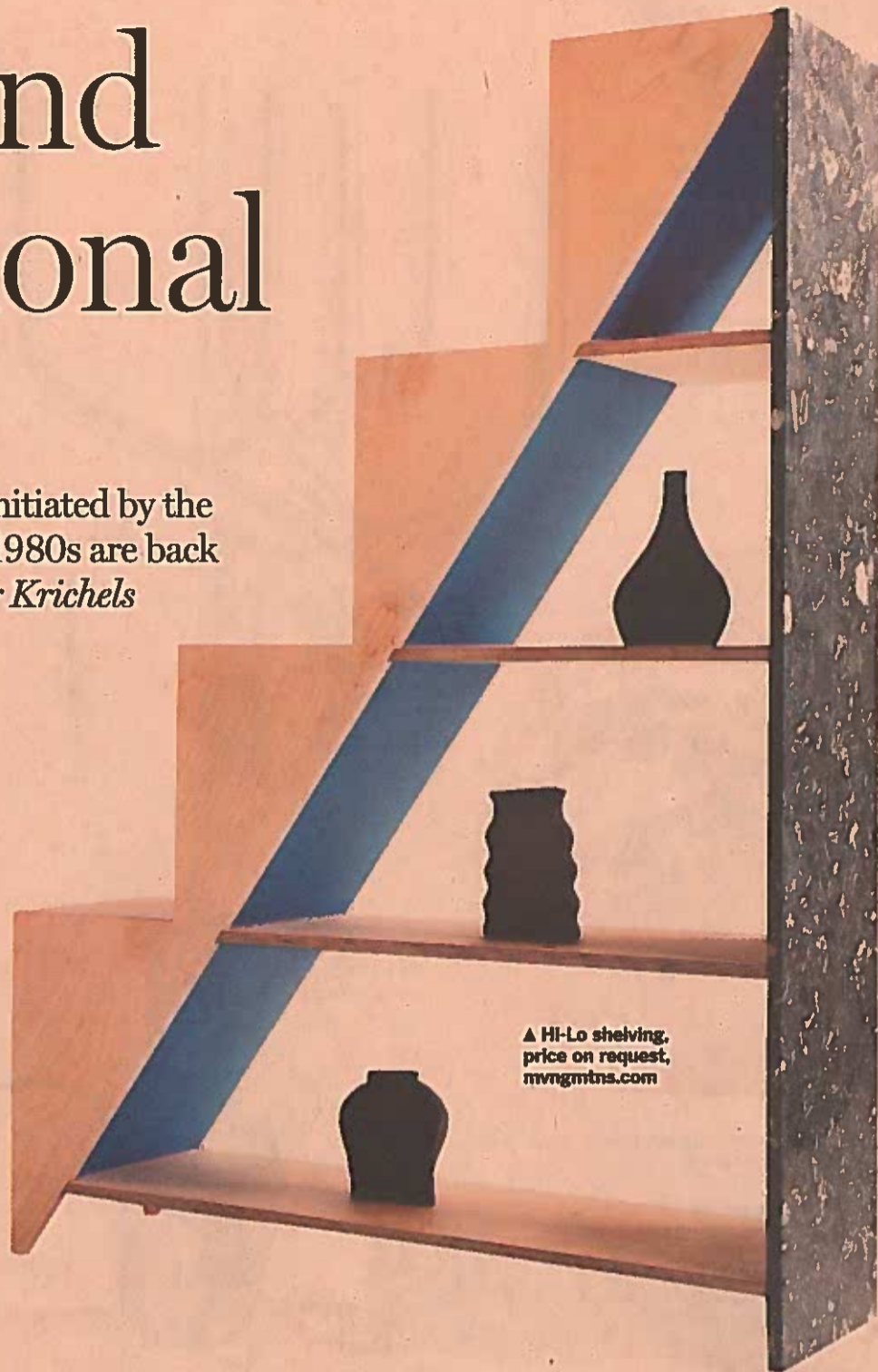
"I know why I like to reference Memphis," says de Cárdenas, who founded his studio Architecture at Large in 2006. "Purely for nostalgia. It feels like an aspirational moment in design, and when I became aware of the design world." His Le Cube-All, produced in limited edition, in a way echoes the Sottsass bookcase question: why does a valet tray have to look a certain way? The cube-shaped object has two halves with a cylindrical centre, and the designer reinvented the historic art deco lacquer process with car paint. Rods of acrylic or steel allow the owner to swap the base.

Beware of applying the "Memphis" label, though – it doesn't just mean funky shapes and bold colours. Zoë Mowat, a Montreal-based designer whose work has a strong sculptural influence, has been thinking about the trend since someone coined her work "nouveau Memphis".

"I feel like this new Memphis, or new iterations on postmodernism or whatever it is – is very much about surfaces. It comes through in surface, and not necessarily in philosophy, with the use of bold colours, patterns, textures and a variety of materials."

Mowat's new Tablescape series includes a console and coffee table with bookends, containers and slabs of granite to hold a teapot or mug. The idea of integrating objects into a tabletop was inspired in part by the early work of her mother, the sculptor Catherine Burgess. Mowat's Arbor jewellery stand is also a pleasing composition of minimal shapes with function; a platform for rings and a hand mirror hang from a dowel that can be removed and draped with necklaces.

She is not alone in honing in on a new hybrid of formal and fun. Syrette Lew, founder of Brooklyn-based design studio Moving Mountains, says she consciously wanted her Hi-Lo shelving to straddle the gap between the Memphis style and minimalism. "I find it interesting that the Memphis movement was a reaction to the minimalist movement, yet both are deeply rooted in geometric abstraction," she says. She incorporated engineered marble into the step-like shelving to reference the



▲ Hi-Lo shelving, price on request, [mvngmnts.com](http://mvngmnts.com)

▲ U-S chair, \$2,700, [assemblydesign.us](http://assemblydesign.us)



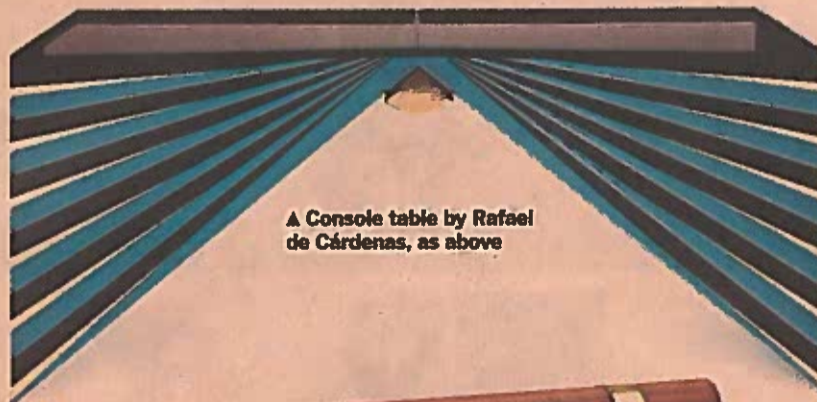
▲ Neo Maroc chair, \$4,500, [kellybehun.com](http://kellybehun.com)



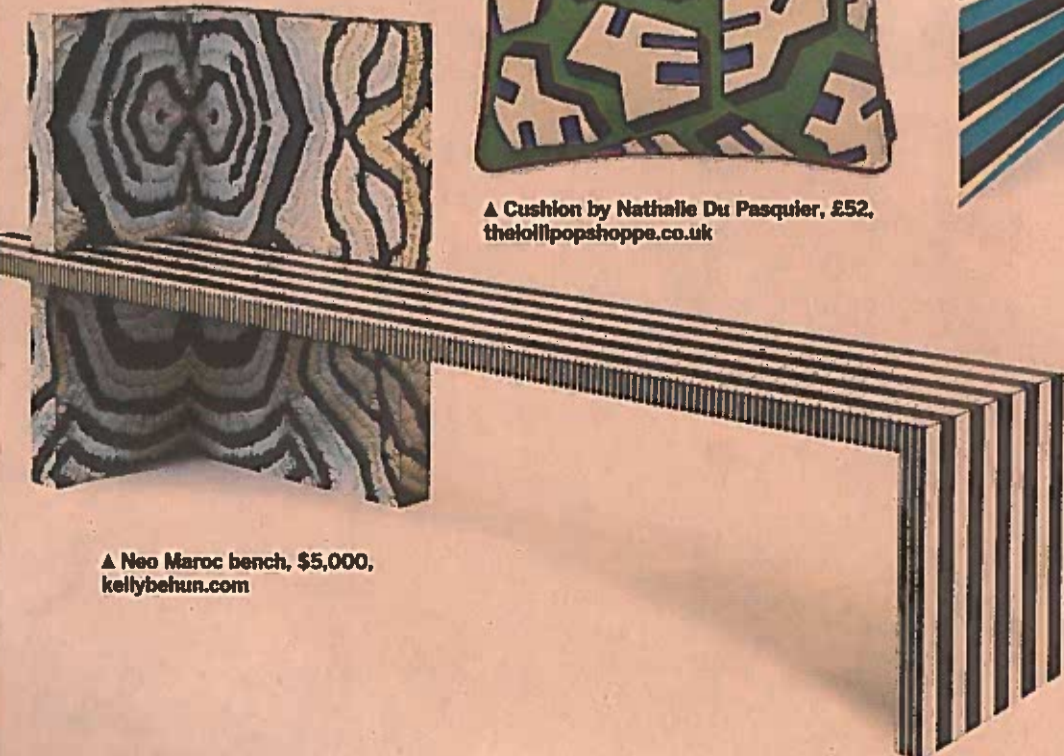
▼ Bench by Rafael de Cárdenas, part of a furniture collection for the Johnson Trading Gallery, [architectureatlarge.com](http://architectureatlarge.com)



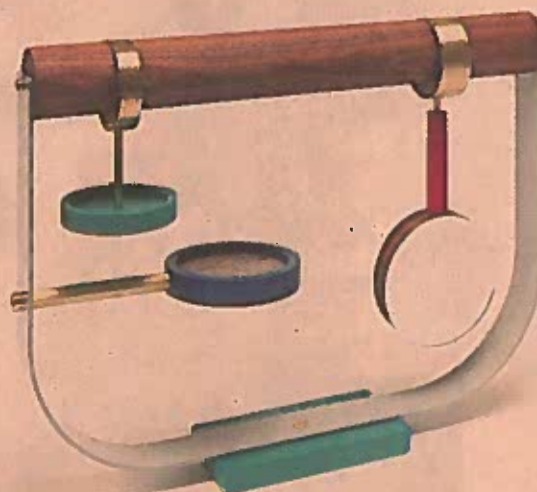
▲ Cushion by Nathalie Du Pasquier, £52, [thelollipopshoppe.co.uk](http://thelollipopshoppe.co.uk)



▲ Console table by Rafael de Cárdenas, as above



▲ Neo Maroc bench, \$5,000, [kellybehun.com](http://kellybehun.com)



▲ Arbor jewellery stand by Zoë Mowat, \$425, [store.dwell.com](http://store.dwell.com)

**Why does a bookcase need to look a certain way? Above all, Memphis was meant to provoke conversation**

laminated patterns often used in Memphis designs.

There is an appeal in light-hearted wackiness. "As someone who is used to designing very practical furniture pieces, it can be liberating and exciting to not have function be constantly at the forefront of your thoughts," says Lew. "The tenets of Memphis allow you to experiment and blur the line between art and design."

The ultimate goal is a new era, not just a flashback. "It is refreshing that the whimsical character that helped define the Memphis Group style is in fashion. Hopefully, this referential experimentation – playing with forms, colours and materials – will yield a fresh style," says Pete Oyler, who co-founded the design studio Assembly with Nora Mattingly in 2012. They recently created the U-S chair in collaboration with another New York studio, New Friends, and drew inspiration for the frame from the bold geometric, often towering shapes of art deco – a style in which Memphis is heavily rooted.

Earlier this year, a small group of independent designers that included Mowat, Lew, and Mattingly and Oyler became part of a new exhibition space in Manhattan's Tribeca neighbourhood. Named Colony, the gallery is funded with co-operative fees and aims to give its members – 13 so far – a new platform for their work outside of Brooklyn workshops and New York's high-end galleries. Its founder, Jean Lin, has curated the group and organised events in the space to invite conversation among the design community. "We are in a moment where our best designers are creating work that measures fun against function and finding the intersection of the two," she says. It is the type of rule-breaking that the Memphis Group might have approved of, even if there isn't a primary colour in sight.