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# Warm Stories

## ALDO CIBIC: DESIGN FOR A SIMPLE LIFE

**The technological wonders of modern living do not have to conflict with respect and understanding of the environment, but according to designer Aldo Cibic there needs to be some serious shifting of agendas to resist the isolation that is often inbuilt into the ways we live, work and play today. Moving beyond material ecological concerns, Cibic's projects combine outstanding aesthetic, environmental dignity and a greater sensibility to consumption on a myriad of scales.**

Text by Virginio Briatore

Aldo Cibic in his studio, Milan  
Photo: Siegrid Demyttenaere

How to improve quality of life without sacrificing a harmonious relationship with the environment has been a long-term reflection of Milan-based designer Aldo Cibic. Born in Vicenza 53 years ago, he finds the issue a source of constant reasoning, conscious that the point of balance between the planet and us needs to be continually identified and reset, because no one knows exactly where and what it is. The origins of his ideas are intimate, starting from the individual, from everyday behaviour, then scaled up to embrace businesses, villages, cities, populations and whole ways of life. It's an approach that sees the Italian drawing on personal reflections going back to 1980, when he was one of the founders of the Ettore Sottsass-led Memphis group, and which has been manifested in multiple forms including the Microrealities project for the Venice Architecture Biennial in 2004. His deliberations are stimulated and decanted on his incessant travels, at his simple ancient house in Galata (the Genoese district of Istanbul) and in the research which he organises for the schools where he is summoned to hold courses, such as the IUAV in Venice-Treviso, the Domus Academy in Milan and Tongji University, Shanghai. Design for living is an expansive banner to wave, but it's one that Cibic passionately brandishes.





*Where are you now with your reflections on 'design for living'?*

In the hands of the farmers! This has given me the strongest sense of fulfilment in recent years. I'll explain: my projects for embodying the relationship between 'homo technologicus' and nature in a new way of life were received with great enthusiasm by the Coldiretti, the principal Italian farmers union that represents 568,000 farms and founded Terranostra, the agriturismo association engaged not only in promoting farm-based holidays but also in multiple aspects of the city-countryside relationship. The most enthusiastic are the young farmers, the ones who are investing in the future. They see my projects [such as] The City and Allotments, A Simple Life, Reappropriating the Seasons and Agricultural Parks as a new approach to the countryside by city dwellers and at the same time a way of improving agriculture. So my projects fulfil two urges: that of town dwellers who want to spend some of their time in a close rapport with nature by growing their own vegetables, and that of farmers who want to continue to have a reasonable income while respecting the land, without following the stupid advice of those who want to turn over the fields to intensive monoculture by producing ethanol for road transport!

*For years you've been presenting small examples of different kinds of living. What does this mean?*

That I want to tell some 'warm' stories, because design today is cold. Today everyone is going after mega-development projects or monumental self-celebratory architecture, useless and inhuman, which fails to produce a better quality of life and merely perpetuates stereotyped lifestyles. We want to suggest new ways of doing business, with possible models of living for broad strata of the population. We self-finance our public-interest projects, build our own models and simulations, at a heavy cost to ourselves. But it's depressing to see that almost all the millionaire archistars refuse to invest in research projects unless they serve their immediate private interests.

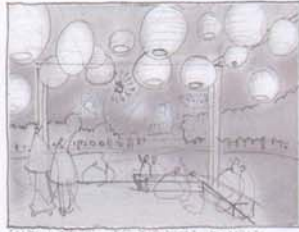
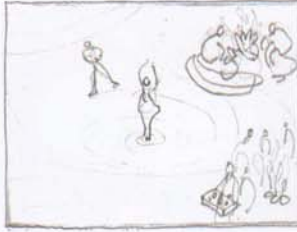
**The Garden City project presented at SAIE Spring 2008, Bologna fairgrounds,** is an innovative proposal for staying close to nature, offering numerous opportunities for interaction with the cyclical passage of the seasons. In an exhibition area of about 800 sq m, two residential units were planned, plus three teepees for an alternative break, a hide on stilts for meditation, a conservatory, two fruit and vegetable gardens, recreational and play spaces for adults and children.

Photos: Lorenzo Vitturi





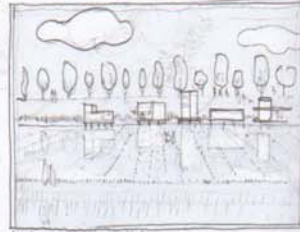
Winter pageant



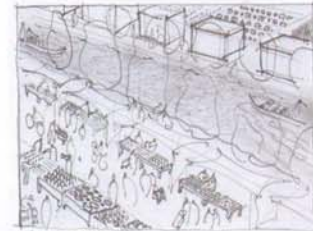
Winter solstice festival



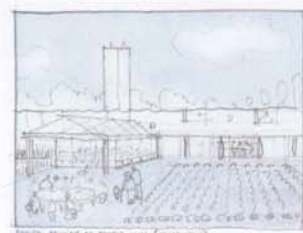
Chinese New Year



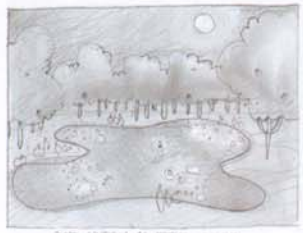
Lantern Festival



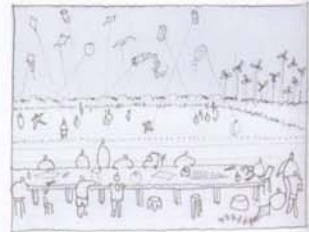
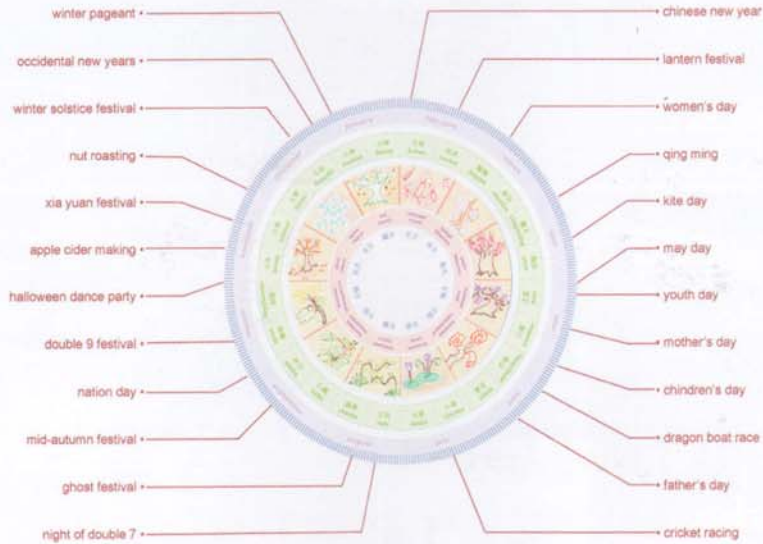
Women's Day



Qing Ming



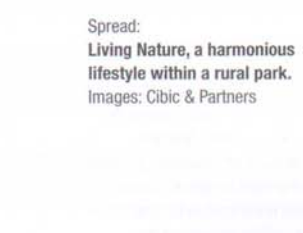
Kite Day



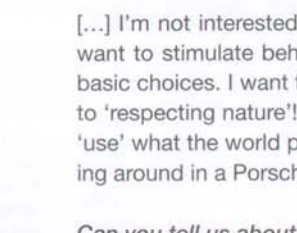
May Day



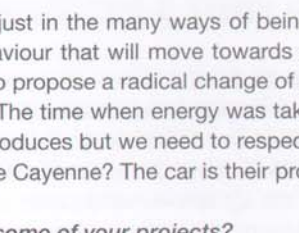
Youth Day



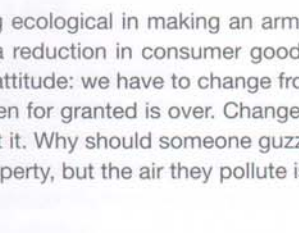
Mother's Day



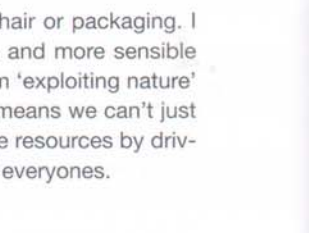
Children's Day



Dragon Boat Race



Father's Day



Cricket Racing

Spread:  
**Living Nature, a harmonious lifestyle within a rural park.**  
 Images: Cibic & Partners

[...] I'm not interested just in the many ways of being ecological in making an armchair or packaging. I want to stimulate behaviour that will move towards a reduction in consumer goods and more sensible basic choices. I want to propose a radical change of attitude: we have to change from 'exploiting nature' to 'respecting nature'! The time when energy was taken for granted is over. Change means we can't just 'use' what the world produces but we need to respect it. Why should someone guzzle resources by driving around in a Porsche Cayenne? The car is their property, but the air they pollute is everyone's.

**Can you tell us about some of your projects?**

There was The Simple Life, presented some years ago at the Abitare il Tempo fair in Verona. We pondered on how to use our leisure time, living a simpler life, closer to nature and its rhythms. You can enjoy living in a hut and having a vegetable patch, a lawn and trees. The cost of living is high and we might be able to get away from certain kinds of logic and reflect on how it could be an achievement and give us a sense of fulfilment if we succeeded in growing and consuming the produce of our own work. One [proposition] that might trigger a new kind of behaviour and new values is to work on the idea of making all sorts of micro-economies, with the objective of finding ways to share this type of project with other like-minded people. All too often we live in isolation and are caught up in our own problems. It is interesting to understand that these are the projects that will create new relationships and situations for a life in common.

**Another fascinating subject is how to find a decent hotel at a decent price. This issue is deeply felt in Milan, where you can pay €200 to sleep in a wretched hotel room or €400 for a 'normal' room that often comes with a noisy soundtrack.**

The issue is really dramatic: on the one hand unrestrained luxury and on the other seedy banality. In Milan now they're building nothing but five-star hotels. The only real innovations in the last decade have been in eco-tourism, which has given rise to numerous forms of rural hospitality, and artistic and cultural



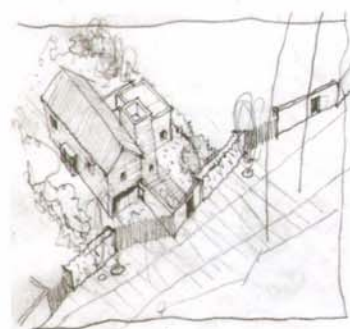
tourism that has favoured the spread of bed & breakfast accommodation in historic cities across Italy and [the rest of] Europe. Even in this sector the design of furnishings and the costs can be disappointing, but at least it has led to more personalised rooms and a greater sensibility to consumption. [This is] precisely because we don't want to feel we're in a 'hotel-house belonging to nobody', but feel we're guests in someone else's home. For years, I've been living with my wife and family in the lemon house of a Venetian villa in the hills outside Vicenza. In 2006 we rented rooms in the outhouse, where we organised bed & breakfast and put up tourists, travellers, clients or designers. They pay €80 for a double room set in an ancient park and equipped with wi-fi connections. That proves you can achieve an outstanding aesthetic and environmental dignity even without charging crazy and unfair rates.

**One of your research projects is expressly devoted to hotels and hospitality. What form does it take?**

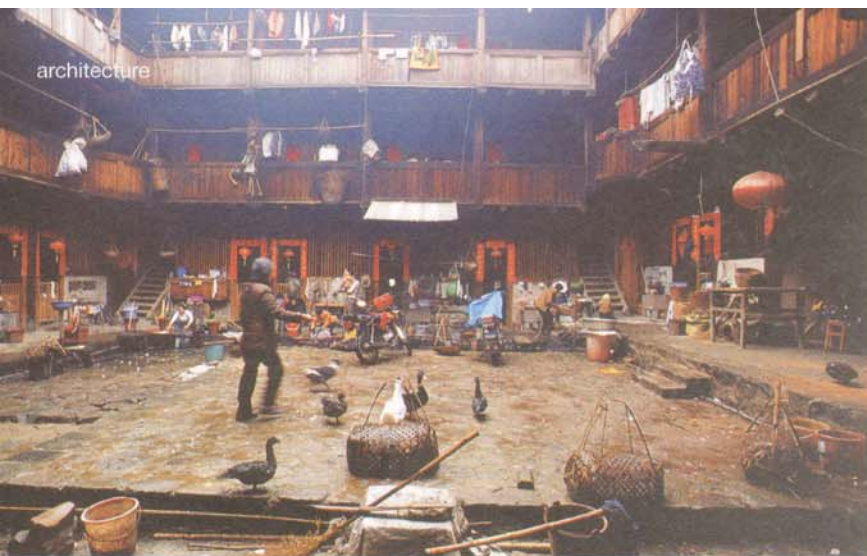
The project aims to rethink the classic hotel room, going beyond the idea of the 'room with a view' and theorising an innovative plan of work entitled View with a Room. It's a room open to the exterior: it can be admired in its entirety from outside. The bath is set inside a 'tower' that collects rainwater; the 'bedroom' is built entirely out of eco-compatible material, with all mod cons supplied by renewable power sources and various built-in systems for active and passive energy saving that I'll try to list. It has a 'green roof', which in winter works as a heat insulator to retain warmth and in summer cools the room below by evaporating water. The tower for collecting rainwater receives the run-off from the 'green roof', stores it in a cavity inside the tower and filters it for domestic use. An underground tank collects the excess water from the cavity in the tower and stores it in a special reservoir sunk in the ground, which is linked to the geothermal plant. The under-floor heating panels inside the room use the underground tank as a geothermal plant: the water is cooled in summer and heated in winter. The weathervane is an electricity generator that supplies power to the water pumps and to energy-saving bulbs. There's a system of filtering the water, so that the two circuits of 'grey' and 'black' water are purified in underground tanks and then used to water the garden. There are solar panels to produce hot water. Finally the building's passive envelope consists of walls made of wood laminate, which is an excellent thermal insulator. The project identifies these eco-sustainable guidelines with the objective of producing a low impact on the environment. At the same time it satisfies two important current trends in design for the hospitality industry: energy saving combined with the development of the market for eco-tourism.

**Have you managed to embody these concepts in concrete works?**

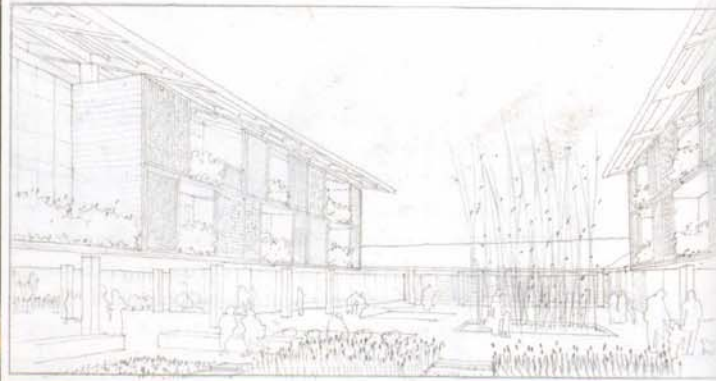
Certainly. You have to take one step at a time. I begin with colour, with some warm or apparently cheap materials, and then work my way up to commissions like one I received recently in China to build an Allotment City, 50km outside Shanghai. Here low density housing and energy saving will coexist with gar-







architecture



**Living Nature, a harmonious lifestyle within a rural park.**  
Images: Cibic & Partners

dens and allotments. The project is called Living Nature - A Harmonious Lifestyle within a Rural Park [and] proposes development of a green area covering approximately one million square metres, located within an idyllic landscape of ornamental gardens, verdant park, agricultural fields and natural wetlands. The proposal is to create a place in complete harmony – a community that is in perfect balance with its natural surroundings – where one could live forever or just go for a weekend. It is possible to create an ecologically sustainable community that also functions as a tourist destination where one could spend one's free time.

Enjoying the fruits of nature and living the rhythms of nature has become a priceless privilege and a new luxury. Here one will be able to tend vegetable plots, make wine, harvest organic produce, catch fresh fish while boating, and feed newborn ducklings in the spring. The area will be divided into two separate but integrated parts. The common denominator in the development of the two areas is the idea of creating micro-economies supporting a lifestyle related to the enjoyment and respect of nature, taking advantage of sustainable strategies that are advantageous to both and which offer new opportunities for growth.

The business programme developed for the northern area is based on the concept of 'visiting use' – with families, couples and young people on weekend breaks or business clientele requiring conference facilities on a short-term basis. A range of accommodations and support amenities will be planned to this end – business services, meeting rooms, rental suites/apartments, cabins, and recreational/sports programmes, all contained within a green 'park' setting. The second area is located on the island to the south. The concept is to create a private residential complex isolated within landscaped gardens, agricultural fields and the natural flora of this wetland ecosystem. Complete support services utilising ecologically sustainable strategies for energy, recycling, water management, permaculture and various other infrastructures will establish a high level of maintenance. Landscaping will guarantee privacy in this low-density area and create beautiful vistas throughout.

In reality these new ways of life are great generators of business, because the ecological issue concerns everyone and all types of production, starting from architecture and furnishings. The furniture industry today has an opportunity to draft a new code of beauty, a new aesthetic to reduce its environmental impact. In Europe and elsewhere there is a large middle class (earning between €50 - 100,000 a year) which is dissatisfied both with Ikea and with luxury furniture, and so it is deeply interested in a simpler way of life, less expensive, more sustainable for the planet but at the same time pleasant, relaxing and technologically advanced. #

[www.cibicpartners.com](http://www.cibicpartners.com)

Aldo Cibic will be art director of this year's Istanbul Design Week, [www.istanbuldesignweek2008.com](http://www.istanbuldesignweek2008.com)