



TO THE BONE

Left, Andrea Morgante, architect and designer, in his studio in London's Kensington. On the table is Morgante's first design for Alessi, the 'Megaptera' tray, £109, www.alessi.com

Right, an illustration and prototype of his 'Grow' ribbed watch, £84, also for Alessi, available from June



BODY CLOCK

Inspired by organic engineering, Andrea Morgante's new watch for Alessi is a natural beauty

PHOTOGRAPHY: PHILIP SINDEN WRITER: NICK COMPTON

Architect and designer Andrea Morgante keeps a camel leg bone and a crow skull in his London studio. He has an obsession, or a serious professional interest at least, with evolution's smartest engineering solutions. A camel, after all, is a weighty but mobile hunk of muscle and hide. 'A super heavy beast', as he has it. Morgante is intrigued about how the leg bone carries the load. And how the crow's skull can protect what it has to protect and yet feel so light and fragile. 'And it's the same company producing the camel bone and the crow's skull,' he says. 'And the same material and the same process.'

Morgante's fascination with organic engineering feeds naturally into his work. Last year he produced a stainless-steel tray for the Italian design company Alessi. The 'Megaptera' tray (named after the Megaptera whale) was ribbed and, apart from producing a rather nice effect, the ribbing also made the tray much stronger than it would have been if it was a flat piece of metal of the same thickness. It is another of nature's great design solutions and the tray was a sort of tribute to the smarts of natural selection.

Morgante has taken the rib idea and run with it on another Alessi commission, this time for a watch. The ribbing here isn't doing much of a job structurally, but again, the effect is striking. 'I looked a lot at the muscle fibres and tissue around the wrist,' he says. The ribbing

continues on the watch face, a radical move in the conservative world of watchmaking. 'As far as I know this is the first watch that messes around with the glass. It's always been sacred territory. But I wanted to continue the formal language and went pretty wild and dramatic.'

The watches look even more striking because they come in pop-bright colours and Morgante's live-work studio is almost all white. (He has called his practice Shiro Studio; *shiro* is Japanese for white). As well as the skeletal remains, there is a small but very detailed model of a Nasa astronaut. This could be Dr McCoy's quarters on the Starship Enterprise.

Designing a watch for Alessi means joining a very select band of heavyweight Italians such as Achille Castiglioni, Ettore Sottsass and Piero Lissoni, as well as select non-Italians such as SANAA and Patricia Urquiola. Morgante is a good fit with Alessi, part of the Italian tradition of architect/designers. 'You grow up looking back at that golden era of Italian design of the 1950s and 1960s, when there was no clear distinction between architects and product designers. Actually, I think design is the aspirin given to architects to take away the headaches.'

Morgante was born in Milan and trained in Italy, but moved to London in 1997 to work with RMJM before joining Future Systems in 2001. In 2006 he became associate director, working closely

with Jan Kaplicky. And it is clear that he considers Kaplicky, who died in 2009, as his mentor. His most treasured possessions are two fantastic Kaplicky drawings of futuristic vehicles and shelters.

Three years ago Morgante went his own way and formed Shiro Studio to design both buildings and objects, but agreed to see through the completion of Future Systems' design for the Enzo Ferrari Museum in Modena (see W 140). The museum is now just about finished, and as much as there is an emotional tie to the building, Morgante will be glad to move on. 'Architecture is a long process and can be very confrontational. There are a lot of people involved and everyone has their own agenda. With design it's just you and your ideas and the manufacturer.'

In this case, Morgante's two clients are Alessi, which approved his design pretty quickly, and Seiko, which was efficient but perhaps less adventurous than he would have liked. Still, he insists the process was simple. After all, this is not a piece of haute horlogerie, no fetishistic celebration of complications and movements. 'You always wonder who really needs that level of complexity. This is just a simple quartz movement and a battery that will last five or six years. The challenge isn't the mechanism, but to create something innovative in terms of the language and the way it relates to your wrist.' ★

www.shiro-studio.com