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WORDS // GIOVANNA DUNWALL  
PORTRAIT // JAMES MOLLISON

**Patricia Urquiola's star just keeps getting brighter, and her output is prolific. The Spanish designer was trained as an architect, but designs furniture and installations with equal style, and thrives on this diversity.**



## WHEN I MET PATRICIA URQUIOLA ALMOST TWO YEARS AGO, I WONDERED WHY IT HAD TAKEN HER SO LONG TO BRANCH OUT ON HER OWN.

Her forthright approach—she does not suffer fools gladly—should have allowed her to do it earlier, but the Spanish designer only opened her own studio at the age of 40. Seated in the meeting room of her Milan studio, which she opened in 2001, she explained: “Now I know that I can deal with whatever is asked of me.”

Eighteen months on and Urquiola is still riding the wave. In 2004, she was one of the hottest designers showing at the Milan Furniture Fair, with a series of tables, sofas and armchairs for driade, B&B Italia, Kartell, Molteni, Moroso and a carpet (along with Eliana Gerotto) for Paola Lenti. Her output is now as prolific as designers such as Philippe Starck. Since she is literally all over the place, geographically speaking, we decide to conduct our interview over the phone. Just back

from a week in Japan, and still suffering from a cold, she nevertheless talks with enthusiasm about the “credibility” she has acquired over the last three years.

“It’s something that you have to earn, and once you have it people know that you have a line you follow in your work, that you have certain professional and creative capacities,” she explains. Losing credibility is, she says, when you “lose all sense of what is contemporary”.

But Urquiola is in no danger of this at present. “It’s wonderful that I can propose what I have in my head and that I am listened to,” she says. However, she concedes, “Right now I would definitely say I’m at my limit.” She lets out a husky smoker’s laugh. “But that is my nature. Let’s hope that this rich and baroque period is

**FACING PAGE** Urquiola’s Malmö sofa and Fjord ottomans for Moroso, 2002. When in Copenhagen Urquiola admired the Oresund bridge, which joins Denmark and Sweden. The sofa represents that bridge, and the other pieces in the collection take their name from the Swedish city on the other side (Malmö). The collection was exhibited at Milan in 2003, where she was named Designer of the Year in the Elle Deco International Design Awards. **PREVIOUS PAGE** Urquiola sits on her Flo stool, produced in 2004 for driade. The stools are made of steel which is then painted and covered with wicker. **BACKGROUND** Pattern from the Rosa rug for Paola Lenti, 2004.



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< PATRICIA URQUIOLA >



COURTESY DEPADOVA AND B&B ITALIA



followed by a more serene and classical period."

That serene period may be a long time in coming, given Urquiola's rising star status and the fact that she thrives on diversity. Trained as an architect (she has two architectural degrees, one Spanish, one Italian), she was an assistant lecturer in Milan for two years under Achille Castiglioni, who is best known for his work with Alessi. He taught her, she says, that furniture and objects "should arouse curiosity, create different behaviour in people". This was followed by stints in the product development office of DePadova, with respected designer Vico Magistretti and the Lissoni Associati Design Group. It was at Lissoni that Urquiola was given two days off a week to pursue her own design projects—something she describes as "fundamental", and which she now

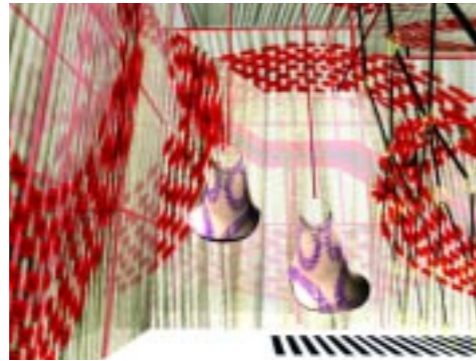
offers her own team—and which led, at last, to the formation of her own business.

She delights in applying her multi-disciplinary talents to architecture, design, installations, furniture and even to humble door handles and carpets. She likes to be working on several things at once, even over the course of one day. At the time of going to print, she was working on the Ideal House exhibition for the Cologne Furniture Fair 2005, together with Dutch designer Hella Jongerius, as well as on bathroom accessories, carpets and chairs.

"I'm not a specialist," she says. "Right now I'm passionate about one thing, next year it will be something else. I'm passionate about whatever I'm doing now."

"I like to provoke at the conceptual phase of the

**ABOVE** Void desk and Lazy chair for B&B Italia, 2004. The desk is named for its two clear panels which can sit flush with the surface or be set below the level of the table, creating storage shelving. According to Urquiola "these tables are a 3D game with wood planes which create pockets." The Lazy chair is designed to follow a body's contours. "I like chairs that have character, that can be used in a relaxed way," says Urquiola. **FACING PAGE** The Ola armchair and pouf for DePadova, 2004. The range is manufactured with a new vacuum technology that means the seat is entirely without seams. **BACKGROUND** Detail of the Lazy chair for B&B Italia, 2004. The covering is a fabric mesh made from perforated leather.



project. For example, my first project with B&B Italia was called Fat-Fat. The idea was based on an ashtray, which is usually a small object. I told them, 'I want to make objects which have some extra weight on them.'

The result was a series of round, almost childlike, colourful poufs-cum-tables-cum-storage spaces that defy categorisation, and which Urquiola says were appealing precisely because their "extra weight" was so unlike the Italian company's traditional products.

Then there was her Fjord range of chairs for Moroso, launched at the 2002 Milan Furniture Fair. The inspiration for the range came on a trip to Scandinavia with Patricia Moroso, where Arne Jacobsen's famous Egg Chair, the ultimate "icon of relaxation", was everywhere. She decided to cut the chair in half, so her Fjord chair comes in two versions: one "an asymmetrical object with just one armrest and a backrest which obliges you to

sit asymmetrically"; the other, a squatter chair with only a short backrest and a cleft in the middle. Both have visible stitching and a lighter look than the original, giving them a contemporary feel, while at the same time making them timeless.

**POSITIVE LIMITATIONS** .....

Patricia Moroso had the foresight to support and encourage the designer who has, in a short time, become her company's greatest asset. A healthy relationship with industry is all-important, says Urquiola. She explains how Lowland, her sleek and seductive second armchair for Moroso, did not sell at first. She and Patricia Moroso "knew we liked it", but they came to the conclusion that it was "just not a commercial product". They moved on to other projects, but in the meantime the product took off and is now the company's best-selling item.

**BELOW** Usame coffee table and magazine holder for Kartell, 2004. Urquiola describes this as "an essential plastic table which wants to disappear". "After all these years of severe and clean design, we don't have to become baroque," she says. "There are many of us now who are not afraid to do something in a more sweet and simple way." **FACING PAGE** The Ideal House for the International Furniture Fair, Imm, Cologne, 2005. Urquiola has focused on the literal meaning of the words: "An ideal does not exist in reality. It only exists in our imagination. As soon as it becomes reality, immediately a new ideal is created." Correspondingly, she understands the design of her house as not-ideal and simply wishes to create an ephemeral "ideal moment". In Urquiola's hands the 'house' becomes a *housse* (which is French for a furniture cover): the structure is enveloped by industrial scaffolding, in the way that an overcoat envelops its wearer. **BACKGROUND** Pattern from the Usame coffee table.



COURTESY PATRICIA URQUIOLA STUDIO AND KARTELL



“If the object makes a statement but is not an industrial product, then I am simply not interested in it.”

< PATRICIA URQUIOLA >

**ABOVE** Urquiola in her studio, working on the prototype for a new chair. “Somebody who’s set on being hip and up to date has a big problem,” says Urquiola. “Even if you come up with a good draft on day one, you need at least a year to develop the prototype. Manufacturing takes another year, and you can add two more for sales. Seen from that perspective, it’s not easy for designers to be trendy.” **BACKGROUND** Pattern from the Asperala rug for Paola Lenti, 2004. The rug (and the Rosa on page 28) were made with longtime friend and frequent collaborator Eliana Gerotto. They are created from ‘virgin’ New Zealand wool by an Oriental technique known as hand-tufting.

Urquiola is adamant that she is not a one-woman show. “The term ‘industrial design’ contains two words: ‘design’ and ‘industrial,’” she says. She relishes the production process, that “step-by-step process which maintains the sense of the concept, but ensures that the product is repeatable. This gives a certain humility to the initial project,” she says. “You might lose some freshness, but you gain solidity. I like this limitation very much. It requires altering your own ideas and taking the industrial into account.” She concedes that this willingness to negotiate may, in part, be due to her sex, but Urquiola is reluctant to become a spokesperson for female designers, saying only how lucky and happy she is to have achieved what she has.

As staff begin to interrupt our conversation, I am reminded of how many people want a piece of Urquiola right now. Yet I am also convinced that

she really means it when she says that, fame or no fame, she is “passionate about what I do and I always knew I wanted to do this”. She hopes that up and coming designers have a similar sort of work ethic.

“I hope that they don’t just want to become stars or create crazy objects with crazy new technologies. Of course it’s easier and more direct to make a new product using a new technology,” but, she believes, truly contemporary language in design comes from a complex “melting pot” made up of “things from your memory, things from contemporaneity, classical things and things from other sectors”.

She wants to create objects that people actually use. “If the object makes a statement but is not an industrial product, then I am simply not interested in it,” she says. With that, she sends me a “warm hug” down the line and is off.