

PART
E

"I'm a genius"

Autistic Stephen Wiltshire in his element as an artist



E4

Final ZoukOut?

Annual festival may be held for last time this year



E5

A surprising result

Taking the Prius taxi on a test drive



E24&25

Life!

THE maestro APPROVES

Mario Bellini, considered one of the best architect-designers of his time, is all praise for Singapore's conservation efforts. **NATASHA ANN ZACHARIAH** finds out more.

E12&13



NEW DIRECTION

With designer Nicolas Ghesquiere now at the helm of Louis Vuitton, the French luxury house is planning to go bigger with its ready-to-wear collections. **GLADYS CHUNG** reports.

E6





Mario Bellini's architectural projects include the Tokyo Design Center in Japan (above and left), the Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre museum in Paris (top) and the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia (right).



BORN TO DESIGN

Famed Italian architect-designer Mario Bellini has created works that are now iconic pieces

Natasha Ann Zachariah

After a day of exploring Singapore, Italian design maestro Mario Bellini is in awe. But it is not the new architecture or the glittering skyline that impresses him. The 79-year-old, regarded as one of the best architect-designers of his time, is enamoured of older buildings and the preservation of green pockets in the city. For example, he describes old shop-houses in Blair Road as historical gems and marvels at the green expanse of The Park in St Andrew's Road has been retained. Bellini, who has been in transit at the Changi Airport many times but saw the city for the first time two weeks ago, says: "It would have been such a crime to destroy the historical roots of this place. These same contemporary, modern buildings can be found everywhere else. "But these historical buildings, which have survived for decades, tell how a

place started. To live in a place without recognisable historical signs, it's really sad. You feel nowhere." The Milanese was in town as part of a designer showcase by Cassina, a luxury furniture label sold at Dream Interiors in River Valley Road. Bellini is a superstar in his own right. The multi-hyphenate maestro has had his finger in all the design industries in the last six decades of his career: architect, industrial designer, teacher, art exhibition curator, car designer and magazine editor.

At 24, he graduated from Milan Polytechnic's faculty of architecture. A young and newly married man, he needed a job but found it difficult to land a position as an architect.

So he took up the post of design director at La Rinascente, an influential chain of Italian department stores which was looking for someone to design furniture, furnishings and packaging. Never mind that he had barely designed a building, let alone a table or a chair, at that time. But the three years he was there proved to be the start of an illustrious career.

In 1952, he won the Compasso d'oro, a prestigious monthly magazine on architecture, design and art. It is a post he holds until 1991. At the same time, he begins to branch out globally, handling numerous architectural projects worldwide. One of his major works is the Tokyo Design Center, which look about four years to build and is completed in 1992. 1987: The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York organises a retrospective, Mario Bellini: Designer, the first retrospective on a living artist. Today, 25 of Bellini's works are in the museum's collection. 1998: He completes many projects in Japan, such as the Yokohama Business Park (1991) and the Risonare Vivre Club Complex in Kobuchizawa (1992). He also branches out to projects in other countries, such as the extension and redevelopment of the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia, where the design phase started in 1996. 2001: Wins his eighth Compasso d'oro for the Bellini Chair, which he designed in 1998. The chair was bought by MoMA for its safe as well as by the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, also in New York. Since its launch, the chair has won numerous awards, including the 1999 Bronze Idea Industrial Design Excellence Award from the Industrial Designers Society of America. 2003: Receives the Ambrogino d'oro, a prize conferred on the most prestigious citizens of the Municipality of Milan. 2012: Work on the Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre museum, which he designed, is completed. The museum in the Visconti courtyard, at the heart of the Louvre, took him and French architect Rudy Ricciotti seven years to design and build. 2014: Designing a new eco-city in Zhenjiang, China. The project, near the Yangtze river, will house one million people.



PHOTO: MARIO BELLINI AT DEPARTMENT OF ISLAMIC ARTS, LOUVRE (© ALBERT GREENWOOD)

tigious and the oldest industrial design award in Europe, for a table. The minimalist piece did not have a name then and was made after only a few initial sketches. It was one of eight Compasso d'oro awards he would go on to clinch. These include wins for Le Bambole (1979), a collection of bean-bag-like sofas and chairs, and the Praxis 35 typewriter (1981) for Olivetti, an Italian manufacturer of gadgets such as computers, smartphones, printers and calculators.

He says of his early success: "I discovered that I was able to design things and I believe in it and I go on and on until I'm satisfied."

After his stint at La Rinascente, he was headhunted to become the chief design consultant at Olivetti, where he stayed until 1991. His iconic Programma 101 in 1964 was a desktop electronic calculator and is considered one of the early precursors to the personal computer today. Along the way, he designed for other brands such as furniture and lighting, labels Flos, Artemide, Vitra, B&B and Cassina. One of his creations was the famous Cab 412 chair, designed in 1977, of which more than 500,000 pieces have since been sold around the world. He also made his mark in car design, having designed with Renault, Fiat and Lancia. In 1972, he collaborated with car-makers Citroen and Pirelli to design Kar-a-Sutra, a spacious car prototype for an exhibition. The open-top car, with its apple-green shell, was designed like a living room on wheels. The concept car, regarded as an inspiration for future models of minivans, was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York for an exhibition on Italian design. In the 1980s, after a successful run with product design, Bellini went back



Other designs: Bellini's (left) Cab 412 chair (above), electronic calculator Divisumma 18 (right) and car concept Kar-a-Sutra (left below). PHOTOS: MARIO BELLINI ARCHITECT(S), AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

his first love - architecture. He started with projects such as the Technical Commercial Secondary School Rolando di Piazzola in northern Italy, which was completed in 1987, and the Tokyo Design Center in Japan in 1992. Bellini, who has been a design professor at various institutions over the years, says the realms of product design and architecture are very different. "The only connection between them is me. You should never mistake the human scale. A tray, a table, a room, a villa and a skyscraper are all growing in scale as you design, so you should set your brain to that scale. "If you're designing an 800m-long building, it's absolutely forbidden to think of it as a long table," explains Bellini, who designed the Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre museum in Paris, with French architect Rudy Ricciotti. It was completed two years ago. He says he sketches only after he has formulated an image of a product or building in his mind, instead of going straight to the computer, as many young architects are wont to do these days. "I'm able to design only if there is

silence and I can imagine how the architecture will look like. In my mind, it's 3-D. If I sketch it, it's like a 2-D picture and you can't see anything," he explains. He does not disdain technology though, and gets his younger architects in his Milan office to help turn his designs into virtual reality.

He jokes that he "torments" them, as he is precise about what he wants. He sits with them and tells them exactly how, for example, the light should shine and what materials to pick. "I work with the best architects and I sit by their side, tormenting them, until the final rendering is what I want. They couldn't have done that on their own. I'm absolutely tormenting them to the end, but they're happy because they learn." It is a method that works - often, the renderings are carbon copies of the actual product, which confuses clients looking at photographs of the real thing and mock-ups of the project.

He will hit 80 next year but the father of four - his son Claudio, 51, is also a celebrated architect and designer - is not slowing down. His first wife died about 12 years ago, and he has since remarried Elena, a 46-year-old journalist. "Normally, architects die on the construction site... If you retire, you die immediately because you get lost. It's rewarding work. As soon as you create, you're alive." So he is very much involved in designing new projects and getting new business. "Of course I get angry sometimes because they create so many different versions of my own product. But if they are copying it, it means that it's successful and they can get money out of it."

Bellini, who has 25 of his works in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, ends the interview with a word for aspiring architects. "To be an architect or designer, you need a visual art attitude, where you have to be able to draw and be interested in things such as music, art and literature. If you don't have it, don't enter the profession. It's not a job, it's a way of life." natashaz@sph.com.sg

Bellini's milestones

- 1935:** Born in Milan on Feb 1.
- 1959:** Graduates from the Milan Polytechnic's Faculty of Architecture and starts working as an architect.
- 1961:** Department store chain La Rinascente makes him design director.
- 1962:** At 26, wins the Compasso d'oro, a prestigious industrial design award for a minimalist table. It is re-issued by Spanish design company Andreu World in 2004 and named Catesius, with an updated look.
- 1963:** Becomes chief design consultant for Olivetti, an Italian manufacturer of computers, tablets, smartphones, printers, calculators and fax machines. Stays on until 1991.
- 1972:** Designs Divisumma 18, an electronic printing business calculator manufactured by Olivetti. It is considered revolutionary because it is a compact, portable device and uses plastic, a new material at the time.
- 1973:** Starts his own architectural and design firm, Studio Bellini, in Milan.
- 1986:** Becomes editor of Domus, a prestigious monthly magazine on architecture, design and art. It is a post he holds until 1991.
- 1987:** The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York organises a retrospective, Mario Bellini: Designer, the first retrospective on a living artist. Today, 25 of Bellini's works are in the museum's collection.
- 1998:** He completes many projects in Japan, such as the Yokohama Business Park (1991) and the Risonare Vivre Club Complex in Kobuchizawa (1992). He also branches out to projects in other countries, such as the extension and redevelopment of the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia, where the design phase started in 1996.
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- 2012:** Work on the Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre museum, which he designed, is completed. The museum in the Visconti courtyard, at the heart of the Louvre, took him and French architect Rudy Ricciotti seven years to design and build.
- 2014:** Designing a new eco-city in Zhenjiang, China. The project, near the Yangtze river, will house one million people.



Quiet Spaces, a line of room designs by Steelcase, has dimmable lighting as well as nooks for introverted workers. PHOTO: STEELCASE

Work sanctuaries for introverts

Washington - When Facebook finishes construction next spring on its massive new campus in Menlo Park, California, one of its rooms will be big enough to hold 10,000 employees.

That is not what Susan Cain, author of Quiet: The Power Of Introverts In A World That Can't Stop Talking, would call a productive space. Cain, whose book on introverts quickly became a bestseller in 2012, has spent the past year sharing her research with design company Steelcase to come up with a workplace alternative to the now nearly ubiquitous open-office plan.

The result is a line of room designs, called Quiet Spaces, that debuted last month at NeoCon, the largest interior design conference in North America. Cain says introverts make up somewhere between one-third and half of the American population.

These are people whose best ideas tend to come when they work on their own rather than in teams and who can feel sapped or distracted by the bustle of a room full of chatty employees. In fact, she says, research shows that - for introverts and extroverts alike - every interruption doubles the time it takes to complete a task.

Yet, roughly 70 per cent of United States workplaces are designed in the open-plan format, in which employees occupy a sea of cubicles and desks with very few private offices. "The sea of sameness was great because it drove real estate efficiencies," says Mr Allan Smith, vice-president of global marketing for Steelcase. "But people were commoditised in the process." Open-office plans came into vogue in the 1950s, when American companies began to see the advantages of a flexible and low-cost arrangement for holding their growing number of white-collar workers.

The book Cubed, which explores the history of the cubicle, even notes how early adopters of the design found the lack of walls liberating. In the decades that followed, more and more walls came down and workplaces saw the advent not only of office-less floor plans but also of flex spaces and hoteling, where employees trade in their fixed desk for the ability to occupy any that are unused - allowing companies to further reduce space. A study by CoreNet Global, a corporate real estate association, estimated that the average square footage an American worker will need will drop 35 per cent between 2010 and 2017.

"There's a mountain of research suggesting that radically open offices are a problem," Cain says. Among the issues are an increase in sick leave and stress, and a decrease in productivity. Also, and perhaps counter-intuitively, co-workers are less likely to form strong relationships in such spaces, Cain notes. That is because trust tends to emerge from a sharing of confidences, which more often happens where there is greater opportunity for privacy. Having transparency in an organisation is "not the same as saying we need to be physically available and on display throughout the day," Cain says. "People take a concept like that and missapply it." What Cain and Steelcase are putting to market, then, are essentially five work rooms that can be dropped into existing open offices to provide a sort of introvert sanctuary. As Cain points out, the rooms are also intended to give extroverts some privacy and respite for the times when they, too, need a quiet space to think. "It's kind of thrilling," she says. "When you're researching a book, you have all these ideas floating around in your head, but you never think they'll be realised in a concrete way." The prefabricated rooms, which cost from US\$10,000 to US\$25,000 (\$12,420 to \$31,040), have names such as Be Me and Flow, and feature dimmable lighting and tinted glass. For those seeking solitude on the job, any room with four walls would likely do the trick. But if nothing else, the introvert-branded designs take a stab at recasting what it means for a workplace to work for its employees. [Washington Post](http://WashingtonPost.com)

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