

Hi, I'm Mauro Porcini, PepsiCo's chief design officer. Join me for our new series where we dive into the minds of the greatest innovators of our time with the goal of finding what drives them in their professional journey and in their personal life, trying to uncover the universal truths that unite anyone attempting to have a meaningful impact in the world.

This is In Your Shoes.

For the longest time, design only existed for the elite and for a small insular culture.

I've worked hard for the last 20 years trying to make design a published subject, including the guest of today.

Time magazine describes him as the most famous industrial designer in all the Americas.

He's an Egyptian-born and Canadian-raised designer.

His award-winning designs include luxury goods, furniture, lighting, surface design, branded entity, packaging, and interiors for companies like Veuve Clicquot, Umbra, 3M, Samsung, Hugo Boss, Audi, and PepsiCo.

His work is featured in 20 permanent collections, multiple publications, and he exhibits arts in galleries worldwide.

He's a perennial winner of the Red Dot Design Award, of the Chicago Athenaeum Good Design Award, ID magazine Annual Design Review,

IDSA Industrial Design Excellence and many other awards.

He's a frequent guest lecturer at universities and conferences globally, disseminating the importance of design in everyday life.

He holds honorary doctorates from OCAD Toronto and Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington.

He's been featured in magazines and books including Time, Vogue, Esquire, GQ, Wallpaper, and countless more.

Karim Rashid, welcome to In Your Shoes.

Thank you, thank you. Thank you, Mauro.

It's such a pleasure to have you with us today, really, really a pleasure.

You're one of the most eloquent designer that I ever met, somebody that on top of doing great things

across so many different categories

is also able to talk about design and to inspire people with your words.

So, today it's really, really a pleasure to have you with us.

[Maybe?] you should say that when it's over.

No, I just put...

Whether I'm eloquent in this discussion or not, so...

I'm putting pressure on you, Karim

Yeah. I'm joking.

Full disclosure, Karim Rashid and I, we're really good friends

and we had many of these conversations
in so many different kinds of situations over the years.
So, today you are seen by everybody as a global citizen.
You are a design star renowned all around the world,
in every corner of the planet.
But as anybody else, you started from somewhere.
You were born in Egypt, in Cairo
and then your journey in life and your professional journey
brought you all the way to New York where you live today.
But once again, you really are a citizen of the world.
So, how can anybody else coming from any city around the world
do a journey like the one you did?

What was your secret?

What was your journey?

Can you tell us a little bit about that journey?

Sure. I think, first of all, this September I turn 60, Mauro.
So, I'll talk about my childhood which was 1960 when I was born.
And if you think about that time in retrospect
compared to the time we live in now, they're worlds apart.
It's as if we have a whole new planet, a new population.
It's fantastic, that shift in 60 years what's happened to the world.
First of all, my father was a painter and artist
and a set designer for television and film.

And when he was studying, after he finished Cairo,
he spent many years traveling around Europe
studying under great painters, Andre Lott and Gromere in Paris.

He was in Athens.

He was in Rome.

And when I was born and my brother was now at this point two, the two of us,
my father decided that he really needed to leave Egypt again.

I think he was a very restless type.

He was probably the black sheep in the family
because he was oldest of 11 children, imagine.

So, he probably felt he had a lot of responsibility in Cairo with the family.

And being an artist, he was the only artist in the family really.

So, we went off to Rome from Cairo.

And when we got to Rome, my father had a job with Cinecitta
and he worked on film set design.

And so, I was very, very young.

I don't remember this very well.

But after a year and a half in Rome, we went to Paris.

And after a year in Paris, he had an exhibition
at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris.

So, he just packed up, took the family.

It was a little white Austin mini that he had, a 1958 white Austin mini.

They drove, from Rome to Paris,

for like five days, whatever it took.
We got to Paris and then in Paris
after his exhibition ended after four, five months,
we moved to England, my mother's British.
In England he worked on a job with BBC television.
At that time CBC in Canada owned BBC.
And they invited him to come to Canada.
So, when I was now about seven, we got to Canada.
And on that ship going to Canada,
there was a little drawing competition for children.
And I by the way probably from the age of one,
every maybe two or three days a week,
I spent with my father drawing buildings, churches, objects.
We were always drawing together and really discussing
in a very abecedarian way disgusting design really.
So, it was a drawing competition, maybe 200 children
and I remember everybody drawing around me and
I really didn't know what to draw because everybody was drawing the ocean
and the ship or the family and the sun.
And I was fascinated with the fact that we took our apartment in London
and packed it in a few crates and managed to put it on this ship
and we're leaving forever.
So, I drew luggage.
And that's what I drew.
So, I drew boxes with my father's shirts lined up
and my mother's shoes and the way they would open,
I kind of drew really distorted drawings of
how they would open and close with the old drawers.
And I won the drawing competition which I'm very proud of.
I think that's the award in my life that I'm most proud of.
So...
- The first one. - The first one.
And we got in Montreal, I was seven.
And it was expo.
And Expo 67, of anybody that's,
if you're young, and you don't know much about it,
it would be great to do a lot of research about it.
I think it was probably the last great global, world exposition.
And Buckminster Fuller did the US pavilion
and Nurvee did the Italian pavilion and
it was amazing what was shown and what was done for that Expo Montreal.
And it was something called Man and His World which was very sci-fi-like.
It was really fantastic.
With Habitat, with a whole apartment complex called Habitat, that was built,
they were override trams that were electromagnetic.
It was all very space age in a sense

and very much about a utopian future in Montreal this.
And since my father had two months to wait to get his job,
we went every day as children.
You can imagine the influence and the impact that had on it.
But then even more so, here I am now in school
learning French and English and my brother,
which is older than me, he was learning Italian when he was in Rome, etcetera.
I think just having parents that were very disparate cultures,
and that the amount of traveling
they had already done, they got married in Athens.
I think we were so exposed to all that.
That it was a sort of restlessness in our family
where we never really felt anywhere was home.
After Montreal for a couple of years, we went to Toronto
and Toronto at that time was a village compared to now.
Montreal was the city in Canada at that time, the more avant-garde place.
But in Toronto, you know, we grew up there.
But even in Toronto,
down the street that we lived on where I was at downtown,
right beside me was like the Polish district
with six or seven Polish bakeries and delis.
Around the corner was the Italian district.
Around the corner from there, there was Greek and Greek orthodox.
Then it was Jamaican town and Toronto was very much
like a small New York in the sense of really multicultural.
In such a melting pot, I'd say much more
so even than New York, more so than the States,
because everybody that came to Canada
were more or less, you know, first generation.
So, the diversity of cultures I was brought up with as a child,
so when I was sitting in class
and every child around me was either Punjab, Croatian, Yugoslavian,
it was Russian, I just assumed this is the world.
I assumed as a child, at the age of 10 that the whole world is like this.
And until I actually traveled independently,
and I think the first time I actually gone
on the plane and left North America,
I went to Rome at the age of 22 to go and study my masters in Milan.
I landed in Rome and I got to a place
that was chaos and beautiful, it's amazing.
But it was completely uni-cultural.
It's happening, everything was Italian, everything.
And if you were a foreigner there, you were a tourist, looking, walking around,
and I landed there in August by the way which I won't go on about but it was so...
You were by yourself.
Yes, I ended up sleeping in the train station.

I remember I couldn't find a pensione because everything was full, like for me it was quite an experience, beautiful experience actually but hard. I got robbed.

I got all, everything went chaos, finally got to Milano.

But anyway, so just to go back to what you said is I think a need, there's always been the sense that the world is one.

And there shouldn't be any boundaries or borders and we should just be able to maneuver and travel the world.

And just because I'm born in a certain place,

I don't really believe because that land under me at that point in time belongs to whoever that I am automatically of that culture, that place and have to be nationalistic or patriotic, etcetera.

I feel like eventually hopefully one day there won't be any boundaries and borders and that one part of the earth, I can go live there if I'd like.

I can choose anywhere I like to live.

And that sense of nomadicism in me has always kind of prevailed and always made me, how can I say?

Never quite feel like I belong anywhere in a way.

But for me in a good way, I don't mean that in a bad way.

I feel very free I'd say.

I've always felt this way.

So, if I listen to what you're saying, the idea of diversity not just in yourself but in the people that surround you,

has been at the base of everything you always did.

It's been at the core of your way of innovating and your design.

Not just once again in the way you grew up but in the people that you surround yourself with.

Today we talk so much about diversity as this theme.

What's your point of view on that, on the base of your background?

Well, when you said that, my immediate reaction, thought was when I physicalize the world,

when I manifest things that people interact with,

I always had a global take on it.

And I didn't believe, and I remember actually in university in undergraduate, there's a lot of classes called iconoclassicism

and cultural differentiation and how when Remington would make an electric razor for men or Norelco or Philips.

And they would change it based on the country and the place.

So, for example the Philips in the States was gold trimmed back in the, late '70s with the kind of wood grain, an artificial wood grain in it.

But the Remington in Germany was black with silver with black leather.

And the one in Europe in the warm countries had something else.

And even in the product differentiation of gender, I never believed in either.

I always thought a great product is for everybody.
An eight-year-old and an 80-year-old should use it
which is what I was brought up also with.
Because I learned under Victor Papanek who wrote a book,
a fantastic book, Design for the Real World,
which until today is the number one design selling book ever in history,
something like 23 million copies or something of it.
And it's a fantastic read because it was all about designing for the real world.
It was designing ecologically but it was also the sense of democracy.
That design, good design should be
for the poorest person and the richest person,
the same object, the same thing, say how we interact.
So, that sense of when you look at industrial design really at the mass level,
the sense of differentiation, how can I say?
Has become less and less and less now from when I was in school.
So, today Apple makes a laptop that's the same globally let's say.
You make a Pepsi graphic or can that can be the same globally.
Of course you go through differentiation
and you have to because food is another animal in a way, in a sense.
But that was always with me, this kind of democracy let's say.
And in a sense of differentiation of people,
I always just believed that everybody should have
in the small time that we're all here, a good life.
And that these objects, these things,
our environments, our spaces, even if it's minimal,
even if it's just, you know, how can I say?
Frugal approach, somebody deserves still to have a decent life.
Things should function well, feel well, be positive
and all the built environment should raise
or elevate one's sense of well-being.
Is that the role of design, creating that kind of condition for human beings?
Is that the purpose of design?
I think that nothing... said to me when we were lying on the beach together,
I'll never forget this down in near Naples,
besides looking at every girl on the beach ...
He said to me nothing should really exist physically around us
unless it brings us some sense of better or how do you say?
Experience.
And it stayed with me that, because what I realized is
if you look around the physical world we built,
the things we do, there's so much that's not additive to our well-being,
not additive to a better life, but the opposite.
They create stress.
As Jean Baudrillard, the French philosopher said,
he called all those things obstacles
to the meaning of life.

And even in the material world and a world of hyper consumption, even more so, that we're so caught up with the consuming. But we end up in turn mostly consuming a lot of obstacles, makes our lives more difficult.

It's obstructive in a way.

And that harps on notions of, [Gidrams?] saying, less but better or [mise?], or was it mise?

I always forget, less is more etcetera.

they have different definitions of that.

Less is more I always had an issue with because less is more was about being super reductive.

And a lot of us can't really be that reductive.

We need ornament. We need things.

We need, we [need things?].

But the question is how much do we really need, right?

Yeah.

And, it's probably all about being for whose on those needs or wants and desires and dreams.

And for some people, that hyper reductive solution is exactly what they need.

For some others, they search some form of romanticism, I mean the product, poetry.

And for them, the perfect solution is something that eventually not that minimal, it's just different.

You created over the years... tell me, tell me, tell me.

I'm sorry but at the same time,

the extreme case you talked about or let's say the two extreme cases, if the physicality that surround you is some sense of an addition to the beautification of your life or others, great.

Be it maximalist or a minimalist,

question you have to ask one's self all the time is do these things provide us a better life?

And it's like function.

The most basic essential lowest common denominator of design, you could argue, is that something should function firstly.

And function well, right?

Yeah.

And I find this as weird design, and designers in general in the build environment disappoints me a lot of times and lets me down.

I remember a commercial on television by IKEA.

In 1995 where they showed a Marc Newson pod chair with three legs, somebody came and sat on it and it fell.

And then they pulled out an IKEA chair, and they sat on it and they were comfortable.

This was on air, on television.

That 15-second commercial stuck with me

because it made me realize that as designers,
this is where we have to be careful.
The things we do, we can get away with the most radical,
most avant-garde, most interesting things
but firstly they gotta work.
Right, it's like Pepsi putting out a package,
a new type of package, a new way of opening something, a new
and if it's letting people down, it will be phenomenally unsuccessful
regardless of what you wrap around it.
And I even noticed this in my career,
I'm talking about real industrial design.
I'm not talking about doing interiors or limited edition things or anything.
In my career, the objects that I design
that function seamlessly are still on the market,
still extremely successful and will keep going.
And people talk about, classicism.
Classic, there's nothing classic.
It doesn't exist, this notion of classic.
Things stick with us if they're still providing us
with this kind of betterment of our needs.
Building value, building value for the society.
I think in that way if we all stick to that kind of purpose,
we can really create a better world,
create a better society collectively where [all dream by?],
not creating anything that is not meaningful,
that doesn't build value in the life of people in a way or the other.
And something very interesting your philosophy of life
and your philosophy as a designer
is this idea of democratization of design,
making design accessible to everybody.
Can you tell us more about that?
For us in PepsiCo obviously it's a topic extremely, extremely relevant because
our products are all about the masses and we serve billions of people every day.
And that is what I've been trying to do all my life,
making design accessible to the masses,
is at the core of your philosophy.
Can you tell us more about that?
Yeah, design touches us on many levels.
It touches us physically, physiologically, right,
emotionally, mentally, spiritually.
It sets or shifts or changes social human behaviors.
It evolves and progresses humanity. You know?
So, design is quite a large facet, a large sphere.
And within that sphere, there's many different aspects of it.
There's consumption for a moment, drink a can of Pepsi, boom, right.
The longer term one could be something like a sketchbook you have in your hand

that you're using and after two months it's full and it's over with.
It could be something very extremely disposable.
It could be something that you just opened up the package
and let the water run and it dissipates.
It's... I don't know... biodegradable cornstarch, polymer, da da.
And these are things that are in our mass world.
But also design, furniture is not really a mass... there are mass market players in it
but a lot of furniture is done a hundred couches a year.
It's the small stuff, right?
Or I don't know, interiors.
Interior's generally are one off.
They're all prototypes really like architecture.
Architecture really at the end of the day, each building is a singular, right?
So, design covers all that.
You can't say oh, well, just design is democratic
and it's for everybody and da, da, da.
No.
There are very kind of specialized areas, too, in design.
Design is even below the line design
like Peter Dormer talked about for many years.
Below the line design is all design you and I, we don't think as design.
We know it's design but a lot of people who are not in this business
would not think it's design.
When you get on the airplane and you turn left
and it happens that the pilot's door is open,
you see the cockpit, those instruments in that cockpit are all designed,
everything is designed so that that pilot is flying
with the best safety, reach, ergonomics,
anthropometrics of the space, all that's being designed.
But you and I, you don't think about it.
You get in there and then the first thing you think of,
you think design is how comfortable my chair is or do I have leg room.
That's design or..
Why do you think that most people out there
don't understand what design is about?
A big chunk of what I do and what you do is also explaining what design is about,
it's exactly what you described until now.
So, why you think that people don't understand it?
And what can we do, we as designers,
to better explain to the world what design is about?
Yeah, I think the Metropolis magazine
back in late '90s did a survey of a thousand people
and asked them about name three designers.
And they all named fashion first of all.
So, the word designer is still today associated
with fashion industry, designing, fashion industry.

But it's just interesting, because in Italy for example, the fashion designer is called stiliste and the designers are called architecti.

They make a differentiation and the reason they make differentiation is because styling as an education,

the way it was taught was to always look in the past for inspiration.

Design is really about looking in the future for inspiration.

So, they're very different that way.

And that you can acknowledge the idea that you style things.

In industrial design and design, that was a bad word, style.

And when I was in university, my undergraduate faculty, it was hardcore Teutonic education.

And I didn't really understand it because

I thought they were a little bit symbiotic.

And they are in a sense.

But the danger of style obviously is that

when you imitate the past, you're styling something,

it means you've looked back in the history.

That's why we use words like,

oh, if I design a restaurant and some client says to me

oh, make it Belle Epoque-like or make it Baroque-like.

The minute you add that like

and you talk about a period, a period that's closed, right,

the movement closed, you're styling really. Right.

So, if I make something, '70s like,

I got to look at the '70s for inspiration.

I'm styling.

If I'm designing and I just take the criteria of today,

what is the criteria of today?

if it's a food product, where does it sit on the shelf?

What's the sight line?

How does it feel when I pick it up?

What kind of sound does it make when I rip it, or trigger, or open it?

how does it feel?

Does it feel cold, warm?

This is design, touching all the senses, very sensorial act, right?

But we're not ever, ever talking about or discussing the past, right?

We're just talking about human-centric, momentary, at this moment now.

That's design.

I just finished a mobile phone in China with Oppo.

Everything, the materials, technology, everything, the interface

is the latest, latest, latest possible, no references of the past.

Past doesn't exist with a mobile phone, right?

Mm-hmm.

So, that's design really.

And what happens is I think it's overwhelming for a mass culture and people to realize that everything around them is designed.

And even more so that everything around them had some creative person behind it. It's too much to handle.

You look at the amount of physicality we have.

But in certain industries, there's been enough discourse since Metropolis did that survey

to now have heard of some names because of media.

The media got very design-driven.

And all of a sudden everybody was talking design and everybody is talking design.

And there's so much now and so much exposure now

that people are very aware of the most banal things

that they're starting to realize that they are designed.

So, I think it has changed a lot, Mauro, a lot, phenomenal amount actually.

In that survey they asked about architects, right?

In America, a thousand and of the thousand,

I can't remember the exact number but something

like 300 could name one.

And it was 700 could name two, and there were a few, some of them named three.

Guess who number one was by the way as an architect?

Who was?

Hmm?

Who was it?

Tell me. I don't know.

Frank Lloyd Wright.

Of course.

And then some people said Frank Gehry

'cause he was really out there at that time.

there were a few.

So, architecture had that kind of respect because it's arm lengths away.

People are awed by architecture, like how that building... wow, that architect

must be a genius, or bridge by Santiago Calatrava, wow.

We're awed.

But the physical stuff every day.

When you're touching a CD case and a salt pepper shaker,

and a mug and a phone,

and the ring and a watch and the glasses and the towel,

I think it's too much information.

It's overwhelming.

And people now have an expectation.

I think this is very important for probably every company and brand

in the world that if they're making anything physical or virtual,

that this stuff has to be great.

You can't just now sell based on a brand name or,

or myth anymore.

There's a new honesty happening with these things around us,

that are just feel great, better work well, better...

And even if you only give them a minute a day, that's all they wanna give, they wanna go oh, what's the history of this mug?

Oh, who designed...?

Well, I know who designed this.

Who designed it?

Yep.

I think I'd understand that people are not that interested.

It'd be like you and I trying to understand the medical industry.

Yeah.

You know? Do we want to?

I don't know, maybe you have interest.

I don't really want to.

But listening to you, you're talking about style, with that interpretation you shared with us.

You talked about emotions.

You talked about functionality, an imperative functionality.

And then you talk about adding value to the life of people, creating something that is meaningful.

And you talk about any category of product that surrounds us.

So, if you put all of this together, in my experience in PepsiCo in my previous life in 3M, this is what these corporations call innovation.

I think we should really start to position

what we do in terms of innovation because

that's exactly what you're talking about,

projecting yourself to the future instead of looking at the past.

And innovation is so important for any company, big or small, in this moment.

And I really believe that designers with that kind of mindset

you just described can add an amazing, amazing value.

But a lot of people don't know that designers do that kind of thing.

They don't know that designers are trained at school,

already at school in doing innovation.

What do you think about that?

First, I love what you said and I think that I always say that design is inseparable from innovation and technology.

And I even say and I taught for many years but I even say to my staff

and I always think about this but if I wanna design

something original or something relative to now,

something that's gonna make some sort of impact or change,

I should imbue the latest technology, period, right?

And innovation will come out of obviously looking at the real behavior, social behavior or of use, and material, and technology, etcetera.

So, I agree with you completely.

And I think the problem maybe that the larger public,

if they don't understand, they think

that design is bringing them some sort of style.

It's that visual exercise, and even more so now with imagery

'cause we're inundated with imagery.
It's all visual, this very little, it's not a lot going deeper than that.
Our responsibility I think is with all these
companies, clients, brands, is to as you said earlier,
is we have to educate perpetually.
And you hear this all the time.
You hear about, if you watch,
I watch every documentary possible on every architect that exists.
And they all had the same sort of sense of frustration,
but believed in the fact that they have to explain to the developer
or explain to the couple who they're designing a house
for, explain really talk them into understanding what you do, what we do.
And maybe that will continue ongoing.
And I don't think there's really anything wrong with that.
I think actually maybe when you said, earlier at the beginning,
you said something about being articulate or verbose or something,
I think that's where I learned something in Canada.
I learned that I had to really sell my designs.
My early days after I graduated, after I graduated from Canada, I went to Italy,
was there two years and I went back to Canada.
When I got back to Canada, I got into industrial firm that the most important,
let's say one or biggest one in Canada, which was still small,
it was like 10 employees or something,
our big clients were people like Black and Decker.
And I designed electric drill and a sander and these very technical objects.
And I had to sit with them and I remember meeting after meeting trying to get them
to understand why electric drill could still be a beautiful object
or why a belt sander,
why I did this shape and this move for the hand.
And I think I had so much pressure in seven years of designing
those kinds of very utilitarian products.
I designed medical equipment, an x-ray table.
I designed a mammographer.
I designed something for the military, Canadian military.
I learned that I had to know how to talk about what I'm doing.
It was pressure. It was survival.
If I cannot articulate why I designed this chair this way, right,
they may not produce the chair.
And in design by the way, we go back to the education of design,
I think what's happening globally with design
from an academic point of view, that rigor is missing.
The rigor of really talking in a very direct simple but smart way
about why you did what you did.
Even more so when we talked about [style or?] there,
a lot of design schools and designers
are still very much steeped in style or styling something

or making something what they think looks cool
and you got to watch out for that word cool because that's momentary, right?
That's trend.

Which I always have a huge problem with that word.

Movement is good.

Trend, not good, you know?

So, five years ago, 10 years ago...

Yeah, or it depends also on the category of product, what you're doing.

But in general I totally agree with you.

Yeah. Well, what I mean by that,

ell, that's not what I'm saying, like I'm saying

if you're doing something that's intentionally for one season or for one year,

sure, you play with trend, etcetera.

If somebody opens up a hair salon 10 years ago, you know what they did?

They stuck a chandelier on it because you know, the history,

or Philippe Starck and the Baroque movement

that happened 20 years ago was prevailing, you know?

But that's just trend, right?

Instead of saying oh, I'm doing a hair salon.

Maybe when people lie down and get their shampoo wash,

I should tilt the ceiling and make it all mirrors

so that I can see the action going on in the salon.

For example, that's design.

Yeah.

I'm doing a restaurant in Rome right now

and it's situated near very close to Coliseum.

And it's on the roof of a building

but the building, the problem with the building is

if you sit in that restaurant, and your back is this way,

you're not gonna see the Coliseum.

And it's a small restaurant.

So, my immediate reaction was I tilt the ceiling both ways, right,

underneath I'll put the buffet bar, whatever.

And all the tables and chairs, everybody will have a view of the Coliseum.

So, I walked in that space and spent two hours trying

to figure out how everybody in the restaurant,

which is only about 60 people maximum,

could have a view of the Coliseum while they eat.

To me, that's building a better experience, right,

a more interesting experience, a bit of element of surprise.

There's nothing more beautiful

when we're surprised like a phenomenological moment.

Touch something, taste something you've never tasted before.

Feel something, you see something, boom, right?

And that's design, right?

Absolutely.

I couldn't make that space look,
I don't know, revival right now is kind of
this new Post Modernism is revived again,
or Memphis like, you know or this like or that like,
using the word like again going back to what I was saying.

But the first thing I do is sit down
and think about how do I get you, Mauro, right now,
to just have a better or original or new experience
because we're having less and less and less.

A lot of our experiences are tertiary experiences.

We watch a movie we think that's an experience.

It's not an experience.

It was the experience of the directors and actors, not ours, right?

Now we produce stuff, products that go in the world
and somehow you just say that we need to bring value in the life of people,
we need to create something that is meaningful.

But in a way, are there any time we produced anything
we are impacting also the environment, right?

There is an impact on, connected to what we do as designers.

Obviously in PepsiCo we know it very well because of the industry we play in.

And we have so much investment now in the world of sustainability,
trying to make our products as sustainable as possible.

You gave a beautiful speech years ago

in a round table organized with PepsiCo in Milan during Design Week,
talking about sustainability and eco-friendly products.

So, what's your point of view as a designer that produced,
and will produce millions of pieces that go in the environment?

What's your point of view on our responsibility as companies
and as designers for the environment

to be as sustainable as possible?

Well, there's a graph there I think.

obviously the larger the company, the more responsible because they're just
putting a lot more into the physical world.

But that then goes all the way down to the singular and the singular may be
oh, there's a guy in Brooklyn and he's making chairs one by one, right.

Well, the guy in Brooklyn making chairs one by one

I think needs to take on the same responsibility as the large manufacturer,
meaning that we all have to be incredibly sensitive

to our ecological system that exists in this world right now.

And so I'll give you an example.

For many years, I worried about it because I was brought up in Canada
and we created Earth Day and in Toronto

we had four waste cans in our living room,

for the garbage in the kitchen and so that's always been part of me.

and I even get criticized.

It was like oh, but what do you think of... it seems like your work,

you don't worry about the environment, right?
And it's why I don't worry about bright colors.
You can make natural things bright color, right?
But with all that said,
I worry about in every interior what the carpet is made out of,
what the furniture's made out of, everything.
And I know it well.
I've done my research in that.
But I think collectively, Mauro, this is our world,
and it's gonna be our children's world and onward.
So, we want everybody to live in a better world.
And I think we have progressively done that over the last few thousand years.
We keep making the world better and better and better
but then there was a little mistake there,
a little mistake was Post Industrial Revolution
was that we start to create toxicity.
And toxicity came out of really
the polymer world more than anything.
So, we now know better.
We're learning. We're pulling stuff out.
We're doing the right things.
and there's so many entrepreneurs
and so many people, which is, by the way,
a fantastic time we live in now because it is the epoch of the entrepreneur,
that are coming in and doing something that is really relevant
and perfect for the time and smart and sensitive.
We know that youth cultures more and more
each one generation after generation are getting
more sensitive to the environment, etcetera.
So, I think we're on the right path by the way,
as much as everybody is so critical and
negative, really pessimistic about the future, I think it's the opposite.
All the companies that I work for around the world
seem to care so much and are so interested
in making these changes ongoing.
And they can be from the smallest, from food and packaging
all the way up to building a building.
so, there is a new sensitivity with that.
What I think the problem is and maybe I'm not really answering the question,
the problem is, is that we have to move a little faster, right,
and we have to somehow dematerialize a little bit.
We can't keep going on with the amount of quantity that's being produced
which is interesting that COVID came along.
Because COVID in a sense you could argue is a bit of a catalyst
or let's say the silver lining of COVID
is the fact that all of a sudden we're all slowing down a little bit

through thinking what our contribution is a little bit.
Kind of a new wave of sensitivity.
That sensitivity is geared towards the earth and in the environment.
And I think it's beautiful.
I think it's a necessity in a way to really realize what we've done.
On one hand we live better today than the majority of people in the world.
There's how many people, there's, what is it, three billion in middle class.
this never existed before in history.
it's amazing that history if you go back 400 years, 3 percent of the world
was filthy rich and 97 were in poverty.
Shocking, when you really think about that, it's crazy.
So, at that time, it was just fortunate that
you happened to be born in a rich family.
Today, it doesn't matter, rich, poor, whoever.
Everybody, the majority have a democratic opportunity
and chance to make something of their lives,
to contribute to others, to try to help or make a better world,
to care about other human beings, etcetera.
One of your brands is this idea of global law, right?
And it's so connected to what you just said.
Through your products, through your words,
you inspire all the time so many people around the world.
What inspires you?
I'll be very honest with you, Mauro.
I'm doing this podcast with you because you're a very close friend.
But I've been asked maybe 50 lectures and things,
I only did one in four months.
This is the second.
I made one lecture in Israel, for Israel.
And I'll tell you why.
Everybody is running to me for inspiration globally.
Like, I don't know. I'm not a guru. You know?
I'm not a god.
I'm a human being who also has the same problems
like the majority of us do, you know?
So, we have anxiety.
We're nervous. We're afraid.
We're confused.
So, I ask myself that question.
This last four months I said
how can I inspire thousands and I can't inspire myself?
So, I thought about it.
And especially in this last month
and I yesterday opened my office for the first time
after almost four months and what does opening mean?
I had four people come.

I used to have 30, you know?
And a very strange feeling and decided today to even close it again
and let it wait, ride this thing out a little bit.
And I thought how am I gonna inspire myself?
So, you know what I do?
I do three things and I don't even know if they're working or not.
One is to stay positive.
I really take care of my health
because with my health,
if I'm in good shape and I'm really working on it,
mentally automatically I feel less depressed or I feel better,
number one which is diet related to that food.
Second is I've been reading and watching a lot and
the reading tends to be more autobiographies,
about the way people who I think were very interesting, how they thought,
what their minds were like, you know?
I find that very inspiring.
And documentaries, I find documentaries really interesting because you really
get to the core of human emotions and human issues, really deep.
And I find those things inspiring. So, the other day for example,
I watched this documentary
on this like terrible architect from Palm Springs.
It was like his work is so bad and
I think he made the documentary, almost got it made for him.
He probably paid somebody to do it.
I won't say who it is because just his work's so bad
that he doesn't deserve a documentary.
And believe me, after the hour, I was very inspired.
I realize everything can inspire you, bad work, good work.
Because you know what inspired me about him?
His passion.
Now he's 80 years old and somehow he still so much believes in what he does,
to a point of blindness, right, that he thinks he's doing something brilliant.
That was inspiring.
I realize yes, Karim, you're capable of
some smart good things, keep going, draw every day.
So, what do I do? Every day,
for the last three months, I make up a project.
I wake up in the morning and say
I'm gonna design today a house that's only 700 square feet,
a whole house in the country, start sketching anything.
This isn't for anybody.
It's totally maybe things, maybe I'm not drawing a product because
I designed so many products, I'm thinking about other things.
If I draw for two hours, immediately it's a drug for me. It's like.
You say something that I believe in so much and it's so precious.

Inspiration at the end of the day comes from within.
What you're saying is that you pick something to activate, that inspiration.
But at the end of the day, even in that documentary,
you are the one that saw something that inspire you.
It started from you and what was out there was a catalyst.
But many other people wouldn't have catch, the glimpse of inspiration,
that idea that you were able to see.
I really believe that inspiration come from within and
then you can be surrounded by amazing inspiring places
or the most boring, simple places.
But if you have that kind of soul that is receptive, that is looking for,
that idea, that something, you would be able to find inspiration
in essentially anything that surrounds you.
The idea that a documentary that you eventually didn't like,
inspires you anyway for the passion is a beautiful example of
how inspiration starts from us, from each of us.
I like, Mauro, that you say this because
first of all I've never heard it before, this idea.
But I think in psychoanalysis for example,
and in psychiatry, we know and documented very well,
that the issues that we create are the ones we create for ourselves that
we blame it on others or we blame it on our environment
but it's actually just us, it's up to us, right?
So, it's how you take it on, how you manifest it, right?
So, everybody always says oh, I live in this house,
I have an ugly view or I have this.
But you're allowing the external, you're internalizing the external.
Versus the opposite, right?
- Absolutely. - Yeah, it's beautiful.
It lines up exactly with that.
And when you think about you go through this life
and of course as you get older,
you've experienced even more and more.
You think about how the experiences that we have,
the amount of information we're taking in,
the amount of people we've interacted with,
the amount of people we love or we hated or we engaged,
all that stuff is building up, building up, building up.
And so a lot of times when people say to me well, how are you inspired?
I always say that it's an accumulation of my life that inspires,
that's coming from my subconscious to my conscious.
I said the other day, someone asked me
why do you think that the Space Age aesthetic
is in a revival like we're living in a kind of neo...
which I don't really agree because
I'm not seeing a lot of it.

But I would say that people like Zaha Hadid and my brother's work, Asymptote, and others, MVDRV or especially in architecture or even in industrial design, people like Ross Lovegrove and others, the Space Age feeling and all that, they're inspired from twofold. One is today obviously we're in a new digital Space Age. You could argue that 40 years later or 50 years later. It's a new way of looking at utopia, the idea of utopia, better world, you know? 'cause back in the '60s when we landed on the moon and we said oh, there's nowhere to go and we were all disappointed, the Russians, the Americans, the Chinese, it was like what? We got to concentrate on this earth because it's a dead rock. We came back, right? Today now we're going back. So, with Elon Musk and etcetera, we're all doing, right? And now we're thinking about living on Mars or living in biospheres, all this. We have the technology now to do a lot of what we dreamed about in the '60s. And as a child from the '60s, because when went over to my friends' parents' living room and there was clear Saarinen chairs around that, clear glass table with a white shag carpet, like everything was kind of space-driven, and all that. That's deep down in me obviously. So, when someone says oh, sometimes your work looks a bit, '60s or '70s. I don't want it to. I'm forcing myself to be original but there's things that come out. They're in there, deep in there and so those things if you can internalize and allow those things to inspire you as you said, they're gonna come out. Yeah. One last question for you and I need to ask you this. By the way, we know each other for many, many years. I never asked you this question. I knew about you already before I met you and then we became friends many years ago in Milan. And I remember during Design Week, you would pass by and you had this pink outfit or this white outfit and you have all these tattoos on your body. And somehow it became over the years your personal brand is your image, you're an icon. It reminds me a little bit of, what Madonna or Lady Gaga or Elton John, in other industries did over the years with their image. What's behind your image, the colors you use, your tattoos, your personal branding? How important it is for you and what is the meaning of it? Well, It's very important because it's me.

It's not in dormant or superficial or superfluous.
I live and breathe what I do and I,
the expression walk the walk, talk the talk.
So, that's one.
Second part of that is that the colors, I love color.
I really love color.
To me it changes my mood.
if I'm driving through a city, I'm in Rotterdam and I see this all orange building,
it's just there's something about it. It just moves me.
I'm in Mexico and I look at the architecture by Barragan
and some of these people, just I feel alive.
Even when I make a concept.
When I make a concept, if I don't add sort of be more painterly
and add something in this space,
I'm doing a hotel room, it brings me some sense of,
yeah, being alive, really alive.
And I think that was with me going way back.
And I tell you, I open with a story about myself at the age of five.
I'll tell you, there's a second one.
When we got to London, we went to Harrods.
My mom went to buy us coats.
And don't get me wrong by the way.
Harrods was an expensive department store and we were very poor.
But somehow my mother took us to Harrods.
We went in there for winter coats.
We came in on the floor and on the left side was the women's coats,
girls' I mean and the boys'.
My mom and my brother walked towards the boys' section
and I vaguely remember that all the boys' coats were just dark.
I don't remember if they were blues or browns or...
The left side it was these pink jackets.
I went straight over there and tried to put one on.
My mother came over.
I tried it on and she bought it for me.
So, what occurred to me was, and this is
why I never really believed in gender differentiation and marketing
and all these things we've done, is that children are so open-minded
and so receptive to beauty, color, iridescence,
pearlescence, vibrance, chrome, reflective.
Because our eyes are being fired,
our brain synapsis is being fired, and we feel like alive.
When I show my daughter I just bought some new set of markers, a 180 markers,
you should see when she looks at the colors.
you feel children this way.
And we all want to paint
and the minute we put paint on our fingers, we wanna draw.

We wanna make. We wanna rip.
We wanna build.
So, we are all born creative first of all.
All of us.
And maybe 0.0001 percent
are not for some brain injury something that's going on.
But I'm saying in general for a normal human being,
we are born to create for sure, right?
And then what happens over the years?
The suppression starts.
Suppression starts with your parents saying
oh, son, you're a boy, here,
here, grab this football, you know?
Don't do that. Why?
You know, ballet?
Like and we start to split.
And then you get into school and
then you have to be exactly like all the other students
and when you're not, there's something wrong with you.
I went through a lot of that by the way.
I was like the odd child.
So, in turn, instead of being that I'm odd in a good way, to them,
I'm just odd period, right?
And with how many years of education,
we still don't have this where we treat children
as mass with the common lowest denominator.
Which is sad because we're not involving
this notion of being empowered that we're individuals.
That I have a different fingerprint than you and
we're all completely, completely different.
Almost a billion people, completely different, right?
And then you get into high school and
there's an acceptance level and you have to be like your peers.
And then you get into, and next thing
it's pressure, pressure, pressure to get the first job.
You have to have a dress code and show up for the interview.
And you just keep suppressing any sense of yourself, you've lost yourself.
And, in a way, I think in my life,
somehow I had some inner strength that I don't want
to lose myself, you know?
So, I went to my high school graduation with a pink suit on,
with pink hair, and pink nail polish, you know?
But looking back at it, there's a time
when I almost felt embarrassed about it.
But looking back at it now,
I'm proud that I had some sort of inner strength to appreciate

and realize that these are the things I like and that we're all different,
- period. - Fantastic.

Go ahead.

Anyway, no, I'd just say that,

and I'm attracted to, as I am attracted to you, Mauro, as a friend,
I'm attracted to people who are like that.

They've not allowed outside forces, forces to suppress them
or to tell them what their desires should be or what their needs are.

That they can choose for themselves if they're critical enough
that they can be called real individuals.

And we should all be called that.

In what you just said, there is a beautiful closure here.

There are so many lessons in what you just shared with us.

First of all for each of us,

this idea of having a unique point of view on life,
on anything and owning it and be confident enough
to share it with others.

And you embrace that and this, what has been making you
who you are today and as successful as you are today.

There is also another lesson for anybody
that in a way or the other manage people, teams.

You with your team, me with my team,

a CEO of a company, anybody, really giving the possibility
to their people to express themselves,
empower them, enable them to be who they are.

Their diversity and inclusion of all these different diversities
is what really create value for any kind of organization and community.

So, it's so, so important.

Karim, thank you so much.

I have no doubt that you're going to inspire me and inspire all of us today.

Sorry I have to rush but it's a good time.

I've barely been rushing for the last four months so I apologize.

This is an important [one?].

We'll let you go.

Thank you, Karim.

Okay, [I love you?] Mauro, take care.

We talk soon, okay?

- Ciao. - Ciao.

Bye.