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RATIONAL DECO

Recent evolutions of **functional languages** display an unusual **ornamental ‘curvature’** that keeps faith with the original **minimalist premises**, which are now oriented towards a new aesthetic subtlety

by Stefano Caggiano



Left, the Triangle chair is part of the Steel Collection by the designer Nazara Lázaro, inspired by the paintings of Joan Miró and the harlequins of Picasso. Photo Veronika Janovec. Below, the Brutal chair by Project 213A takes its cue from Brutalist architecture, refined and reorganized in a linear structure made in matte black steel.

“Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here,” was written over the entrance to Plato’s Academy, reflecting the philosopher’s belief that geometry was essential to understand his doctrine of ideas. For Plato, in fact, any empirical element, accessible to the senses, is produced from its universal abstract prototype, the “idea,” a sort of mold that shapes all the material occurrences of a given thing. In this sense, geometric knowledge represented “knowledge that exists eternally, not something that comes into being at some moment and then ceases to exist.” This concept of geometric order as an organizing principle of the physical world has been one of the pillars, or perhaps even the backbone, of all western culture, informing the development of rational thought across the centuries until it has been channeled into the modern concept of design, which appeared with the advent of the industrial society that called for the formulation of an aesthetics of the product that would be different from the traditional ornamental character of the applied arts. As we know, this new path to form was outlined through the application of geometric-rational order to the creation of useful objects, stripped of any decorative ‘superstructure’ and led back to the functional essence. It is no coincidence that in that same place and time (the Austro-Germanic area at the start of the last century), another philosophical giant, Ludwig Wittgenstein, was carrying out a similar process of stripping down of verbal language, shedding light on its logical structure which could come to the fore once the variegated morphology of words had been removed. (Wittgenstein himself, when he designed furnishings for the home of his sister Margaret, with design by the Loos-ian Paul Engelmann, applied rigorous tenets of functionalism). Though its basic principles are correct, modernism is substantially conceived as an ‘explanatory’ translation of rationalist thought. A conception that already in those days (still in the Austro-Germanic ambit, still at the turn of the last century) was being radically revised by the work of Albert Einstein. The theory of general relativity, in fact, disrupted our vision of the universe, not denying but surpassing the ‘flat’



The Console project by Clémence Birot stands out for its successful combination of decorative and vectorial elegance, ornamentation and rational architecture.



The U-light by Timo Ripatti for **Axolight** brings together aesthetic elegance and lighting quality. The latest version also offers acoustic comfort, thanks to a sound-absorbing panel that reduces reverberation in spaces.



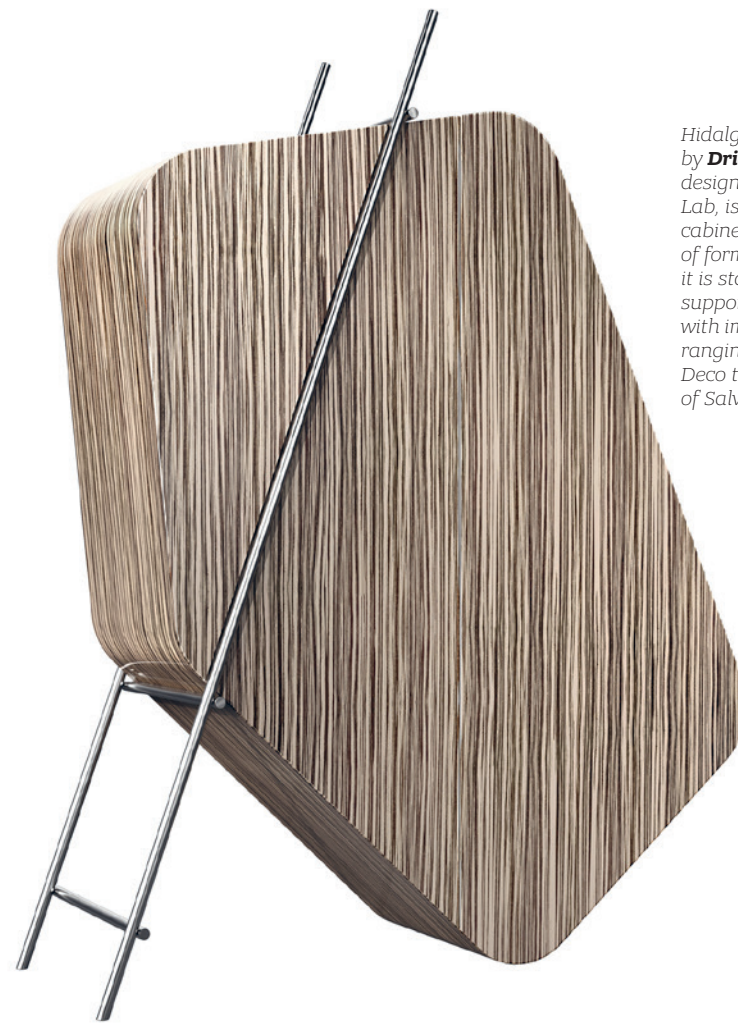
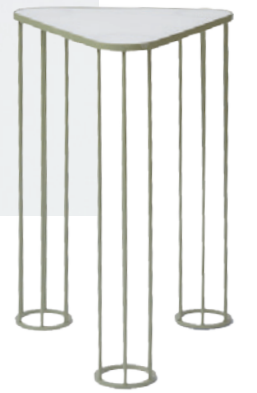
idea of rationality and moving towards an incredibly elegant description of gravity, seen as a distortion of the four-dimensional geometry of space-time, a geometry not like that of Euclid, but with a 'curvature' that varies, according to the vision of the mathematician Hermann Minkowski (whose tensor calculus was decisive to allow Einstein to give his theory a solid mathematical framework). Today, after

decades in which design culture has relied on rationalism in keeping with a Euclidean worldview, a new "non-Euclidean rationalism" is emerging (see *Interni* no. 685) in which the grammar of the product, defined starting with the typical elements of the functionalist tradition, is 'curved' along trajectories that are no longer (only) orthogonal. This is a very particular development, specific to our time,

*The impalpable firmness of a rationalism that transcends the material body of things, while nevertheless providing a geometric framework – perfectly expressed in the Vitruvio mirror by García Cumini for **Agape**.*



*To the side, the Stile family of suspension lamps designed by Formidable Studio for **Foris** takes its cue from Venetian architecture. In the image, the Stile Veneziano model, referencing 13th-century arched windows. Below, the ethereal clarity of the Muhly table designed by the group **Laun** of Los Angeles. Photo Little League Studio.*



*Hidalgo, produced by **Driade** and designed by Driade Lab, is an 'anomalous' cabinet in terms of form and concept: it is stable though its support seems shaky, with implicit references ranging from 1930s Deco to the Surrealism of Salvador Dalí.*

illustrated by objects like the U-light sound-absorbing lamp by Timo Ripatti for Axolight, or the Console by Clémence Birot, in which the design – though running along the axes of historical rationalism – distorts them in an ornamental direction. This new decorative rationalism – no longer derived from the rejection of ornament but by the "relativistic" curvature of its own structural geometry, which is transformed into an ornamental sign – responds to a widespread desire for post-material formal grace, made even more urgent by the many processes of virtualization of products in progress. Thus we are seeing projects like the Stile suspension lamps by Formidable Studio for Foris and the Vitruvio mirror by García Cumini for Agape, whose structure seems to derive from the sublimation – in the body of the object – of geometric concepts that transcend the ordinary three-dimensional norm. It is also interesting to observe the distilled form of seating like the Triangle by Nazara Lázaro, and Brutal (a curious name, given its clean lines) by the Portuguese studio Project 213A. At the same time, the Muhly table by Laun and the Hidalgo cabinet designed by Driade Lab for Driade reveal a careful game of dislocation between the 'ideal' sign and the material body of the object, illustrating a less idealist and more cunning conception of rationalist thinking applied to design. ■