

Photos ANDY MASSACCESI

At Work With:
STUDIO UTTE

A visit to the small,
sophisticated
Milanese studio of
Patrizio Gola &
Guglielmo Giagnotti.

Words LAURA RYSMAN



In just three short years, STUDIO UTTE has perfected the time-consuming art of utter simplicity.

(below) An artwork by Studio Utte consisting of oil on plywood and fish bones hangs on a plinth made of Beola stone and aluminum.



The Milan neighborhood surrounding the headquarters of Studio Utte is an exuberant jumble of 20th-century architecture. Just beyond the Central Station, with its fascist-era soaring halls and larger-than-life classical decorations, you'll find state-of-the-art art nouveau and neo-Gothic residences standing beside eccentric 1970s apartment blocks built to fill bombed-out lots. Gio Ponti's green-tiled cubist Palazzo Montedoria is among them. Milan, considered ugly by Italian traditionalists, bears its own kind of splendor: a zany abandon unhindered by heritage and spurred on by the wealth and rapid building needs of the last hundred years.

It's the context in which Studio Utte was born, and from which it stands apart. On arrival, I leave the madcap experiments of the street outside and enter a domain restrained to the palette of a black-and-white photograph. Patrizio Gola (black crewneck, white button-down, white pants) flanks Guglielmo Giagnotti (black sweatshirt, black Levis), who holds open the door—it's his apartment, with the studio office upstairs. The walls are a foggy gray; the wood-beam floors are stained brown; a couch is cloaked in a white sheet. There's a monolithic dark wood table made by Vittorio Introini, and I am invited to sit in the ebonized oak version of Studio Utte's emblematic 001 Ert chair. Constructed with seven planks of wood, the box-shaped seat is both airy and majestic, zen and imposing—an exercise in absolute quietude.

"Simplification takes an incredibly long time," says Giagnotti. "There's an enormous complexity in the work of eliminating details." Gola adds, "You have to eradicate all traces of trends or fashion from your mind

to create something that, we like to think, is an object without a connection to any specific era."

Having founded their studio in 2020, the duo's first big project was the Munich concept shop Routine, for which the designers conceived a meditative space of natural materials and custom furnishings. There's a discreet wall lamp shielded by a sleeve of steel, a heroic-sized oak table, plus stools, chairs and the other needs of the lifestyle brand—a big undertaking for a fledgling operation. "We weren't scared," says Giagnotti. "At the beginning, there was nothing but enthusiasm," says Gola. "Then came reality," adds his partner.

But Studio Utte (from the German *hütte*: a hut, small cabana, wooden cabin, or shelter. "The origin of architecture is the protection of mankind," explains Giagnotti) is making its own reality, today designing a handful of homes and launching limited-edition furniture as the pair adhere carefully to the rules they've set out for themselves—spareness, timelessness, pure form that speaks to the quintessential. They're happy to keep the studio small. The designers both previously worked at Dimore-studio, though in different departments, when the fast-growing firm was in the process of leaving behind its original lush but uncluttered aesthetic in favor of more flash.

"We like everything possible to be done in-house," says Gola, as Giagnotti dashes up the iron spiral staircase to find the catalogs they've produced. The oversized books contain the stark photos of objects they shot with a manual 1970s camera, alongside the messy charcoal sketches that they begat them. "We love everything analog,"

says Giagnotti. Their Giano vase, shown in the catalog, also sits in physical form on the floor—a chalk-colored bulb of terra-cotta blooming atop a tapered base, whose perfect and austere geometry is softened by irregular handmade facets. "All of our designs begin from sketches," says Giagnotti, "but our ceramics remain closer to the original imperfectness of hand-drawings." These terra-cotta pieces, "small architectures," says Gola, create a "warm minimalism: not perfectly orthogonal, not industrial, but manual and expressive."

Their design process begins with piles of books and references covering the table, then drawings and discussion. A nascent form emerges to be repeatedly re-elaborated and pared down, and a final archetypal object is produced. Their studio space, a pocket-sized attic room with a sloped wood-beam ceiling and skylights over the desks, bears witness to their thought process with heaps of books—boldface spines celebrating Isamu Noguchi, Enzo Mari, Tadao Ando, Carlo Scarpa and other purists—plus "I spy" sketches, notes, photos, sample blocks of black wood, rattan seat backs in a range of dark finishes and much more: creative chaos in monochrome.

On the living room table there are three small handmade knives. I pick up one of them—a slim and artful curve of solid horn. "We're serial hoarders," admits Giagnotti. It's not what one might expect from the authors of such harmoniously essentialist designs, but the accumulations of objects have profound significance for the two. The knife, a gift from Gola to Giagnotti, was crafted specifically for caviar. "We don't have caviar yet, just the knife," jokes

Giagnotti. It's also a symbol of an Italian legacy—of high craftsmanship and design applied to the quotidian details of life, of the depth and everyday beauty that has made Italy an aesthetic dream in the eyes of the world. The partners express an almost mystical belief in ascribing an animism to objects, but it's a faith derived from culture, and from reverence for the radical and experimental talents of architecture and design that helped illuminate a path for them.

They hail from opposite ends of Italy—Gola from Sondrio near the northern border with Switzerland, Giagnotti from Molfetta along the southernmost heel of Italy in Puglia. They venerate an Italianate design language in its most minimalist and modernist forms, with admiration for the concise styles







(above) Gola (left) and Giagnotti (right) have furnished the studio with pieces by other designers whose legacies they admire. The central table is by mid-century designer Vittorio Invernizzi.



of Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Belgium, where Giagnotti worked for Vincent Van Duysen for three years. “What brought us together is minimalism—this finding of the canons of form—tinged by Italianism,” he says. They point to the clean-lined exactitude of the 1920s, to Giuseppe Pagano, to Giovanni Muzzi, to Villa Necchi, to architecture that flourished during Mussolini’s reign.

This is a difficult topic for Italy’s design community. “Unfortunately, there was a politicization of architecture in Italy,” says Gola. “The country attained this great simplicity and minimalism, but its connection with fascism ruined the aesthetic, and the result afterwards was a more baroque style.” But today in Italy, people are largely so distanced from political life that the terror of the fascist years feels nearly as far away and impersonal as the reign of Julius Caesar. (Distant enough, even, to elect a prime minister with neo-fascist roots.) There hasn’t been the same reckoning with the historical meaning of monuments and buildings that there has been in the US and elsewhere.

But Giagnotti and Gola also draw from a host of postwar architects as influences. They’re encyclopedias of modern design, citing everyone from Aldo Rossi to Piero De Martini, Mario Bellini, and especially the great pragmatist Enzo Mari, an anti-capitalist firebrand who saw design as a tool to help overturn bourgeois society. For Studio Utte, their mission is instead to quiet things down. We live in a time when design has lost its links to ideologies, but has become a personal signifier, and for these two their designs are totems of a desired peace: hushed and clarified objects whose contemplative simplicity spreads a calm that surpasses the commotion of our time, odes to the eternal goal of serenity.

“We always say that there needs to be silence in architecture,” says Giagnotti. The presence of “noise,” or trends or extraneous details, says Gola, “wears out your interest, where silence is timeless.”

Do they possess this tranquility inside them? “We’re trying to arrive at silence,” says Gola, his eyes shining more now from amusement at the idea. Their sense of design is “not a response to what we have inside of us,” says Giagnotti. “It’s an aspiration.”