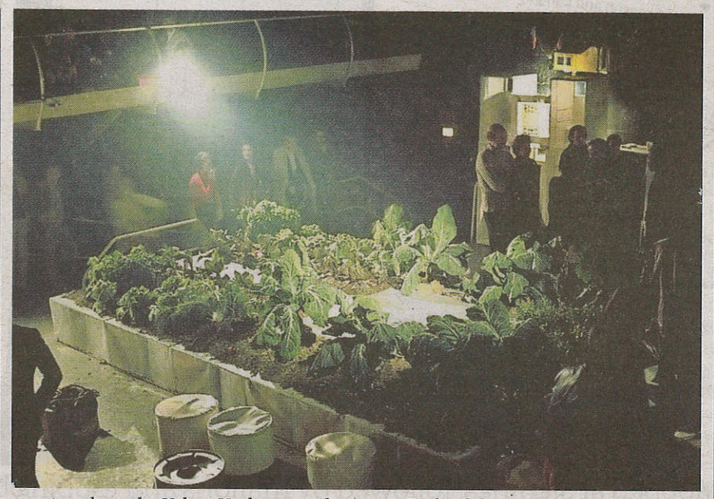
Boogie wonders

Flying carpets and Scrooge McDuck: in the 1960s, Italian architects radically redesigned the disco. **Alexis Petridis** on a forgotten moment in nightclub history



The pluri-disco-teca could be configured for fashion shows or music nights for factory workers

Clockwise from main: **La Fine del Mondo, Turin; the veg patch at Space Electronic, Florence; swinging lovers at Bamba Issa, Forte dei Marmi**

In 1969, an Italian architect called Titti Maschietto got an unmissable opportunity. He and some fellow students at the University of Florence had set themselves up as a radical architecture practice called Gruppo UFO the previous year, inspired by studying "the language, semiotics and contradictions of architecture" under Umberto Eco.

As was the way in the late 60s, they had developed a lot of radical ideas - "about disunity and provocation and abandoned strands of urban theory" - but never really had the opportunity to put them into practice. "We started off disturbing the ancient traditions of Florence," he says, "by parading huge inflatable objects down the street."

But now Maschietto's father had bought a large villa in the Tuscan seaside town of Forte dei Marmi, with the intention of turning it into a hotel. It came with its own stretch of beach and a "marquee or pavilion-type structure" that Maschietto decided was the perfect place for Gruppo UFO to design a nightclub that would put their theories into practice.

His father agreed, although you get the sneaking feeling that he didn't really know what he was letting himself in for. Bamba Issa took its inspiration from a Disney comic book, Donald Duck and The Magic Hourglass, which UFO felt was "an allegory for capitalism, its arrogance and shortcomings". The club's design reflected the comic's look: it had large lanterns, hourglass-shaped furniture, a DJ booth apparently on a flying carpet.

Moreover, they kept changing the way the club looked. "For three years, we tried to tell an evolving story. In the first year, we painted a picture of a crisis in a barren desert: Scrooge McDuck's egg timer isn't working, no one can find the red sand - oil - and the camels have long since left. In the second year, the oasis is colonised. And in the third and final year, inevitable systematic exploitation is addressed. Africa is rich in treasures, but now also filled with the coloniser's waste and the only way the natives can earn a living is by selling us unnecessary trinkets."

You might think that people who wanted to go to a nightclub to drink and dance and cop off with each other would balk at the idea of spending the evening in an environment where inevitable systematic exploitation was being addressed, but apparently not. "It was a huge success," says Maschietto. "At the time, the average club along this stretch of coast was still very old-school, with singers and orchestras. We only played records, purchased especially in London."

Nor was Bamba Issa a one-off. For a time in late 60s and early 70s Italy, discos became the playgrounds of architects with heads full of uncompromising new ideas born out of the social and political tumult of 1968. They formed a movement called radical design. It was a bizarre phenomenon, largely unknown outside its home country, which is explored in a forthcoming exhibition at London's ICA, Radical Disco: Architecture and Nightlife in Italy, 1965-1975.

"Radical design is known for not having produced that many buildings; it's very conceptual in its thinking," says the exhibition's co-curator, Sumitra Upham. "They weren't really interested in the commercial aspects of being architects. These discos were among the few examples of radical design that ever got built.

"To be honest, I think the discos were the only places that would have their designs. They were a new kind of neutral space where there were no boundaries between disciplines like architecture, art and music."

Even 45 years on, the results look astonishing. Some of the discos - or "pipers" as they were locally known, in homage to Rome's Piper nightspot - were visibly influenced by Andy Warhol's multimedia experiments at the Dom nightclub in Manhattan, home to the Exploding Plastic Inevitable events, where the Velvet Underground would play amid lightshows, dancers and projections of Warhol's films.

Others were like nothing else. Florence's Space Electronic, the work of a radical design group called 9999 was a former engine repair shop, decorated with furnishings made out of discarded washing machine drums and refrigerator casings. By day, its dancefloor hosted an experimental architecture school: for 1971's Mondiale festival, the ground floor was flooded, and a vegetable garden was planted upstairs.

The interior of Mach 2 in Florence was pitch-black, lined with bright yellow handrails and pink strip lighting to guide bodies around. Largely constructed out of transparent and reflective materials, Milan's Bang Bang featured a boutique above, with Perspex cylinders containing clothes. At the flick of a switch, the cylinders would rise or fall: you got inside them and tried the clothes on.

"The aim was to more directly contribute to the transformation of the city's architecture towards better social justice," says Gruppo Strum's Pietro Derossi. "The question we asked ourselves was this: how can the architect's work contribute to this improvement?" Their La Fine Del Mondo in Turin was an industrial container done up with multicoloured plastic seating, movable bars, partitions and towers: the self-styled *pluri-disco-teca* could be configured in different ways for different events, which ranged from fashion shows to music nights for Turin's factory workers.

The radical discos' moment was brief. By the mid-70s most had closed, or been turned into more straightforward nightclubs. "It was a period of great experimentation," says Upham. "They had a life span, the way people consume nightlife is ever-evolving and, in a way, I think it was a natural ending for them to close in the mid-70s. Radical design was a really unique movement, and to my knowledge there hasn't been a movement like it since."

Titti Maschietto isn't so sure. "Some radicals became famous architects, and by that I mean the less radical they are, the more famous they become. I'm not even sure I'm "radical" any more. But radical design is famous now, it's taught in every architectural university hall in Italy.

"And I often see components of the Bamba Issa in theme parks, at the Carnevale of Viareggio, Gay Pride, or even more simply when something happens out of the ordinary on the street. Even a fox surprising you by your front door has this ephemeral effect."

Bamba Issa still exists, at least in name, but today it's a plush beachside restaurant, where inevitable systematic exploitation goes unaddressed.

PHOTOGRAPHS: PIETRO DEROSSI, CARLO BACCHI/UFO ARCHIVE, ANDREA PISTOLESI/GRUPPO 9999

i Radical Disco: Architecture and Nightlife in Italy, 1965-1975, is at the ICA, London, from 8 December to 10 January; ica.org.uk