

DESIGN DOESN'T GIVE UP

The recent outbreak of COVID-19 on a worldwide scale is forcing the global economy to face a serious and unexpected phenomenon.

The impact that the virus will have on the planet's economy is almost impossible to assess at the moment as it is influenced by several variables that are currently difficult to predict: the duration of the epidemic in our country, the extent of the remedial measures that will be taken and the spread of the virus in the rest of the world.

At such a time of great uncertainty, initiatives to collaborate and safeguard the situation are developing even among those companies who are usually engaged in healthy competition but who know how to interpret the delicacy of the moment and feel a strong desire to federate their efforts in shared objectives.

It is in this spirit that a group of companies in the furniture and design sector have established a new level of dialogue over recent weeks. An initial chat between a few individuals in just a few weeks has turned into a fervent digital round table involving some of the most important companies in the sector: B&B Italia, Bisazza, Boffi, Cappellini, Cassina, Flexform, Giorgetti, Molteni Group, Poltrona Frau.

The group's first tangible result was a document drawn up two weeks ago to request a rent moratorium for all commercial properties that are currently closed. The companies proposed to reach an agreement that would reduce the cost of rent by 50% from April to December 2020. The request was immediately sent to all landlords of rented properties throughout the world and today constitutes an important tool and an effective basis for discussion.

Today the main objective of the group, and of the entire sector, is to ensure that production will recommence as foreseen on the 14th April.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO START PRODUCING AGAIN

The trend of the number of cases of infection is finally giving some positive and encouraging signs.

The time has therefore come to start thinking about a new phase that foresees Italians returning to their social and productive life while respecting all the countermeasures that will have to be taken due to COVID-19.

One of the most urgent decisions to be taken in the coming days concerns the expected resumption of production in the country, now scheduled for the 14th of April.

It is a very important, almost decisive choice that will have a profound impact on the industrial, economic and social future of our country.

We continue to support the manufacturing sector as central to Italy, but it is important to remember that in 2017 in the European ranking we lost the long-maintained second position, following Germany, to France.

It is therefore fundamental that together we address the issue of returning to work and recognise the importance that this decision will have in preventing a great human and social tragedy transforming into a consequent industrial and economic catastrophe that would destroy thousands of businesses, meaning hundreds of thousands of jobs lost.

The furniture and design sector constitutes one of the 3 strategic sectors of Italian production. With the strength of its 20,000 active companies and 130,000 employees, the sector generates 23 billion in turnover with an export level that exceeds 60%.

If we considered the entire 'Legno-Arredo' wood and furniture industry, then we would be talking about 75,000 active companies with 315,000 employees and a turnover of 43 billion. There are several reasons why the entrepreneurs in this important sector request to reopen the currently closed plants as soon as possible:

Health comes first. The fact that factories are safe places should be reiterated. Following, and often exceeding, safety protocols, today our plants are safe places thanks to the layout of the production areas that respects social distancing, the possibility to measure temperatures through modern thermal scanners, meals distributed and consumed individually to temporarily avoid attending canteens, the use of appropriate and certified masks, and overalls and gloves when required, as well as the regular sanitisation of each environment with the most modern systems available.

The companies in this sector are in constant dialogue with the authorities and are attentive and available to evaluate the introduction of regulations and protection that go beyond what is required by law.

When workers go to the factory today, they know that they are entering a controlled and safe place such as, and perhaps even more than, their home or the supermarket where they shop regularly.

It is also worth mentioning that our factories are located in suburban areas, in towns that allow our workforce to reach the workplace independently, often on foot or by bicycle, without having to use public transport.

The need to work. Our companies have been competing for decades in a global market, populated by global competitors. This month of necessary closure has made it impossible for our companies to respect signed orders and delivery terms of goods expected for orders and projects.

We can still make up for this delay by reopening on the 14th of April and working hard in the next months. Our customers choose us for the beauty and quality of our products, they will be understanding and wait.

But if the closure continues further then the endurance of the industrial system will be severely tested. Many of our competitors, for example in Germany and Scandinavia, continue to operate regularly in these weeks. Solicited by large developers or international customers, they can certainly guarantee production and delivery times by obtaining commissions and orders that would have otherwise been ours.

Their products will first take our place in projects that cannot be postponed over time, then perhaps even in multi-brand stores around the world. Thousands of orders would be lost or cancelled. The recovery, when it occurs, will be characterised by a very low backlog and a severely deteriorated financial situation.

For many companies in the sector, this would mean that they would no longer be able to open again. We could lose 20-30% of our industrial heritage and witness serious damage to the industry. All of this would inevitably result in the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

It could take 20-30 years to recover what we would lose in a few weeks.

A return to normality. A diligent and prosperous social belonging is also based on the fruitful participation in working life and the consequent industrial progress of the country.

Mankind is the fundamental element behind this process. Through active participation in the productive life of the system, not only family well-being is ensured but also the social and psychological fulfilment of one's own existence.

In particular, the Italian manufacturing system thrives internationally thanks to the extraordinary nature of its workforce. Especially in the furniture/ design industry, production takes place mainly thanks to the extraordinary contribution of women and men who everyday conceive and create superior products in terms of form and content that customers all over the world aspire to.

This immense human and professional capital now lies temporarily idle in apartments and places often not adapt to endure such long and forced confinement.

Bringing this lifeblood back to its natural veins constitutes a moral and social duty rather than economic obligation to our society.

WHAT WE ASK OF OUR COUNTRY TODAY

Today, furniture and design companies are asking to be able to begin a progressive and safe reopening process from the 14th of April.

It is our workforce who ask us, together with customers from all over the world with whom we are in constant daily contact.

The factories are ready and safe, the rules clear and perfectly enforceable.

Financial aids and measures for credit are important but if production does not start we will no longer have companies that are able to take those measures once available.

Together with the production it is also important to be able to open the furniture stores again soon.

In our sector, we usually have very large shop floors with a small and distributed influx of people, not at all concentrated at the same time. The risk of over-crowding is practically non-existent. In any case, a temporary regulation to control access or by appointment only could be easily implemented.

WHAT WE HAVE DONE SO FAR TO COUNTER THE CRISIS

First of all, we activated an internal task force that was formed and trained to manage a crisis of this nature.

After a few days, we transferred the entire operations of our companies to our employees' homes where they worked remotely thanks to their extraordinary spirit and availability to work from home, demonstrating great spirit of sacrifice and maintaining a very high standard of efficiency.

From that moment we started thinking about reopening, working on the plants to guarantee the maximum level of safety that all of our employees are entitled to and that they can always expect from us.

Great effort is made every day to make us feel close to our many employees around the world, often in 'smart working' mode, and to our customers and the large community of architects and designers.

To keep this great family together with the right warmth is the best guarantee to ensure a prompt recovery as soon as we can all start again.

Many companies have voluntarily decided to reduce managers' wages at this time of crisis to compensate for part of the workforce's salary reduction due to the state benefits that have had to be enforced at this time of closure. We are really proud of this gesture which tangibly demonstrates one of the secrets of these strong Italian companies: in great challenges we pull together.

Some of our companies are now centuries old. During this long period of time the world has significantly transformed. New products, new markets, new consumers.

This impressive evolution was only possible thanks to the extraordinary people who honoured and supported us with their precious everyday work.

And it is to our craftsmen, workers, office employees and managers that we dedicate our utmost effort to be able to reopen and start again stronger than before, in the knowledge that only united we can continue to thrive in the time to come.

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