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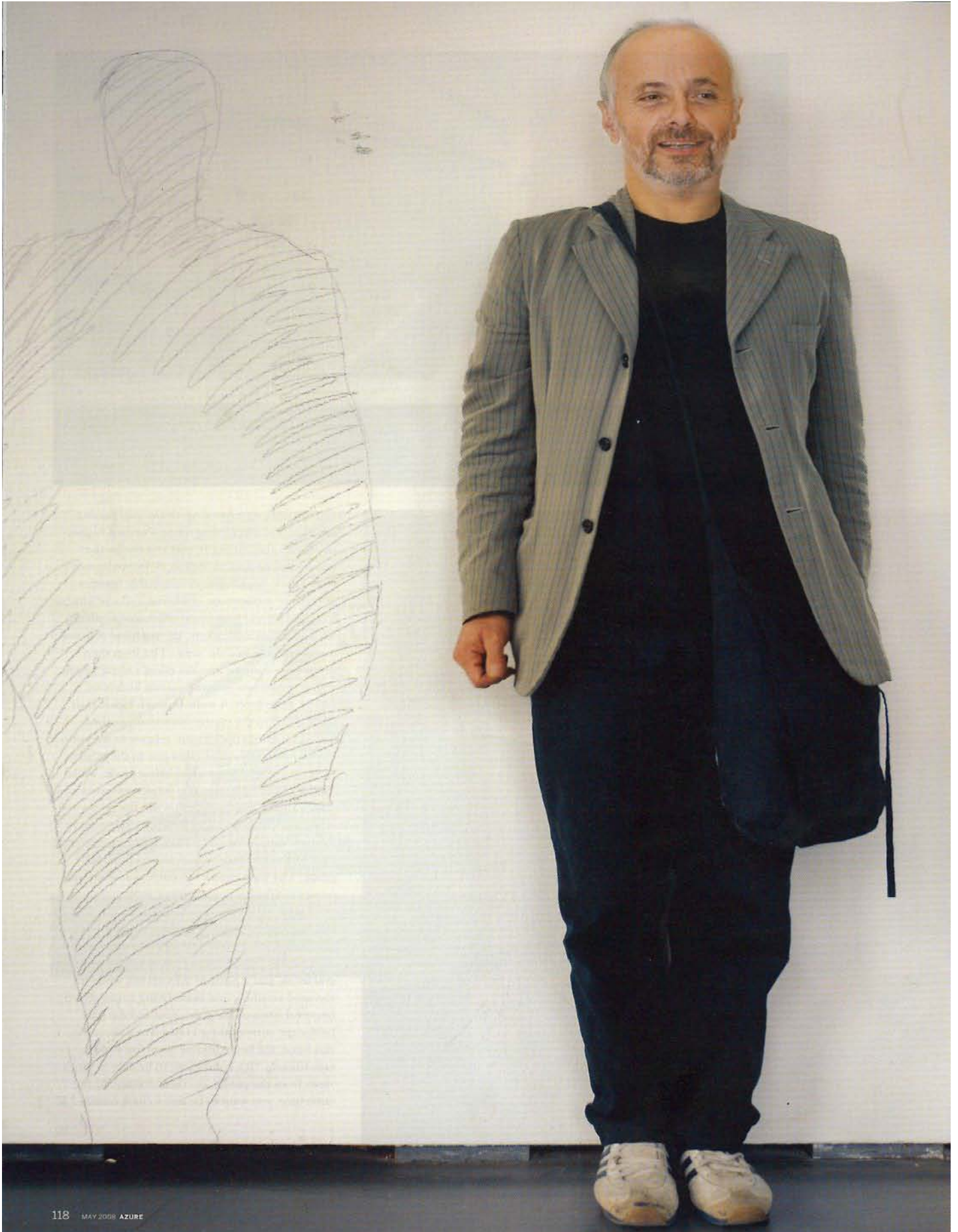
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# The maestro of light

The life force behind lighting company Viabizzuno, Mario Nanni has long conjured up luminous solutions for projects around the world. Now he's manipulating moving imagery and light to create poetic installations

By Elizabeth Pagliacolo

Two hours into my tour of Viabizzuno's home base in a small town near Bologna, Mario Nanni finally materializes on the narrow white terrace. He's conferring with a workman on the staircase leading to the roof, where an array of solar panels is being installed. A spiky-haired cook has prepared lunch and switched on the Peter Zumthor-designed pendant hanging above the table in the light-filled kitchen, just to show me how it works. When Nanni finally joins us at the table, he starts sparring with two young designers. He plays with his food while the cook justifies her new take on the risotto, to Nanni's feigned consternation. This family-style set-up seems so convivial that even though the lighting designer is answering my questions while number-crunching with the company's accountant, I can't help but fall for the oft-repeated comment about the innovative lighting company not being market driven.

"I don't want to be a businessman anymore," Nanni says, his boyish demeanour taking on a no-nonsense expression. The 52-year-old, who also teaches architecture at the University of Ferrara, wants to dedicate the rest of his creative life to designing light, to being a progettista – the Italian word for designer. As the driving force behind Viabizzuno, he's met his goal. Founded in 1994, the company has created fixtures and schemes that invisibly integrate into architecture, producing illuminations so natural they feel intrinsic. Most of its products – from the monolithic Notte floor lamp to the giant Cor-ten matchsticks of Palo B – represent the fruit of collaborations between the company and outside designers and architects. And many evolve directly from site-specific projects: Viabizzuno submerged its delicately flickering LEDs in the pool at Peter Zumthor's Therme Spa in Vals, Switzerland, and hung its wire-thin pendants from the ceiling throughout. It collaborated with John Pawson on the repurposing of a convent into a house in Montemaggio, Tuscany, by creating

a delicate interplay between the natural light coming in through the windows and the concealed artificial lighting of the fireplace ledge and the ceiling beams. But if Viabizzuno's essence can be distilled into one product, it's the 094 system. Since 1995, Nanni has been finessing the design, which comprises a profile fitted with any light source and inserted into plasterboard. This cut in a wall beams a straight line of light that visually carves up a space, conjuring a multi-planar volume, transforming both light and space into something beyond their fundamental purpose.

According to Nanni, the 094 system and Cubo Doccia (a shower head with integrated lighting) count among his most copied designs. "I don't care about losing business," he says. What riles him is having his ideas stolen, cheaply reproduced but not credited. He does allow, though, that his own inspirations are out there in the real world: "I copy from everyone," he says. "To copy from just one person is to be a plagiarist. It's about interpretation. Everything's been invented. The secret is to understand and interpret many things at once."

How Nanni defines what he does is of the utmost importance to the inner workings of Viabizzuno. Instead of advertising, the company self-publishes its lighting schemes in tabloid-sized monthly reports; and in Nanni's published notebook he lists his eight rules of light, which range from light as building material to the importance of shadow.

Housing the self-mythologizing entity that is Viabizzuno are its new headquarters, under construction since 2002. The sprawling building gathers design studios, meeting rooms, a library, a kitchen and a dormitory under one roof; it also contains a warehouse,

Viabizzuno has created fixtures and schemes that invisibly integrate into the architecture, producing illumination so natural it feels intrinsic

temperature- and stress-control labs, and a mock-up room where products are tested in a simulated environment, such as a hotel room. Adjacent to casa Viabizzuno is a huge factory. A 90-seat theatre and a daycare for the children of its 130 employees are planned.

Since 2006, Nanni has been running his side project from this same venue. Through Mario Nanni Progettista, he creates installations where light – coloured and animated by moving images – is the main event, and an all-consuming experience. Last April, he staged *La luce che ho in mente* ("The light I have in mind") at the Milan Triennale. In a series of rooms, the walls and floors were bathed in hues that changed when visitors touched a painter's palette on the wall; a ghost pen scribbled a luminous letter onto the surface of a long white table; and thick books of blank pages appeared to catch fire, the flames projected as furious shadows. At the end, white umbrellas were handed out, to protect visitors from alphabetic letters that rained down within a darkened corridor.

Nanni has never abandoned his love of cinema. In the corporate literature, he writes how as a boy growing up in the small town of Bizzuno in Emilia Romagna, he would go to the movies with his grandfather. Habitually arriving after the film had started, Nanni would watch the light dance along the edges of the seats during a brightly lit scene, and find himself completely in the dark, and terrified, during a nighttime shot. During our lunchtime talk

1 In the Design Museum at the Milan Triennale, Nanni's wall projections illuminate the history of Italian design. Subtle recessed uplighting bathes in warm light such iconic items as Ettore Sottsass's Carlton bookcase.

2 The lighting is pulled back when illuminating the museum's display cases, as a way of emphasizing certain details, for example the layers of a red dress.

3 Last March, Viabizzuno worked with German artist Herbert Hamak on an installation that delineates the historic Castelvecchio Museum in Verona. Eighteen resin panels, four metres long and fitted with blue LEDs, illuminate the rooftop battlements.

4 A shower of water and light, beautifully complemented by the moon and its reflection on the water, gives Touch restaurant in Marche, Italy, a magical feel. The effect was created with the Cubo Doccia, a stainless steel shower head incorporating a lamp.

5 Campana Brembana is one of Nanni's latest and greatest designs, newly installed in the Brembo factory in northern Italy. Elliptical cut-outs in a false ceiling glow with morphing colours that mimic the daily solar cycle.





PHOTOS: TOP LEFT BY GIOVANNI GALLI; TOP RIGHT BY PIETRO SAVOIELLO; BOTTOM BY TITO MARCIZZANO





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6 The Notte floor lamp represents a collaboration between Nanni and architect Claudio Silvestrin. Originally designed for Armani stores, the fixture provided a palette of possibilities for highlighting details of the fashion designer's clothing. The back side is fitted with adjustable mirrors and lit with halogen, fluorescent and spot lighting.

7 The Dodò sconce uses a halogen or fluorescent light source integrated into a plaster body, creating the illusion of the wall peeling back.

8 One of Viabizzuno's first influential designs, the O94 system consists of an aluminum profile fitted with halogen, metal halide and/or fluorescent bulbs. Aligned with the edge of a plasterboard panel, the resulting light seems to burst through a cut in the wall or ceiling.

9 Peter Zumthor designed the Cono Infinito for Viabizzuno. The built-in ceiling light comes in anodized aluminum, with a silver or gold interior finish.

10 Cantilever, a recessed telescopic lamp conceived by Shigeru Ban for Viabizzuno, diffuses the direct light of a fluorescent tube.

11 Inside the Milan Triennale last year, Nanni staged an interactive installation called *La luce che ho in mente*, or "The light I have in mind." At the end of the exhibit, visitors walked down a corridor animated by a light shower of words and letters.

12 *La luce che ho in mente* encompassed many of Nanni's inspirations, including the effect of white light on a white surface, such as a snowbank or a blank page. The scribbles on the table were projected by LIV, "the lamp of variable images."

13 The installation's "painter's room" displayed the Campana Brembana. The colours of the ceiling light's LEDs mixed when visitors touched paint-splotch panels on the wall.

14 In conjunction with the installation, Viabizzuno set up a lighting display inside two stacked containers located outside the company's Milan base.

at Viabizzuno's headquarters, he amended the story to take place when he was a bit older: "When there was a scene with snow, you could find your seat, get close to someone. When it got dark, you could kiss your girlfriend, put your hand on her knee, but with the next scene of light you had to take your hand away." Nanni translated that thrill into LIV, *lampadina a immagini variabili* or "lamp of variable images," through which he creates the imagery that brings his latest light installations to life.

Many of Nanni's ideas are realized in two new permanent projects. In the Design Museum at the Triennale – where he created his *La luce che ho in mente* installation a year ago – he devised large screens that come alive with movies in black and white, leading visitors through halls filled with iconic fashion and industrial design. Along the edges of glass display cases are anodized aluminum profiles that focus thin fluorescent beams from fine

"When there was a scene with snow, you could find your seat, get close to someone. When it got dark, you could kiss your girlfriend"

slits on certain details – say, the silk layers of a couture dress. In other instances, the profiles drop down from the ceiling and line the plinths; they are used to illuminate the curves on sculptures, and on such renowned pieces as Alessandro Mendini's Proust armchair. And evoking the excitement of revving up one of the gallery's parked Fiats or Vespas, Nanni conjured skid marks scraping across the floor.

In a similar vein, his scheme for the Brembo factory, located between Milan and Bergamo, coalesces his vision into an exhilarating experience. Among his many gestures of dynamic lighting, one stands out: the Campana Brembana, or Brembana bell. With the help of soft-ware, RGB fluorescents and LEDs hidden along the edge of a bell-shaped cut-out in a false ceiling mimic the sun's changing light. This same system is installed in the ceiling of Viabizzuno's reception area. Standing beneath it, it takes a while to realize it's not a diffuser, but a hole in the ceiling that throbs in an infinite palette – red, pink, white, blue, and so on. It's a technological breakthrough that provokes an emotional one. And it speaks volumes about how Nanni creates changing environments with a few strong central ideas. If the O94 system's effect recalls Dan Flavin's experiments in outlining a room's geometry with pulsating fluorescent light so the two come together as a resplendent and mystifying whole, this latest creation evokes James Turrell's sky spaces. While Turrell builds boxes that influence the perception of a patch of sky in order to achieve transcendence, Nanni creates the oculus in a poetic but pragmatic way. It draws your attention up and lets you quietly figure it out, but it doesn't overwhelm the experience of the space. He's not a light artist, after all, but "just a designer who works with designers."

As we wrap up our talk, a commotion arises in Viabizzuno's courtyard. From the landing outside the dining room, we watch as three men try to balance a huge pole supporting a prototype of a new fixture. This 15-metre-tall green fibreglass diffuser will light up a piazza in Bilbao. One of the workers yells up at Nanni: "Where do we put it?" He isn't exactly sure, but he's clearly excited. "My favourite projects," he says, "are the ones coming up." **AZ**