

# THE BARE ESSENTIALS

*Davide Groppi is known for his simple, beautiful luminaires whose light evokes an emotional response.*

*But his ultimate goal is to create 'absolute light' – light without a source*



**WORDS:** Nicky Trevett  
**PICTURES:** Davide Groppi



**W**hen Davide Groppi designs a lamp, his intention is to 'surprise with less'. And it doesn't get much less than a tiny hole in the ceiling.

Nulla – whose very name means nothing – is the ultimate expression of a design philosophy in which the light is everything and the source is a means to an end. As Groppi puts it, Nulla is 'the negation of all that can be considered design'.

Of course, it's an illusion – an ingenious sleight of hand that deceives the viewer into perceiving only the light itself, until they look up and see the tiny, twinkling star in the ceiling. Behind that star the wizard is pulling the levers – LED technology and a system of lenses direct light down through an 18mm hole, creating a fall of light that appears almost magical. But that's the point. Groppi wants nothing to distract from the beauty and mystery of the light.

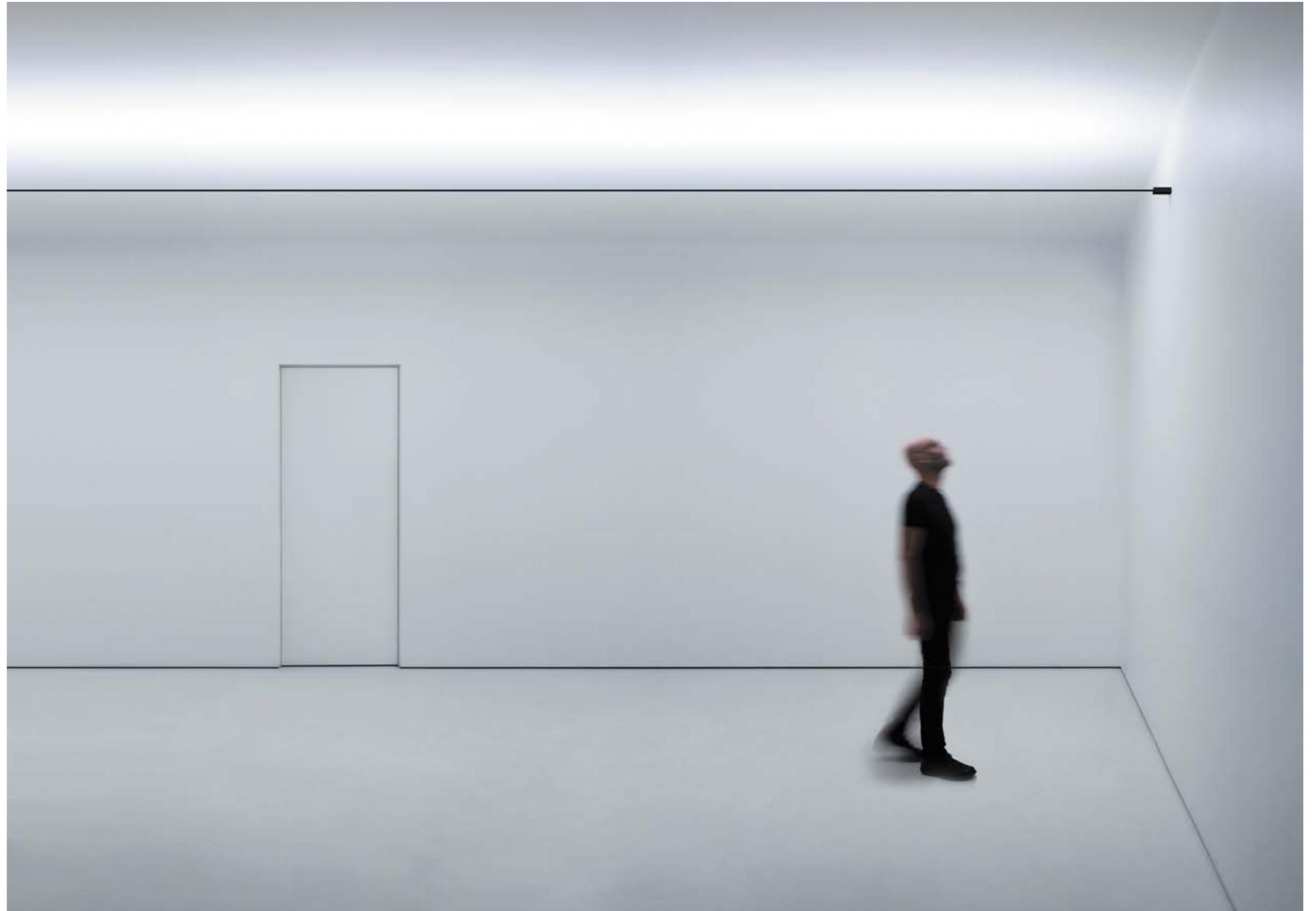
Davide Groppi was born in 1963 in Piacenza, a city in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy not far from Milan. He was a child of the generation that shook off post-war gloom by reinventing modernism; free-thinking designers teamed up with progressive manufacturing start-ups to produce an explosion of avant-garde lighting and furniture. In Davide Groppi, the two strands came neatly together. He claimed the freedom to deliver light exactly the way he wanted by becoming his own producer.

Groppi has had no formal training in design, but an important early influence was his father – a product of wartime 'make do and mend' austerity. 'My father taught me not only how to put things together and create from spare parts, but also how to appreciate beauty and construct things solidly,' he says. 'Together, we built a pinball machine, a telegraph – and a lamp.' The desire to do something with less has clearly remained with him all his life.

In 1985 he set up a small laboratory in Piacenza and began experimenting in the field of mechanical design. It was only in 1988 that he began to focus on lamps. 'I don't really know why it had to be lamps and not something else,' he says. 'One thing is for sure – lamps gave me a great opportunity to express my personality and make a practical living of it.' ▶

Nulla (pictured previous page with Groppi) and Infinito (left) explore two fundamental states of light: direct and indirect, respectively

‘The theme of subtraction fascinates me very much’



‘Light is expressed by dematerialising the lamp... it becomes merely a concept,’ says Groppi of Infinito



## ‘The ideal light for each of us is the one that is closest to us, always within reach’

His commercial breakthrough came in 1994 with Baloo – a design he still remembers with fondness. ‘At the time, I had very few resources and so the first projects were made of paper. I’ve always loved paper very much. The light of a lamp made out of paper is always special.’ (He revisited this early love affair in his 2005 Moon suspension lamp – a luminous globe made from Japanese paper designed to bring the radiance of the moon into the home.)

Baloo was seen and snapped up by Maddalena de Padova – founder of furniture company De Padova and a renowned entrepreneur famed for following her instincts and supporting emerging talent. She purchased 40 prototypes and exhibited them in her company’s showroom in Milan, highly visible to the crowds flocking to that year’s Salone del Mobile.

For Groppi it was a seminal moment – the realisation that people were interested in his lamps, and he could make a living while pursuing his dream. Collaborations with other companies followed, including Boffi, Mutina, Paola Lenti and Agatha Ruiz De La Prada. It all helped to build an international distribution network for his creations, but he was never interested in conceiving ideas for other people to build. From the start he was determined to produce his own designs, likening it to ‘the ability to play the music you love’. It was the only way, he says, to ensure consistency and control over the way his ideas were presented. But he remains, first and foremost, a craftsman.

Davide Groppi has a very personal relationship with light. His lamp designs encompass four key concepts: simplicity, lightness, emotion and invention. A walk through the company’s Spazio Esperienze showroom is an immersive experience, a journey from one engaging effect to another. The light is warm, welcoming, intimate – sometimes white, sometimes coloured, sometimes direct, sometimes diffuse, but always personal. ‘The ideal light for each of us is the one that is closest to us, always within reach,’ he says. This ability to create a sense of comfort and intimacy ►

Opposite: Groppi explores Spazio Esperienze, an experiential showroom for designers and people who want to be closer to our light’

explains why his luminaires are particularly popular in hotels, restaurants and homes.

This is not to say that form doesn't matter. Quite the contrary. Groppi has said that in another life he might have been a mathematician, and the pure lines and geometric precision of many of his designs is striking. The drive for 'less' manifests itself in minimalist forms with no frills, no fuss, no flourishes and no waste. He once said that his design hero is Mies van der Rohe, 'for his ability to say so much with so less. The theme of subtraction fascinates me very much.'

His leanest designs are among his most dramatic, their power often offset by a curious sense of fragility. This is particularly true of the designs based on straight lines – beautiful in their simplicity, but so self-effacing as to be barely there. Miss, a metal LED suspension lamp designed for the company in 2006 by Omar Carraglia is, for Groppi, a superb realisation of his ideals and one of his favourite lamps. The luminaire is about as minimal as it's possible to be. A slim suspended tube, just 25mm in diameter, lets fall a pool of light on to a surface directly below. Maurizio Mancini's 2015 Masai floor lamp is similar in concept – a vertical line that bathes its immediate surroundings in a warm glow.

Groppi insists that his aesthetic choices are never arbitrary but always informed by a specific idea or concept. It might be the need to resolve a problem, convey a certain sense of meaning, honour a work of art, or simply to make people smile. Nulla, for example, was born from a desire to inject light into a dark space, the way that light characteristically infuses a Caravaggio painting. It may be the only lamp to win a Compasso d'Oro award on the strength of the light it produces rather than the lamp itself.

The idea of 'portable light', bringing light closer to the user, is expressed in the Neuro metal suspension lamp, a 2013 collaboration with Beppe Merlano. It reduces electrical lighting to its component parts – a plug, a cable, some isolators, a socket and an LED. Groppi's current Wireless is More project takes this idea further by eliminating the limits imposed by electrical wires.

Fosbury, an LED floor and suspension lamp from 2014, is a construct of horizontal and vertical lines in perfect balance. It was inspired by the work of US sculptor Alexander Calder, known for his delicately poised mobiles that move at the slightest touch or breath of air. But the name pays tribute to the US ▶

'My father taught me not only how to put things together... but also how to appreciate beauty'

Opposite: Solemio evokes sunlight and blue sky





Spazio Esperienze is an immersive experience for the visitor, a journey from one engaging effect to another  
Left, top: Masai  
Left, bottom: Neuro  
Opposite: Banner and Moon





Opposite: Mira wall light,  
an exemplar of Groppi's  
geometric precision  
Right: Miss, 'one of  
my favourite lamps'





‘The light of a lamp made out of paper is always special’

high jumper and gold medallist Dick Fosbury, inventor of the Fosbury Flop, who raised the bar, so to speak, when he introduced the novel idea of propelling himself over it backwards.

Groppi’s cultural influences are eclectic. His famous Sampei floor lamp, a 2011 collaboration between Groppi and Enzo Calabrese, was inspired by a Japanese manga, but it began with a challenge: how to create a suspension lamp based on the ground rather than the ceiling. (It was the ingenious resolution of this problem that earned Groppi another Compasso d’Oro award.) Sampei is one of Groppi’s most beautiful and aesthetically memorable creations. The idea came from a popular cartoon called Tsurikichi Sanpei, or Fishing Enthusiast Sanpei, a story about a young boy with a gift for fishing. It is, indeed, a kind of fishing rod – the elements are wedged together in a telescopic system, anchored at the base with a joint detail. But Calabrese prefers to liken it instead to a slender blade of grass, its fibreglass stalk swaying and bending like a reed in the breeze.

Groppi continues to explore his established themes while introducing new ways for people to engage and interact with light. His 2016 PoPuP audio table lamp, for example, combines LED lighting with a wireless audio speaker – light and music in one elegant package. The lamp is a toadstool birthed by a mathematician, creating a circle of light that illuminates the stem while leaving the diffuser mysteriously dark.

Most recently, Infinito is an extreme example of a source that has been all but dematerialised. It’s simply a thin strip of metal alloy that cuts through the air, wafting indirect light as it goes. Like the grin of the Cheshire cat, it hangs in space, poised to disappear at any moment. The cultural influence is the work of Italo-Argentine artist Lucio Fontana, whose Spatial Concepts played with ideas about ‘slashing’ through space to create emotional responses.

With the likes of Nulla and Infinito in the world, it’s hard to imagine where Groppi can go next in his quest for absolute light. It’s hard to imagine how much ‘less’ a lighting product can be. □

Opposite: inspired by a Japanese manga story about a boy fishing, Sampei began as a solution to a problem  
Above: the paper Baloo, Groppi’s first lamp and commercial breakthrough