

design news



milan elan

Among the 'experimental' designs at this year's Milan Furniture Fair were future classics

Fun at the fair, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 'Moby's Trip' by Ron Arad. The 'Sistema 8' bathroom by Piero Lissoni. 'Soft Wall' by Carsten Gerhards and Andreas Glöcker for B&B Italia. 'Custom-Caddy' by Ingo Maurer and David Best. 'Screen', a prototype room divider by Barber Osgerby for Cappellini. 'Fjord' chair by Patricia Urquiola for Moroso.

NOTHING ABOUT the Milan Furniture Fair is low-key. It's a high-speed spin cycle of product launches, parties and off-piste events designed to allow the best and the rest to work hard on their reputations. Wading through the relentless series of exhibition halls where the majority of the 1900 exhibitors have their displays, I'd have liked a pair of blinkers to protect myself against the kaleidoscope of images.

Much of the furniture was enthusiastic rather than accomplished but there was the occasional gem. Patricia Urquiola's Jacobsen-inspired 'Fjord' collection for Moroso was a highlight: lofty high-backed armchairs and thin-shelled blue-tweed chairs on light steel frames. Two favourites among a highly covetable B&B Italia collection were 'Soft Wall', a felt room-divider/storage system by Carsten Gerhards and Andreas Glöcker, and Vincent Van Duysen's collection of exquisitely fragile chairs.

Across town, the Superstudio showed a striking assortment of sleek pieces and prototypes. The huge array of designers and multitude of materials provided a much-needed energy surge: this was furniture with a pulse. Emilio Pucci and Piero Lissoni presented loud prints and deep-seated comfort with the luxuriously large 'Swimming Pool' indoor/outdoor collection of pieces in glamorous velvet and terry cloth for Cappellini. Andrew Stafford produced 'Lux', a lacquered timber bed complete with wings. Plastic was everywhere in every colour: the Tom Dixon purple PVC 'Spaghetti' chaise; 'Shadow' in slick black Corian by Christian Ghion; Barber Osgerby's 'Screen', a semi-clear curved white plexiglas wall/display unit; and the Werner Aisslinger 'Gel' chair in moulded TechnoGel.

Technology and materials were tested by Philippe Starck's 'Strange Thing' armchairs for Cassina (three-legged, with colourful coverings over titanium frameworks) but trailblazer Ron Arad pushed closer to the edge than most. >

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New technologies and updated materials in inspirational ideas at the 2002 Milan Fair

Show stoppers at Milan, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Philippe Starck's 'Strange Thing' chair for Cassina. 'Utitors', Tord Boontje's design for a chandelier in Swarovski crystal. 'Shadow' chaise by Christian Ghion for Cappellini. 'Oblo' kitchen by Mario Mazzer. Andrew Stafford's 'Lux' bed. Day-bed system from Piero Lissoni and Emilio Pucci's 'Swimming Pool' collection for Cappellini. Day bed by Vincent Van Duysen for B&B Italia.

< The apparent simplicity of his two-tone 'Nino Rota/None Rota' chair pairs (cut from a single moulded polyethylene structure) swept away the competition. Arad continues to use everyday materials in an unconventional way, developing ideas digitally but finishing by hand. 'Moby's Trip', part of his Paperwork collection, is an astonishingly light desk formed from a continuous honeycomb core locked between cured carbon fibre. Piero Lissoni revisited melamine in 'Sistema 8', designing strong, resistant bathroom containers, while Mario Mazzer put the charm back into industrial stainless steel with the 'Oblo' kitchen.

This year some designers were in a reflective mood as they revamped old ideas. Starck explored jolly plastic for Kartell and was as enduring as ever; the deadpan quality of 'Louis Ghost' was just one of a series of consistently strong ideas. Versace also surprised by updating classics with psychedelic prints. Paul Smith, the latest fashion name to design for the home, invigorated old forms with his 'Mondo' range, which included a collection of chairs with printed covers displaying debris from daily life: elevating the glorious to the mundane and vice versa.

The Milan fair has many contradictions: it's a mix of the uncomfortable, the bizarre and the absolutely gorgeous; explosive colour and loud prints, friendly plastic and historical reference. Yet despite the show stoppers, discreet, understated furniture is still around (case in point: the 'Door' wardrobe system by Antonio Citterio for B&B). The experiments with materials and technical wonders are worth making a fuss over (and ensure that even the knick-knacks are bearable) but much of what I saw stretches the term 'designed'. While retailers need to take care of business, a fair on alternate years would allow for greater development of ideas, time for a good sit down, and give the designer velcro a year off. CAT MARTIN