

Hella Jongerius's Worker chair is modeled on beloved old armchairs, but is immaculately engineered by Vitra's German factories.



Mark Eggiman

At Milan fair, a somber and disquieting spirit

By Alice Rawsthorn

MILAN
If it runs true to form, we should all be worried. Year after year the exhibition of the work of the Eindhoven Design Academy at the Milan furniture fair has anticipated the future direction of design. The theme of the Eindhoven show in Milan last week was scarcely reassuring — it was death.

The biodegradable cardboard coffins and funereal picnics dreamed up by the Eindhoven students were unusually melancholic, even when compared to other directional exhibits. Yet the hoopla of the Milan fair — from the birthday party thrown by the fashion designer Miuccia Prada in her private art foundation, to the New York entrepreneur Ian Schrager drooling over the troglodytic forms of Zaha Hadid's futuristic Corian kitchen — could not disguise the fact that the new spirit of design is somber, surreal and introspective.

Only a few years ago the hottest theme in design was romanticism, with its ornate decoration and pretty floral forms. Yet design changes with the times and it has darkened, like fashion, art and other areas of contemporary culture. Romanticism seems frivolous in an era of economic uncertainty, environmental crisis, ethnic strife and political farces like Silvio Berlusconi's last stand in the final days of the Italian election.

These pressures are especially acute for the makers of the furniture that filled the labyrinth at Rho-Pero, where the main Milan fair is now located. They are also grappling with the onslaught of cheap competition from China, and the grim truth that in a postindustrial culture already bloated with too much stuff, no one needs to buy more of it.

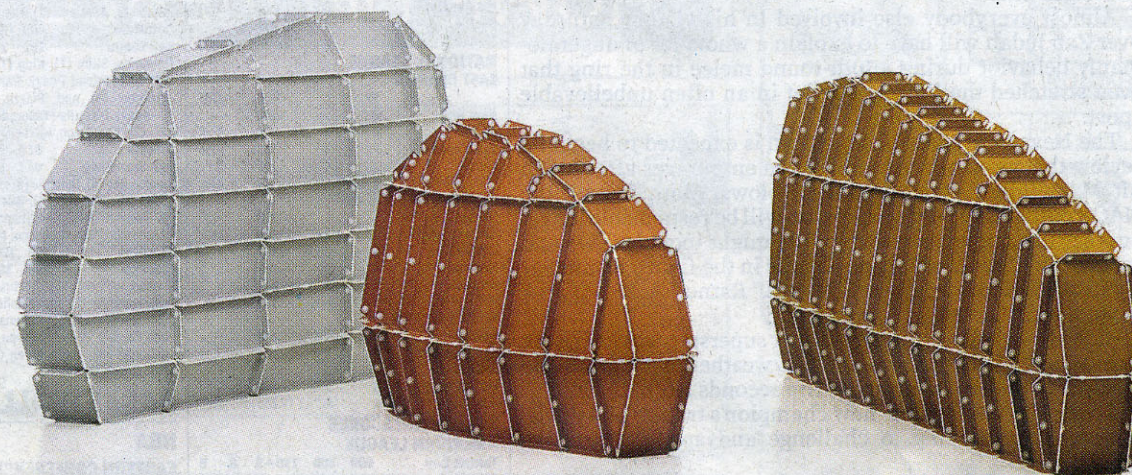
What makes it worthwhile for the designers, manufacturers, retailers and journalists who flock to Milan each year are the few genuinely incisive projects, which will influence the way we live in the future. The most compelling of last week's launches were those that reflected design's new dark spirit, often by applying new technologies.

The skulls, rats, weapons and other subversive symbols sculpted on to the Biscuit collection of white pressed porcelain by the Belgian design duo Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel of Studio Job were the product of a new process invented by Royal Tichelaar Makkum, the centuries-old Dutch porcelain maker. Equally macabre was the "serving pet" created by the Swedish design group Front for Moooi in the form of a grotesquely realistic pig.

Moooi, now buoyed by investment from the B&B Italia furniture group, worked with the young Dutch designer Maarten Baas to manufacture his Smoke chair, originally made by burning an existing chair into a new shape, on an industrial scale, but with the bleak beauty of the hand-charred original. Baas also unveiled a new collection of clay furniture that he made with Bas den Herder by coating spindly chairs and shelving in



The most enjoyable new projects at the Milan fair were shameless exercises in technical showmanship, including the Roc screens and storage designed by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec.



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A slide show of images from the Milan furniture fair.



Peter Guezel

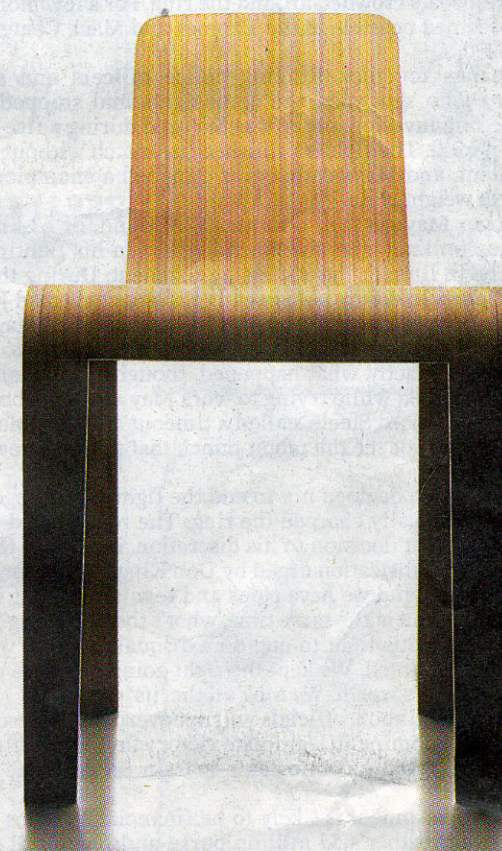
"The Crate" by Jasper Morrison is a replica of the wine crate where he stashes books and magazines in his apartment.

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were shameless exercises in technical showmanship. Take the spiraling bird's nest of a chandelier devised by the Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa for Swarovski, or the pulsating giant jellyfish chandelier conceived by the veteran Italian architect Gaetano Pesce. Equally innovative was the process developed by Vitra to bond cardboard and fabric into the boulder-like forms of the Roc screens designed by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec. Artek, the Finnish furniture maker, marked its first year under the creative directorship of the British designer Tom Dixon by combining technical virtuosity with an environmental conscience by inventing a new way of engineering fast-growing bamboo into furniture.

The British designer Jasper Morrison adopted yet another approach to the thorny issue of how designers can justify creating new products in a saturated market by concluding that sometimes they can not. He designed The Crate, a stool-cum-storage unit, for the British manufacturer Established & Sons as a precise replica of the wooden wine crate where he stashes books and magazines beside the bed in his Paris apartment. Beautifully made in Douglas fir, The Crate even reproduces a crack in the original. "The old crate was so perfect for its purpose," observes Morrison, "that it seemed pointless to try to invent something better."

International Herald Tribune



Andy Barter

A bamboo stacking chair designed by Artek Studio.