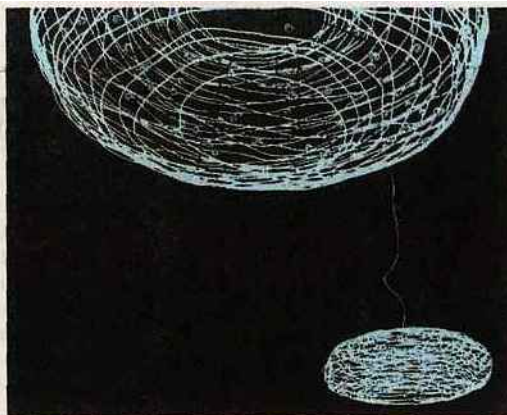


Louche Life

On display in a stressed-out Milan, seductive furniture from another realm.



Photographs by Alice Fiorilli for The New York Times

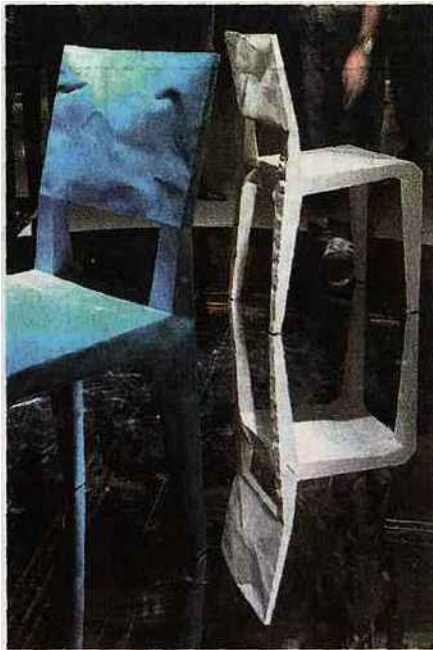


By BRADFORD MCKEE

VISITORS to this city during the 45th International Furniture Fair, beginning on April 5, could easily have missed the fact that a savagely contested Italian national election was just days away, in spite of the obstreperous posters pointing left, right and far right (Alessandra Mussolini) at every turn. Certainly many of the nearly 200,000 people who attended the fair seemed oblivious to the nasty battle raging between Silvio Berlusconi and Romano Prodi, intent only on locating the hottest furniture and parties

on offer across the city and at the fairgrounds outside it.

It was a daunting challenge. There were more than 300 product debuts, exhibitions and events held in Milanese storefronts and galleries, and more than 1,500 exhibitors showing their wares at the fair's new two-million-square-foot home at the end of the metro's red line in the suburb of Rho. (Fairgoers packed trains all day long, undeterred by news reports of a possible pre-election terrorist attack.) The fairground, designed by the architect Massimiliano Fuksas, was an overwhelming spectacle in itself: 16 glass pavilions arranged along a mile-long promenade punctuated by big silver eggs on stilts and square, black-painted pools of water. Over all of it is a co-



CONVERGENCE At the Milan fair, the talk was pure design. Top Sounds of Silence, a concept piece by Droog Design. Above, Wall paper magazine's 10th-anniversary party. From far left: a Corian kitchen by Zaha Hadid; crystal chandeliers by Naoto Fukasawa; the crumpled-tin Mr. Bugatti chair by François Azambourg.

lossal undulating glass canopy draped from steel towers more than four stories high.

Some of the best-received pieces at the fair reflected a similar single-minded pursuit of self indulgence and sensory pleasure. Set against the backdrop of Italy's political travails, in fact, many of the fair's offerings this year felt almost decadent.

The Italian company Moroso, for example, made a splash at its showroom with the Antibodi chair and chaise by Patricia Urquiola, pieces that dress a minimal metal frame in expressionist "petals" of padded and stitched felt, leather or wool. The materials bloom in richly contrasting



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A Designer's First Step: Pretend You Cook

THE architect Zaha Hadid says she does not cook much, but she has considered what her fantasy kitchen would look like. The 55-year-old Ms. Hadid, an Iraqi who made her name in London, has designed art museums, a ski jump and a fire station that have made her one of the world's most-watched architects and a winner of the canonizing Pritzker Prize in 2004. So there was a certain amount of fuss when she unveiled her kitchen concept in a gallery in the Tortona district of Milan last week.

Ms. Hadid's white otherworldly theater for cooking, which will be manufactured and sold by the Italian kitchen company Ernestomeda, is called the Z. Island. In fact, it contains two separate islands and is surrounded by bulbous cabinets and lighted panels made of white Corian. The pristine surfaces show vestiges of the deadly angles that were typical of Ms. Hadid's early buildings, but their edges are rounded — or “eroded,” said Thomas Vietzke, one of Ms. Hadid's project architects — like those of a Volkswagen.

Presiding over a swarm of reporters, handlers and fans, Ms. Hadid described her recent work as “more, let's say, soft.” Her design, she said, was inspired by her desire to create a kitchen that merged seamlessly with the rest of her London flat.

Ms. Hadid suggested that the kitchen as we know it has yet to find its rightful place in the home. “It either



becomes too much like a utensil," she said — that is, too tiny and segregated — or "it takes over an entire space." Her design represents a significant departure from the squarish metallic kitchens offered by the likes of Bult-haup or Boffi. She throws in extra fil-lips that cater to a spectrum of extra-culinary appetites: the longer island is shaped like a diving board, canti-levered over a small base by an inter-nal steel frame.

It holds an oven and a range (the appliances are by Scholtès), a heating plate, a cutting board and a pop-up cylinder of electrical sockets. A verti-cal bulkhead at one end — which gives it its signature silhouette — houses a television monitor and an iPod. At the island's center is a touch-

control panel lighted in cobalt blue; nearby a menu of red L.E.D. lights stands out on the translucent counter.

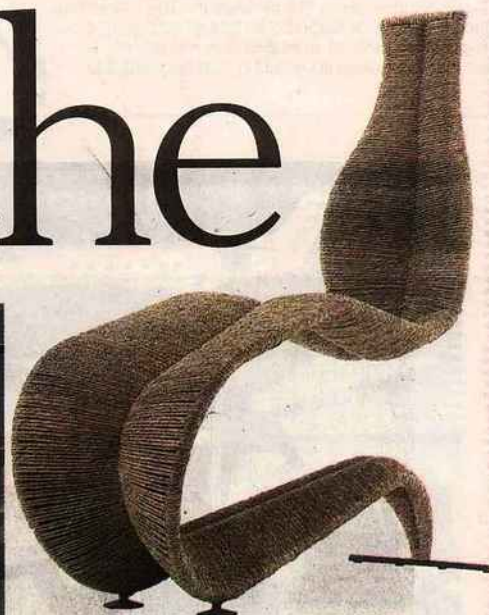
The three spigot-like objects stick-ing up in the middle are scent dis-pensers that had one end of the gal-tery smelling like verbena. The small-er island, a more conventional hexag-onal shape, houses the sink and dish-washer, along with a dish rack com-posed of oval-headed pegs.

When asked how much it would cost, Mr. Vietzke said, "That's what I asked, and I haven't gotten an answer yet." Ernestomeda, which has not yet settled on a release date, considers the kitchen a "special production"; apparently there are engineering is-sues to work out.

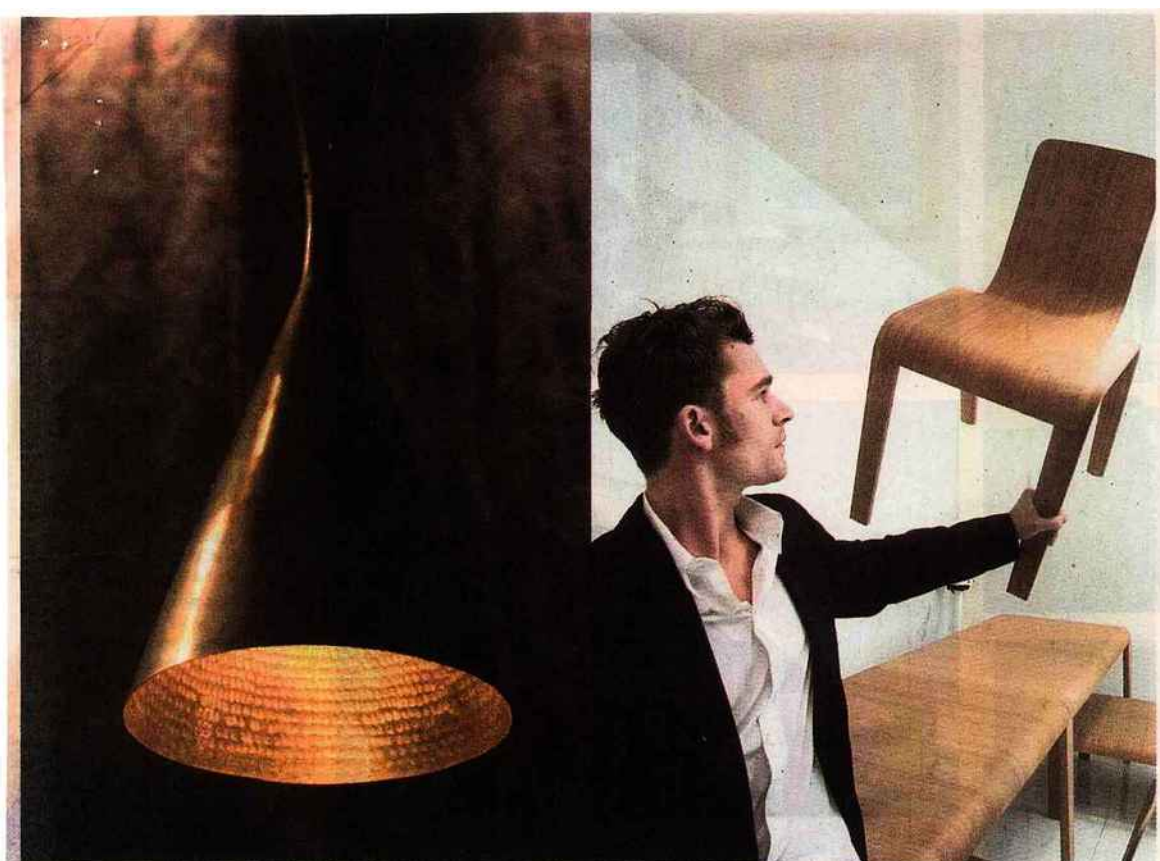
BRADFORD MCKEE



Louche



LEISURE TOOLS The Antibodi Chaise by Patricia Urquiola, top left, has a metal frame and lush felt, leather or wool "petals"; top right, Matali Crasset, a French designer, at her installation in "The Devil of Hearth and Home" show at the Triennale di Milano museum. Comfortably familiar forms included the 1991 woven-straw Bolide chair, above right, by Tom Dixon, and the Slow chair, above left, a homage to Eero Saarinen's 1948 Womb chair by the Bouroullec brothers.



Photographs above from left and below right by Alice Fiorilli for The New York Times

Life



—
 Tables with dangerous
 looks, bamboo as
 eco-friendly plywood.
 —

HARD MATERIALS, SOFT LINES Clockwise from top left: Tom Dixon's beaten brass lamp; Henrik Tjaerby with his Bamboo chair; the glass Brasília table by the Campana brothers; and Drift benches by Amanda Levete, to be offered in a limited edition in beechwood or in mass-produced red polyurethane.

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 colors (olive green or blood red against cream, for example) across the seat's surface and provide a spongy, luxurious comfort — unless you unsnap and reverse the cover to show its smoother, still softer side. (The fashion house of Valentino liked the Antibodi well enough to hang the seats in the store's windows on the Via Montenapoleone.)

Another Moroso piece, the Raw chair by Tomek Rygalik, was made from a single piece of leather, and looked as comfortable as an old shoe. (Sitting was not allowed, and the chair is too new to have a price determined.)

Vitra, which had retreated for years into the office furniture business, made a point of reminding the crowds of its considerable history as a provider of domestic comforts (not least with a gallery of greatest living-room hits by the Eameses and others). Its most talked about piece was the Slow chair by the French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, an obvious homage to the ultimate comfort machine, Eero Saarinen's 1948 Womb chair.

Kartell, too, put on a show of its past successes, dating back two decades to an early polycarbonate chair by Philippe Starck. The pieces in the retrospective — almost all of them angular hard plastic — threw the company's new Pop chair, by Piero Lissoni, into relief: the chair, which fattens up a clear polycarbonate frame with punchy flower-printed cushions, is a rare nod to serious comfort for Kartell.

Standing in the Kartell space inside the event hall where the show was mounted, Murray Moss, the owner of the design store Moss in SoHo, saw value beyond promotion in the retrospective.

"There has been this push for the news — 'what's the news?'—and every year you're born fresh," Mr. Moss said. "But that's not correct. As the world changes, you go

back and you look at a Kartell product from 20 years ago and it's new to you because you never saw it before with what you know today."

Paola Antonelli, the acting chief curator

of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, said the fair's obsession with novelty was ebbing for the first time in years. "Especially in the mid-90's, until about two years ago, it was a necessity to have something new every time," she said. "It had taken on some fashion rhythms."

This year, Ms. Antonelli said, she was struck by the number of goods brought out to appeal to collectors, particularly art collectors, who, she observed, have been attending the fair recently in greater numbers. "There were clearly more pieces there that were made to be sold for a lot of money," she said.

One such piece was Cappellini's re-release of its woven straw Bolide chaise, a now-historic design by Tom Dixon from 1991 that will be sold in a limited edition of only 99. Another was the Drift bench by the architect Amanda Levete, a principal of Future Systems in London, which was displayed two ways at Established & Sons' soaring, hangarlike showroom in central Milan.

The bench, a sweeping arc measuring about nine feet long with complex curved openings beneath its seat, will be available in dark-stained beech as a limited edition of 12. The company would not give a price, but did say that its mass-produced version, in glossy red polyurethane, will soon be available for a mere \$6,000.

Not everything at the fair, of course, was about indulgence. Much interest was generated by pieces produced using technological advances like rapid prototyping, which marries crazy computer models to smart factory machines and allows designers to exploit materials that were once difficult to tame. The Belgian company Materialise. MGX has pressed rapid prototyping into fantastical feats of home décor, many of them made of pigmented epoxy, like its new topaz-colored Minishake lamp designed by Arik Levy.

Cappellini's new Mr. Bugatti chairs, made of crumpled tin injected with polyurethane, were mass-produced one-offs, each with its own pattern of dents, made possible by advances in production technology.

Swarovski, the crystal maker, showed several conceptual chandeliers, including a widely admired pair by Naoto Fukasawa that hung crystal droplets in nests of glowing electro-luminescent film. And at Artek's showroom, Henrik Tjaerby's tables and

chairs turned bamboo into a new, more eco-friendly bent plywood

Perhaps the most adored exponents of tech-based craft were the Brazilian brothers Fernando and Humberto Campana. In their corner of the Edra showroom, people fell hard for their Brasilia table, whose surface was a layered mosaic of mirrored glass shards colored in white, yellow, blue or lavender.

The table looks more dangerous than it actually is to make — or to sit down to, said Fernando Campana. “The first two layers are laser-cut,” he said. “And what is left over is used to cover them.” The outer edges are all smooth.

The Campanas are said to speak for a

continent whose design culture is only just emerging in this hemisphere. (Just this week, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, a Brazilian architect, won the Pritzker Prize.) “They have brought back an awareness of this cacophony of Latin America,” said Raul Cabra, a designer, author and adjunct professor at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

And given the warm reception to their work, the crowds at the fair may not be as oblivious to the outer world as they appeared.

“There is a very strong social and political statement in it,” Mr. Cabra said of their work, “and Milan is eating that up.”