

MONOCLE

A BRIEFING ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS, BUSINESS, CULTURE & DESIGN

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- A AFFAIRS** Are you being Serb-ed? A nation's makeover
 - B BUSINESS** Surprise casting: LA's starring industrial role
 - C CULTURE** Thai-tastic: inside Bangkok's T-pop hit factories
 - D DESIGN** House style: why Japan wants to build your next home
 - E EDITS** Buying in Brussels, Mr Yello's last meal, and nice rice from Massimo Bottura
- PLUS** Taxi! Our meter-ticking Tokyo Expo

Transport
Special

Get a move on! How to get the world on the road

The visionaries, mavericks and clever types rethinking how you get from A to Z by train, boat, plane and the odd trike too – **A MONOCLE SURVEY**



1 ↓
GLOVE AFFAIR
How Tokyo's cab drivers became advocates of good manners and a better way of driving



2 →
LOOK OUT!
Japan's new trains designed for window watchers and day dreamers on the move



3 ↑
NEED A LIFT?
The Alpine hideout with the ultimate transport plan



**HONK!
VROOM!
WHOOSH!**

The cars to have on your drive and the automakers rethinking four wheels

Why Asia's airport builders have left Europe in a holding pattern

Our blueprint for the perfect suburban station

Thailand's transport minister reveals his high-speed plan

→



5 ↓
RIDE ON TIME
The Latin American bike shop that's pumped for action

4 ↑
SWISS TWIST
How the humble bus keeps the Swiss valleys alive





A debate about micro-financing and self-production sits uneasily alongside a showroom unveiling 10 new sofas; it feels like talking ill of the dead before they've died.

Slipping down the table

Milan's Salone del Mobile made a brave attempt to expand the debate on the future of furniture but ended up feeling more fractured than forward-thinking.

BY HUGO MACDONALD

"What are the trends?" people scream over drinks after dark in Milan during Salone del Mobile. It's a fairly annoying question at the best of times; it feels childish to talk about table shapes at the biggest event on the design industry calendar, as if they say something revelatory about the way we live today.

It's the weight of expectation for new stuff – from press, buyers and from each other – that makes manufacturers feel they need to produce 20 furniture elements as a badge of a thriving business when really the small coffers could be far better spent. No one feels this weight more keenly than the Italians. Domestic spend has continued to fall and Italy's design exports are lagging severely behind its European neighbours. What was the trend? Lots more new Italian furniture, struggling to make it to the production line let alone beyond Italy's borders.

Against this backdrop the 52nd Salone del Mobile felt like two separate events that just happened to take place in the same city at the same time. One event, which dealt with furniture, took over the Rho fairgrounds and the giant monobrand showrooms in central Milan. The other had a wider remit, taking full advantage of the world's design industry being in one place for a week. It consisted of exhibitions and discussions that delved into questions about how we might live in the future, how objects might be made and how they might reach their consumers. This half of Salone had nothing to do with trends (or table shapes) and the fact that it was here at all was confusing and counterintuitive: a debate about micro-financing and self-production sits rather uncomfortably alongside a showroom unveiling 10 new sofas. It felt like talking ill of the dead before they'd died. People here spoke of not visiting the Rho fairgrounds at all – that it was irrelevant. Such talk is more dangerous even than trendspotting and I think these two events need to be split before one eats the other.

The furniture industry is experiencing grave illness but it isn't dead and it will recover. It might be an industry that looks and works a little differently when it finally emerges from its sickbed, with new markets, channels, chains, materials and names, but the essence of it will remain the same: we will always need furniture and the Italians make beautiful furniture. — (M)

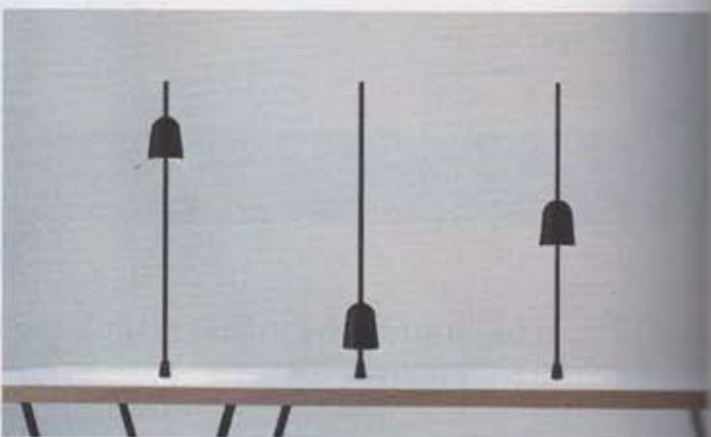
Preface

Exhibitors from 160 countries flocked to the 52nd Salone del Mobile but Italian design dominated. Here are our favourite pieces.

Three lights

Euroluca Milan [LIGHTING]

At biennial lighting fair Euroluca, once the hottest part of the *fiera*, adoption of LED meant we could peruse the stands without drowning in sweat this year. Our highlights were: Carlotta de Bevilacqua's Empathy for Artemide in blown glass; Michael Anastassiades' brass and glass Tip of the Tongue; and Daniel Rybakken's compelling Ascent light for Luceplan. Shining examples, all. artemide.com; michaelanastassiades.com; luceplan.com



Best contract

Padua [SEATING]

At its Paduan facility, La Palma makes around 450 chairs a day and exports 95 per cent of them. The Cut chair family by new art director Francesco Rota is sure to be a winner in offices and restaurants. lapalma.it

