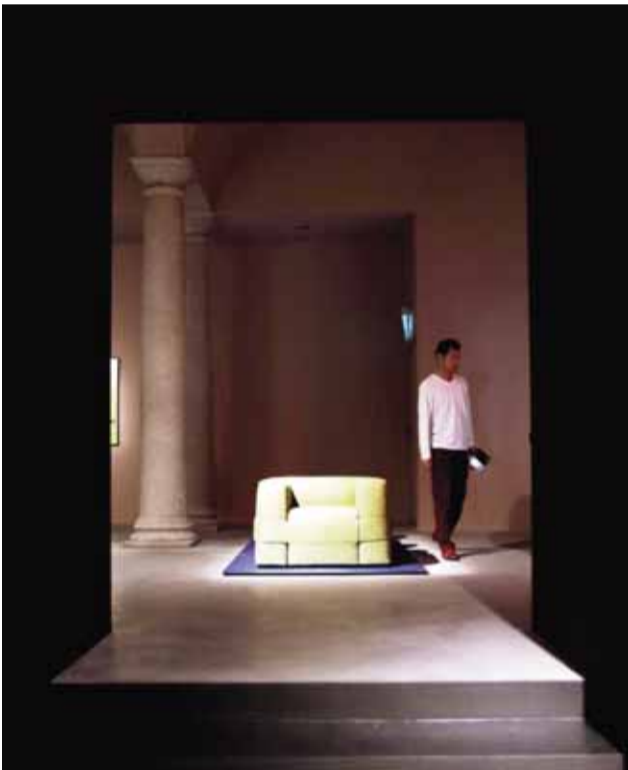




A woman takes photo at a creation by Piuarch called "Flowerprint", part of the Design Fair exhibition in Milan, Italy. — AP photos



A man walks at the entrance of 'Giro Giro Tondo design for children' exhibition.



A man walks next to an armchair created by designer Mario Bellini for Cassina's furniture designers.

RETRO-MODERN IS THE DESIGN WORLD'S COMFORT FOOD AT MILAN

'95 percent of people in Milano will buy retro furniture'

Retro-modern is the design world's comfort food. As populism finds political traction, designers at the Milan Furniture Show looked to the past for inspiration, offering reassurance in the form of high-quality furnishings to help navigate an uncertain present. "When you are scared, you want something you know in life," said designer Philippe Starck, sitting on an updated Caprice cafe stool and coordinated Passion table for Cassina. "We cannot start from scratch. It is impossible. We cannot use the fantastic technology which is available because it is not what people want. When this cycle will finish, we will explode. We have drawers full of projects, boxes."

Among the designer's other pieces this year were series of Versailles lamps for Floss and Baccarat and two new chairs in the Generic line for Kartell. "Today, 95 percent of people in Milano will think they are buying modern furniture, and they will buy retro furniture," he told The Associated Press. Some highlights from the seven days of events that will end tomorrow:

Presidential opening

Milan design week, which combines the Milan Furniture Show with collateral Fuori Salone events throughout the city, is as much about ideas as about products, and the debate about which prevails is a constant. Italian President Sergio Mattarella opened the weeklong preview of furniture and lighting at the Rho fairgrounds, a first for the furniture fair representing an industry with more than 10 billion euros (\$10.6 billion) in exports last year.

"It is a great sign for Italy," said Claudio Luti, the furniture show's president, saying it signaled the government's support for the sector, which is comprised mostly of small- and medium-size companies that often view each other as competitors. "We cannot so easily form a system, and this is symbolic that we can work together when we travel around the world and not just go it alone."

Past revisited

Architect and designer Mario Bellini was some 50 years too early, by his own admission, with his 932 chair for Cassina, comprised of four cushions held together with a belt. Now he's back with the MB, an updated version that includes a leather-and-textile mix, and betting on success.

"This armchair was not lucky at the time, after which I believe I designed another 40 pieces of furniture for Cassina. But a few years ago we asked ourselves, why wouldn't we give justice to this innovation, and attempt to bring it back today in a world that has become a lot more sophisticated and a lot more capable to receive new messages," Bellini said.

Legacy battle

Dipping back into the archives has its risks.

Cassina and Molteni&C, both from the Brianza furniture district north of Milan, found themselves locked in a public relations and legal battle over rights to a classic chair designed by Italian architect Gio Ponti in the 1950s during this edition.

Cassina showed the chair Cassina 811, which had been out of production since 1964, at its showroom in downtown Milan. But Molteni&C, which also previewed its version, claimed it had obtained the rights from Ponti's heirs, and has taken its competitor to court. nCassina said the 811 is not on sale yet, and that it is "waiting to resolve the issues through legal channels in order to legitimately produce the armchair." It said the chair was "conceived, engineered and produced by Cassina ... in cooperation with Gio Ponti."



A woman takes a picture of a creation by Melissa's furniture designers.