**milan elan**

Among the ‘experimental’ designs at this year’s Milan Furniture Fair were future classics.

NOTHING ABOUT the Milan Furniture Fair is low-key. It’s a high-speed spin cycle of product launches, parties and off-price events designed to allow the best and the rest to work hard on their reputations. Walking through the endless series of exhibition halls where the majority of the 1900 exhibitors have their displays, I’d been torn between 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 Japon-inspired ‘Jori’ collection for Memphis was a highlight. The loft-high backrests and then-rolled blue-cushioned chairs on black steel frame. Two favourites among the highly covetable 2002 Italia collection were ‘Soft Wall’, a felt room-divider/storage system by Carsten Gerhards and Andreas Giscler, and Vincent Van Duysen’s collection of exquisitely fragile chairs.

Across town, the Serpentine showed a striking permanent display of shelf pieces and prototypes. The huge array of designers’ and manufacturers’ products, including a much-needed energy surge, was the furniture with a pulse. Ennio Piacenti and Piero Lissoni presented bold forms and deep-seated comfort with the luxurious large ‘Swimming Pool’ indoor/outdoor collection of pieces in glamorous velvet and terry cloth for Cappellini. Andrew Stafford produced ‘Lea’, a lacquered timber bed complete with wings. Fasicki was everywhere in every colour: the ‘Tom Dixon’ purple and white ‘Spaghetti’ chair, ‘Shadow’ in black Corian by Christian Girton; Barber Ogerby’s ‘Screen’, a semi-circular white enfilade wall/display unit; and the Warten Auling’s ‘Golf’ chair in modulated TechnoCel.

Technology and materials were tested by Philippe Starck’s ‘Strange Thing’ armchairs for Cassina (three-legged, with colourful coverings over titanium frame works) but alpinist Ren Arad paused closer to the edge than most.

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


< The apparent simplicity of his two-tone ‘Nino Beta/’Nino Beta’ chair pair (not from a single moulded polyethylene structure) swept away the competition. And now to consume everything materials in an unconventional way, developing ideas digitally but finishing by hand. ‘Nino Beta’, part of his Paperwork collection, is an astonishingly light desk formed from a continuous honeycomb core, locked between corded carbon fibre. Piero Lissoni revisited the metaphor in ‘Swarowski’, designing strong, resistant bathroom containers, while Mario Magrun put the charm back into industrial stainless steel with the ‘Oka’ kitchen. This year, some designers were in a reflective mood; as they revamped old ideas, Starck explored jelly plastic for Kartell and was at enduring as ever; the dynamic quality of ‘Louis Ghost’ was just one of a series of constantly strong ideas. Verace also surprised by updating classics with psychedelic prints, Paul Smith, the latest fad, has designed an entire collection with his ‘Mondo’ range, which included a collection of chairs with printed covers displaying floral patterns from daily life—chessboards to the mandala 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, violently plastic and historical references. Yet despite the show stoppers, discreet, understated furniture is still around (case in point the ‘Duck’ wardrobe system by Antonia Citterio for B&B). The experiments with materials and technical wonders are worth making a fuss over (and ensure that even the knock-knocks are desirable) but such things as I saw stretch 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 a year off.

**GOT MARTIN**