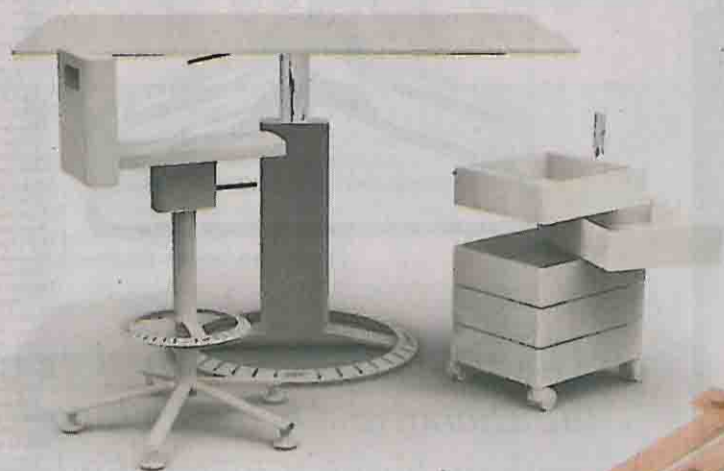


The New York Times



BASICS From far left: the 360° Family by Konstantin Grcic for Magis; \$924 for stool (prices not available for other pieces) starting this summer, magisdesign.com. Brave New World lamp by Freshwest; \$3,214 starting this summer, moooi.com. Vegetal chairs by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for Vitra; \$555, vitra.com.



PAUL TAHON

Milan, Stripped Down

By ALICE RAWSTHORN

MILAN

DESPITE the economic gloom, Milan seemed as frenzied as ever during the furniture fair here last week. Hotels were full, even at vertiginous rates, cabs scarce (empty ones, at least) and roads choked with traffic. There were hundreds of parties, including one every night at the flagship store of Skitsch, a new Italian furniture company.

Behind the bravado, some manufacturers cut costs by introducing fewer products than usual, and designers swapped sob stories of canceled projects and dwindling royalties. The number of people visiting the Salone del Mobile, which ran from April 22 to 27 in the labyrinthine Rho-Pero complex, fell from last year's record of 348,452 to 304,702, according to the organizer, Cosmit.

There was also an uncomfortable awareness that the investment decisions to green-light this season's new products and ventures, like Skitsch, had been made over a year ago, when the industry's prospects looked very different.

"The market is obviously much tougher now," said Alasdair

In a gloomy climate, a retreat from flashy design.

Willis, chief executive of the British furniture company Established & Sons. "But we won't see the full effect of the recession on the fair until next year."

Young companies, like the five-year-old Established & Sons, can still grow, albeit more slowly, by expanding into new countries. The chief casualties of the economic crisis are the larger, longer-established European manufacturers, whose sales have fallen. These companies have, at least, weathered recessions before. Some also have the advantage of being privately owned, and therefore free from the scrutiny of external investors.

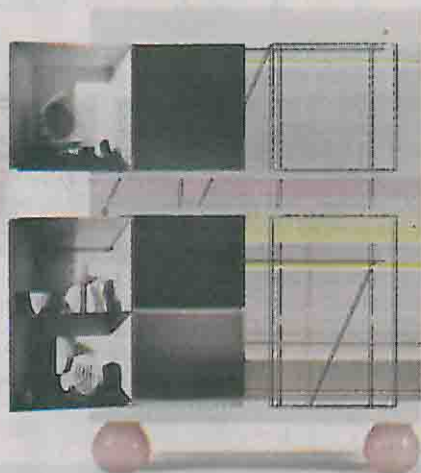
"Family ownership is a great strength, especially at a difficult time like this," observed Rolf Fehlbaum, chairman of Vitra, the Swiss furniture group founded by his father in 1950. "You need that passion, commitment and craziness."

Yet the economic storm has also aggravated the European manufacturers' longer-term problems of fierce competition from China, and their own failure to meet consumers' demands for sustainable products. The most depressing sights in Milan last week were the seemingly endless "eco-installations," typically featuring twee New Age music and digitally animated trees, and apparently bent on guzzling as much energy as pointlessly as possible.

That said, there were some gems to be found in the fair's flotsam. Among the technical coups were Vegetal, an intricately molded plastic chair by the brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for Vitra, and Konstantin Grcic's 360° collection of office furniture for Magis, another innovation in advanced plastics. Equally

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In Milan, a Retreat



Above: Amsterdam armoire by Scholten & Baijings; \$44,900, scholtenbaijings.com. Below: Build Up by Philippe Nigro for Skitsch; about \$103 for table, \$78 for chair, starting May 5, skitsch.it.



AINO HUOVIO

Above: 10-Unit System chair by Shigeru Ban for Artek; about \$312, artek.fi. Right: Tile stove by Dick van Hoff for Royal Tichelaar Makkum; about \$5,500 to \$17,165, depending on size and finish, starting this summer, www.tichelaar.nl.



Standard Unique chairs by Maarten Baas; about \$890 each, starting this fall, mattermatters.com.



Lanterne Marine vases by BarberOsgerby for Venini; \$9,400 each, starting this fall at Moss, Bergdorf Goodman, Barneys New York and other stores. Left: Skin light by Paul Cockledge for Flos; price on request, available by end of year, www.flos.com.

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ingenious were Paul Cockledge's lights for Flos, one of which is switched on by placing a flower into a vase and switched off when the flower is removed, and the eco-savvy 10-Unit series of furniture designed by Shigeru Ban for Artek, made from identical L-shaped pieces of a recycled composite material.

Several manufacturers responded to the crisis with things that they hope people will care about and use for longer, because they were so thoughtfully designed and made.

This was the theme of a quietly elegant exhibition by the Dutch school Design Academy Eindhoven, which showed products intended to encourage the enjoyment of the rituals of daily life, like a series of liquid and solid soaps meant to make washing more engaging. (The exhibition was the debut of Alexander van Slobbe, the Dutch fashion designer, as Eindhoven's artistic director; he has the unenviable task of succeeding the formidable

Li Edelkoort, who established it as the world's most dynamic and influential design school.)

Some companies put the theory of "thoughtfulness" into practice. The 400-year-old Dutch ceramic manufacturer Royal Tichelaar Makkum showed off its workers' skills in Dick van Hoff's tiled stoves, as did the Venetian glassmaker Venini, in BarberOsgerby's gorgeous Lanterne Marine vases.

Other examples were Amsterdam Armoire, Scholten & Baijings's digital take on an antique Dutch cabinet with screen-printed decoration, and the beautifully restrained, improbably slender Iri chair by the young Italian designer Paolo Cappello, the rising star of the fair this year. Only a few years out of design school, he also showed a desk, as purist in style as the chair, for which he won a prize from *Abitare*, the Italian design magazine.

Another theme was functionalism, a rugged variation on the dystopian survivalist style that surfaced in Milan last year. This took the form of sparse compositions of angular shapes made from



Iri birchwood chair by Paolo Cappello; \$920 to \$970, depending on finish, www.ilpiccolo.com.

rough materials in boldly contrasting colors and reflected the influence of Mr. Grcic and the Dutch conceptualist Jurgen Bey.

Those qualities were visible in the work of Nacho Carbonell, Peter Marigold and Raw Edges in Design Miami's "Craft Punk" installation, as well as in Maarten Baas's roughly hewn wooden Standard Unique chairs for Established & Sons

and the circular tables that Martino Gamper made from salvaged chunks of laminated hotel cabinets, originally designed by Gio Ponti in 1960, for the gallery Nilufar.

Whatever happens to the economy, the future of design arguably lies not in reinventing old styles or dreaming up new ones, but in harnessing technology to develop solutions to the world's problems. A group of Japanese manufacturers rose to the challenge by inviting designers to invent practical applications for their newly developed nanofibers — some of which are 1/7500 the width of human hair — and displaying the results at an exhibition at La Triennale di Milano, a design museum.

From "wiping robots" that sweep across the floor like tiny clouds and clean it after detecting dirt with their sensors to a sofa that changes shape at the touch of a remote control pad, the results were pragmatic and optimistic, offering an enticing glimpse of a future in which design will help to improve our lives — hopefully without a note of twee New Age music.