

piece of milanese mind ●

If you just want to look at office furniture, go to NeoCon or Orgatec, suggests Chris Carpenter, MD of Stills Design. If you want an exciting, inspirational experience which stimulates all your senses, then get yourself to Milan.

I'm not talking about the main show, Saloni di Mobile, but I do mean the 'temporary design museum' and the rest of Via Tortona; where mainline corporates such as Poltrona Frau, Canon, Lamshults and Blackberry choose to rub shoulders with students, start-ups, artists and fashion houses.

Day one, for us, started in the main showhalls and, to be fair, the exhibition was excellent; in particular the domestic and lighting halls clearly demonstrated the Italians' ability to be high design one moment and high kitsch the next. Although not nearly as busy as the main show (which was rammed) the office salon, with the likes of Boss and Humanscale, were clearly happy with the results. Overall, the show was noticeably busier this year, more international and less domestic.

We started our Via Tortona experience on day two, in a rundown room staring in wonder at a tabletop full of flashing, dancing Anglepoise lamps appearing to have minds of their own. In fact their bobbing, weaving bulbs were being controlled independently by the power of tweets. Who knows what we will be able to control with the power of positive or negative thoughts over the internet in the future. In an adjacent space a student from Germany had created a plant pot that walked slowly towards the light. A group of plants moving across the office in an apparent expression of freewill may well raise eyebrows. In this environment they raised only smiles.

Is all this conceptual stuff relevant? Who knows what commercial application an interesting idea will spark. The beauty of some of the more conceptual ideas on display in Via Tortona is that they were not shackled by the need to make money. And yet the great thing about Milan is that some of the more enlightened manufacturers wanted to be associated with the excitement. Lamshults for instance had, after 10 years, moved into Via Tortona especially so that their brand could be seen as more inventive.

Further along Via Tortona, at the entrance to the 'Temporary Museum for New Design' in Superstudio PIU and above Karim Rashid's outdoor furniture, we were greeted by a huge mobile of real Minis suspended from a crane. Next was an otherworldly Japanese experience from Kanega in a series of blacked-out rooms lit only by thousands of flat LEDs. We were encouraged to drink freely from bottles of Saki as the colours changed, dimmed and brightened in a hypnotic and magical manner – a sensory delight, to say the least.

Amongst many others of note were Foscari; the lighting magicians forced you to lie on your back and look up at their jellyfish-like creations.

We breezed through Tom Dixon's Blackberry sponsored building and then onto the DesignJunction exhibition; a loose collection of companies successfully flying the British design flag in Milan and supported by UK Trade International. This show was housed in the spectacular Zegna building and the exhibitors included Channels, Benchmark and Welsh weavers Melin Tregwint. We ended day two as we started, by talking about lamps and, in particular, the new Type 'C' lamp from Anglepoise.

On the way home we couldn't resist the Toshiba strobe-light rain show. In the street party that we got caught up in on our way back to the hotel it was so busy with hoards of delirious design disciples that it took us half an hour to go 400 metres.

Day three, our last, saw us at the Triennale, which houses the permanent Design Museum. Following a trip through a red tunnel, past soft cactus balls and into the mind of Maurizio Galante; the rest of the visit was dominated by the InterfaceFLOR show, which was a triumph of brand building and positioning.

For me, the mere fact that InterfaceFLOR commissioned an art installation in a Design Museum signalled to everyone the direction and ambition it has for its brand. The wit and intelligence of the designer Francesco Bandini, to display flooring so that it could only be viewed by looking at its reflection in the mirrored ceiling, was breathtakingly simply and amusing – literally turning your expectations on their head.

So, if you can, I urge you to visit Milan when the furniture and design show is on. Where else in the world can you pay one euro to jump on a 1930s tram, jump off into a park and walk into a Design Museum where you see some office carpet reflected into a mirrored ceiling; then walk through a womblike tunnel to see a marble Poltrona Frau armchair. Nip outside to have a drink at the Campari bar followed by poached egg and asparagus cooked on a solar barbecue? Only one word sums up the experience: GENIUS!

The challenge for Clerkenwell Design week is not to try and be just like Milan; that would be like trying to make pasta with potatoes. You'd just end up with gnocchi and who really enjoys that?

Clerkenwell Design week has had the confidence to forge its own identity. It needs to continue to be inventive, inclusive and relevant. It is part of London, itself a fashion and design capital of the world and like Milan some of the creative stardust may well rub off on it. Importantly everyone should have high hopes of how it can grow and flourish. The seeds of inspiration should continue to be planted with enthusiasm ●