

Welcome to TimesPeople TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NY... 10:05 AM [Get Started](#) No, thanks

HOME PAGE TODAY'S PAPER VIDEO MOST POPULAR TIMES TOPICS Try Electronic Edition Log In Register Now

The New York Times Fashion & Style Search All NYTimes.com

WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH SPORTS OPINION ARTS STYLE TRAVEL JOBS REAL ESTATE AUTOS

FASHION & STYLE DRIVING & WINE HOME & GARDEN WEDDINGS/CELEBRATIONS T MAGAZINE GLOBAL STYLE


DESIGN

Taking Stock as Milan Readies Its Fair

By ALICE RAWSTHORN
Published: April 18, 2009

LONDON — Riding on Line 1 of the Milan subway system was always a treat. The crisp white lettering on Bob Noorda's signs and gently curved granite of Franco Albini's benches said so much about the elusive mix of purism and whimsy that defined 1960s Italian design. But now, Line 1 is ruined, and Line 2 is next for the chop.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Milan's transport officials seem hellbent on "modernizing" the subway by replacing Noorda and Albini's design scheme with indistinguishably bland stations that could be just about anywhere. As Italo Lupi and Federico Tranfa lamented in the latest issue of the Italian design magazine, "Abitare": "One can't help regretting the loss of something that said what Milan is all about."

Should that be "is" or "was"? That is as pertinent a question for the Milan Furniture Fair opening Wednesday, as for the city itself. Having begun in 1961 as a showcase for northern

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY
(500) DAYS OF SUMMER

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
PRINT
SINGLE PAGE
SHARE

More Articles in Fashion & Style »

Get DealBook by E-Mail
Sign up for finance news, sent before the opening bell.
[See Sample](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

MOST POPULAR
E-MAILED | BLOGGED | SEARCHED
1. Personal Health: Paying a Price for Loving Red

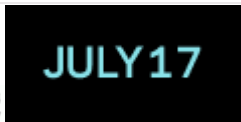
PERMALINK

HTTP://WWW.NYTIMES.COM/2009/04/20/FASHION/20IHT-DESIGN20.HTML?SCP=1&SQ=NODUS%20RUG%20MILANO&ST=CSE

DESIGN

Taking Stock as Milan Readies Its Fair

- SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
- PRINT
- SINGLE PAGE
- SHARE



ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY

By ALICE RAWSTHORN
Published: April 18, 2009

LONDON — Riding on Line 1 of the Milan subway system was always a treat. The crisp white lettering on Bob Noorda's signs and gently curved granite of Franco Albini's benches said so much about the elusive mix of purism and whimsy that defined 1960s Italian design. But now, Line 1 is ruined, and Line 2 is next for the chop.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Artek

The 10-Unit System, designed by Shigeru Ban for Artek. [More Photos »](#)

Multimedia



Slide Show

[Utilitarianism at Milan's Furniture Fair](#)

Milan's transport officials seem hellbent on “modernizing” the subway by replacing Noorda and Albini's design scheme with indistinguishably bland stations that could be just about anywhere. As Italo Lupi and Federico Tranfa lamented in the latest issue of the Italian design magazine, “Abitare”: “One can't help regretting the loss of something that said what Milan is all about.”

Should that be “is” or “was”? That is as pertinent a question for the Milan Furniture Fair opening Wednesday, as for the city itself. Having begun in 1961 as a showcase for northern Italy's furniture makers, the fair has expanded relentlessly to become a global design extravaganza. New York, Paris, London, Tokyo and dozens of other cities now sport their own furniture fairs, but none matches Milan. It is still the best place for young designers to make their names, and for manufacturers to launch new products.

The Milan fair's clout comes partly from its size — with 350,000 visitors last year, 29 percent more than in 2007 — but it has other strengths too. One is the quality of the local manufacturers, even though many of them now produce in Asia and shop the world for designers. Another is Milan's heritage as the home of late 20th-century design greats like Achille Castiglioni, Enzo Mari and Albini, whose work is visible throughout the city. Popping into Castiglioni's lovingly preserved design studio or scarfing up an ice cream

while perched on one of Mari's concrete traffic barriers is part of the fair's appeal — as was riding on Line 1.

Its loss is not just sentimental. Anything that diminishes Milan's credibility as a city which cares about design makes it a little less marketable as a commercial design center, and risks making the furniture fair seem like any other branding bacchanal. "It is evolving from a trade fair into a marketing fest for brands that have nothing to do with furniture," observed the British designer-entrepreneur, Tom Dixon. Silly though it would be to suggest that the city should be fossilized by postwar nostalgia, it seems even sillier to have replaced something as special as Milan's old subway system with an unremarkable one.

Fairgoers this year are, of course, struggling with another question — how damaging will the recession be? The combination of a real estate slump, consumer spending squeeze and credit crisis has proved particularly painful for the furniture industry. Having flourished in the days when property prices were soaring and investment was flowing, it has been clobbered by the credit crunch. A year ago, the industry could still count on growth from emerging markets in nouveaux riches economies, like China and India, but not now. "It's a tough scenario," said Piero Gandini, president of Flos, the Italian lighting company. "Flos has been through other crises in the 1970s and 1990s, but this one is very dark. We've all got to fight it."

At first glance, the industry's battle plan seems to be bravado, or possibly denial. Milan's hotels are fully booked this week — at vertiginous rates. Scores of parties are to be thrown each night. Hundreds of (mostly forgettable) chairs will be unveiled, and a few brave souls are launching new ventures.

Among them is a new French furniture company, Moustache, and an Italian rug maker, Nodus, with the country's rising design star Paolo Cappello as its creative director. The most ambitious new project is Skitsch, a €12 million — or about \$16 million — start-up, which is to unveil a flagship store in Milan as well as an online store and a collection of home products, although it has postponed the opening of stores in London and Paris until next spring. "It is a terrible climate," said Renato Preti, Skitsch's chief executive. "But this is an underdeveloped market, and there are still opportunities for new companies with interesting ideas."