Milan Design Week: Key trends

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This year at the 55th edition of Salone del Mobile in Milan, experiential installations dominated the conversation, winning out over traditional product launches.

Big brands including Lexus, Nike and Pepsi dominated headlines, stealing the spotlight from traditional design brands. And while the week has traditionally focused on furniture and product design, this year saw a huge industry blur—Salone now wraps in auto, tech, fashion, food and drink, and well…the entire lifestyle package.

An Encounter with Anticipation by Lexus and Formafantasma. Image courtesy of Lexus

The universality of food

Milan Design Week can be overwhelming for visitors, with its abundance of exhibits dotted across the city. Competing for time on visitors’ schedules, brands have concluded that simply showing products is not enough. Instead, they are ramping up partnerships with food designers, using the familiarity of food and drink to indulge visitors through their bellies.
The Restaurant by Caesarstone and Tom Dixon. Food by Arabeschi di Latte
East of the city, quartz manufacturer Caesarstone partnered with designer Tom Dixon and food design studio Arabeschi di Latte to create The Restaurant. It consisted of four deconstructed kitchens made from Caesarstone quartz, with menus based on the four elements: earth, fire, water and air. “We decided to avoid a show of products for Milan this year,” said Tom Dixon. “Instead, we wanted to bring people together to this restaurant to sit and eat in the design landscape.” (See our full story here.)

Elsewhere in the city, Airbnb took over Ristorante Marta for Makers & Bakers, an installation that focused on the rituals around a meal. The warm and homely setting was filled with product designs commissioned by curator Ambra Medda, and a table full of continually replenished food, which included a selection of cold cut meats, cheeses and loaves of bread. “Airbnb believes in the universality of food and design, and their ability to create community through a common language,” Joe Gebbia, co-founder of Airbnb, said in a release.
South of Milan, Lexus created three areas for an exhibition called “An Encounter with Anticipation,” which revolved around the hydrogen-powered LF-FC concept car. One, titled “Sensing Innovation,” was a collaboration with Michelin star chef Yoji Tokuyoshi.

The luxury carmaker tapped into the roots of Japanese hospitality, serving a visually compelling sample of bites. Entering the exhibition, visitors encountered what looked like miniature lily pads floating in transparent bowls, which in fact were edible. Visitors were then served a clear fish broth in a bowl containing a clear jelly that dissolved as the soup was consumed.
The Power of Water by chef Yoji Tokuyoshi for Lexus
Swedish design studio and retailer Hem launched six new products, gathering visitors to enjoy custom-made gelato at a pop-up called Ice Cream Social. Designers Philippe Malouin and Max Lamb spoke at the venue.

**Why this is interesting:** From auto brands to quartz manufacturers, seemingly every industry is now using Salone as a chance to apply design thinking to food. Brands should lead first with food experiences, and then allow visitors to appreciate the selling points of their products.
Ice Cream Social by Hem

Ice Cream Social by Hem
Big brands dominate

This is not the first year for big brands to participate at Milan Design Week, but it is the first time they’ve impressed the design industry and grabbed headlines. “Megabrands like Nike and PepsiCo have stolen the spotlight,” design writer Marcus Fairs wrote in an opinion piece for Dezeen. “These [big brand] exhibitions are really good; in fact they’re among the best things in town.”

Nike put on a large-scale installation that led visitors through a visual, scientific and conceptual journey on “The Nature of Motion” (see our full story here). Jaguar invited young designers to design the surface of its new F-Pace model. PepsiCo made its debut at Salone del Mobile with an installation called Mix It Up, also announcing an expansion of its design team from 100 to 160 and a plan to open more international design studios. Other notable big brands on the ground in Milan included Samsung, Audi and 3M, not to mention Airbnb and Lexus, as mentioned above.

Why this is interesting: Big brands are using Milan Design Week to shake up the design industry, showing off design innovations and conceptual thinking. It’s no longer a week for traditional furniture and design brands; it’s about every facet of life. Bring on the lifestyle categories.

The growing kids’ market
Sales of children’s furniture have been steadily growing. In March 2016, market research company Technavio released a study revealing that children’s furniture in the US generated revenue of $2.86 billion in 2015, and will likely generate $3.08 billion by 2020. (See our full story on “Kidult designs” here.)

High-end design companies have caught wind of the growth and are investing more in this young market. Kartell launched its first children’s range, Kartell Kids, which included toy vehicles, a rocking horse, an air swing, table and chairs.
Magis also added several designs to its Me Too children’s collection, including an adjustable chair and a latticed floating fish mobile.

Austrian design company Gebrüder Thonet Vienna commissioned Swedish design studio Front to design a rocking horse for its children’s collection.

Why this is interesting: Market research shows that parents are spending more on home furnishings for children. Design companies should invest attention in this sector if they haven’t already, and all brands should realize that designing for kids can be a great way to reach parents. “It’s a huge market with very high potential,” said Claudio Luti, CEO of Kartell.

Time to procrastinate

Amid the rush of Milan Design Week, brands created havens for visitors to slow down and hit pause.

COS collaborated with Sou Fujimoto to create an installation called “Forest of Light,” a visual spectacle that dominated Instagram posts. The installation was set inside a former theatre built in the 1930s, and featured cones of light that flooded the darkened space, flickering on and off. “People meander through this forest,” said Sou Fujimoto in a release, “as if lured by the charm of the light.” Seats were provided to allow visitors a place to sit and take in the hypnotic forest of light.
The Forest of Light by COS and Sou Fujimoto
For an installation called “time is TIME” Japanese watch brand CITIZEN suspended multiple plates used in its watches, allowing visitors to walk through them. Two circular areas invited visitors to take time to understand time. Like The Forest of Light, the experience required people to slow down.

**Why this is interesting:** Brands are capturing the attention of busy urbanites by slowing them down and taking them on hypnotic journeys.
From the body to the mind

Last year, Italian Design studio Atelier Biagetti invited visitors to explore the physicality of the perfect body at its Body Building exhibition. This year, the brand focused on the mind, creating a refuge for visitors to find the right sexual equilibrium with a provocatively titled exhibition called “No Sex.”

“In an age where libido is a business and is sold everywhere, the absence of it is considered a medical condition,” said founder Alberto Biagetti. “A world without sex is not a world,” he explained, “so we are trying to find a new equilibrium of our vision about sex.”

Visitors needed to push through two sets of white vertical blinds before entering the hyper-clean space, which resembled a medical clinic. The space featured nude-colored furniture that sighed under pressure, and a leather daybed with brass bolts that subtly mimicked nipples. “This is not a clinic,” said Biagetti. “This is a detox or retox pleasure-house, where you can help find yourself.”

**Why this is interesting:** Atelier Biagetti tackled a wider cultural issue, using design as a vehicle to express a point of view and stand out from the crowd.

**High-end flat-pack furniture**
Move aside Ikea—high-end design companies launched flat-pack furniture at Salone del Mobile this year.

Danish brand Normann Copenhagen debuted the flat-pack Ace collection of upholstery furniture, including lounge chairs and sofas. Hay, another Danish brand, launched its customizable Can sofa, designed by French brothers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec.

Why this is interesting: The environmentally friendly, cost-effective flat-pack shipping technique that was once associated with cheap and flimsy furniture is now carving out a place in the high-end market. Brands are taking a broader look at their entire supply chains in an effort to appeal to conscientious consumers.
Can sofa designed by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec for Hay

**Modular micro-living**

Brands and designers in Milan were also seeking creative ways to make the most of increasingly scarce urban space.

MINI applied its car-size principle to living spaces with MINI LIVING. The installation consisted of fold-out shelving and a modular kitchen unit.
Carlo Ratti Associati created a flexible living concept called Pin Room at “Rooms: Novel Living Concepts,” an exhibition where 11 Italian architects explored the potential of living spaces. Pin Room featured “the world’s first digitally-transformable sofa,” called Lift-Bit. The sofa was made up of several hexagonal cushioned seats that formed one large “sofa,” but was a flexible piece of furniture that could also become a lounge or a bed.

Why this is interesting: In our Future 100 report, we note that modular living will be increasingly in demand as more people move to cities.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNKmNJlh5lQ

Fashion brands encroach on homewares

Fashion brands, while not new to the furniture and homewares markets, have increased spending and devoted more resources to this sector. The likes of Diesel, Roberto Cavalli, Marni, Fendi and Armani added to their home collections. (See our full story here.)
**Versace Home** announced a reorganization this year, planning to take its home collection in house and align it with the brand’s clothing and accessories offer. Meanwhile, Austrian crystal brand [Swarovski](https://www.swarovski.com) launched its debut luxury home accessories collection.

**Why this is interesting:** Consumer spending on the home has been steadily increasing. A 2015 survey conducted by Barclaycard showed furniture stores recorded 7.4% sales growth in the UK, a three-year high. And in the US, a 2015 study by CIT Group found that growth in the furniture industry continued to outpace overall growth in the US economy. Fashion brands are leveraging their resources to tap into the growing opportunity in this market.
Made in China

Chinese furniture and design companies have considerably increased their visibility and quality at Salone this year.

Shanghai-based architecture firm Neri & Hu debuted a minimalist coat hanger for Swedish design retailer OFE CCT. Chinese home furnishing company Red Star Macalline commissioned 10 local design firms to reinterpret Chinese tradition with The Tradition in Evolution exhibition. Additionally, Stellar Works collaborated with American designer David Rockwell to launch a furniture collection called Valet.
David Rockwell

**Why this is interesting:** The launch of Beijing Design Week in 2012 showcased an array of talented Chinese designers and quality manufacturers. This year, Salone del Mobile showed the promise Chinese talent as it goes global, and the potential of Chinese design companies to take a slice of the international market.

**Ubiquitous objects reimagined**

Design shows often see the launch of familiar products—another set of cutlery, another lamp, another table. In response, students at the university of Art and Design Lausanne (ECAL) created "When Objects Dream," a conceptual project looking at the future of familiar objects.
The exhibit was surprisingly fun and interactive, reimagining even the most mundane objects. Visitors swept the floor with a broom, while their heads were glued to a virtual reality headset on the tip of the stick. A hairdryer faced a screen, and when switched on it melted the telephone and stationary on the cyber desk.

Japanese design studio Nendo took 50 monochrome stainless steel chairs and added different abstract cartoon characteristics to each one. The Manga chair series borrowed emotions and exaggerated expressions from manga comics to visually capture the sound or action through a chair. “The chairs are
lined up as a grid just like manga,” said Akihiro Ito, managing director of Nendo. “Each chair tells a story.”

Manga chair by Nendo

At Nike’s The Nature of Motion exhibition, the last room was filled with sport shoes illustrating motion—a conceptual, rather than practical, take on the shoe.

Why this is interesting: Design is about storytelling, being playful, and pushing the imagination. Salone del Mobile in previous years has often lacked these qualities, churning out familiar objects. Brands this year added new takes on old objects to the eco-system of consumer choice.

The Nature of Motion by Nike

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