

HOUSE AND HOME

# Setting out in a designer's playground

corner of Milan's Salone del Mobile is home to designers looking for a reports Alison Beard

With two curved walls in a sea of squares and rectangles, hall 9 stands slightly apart from the other buildings packed into the grounds. It is by no means an

structure. But its corner and somewhat softer looks are a contrast to people visiting the fiero of the annual Salone Internazionale del Mobile: they should expect to find something special inside.

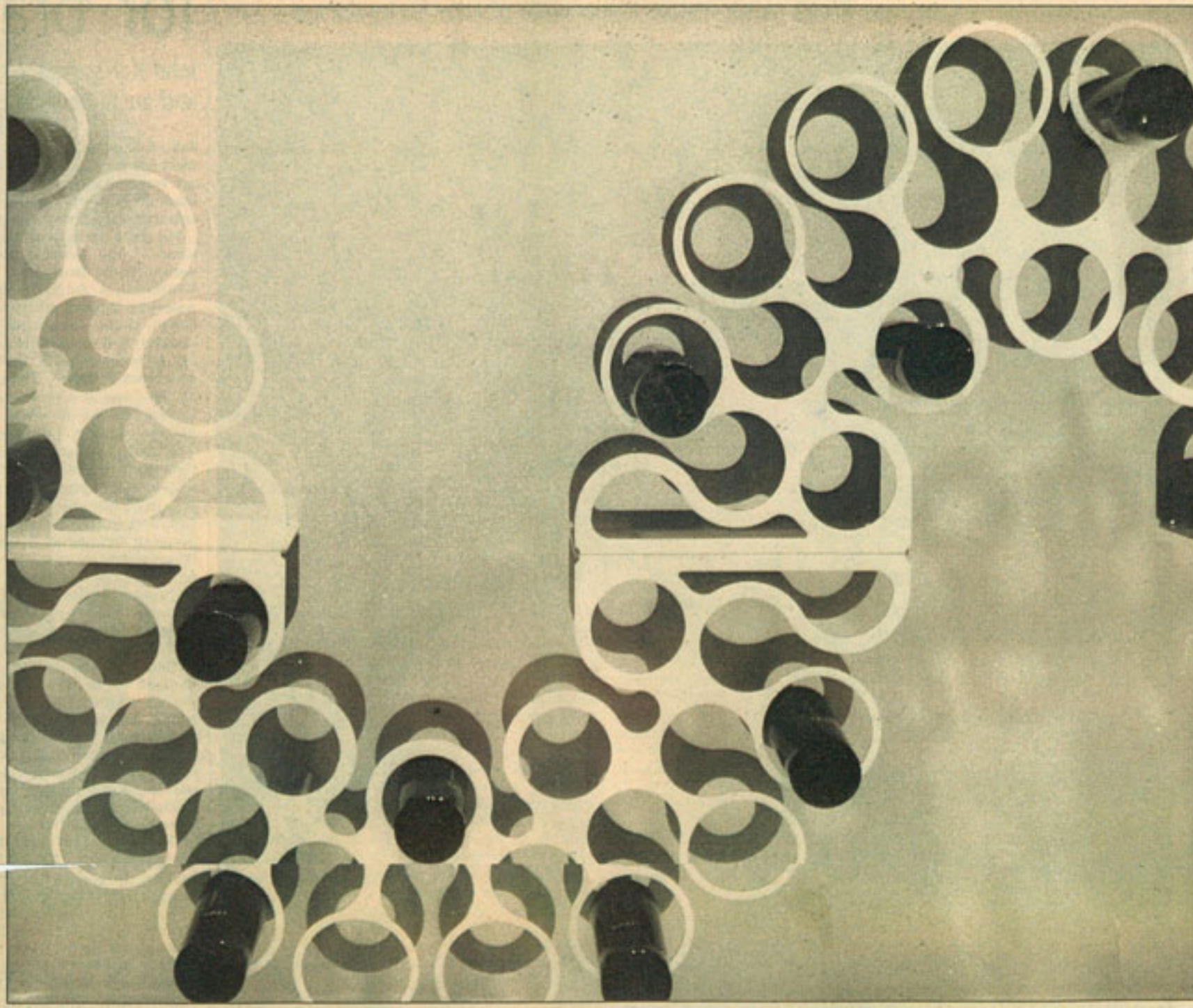
At 1-8 and 10-26, big-budget designers vie to sell refined collectible furniture to commercial buyers and the world. There are vast areas, famous designers, slick displays and areas where espressos are consumed over millions.

By contrast, the stands are small and the business suits rare. It is a puzzle is better because this is SaloneSatellite, an area where designers come to show off their work - professional - but often more experimental - wares. Some come away disappointed but others end up getting a break.

At two exhibitors I meet are Henry Wiegus and Martin Hasek, students of Prague's Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, who support themselves with design work and parental help.

Competition to attend the fair, the price of airfare, admission to a hotel and a hotel room. But they have to drive the 13 hours from Prague to Milan, so they missed out on the training. When I find them standing in their half-finished display space the afternoon before the fair opens to the public - I am slightly overwhelmed.

Except for one hour in the car," they try. "It was horrible." They are trying to transform a room - a "white box with a floor" which cost a surprising amount (we thought the first time was a lament) - into something interesting. So far, they have a black industrial carpet, black paper on the walls and black duct tape to hold it all together.



Decking the halls: (clockwise from top) Hiroshi Tsunoda's wine rack; Hiroshi and Lincoln Robbin-Coker; Lenka Kavcic (r) at her stand; Henry Wiegus and Martin Hasek

for example. She's sitting on the floor with a helium tank, blowing up bright orange balloons and sticking them to the walls. I can't see her furniture yet, but she's already caught my attention. Then there is the space labelled Hiroshi Tsunoda. A black curtain is drawn across the opening, and I have to stand on my tiptoes to see inside. It is pure white, with a professional corporate logo on the back wall, and full of what seems to be well-made furniture. A brown-and-black desk stands at the back; an interesting long, slatted, (rocking?) bench sits at the front. There is another bench, white with a picture of a bright blue butterfly wrapped around the corner; several lamps, both hanging and standing; and some curvy metal wine racks. Most striking: the designer isn't there. His work is clearly done.

The next day, an hour after the Salone has opened to the public, I'm back at hall 9 to see how everyone has progressed. The Taione booth looks

about the same - black, a bit messy and relatively empty - although Henry and Martin have hung the red "instant home" kit on one wall and spray-painted an inspirational "be pure" in white on another. Still, they are nowhere to be found. Lenka at Supernova is standing amidst her orange balloons, talking to visitors about her furniture - which I now see is an upholstered bench in orange and red, called the Lang Osta. She is handing out explanatory cards - "The Lang Osta Trans Aesthetic Leisure Platform is a sofa that assumes the natural form of a lobster tail... is intended for leisure (contemplation) or seating several people (communication)... [and its] main advantage... is its bio-dispositive which protects against harmful effects of electromagnetic pollution and geo-pathogen radiation". She also has a thick publication featuring Slovenian architecture, including some of her work. The balloons were a good idea, she tells me. "I've just started studying

nano-architecture, and my idea was that you're inside a cell," she says. But "everyone looks at them and says 'Oh it's the explosion, the supernova.'" And brand recognition is key. Furniture is still a sideline to her architectural and interiors business. "Most design is too exclusive. We want to make people think about design... It is a thing to use and to have fun with" and this is the first time that the 36-year-old and her partner, Mattea Panterr, are exhibiting at the SaloneSatellite. But she seems prepared and confident. "In Slovenia, it's very difficult [for young designers] because we have

a very small market and all the big brands are there," she says. But "here, I think there's an opportunity to break through. Milan is the centre." At the very least, she adds, "maybe I can find more [architecture] clients." Over at Hiroshi Tsunoda's booth, I find him - a young man in a black suit, T-shirt and trainers - and his marketing director, Lincoln Robbin-Coker. They are discussing whether the fair organisers will be able to give them another spotlight for the back of their booth. And, after a few minutes of talking with me, both men hand over business cards, plus a company card and a CD with images of the furniture. Hiroshi, who was born in Japan, studied at the Rhode Island School of Design and now lives in Barcelona, tells me that this is his second appearance at the SaloneSatellite. "The first time was three years ago," the 30-year-old explains. "I was out of school and eager to show my stuff, but it wasn't complete. I had made everything myself. I had no floor, no back panel."

It was not a total failure, of course. His work was pictured in a few magazines and someone asked to buy 50 wine racks. But he didn't have the manufacturing capabilities to fulfil the order, and the media attention was fleeting. "It was a lost opportunity," he says.

Three years later, he's showing furniture that was professionally produced in partnership with established companies, such as Formica. Visitors keep stopping by to marvel over the lamps, which have shades with flower-shaped cut-outs revealing colours inside. "My goal in this is to make contacts, to look for producers," he says.

I ask him about the black curtain that was shielding his stand the day before and how he managed to be ready so early. He says he started planning last year. His pieces came on trucks used by some of the big Valencian furniture manufacturers; he simply rented space. He flew in with Lincoln on Sunday, three days before the Salone opened, then spent Monday setting up. "We had this morning [Wednesday] to retouch - to change a few things around," he says, "and it looks better."

At this point, I leave hall 9 to view the rest of the fair. Several hours later, my photographer calls to say that Henry and Martin have finally arrived, dressed in white shirts to contrast the black stand. Upon returning, I find the space improved. There are funny postcard-pictures of their products - "Design Needs People", "Hit or Shit?", "Does Your Mother Know What You're Talking About?" - which a few people are picking up; booklets advertising a Prague design fair; and some red-and-white Design stickers sitting on the floor. Unfortunately, the designers have again disappeared.

Charming visitors, and Hiroshi, who is hanging back from the crowd and letting Lincoln do most of the sales work. After all, he tells me, "that's his job. I'm the designer".

A week after the Salone opened, and two days after it closed, I contact Henry and Martin, Lenka and Hiroshi, to get their verdict on the experience. Henry and Martin, who reply via e-mail, say they have mixed feelings. "Many people, mostly the Italians, didn't understand what we wanted to say [with] our concept. But also lots of reactions were strongly positive - usually from the Netherlands and... the British... architects, designers and students. There is a long way to the next stand. [But] it was a fantastic experience."

When I reach Lenka, she sounds even more upbeat. "It wasn't just [the reaction] to the furniture, because this piece is not for everyone," she says. "There were people interested in my interior design business and in me because I'm from Slovenia."

She also ventured out of the SaloneSatellite to meet executives at Vitra and Magis. "These are some of the most important contacts," she says. "It could turn into something... maybe designing furniture for them."

As for the orange balloons, "everyone wanted them, so the last day we were just giving them away".

I reach Hiroshi and Lincoln as they are packing up to return to Barcelona so we agree to speak the following day. Back home, Hiroshi says he is pleased with his performance at the fair. He was approached by a few Spanish and Italian companies interested in manufacturing some of his pieces. "I feel like people could see this time that they could be produced," he says. "I did a good job, and I'm excited."

Of course, "now I have to finish," he adds. "They may call me but I will have to do follow-ups."

Indeed, for all the designers at this year's SaloneSatellite, the show is over but the work of capitalising on the exposure has only just begun.