

NEW YORK

A Design Binge in Italy Twelve dazzling moments at the Milan Furniture Fair.

By Wendy Goodman



Milan's furniture fair, a.k.a., Salone del Mobile, which ran from April 17 to 22 this year, was the most energized, bountiful, and populated of design happenings in recent memory. Just winding your way through the Fiera (imagine the Javits Center times 20, comprised of 2.5 million square feet of exhibition space) in the RHO district of the city felt like navigating the NYC transit system at rush hour, ditto, making your way through Milan's streets for off-site events and exhibits. It was exciting, fast-paced, and satiated design-crazed appetites, for a spell anyway. While the Fiera hosted iconic companies like Molteni Mobili, B&B Italia, and Poltrona Frau with mind-boggling installations as large as city blocks, the city harbored treasure hunts behind the normally closed doors of its private palazzos, villas, and decades-old apartments. Meanwhile, many of its public squares and industrial spaces featured enthralling installations, not to mention that the Prada Foundation revealed the latest jewel in its design crown, the new tower designed by Rem Koolhaas along with other OMA designers. Here are Design Hunting's top picks.

The talk of Milan was Villa Borsani: Casa Libera! Seen above, the magnificent Villa, designed and built by Osvaldo Borsani between 1939 and 1945 as a family home in the town of Varedo, has been opened to the greater public for this exhibition. Borsani co-founded the design company, Tecno, in 1953 with his twin brother, Fulgenzio, and together they put their stamp on marrying artisanal and industrial design in Italy. The family invited Ambra Medda to curate the Villa opening during Salone. There will be an exhibition of Osvaldo Borsani's work at the Triennale di Milano (May 16–September 11). The entrance to the Villa, seen here, is revolutionary, in the sense that most entrance halls welcome you with an inviting view toward the ascending stair, but here I was struck by how you are immediately

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confronted with a fantastic profile of the suspended modernist design. The invitation is of a different kind: it is to admire the beauty of the design.

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Photo: Wendy Goodman

My friends Ivano and Kyre, who live in Sardinia and have created a fantastic design lab called Pretziada, led me to places that I would never have found on my own, and what a gift that was! I went down the rabbit hole to discover 5vie art + design's many exhibitions. First I went to the abandoned garage in San Remo for a show curated by Maria Cristina Didero and produced by Aline Radice Fossati, a co-founder of 5vie art + design. I met artist Erez Nevi Pana pictured here with his installation of one of his vegan projects involving salt. Erez's designs are driven by his lifestyle as a vegan, and until I spoke with him I had no idea how many animal products went into furniture production. "The practice of vegan design is moral, it's ethical, and it's just," Erez told me. I felt enlightened. Erez is going to be showing this work at Friedman Benda next month.

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Each object aims to provide a different approach to vegan design and the "art of reduction."

The designer started his exploration into vegan design with the Dead Sea – using the sodium-heavy water to create salt-covered stools.

By collecting scraps of wood discarded from carpenters' workshops, Nevi Pana constructed a seat that he then attempted to fix together using his self-made vegan glue, consisting of plant fibres and wood resin.

However this glue wasn't a success, the designer told Dezeen, as it was not powerful enough to secure everything together.

"I took advantage of the idea that the crystallising process in the Dead Sea can create a kind of skin around the product, and this is what unites everything together into one piece," he said.

"The legs are pushed inside the body in a slot-like manner, and slowly the salt starts to cover everything," he added.

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For a second stool, the designer took natural substances he found on the side of the road while wandering in the Israeli desert – branches, leaves, stones and textile scraps – and combined them to form a chair.

This was then dipped in water from the Dead Sea for several months. When it emerged, it was coated with a "skin" of salt crystals.

Nevi Pana also experimented with soil as a material, combining soil, fungi and other natural materials that, together, arouse a chemical reaction that makes the ingredients "rise" like dough.



When left overnight at room temperature, this so-called dough will double in size. The mixture is then shaped inside a wooden mould to create the desired object.

Nevi Pana then bakes the mixture, causing it to become solid and strong enough to be sanded, sawn and drilled into a chair-like form, which was given the name Soilid.

The exhibition also includes objects made from clay that the designer sourced himself from the Dead Sea, a material made from silkworm cocoons that is taken non-invasively, and a pile of the waste produced by the making of these products.

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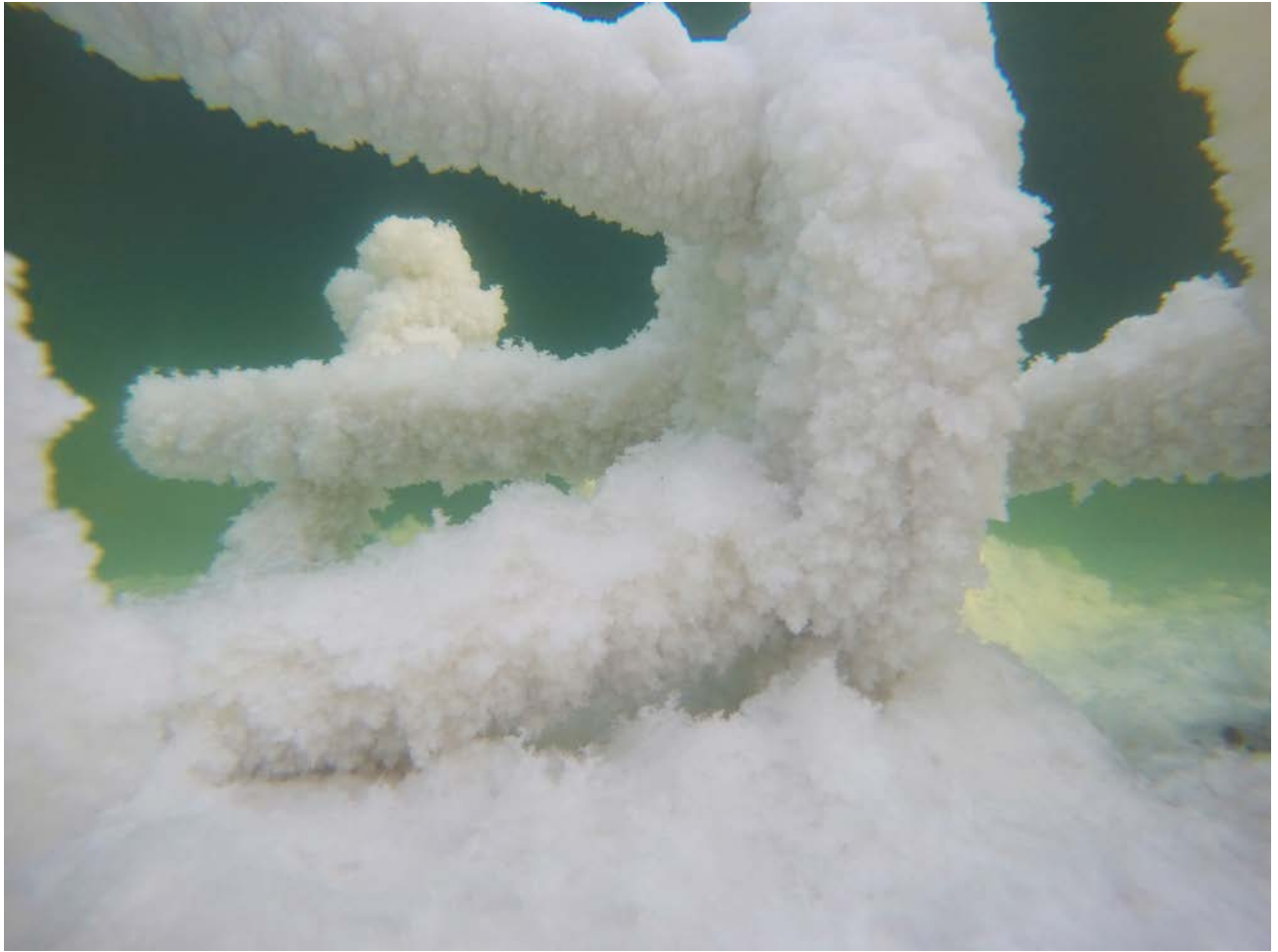
After becoming a vegan five years ago, Nevi Pana began to change his eating habits and diet. He then started to question what he was wearing, and the materials he was using in his design work.

"When you choose to be vegan, you are questioning the sense of superiority over animals and their usage for the production of our products," said the designer. "This results in a reduction, but not only in one's diet."

"Choosing awareness leads to action, thereby expanding the discussion to much more than diet – a broader questioning arises regarding usage in general, whether vegan or not."

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He says his work adopts a more intellectual and academic approach rather than presenting usable furniture items, and hopes his ideas will provide a starting point for other designers.

"No one brings out the voice of animals in this [design] context," he said. "This is not my feat, this is everyone's."

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Veganism is on the rise all over the world and is now spreading to the design industry following the launch of the Vegan Homeware Awards last year.

Nevi Pana's exhibition is on display as part of Milan design week, which is taking place this year from 17 to 22 April.

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