

# Last V

Life&

## Part of the furniture

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The Fast Lane



I signed off last week promising to report on the Milan furniture fair. But nine days on since I darted around various showrooms and exhibitions, I'm struggling to recall the highlights – partly because I've misplaced my well-worn linen notebook, partly because so much has happened since I left the fair and headed north to Bolzano and then on to Munich and Lisbon. So as not to miss anything, I'm going to attempt to retrace my steps.

Still on Singapore time, I woke up early on Monday and sifted through my invitations, trying to identify who was holding press previews before the fair's official opening on Tuesday. I dropped a note to Monocle's Milan correspondent and asked if he had any thoughts on where to start. He suggested Agape, a company renowned for its bathroom fixtures and fittings. Not long after, a text arrived from Mario, my driver in Milan for the past 20 years, saying he was waiting downstairs and ready to start our tour.

About 30 minutes later we pulled up at Agape's showroom. Despite having only just opened its doors, the space was already packed with journalists from Italy and Japan all jostling to look at shelving systems for fluffy towels, new wall-mounted units for housing toothbrushes, moisturisers and painkillers and smart new concepts devoted to helping the world's more affluent wash away urban grime. My attention was drawn to a chair and stool designed by Jasper Morrison for US company Emeco. "The seat is made from completely recycled material,"

said a woman clutching a clipboard. "Also, most of their woodwork is all done in Amish country in Pennsylvania." I nodded approvingly and snapped a picture, thinking that the mid-height stool might work well around a work bench-style kitchen table I'd been sketching in my mind.

Back in the car, we headed to via Savona and pulled up alongside a reflective wall that marked the temporary home of Cotto, another company known for its bathroom fittings. In a gravel-covered courtyard, the company had erected large vertical slabs to show off its stone-effect tiles. Inside, a series of rooms was devoted to

**There were new concepts devoted to helping the world's more affluent wash away urban grime**

new tiles designed by Piero Lissoni in an array of vaguely Japanese-style shades and patterns. Mario asked me about the company, recognising it was clearly a new player on the scene. I told him it was from Thailand and part of the Siam Cement Group. Mario threw his chin forward while shrugging his shoulders in a gesture that could have been translated into, "Good for them," but was more likely, "That's nice but I'm still going to buy Italian."

In the afternoon, we turned up the pace a bit and zipped by the showroom for B&B Italia to see a new range of rope-themed furniture designed by

Patricia Urquiola and then visited the stand belonging to the Ticino-based electronics brand Punkt.

Company founder Petter Neby showed me the group's latest device, designed to remove the tangle of cables on your desk or by your bed. Sitting on the coffee table in front of us was a simple plastic block with a power cord and three USB outlets to charge up a family of devices. Designed, again, by Jasper Morrison and made in Italy, I asked if it was already in stores but Neby said I'd have to wait till the end of summer.

I suggested he should get some kind of special honour from the Italian state for making such a simple device in Italy when he could have done it for far less in China. Neby said he felt it was important to stimulate businesses in the Veneto region that still had the skillset to make such devices but were simply being overlooked because most brands think of Asia first.

Tuesday was a bit of a blur because we spent much of the day booking guests for Monocle's radio show broadcast later that evening. I think this might have also been the last day I saw my notebook. I departed Milan late for South Tyrol and made it to the town of Merano in record time.

The next day, with the furniture fair in full flow and the city gridlocked, I was sitting in a sunny, quiet garden overlooking the Dolomites, happy I'd made a snappy escape.

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