

Confidence and Coffee in Milan

APRIL 24, 2009 MILAN -- Milan buses are plastered with bright red posters reassuring recession-anxious consumers that if there's a financial crisis, the Salone del Mobile is the answer.

That confident attitude sums up the buoyant mood at the 48th annual International Milan Furniture Fair, which started here on Wednesday and runs until Monday. In a city where fashion is king, design makes the most of its yearly five-day spotlight by showcasing the weird and the wonderful.



Exhibitors at the Massimiliano Fuksas-designed fairgrounds were up 15% to 1,496 from 2008 -- plus a waiting list of nearly 500 companies according to the organizer, Cosmit. Organizers expect to surpass last year's record of nearly 350,000 visitors. Indeed, antsy lines for the metro, elbowing around the big-name stands and the crush to procure a restorative cappuccino are as fierce as ever.

If Italy's furnishing sector can't hold a candelabra to its fashion industry -- exports are about €12 billion yearly while clothing exports hover around €40 billion -- it does seem more sturdy. Italian furniture exports have slumped just 1.3% in 2008 from 2007 while fashion exports dropped 4% in 2008 and are expected to fall 5% in 2009.

Staying upbeat requires more than just a slogan, however. Exhibitors are trying hard to make it look like business as usual here. Italian design house Moroso took the same double stand in the design pavilion as in 2008, organized an exhibit of African art in their Brera neighborhood showroom and showcased a joint-venture with Diesel in the "fuori salone," one of hundreds of collateral exhibits-cum-cocktail parties that cluster in the city center.

"Milan is still the place, especially for high-end design, where dealers and architects come to see what's new, while other fairs are starting to lose ground," said Marco Cappellin, export sales manager for Moroso. "Our outside events serve to cultivate younger clients who, in five or 10 years, will be thinking more seriously about furniture. We're looking past the expected slump."

Standouts at Moroso included smaller pieces that could liven up tired decor without requiring a huge investment, such as the playful "Helix" chair from Karmelina Martina (about €1,000) or the embroidered ball-like cushions and poufs (€150-€300) from Edward Van Vliet's "Sushi" collection.

Graceful "Plateau" lounge chairs (€2,940 for the fabric version) are along the same practical, yet striking line: Veteran Danish designer Erik Magnussen imagined a pod-shape with elongated left armrest, handy for placing a cup of coffee or suitable for a laptop. At Dieffebi, the home office gets a brighten-up with a drawer unit called cBox topped by a pouf (€500) designed by Gianmarco Blini.

British designer Tom Dixon hit the right note with his "Utility" line, publicized in a simple newspaper broadsheet tucked into an oversize bronze carry-all that trumped the usual canvas handouts collected during the fair. Utility, but not utilitarian. His "Pressed Glass" series uses heavyweight industrial components with a light touch; grouped together, the tube, bowl and lens shapes (€190 each) are a shining example of how simple doesn't have to be spartan.

New York-based designer Dror Benshetrit sat in his "Peacock" chair for Cappellini surveying the folds of blue and green felt for damage from hundreds of serial sittings by fairgoers. From his point of view, the Salone may look the same, but changes are already afoot.

"Companies are coming, they're just not bringing as many people," Mr. Benshetrit said. "Publications that used to send five people sent only two. So all of this has to get done with a fraction of the muscle behind it."

That, plus espresso offered in shots topped with flavored whipped cream by sponsor Lavazza, explain part of the frenetic energy at this year's fair.

