Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Unexpected Guests. Yesterday's homes, today's design.

Inertia doesn't make for terribly attractive decoration, and just a flying visit to four of Milan's historic design houses tells you that was never part of the original owners' vision. Unexpected Guests is a new exhibition that brings contemporary design to some of the Italian city's most intriguing domestic settings.

text EMMA FIRMIN

Despite not being a naturally envious person – OK, sometimes a glimmer - there were times during the preview of Unexpected Guests when I wished that I was the long lost relative of an Italian industrialist's family or the forgotten heir to a past collection of futurist delights. I think it was the swimming pool outside the Villa Necchi Campiglio that started the push over the edge. In a house designed by Piero Portaluppi in the 1930s, its resident Necchi sisters had been design patrons of their time and the house – in the most orderly fashion – is home to the works of Guglielmo Ulrich, Albini-Palanti, Michele Marelli and Alfredo Ravasco. Public or not, this was home that I could easily have set up camp in, albeit in the servants quarters or the bottom of the garden.

However, Unexpected Guests is not about what was, but more about what is or could be. Along with chez Necchi, the Case Museo Di Milano is made up of a network four historic design houses that also includes the Museo Bagatti Valsecchi, Casa Boschi di Stefano and the Museo Poldi Pezzoli. Now, the words 'historic' and 'network' might be music to the European subsidy givers, but there comes a times when hidden treasures have to give up a few of their secrets. So it makes perfect sense, especially given the timing with Milan's Salone, that over 200 works have been given temporary residence in this quartet of 'backstreet' landmarks.

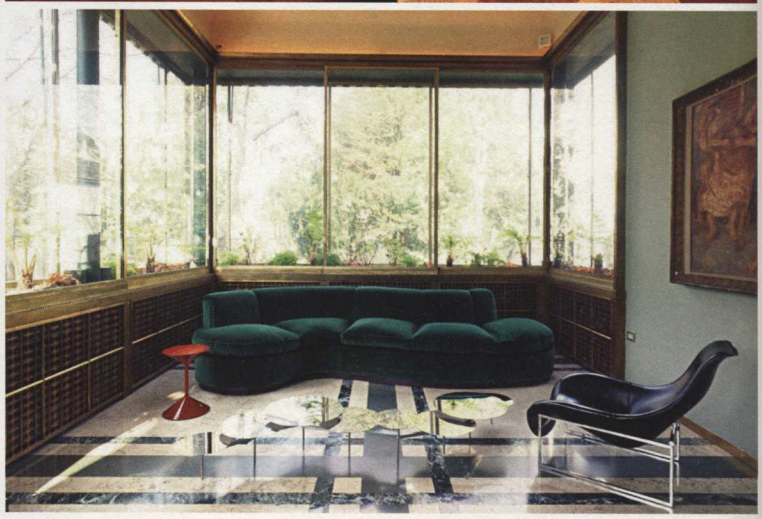
Curated by Beppe Finessi and collaborator Cristina Miglio, at the press conference it was Italo Lupi who was given the task of enthusing about this structured spontaneity. Responsible for the exhibition's image, what Lupi and his fellow collaborators stressed was that the history of these divergent addresses is not static. Time waits for no one on this mortal coil and aspic preservation is not a regular visitor in the open house of accessibility. So inviting the offspring of Ron Arad, Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, Andrea Branzi, Fernando & Humberto Campana Herzog & de Meuron, Alessandro Mendini, Jasper Morrison, Fabio Novembre, Gaetano Pesce, Ettore Sottsass, Philippe Starck and Patricia Urquiola for an extended sleepover was definitely a smart move. Of course, it would be remiss not to mention that along with the Fondazione Cariplo the exhibition has been realised by the funding by Cosmit. Yet given the Salone's emphasis on design as being part of the cultural DNA of Italy and Milan in particular, a visit to any of the houses will undoubtedly provided some design solace during the frantic pace of the design week.

Elisabetta Gonzo and Alessandro Vicari, Rosemary cradle with seat, 2000
Edizioni Galleria Luisa Delle Piane
Ineke Hans, Happy Horse rocking horse, 2001
Ineke Hans Collection
Photo: © Pasquale Formisano









Julian Mayor, Clone chair, 2005, self-production

Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, Clouds fitted textile module, 2008, Kvadrat
Toyo Ito, Ripples bench, 2004, Horm

Fernando & Humberto Campana, Boa sofa, 2002, Edra
Piero Lissoni, Sturm und Drang mirror, 2009, Glas Italia

Prospero Rasulo, Tempo small table, 2001, Zanotta
Carlo Contin, Snake small table, 2006, Meritalia
Antonio Citterio, Mart armchair, 2003, B&B Italia

Photos: © Luca Fregoso

For those with an oversensitised and conservative vocabulary the simple act of putting something old next to something new can seem like radical heresy. Labelling geographics as dialogues is also a trap that juxtapositions falls into more times than is healthy. However, to varying degrees of success Unexpected Guests gets it right when it describes what the exhibition achieves as 'parallel readings'. One of the most successful interlopers was the Rose Marie swing cot of Elisabetta Gonzo and Alessandro Vicari. A rattan rocking chair cum cradle, which not only looked right at home in the Red Room of Fausto and Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi, it's a design so full of empathy that the conversation was clearly not in the past tense. Likewise, the Bouroullec brothers Cloud installation perfectly framed its artistic foreground.

The houses that make up the Case Museo Di Milano are incredibly precious and taste is always open to interpretation, but putting the armoury to one side, these homes were never mausoleums and it's this kind of exhibition that is going to swing open their doors.

Unexpected Guests was also made possible with the collaboration of the Culture Council of Milan and under the patronage of the Region of Lombardy, the Province of Milan and the Milan Chamber of Commerce.
'Unexpected Guests. Yesterday's homes, today's design' runs until the 2 May.
www.casemuseomilano.it