



Laurian Ghinitoiu

Architectural Standards

AN examines how architects are influencing Milan Design Week—and vice versa.

By Olivia Martin

Despite Milan Design Week's focus on—obviously—design, every year there is a growing amount of architectural involvement, expanding beyond the elaborate pavilions at Salone del Mobile and inhabiting spaces all over the city. But with numerous architectural biennales and exhibitions, one has to wonder: What role does architecture play in this highly commercial ode to furniture?

Dutch architect Ben van Berkel, founder and principal of UNStudio, has participated in Design Week for the past five years. “Traditionally the Milan Design Week is the yearly event where new color, form, and material design trends are presented. However, in recent years we have noticed that it has increasingly become an

important place to test and gather feedback on new ideas. Visitors to the Salone are open-minded, critical, responsive, and early adopters when it comes to new ideas and inventions. For a few years now we have been approached by large international brands who not only ask us to reflect on design issues, but also to come up with strategic design solutions for larger themes that impact our built environment—such as the consequences of the Internet of Things, of how we live and work, new modes of mobility, the circular economy, etc.,” van Berkel said.

This was the case for SO-IL, which collaborated with MINI on the hugely popular MINI LIVING – Breathe installation. MINI LIVING – Breathe, a vertically oriented living space, was built in a narrow lot in the Tortona district. “Basically, they just wanted us to create a design that showed how to do more with space,” said SO-IL principal Ilias Papageorgiou. “It wasn't about the car, but it was about consolidating and living in cities with a small amount of resources—which is related to their general brand. For us, it was an opportunity to explore ideas that are happening quite quickly, and then we can take those ideas and explore them in larger client-based projects.”

Jimenez Lai of L.A.-based architecture firm Bureau Spectacular, a first-timer at Milan Design Week and winner of Swarovski's Designers of the Future Award, explained, “Design Week is a platform for the culture

of corporations with design motivations.”

The marketing and social media benefits of these collaborations are apparent. New York-based Snarkitecture cofounder and partner Alex Mustonen believes that architectural installations can conjure moments of respite amid the chaos of Design Week, havens where participants can have visual relief from the product onslaught. “It creates a memorable pause that will stand out in memory amidst all the furniture and products,” he explained. In the age of social media, particularly Instagram, these memorable pauses often lead to popular hashtags—a marketing boon for brands. Every year, it seems more large companies want in. “I have noticed a clear shift:

Alongside the traditional large design brands, more consumer brands such as Samsung, Nike, Adidas, Audi, and Lexus are taking part,” van Berkel said.

For architects, it offers a contrast to the slow timeline of building construction; these design collaborations keep firms in the spotlight while their longer-term projects churn in the background. In particular, Milan Design Week draws far more people from outside the industry than the Venice Biennale of Architecture, so an up-and-coming firm’s installation can quickly become a popular hashtag in hours. At its best, this give-and-take between big commercial brands and architects is mutually beneficial, with media exposure and exploration for all.

Facing page

SO-IL’s MINI LIVING – Breathe is wrapped in a fabric that doubles as an air filter; its roof collects rain water. “We were interested in the opportunity to do a housing prototype,” said SO-IL principal Ilias Papageorgiou. “But I was shocked by the amount of people who came through the installation—I think we had 8,000 people. I was also interested in how design week activated different parts of the city.”

Right and below

“Using a monochromatic palette for Valextra allowed us to experiment more with texture and structure,” explained Alex Mustonen of Snarkitecture. “Even though there is a lot going on, the eye goes straight to the product.” Valextra opened its new Snarkitecture-designed store in Milan for Design Week. Mustonen also worked on projects of varying scales, including tromp l’oeil wallpaper for Calico Wallpaper (below) and a structural mirror for Gufram. “A lot of times it’s an organic process and the companies give us a blank brief, which is great.”



Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

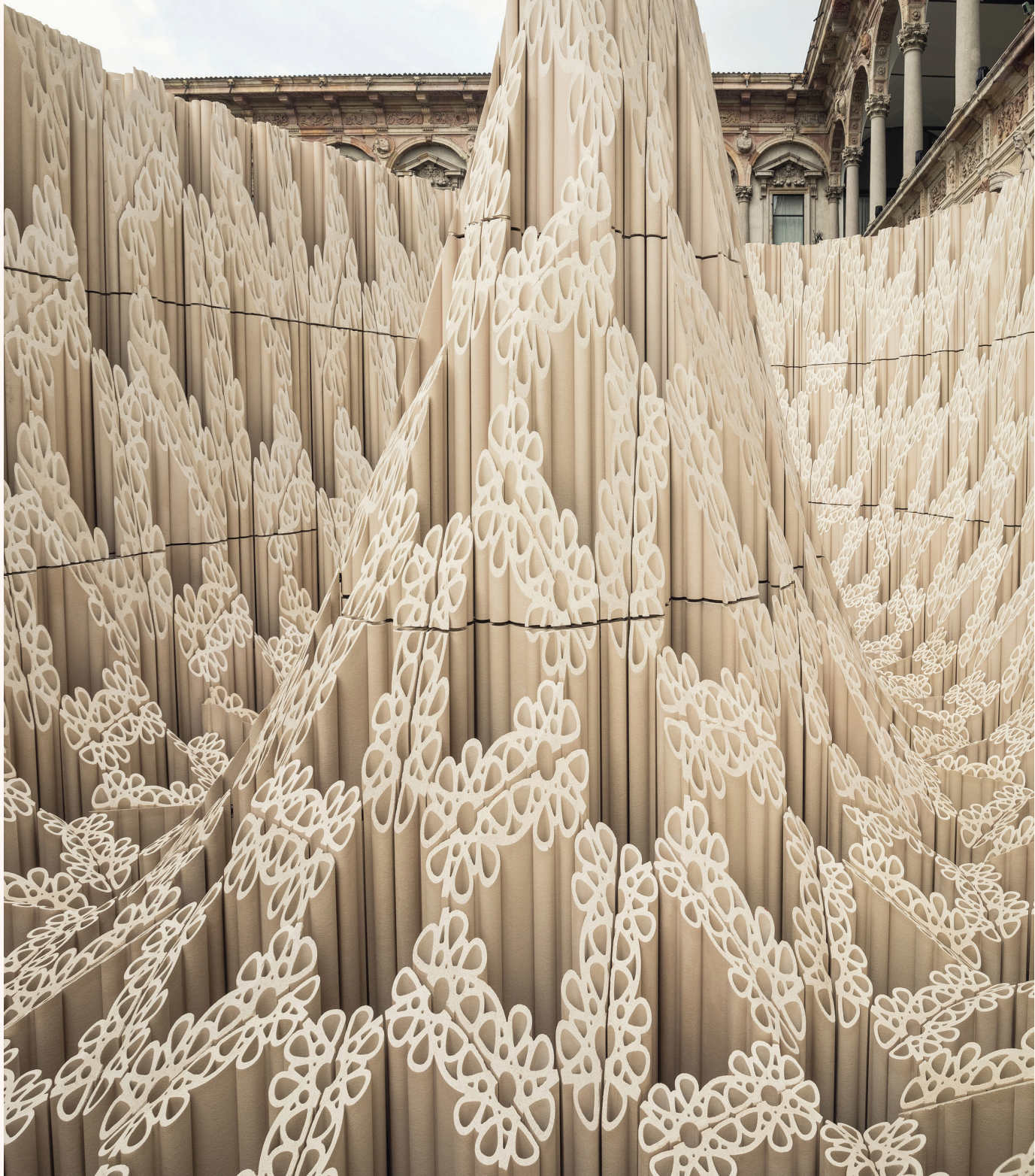


Lauren Coleman

SHoP Architects designed WAVE/CAVE for *Interni* magazine's *Material Immaterial* exhibition at Università degli Studi di Milano. A custom system of 1,670 terra-cotta blocks were stacked in three tiers and arranged into a 24- by 33- by 12-foot installation. SHoP collaborated with German firm NBK Keramik for the blocks, with Metalsigma Tunesi as the installer

and Arup as the engineer. PHT Lighting Design developed the lighting scheme, which highlights the blocks' pattern. "[It was] a great experience for our studio to explore the possibilities of design on a smaller, more intimate scale," SHoP Principal, William Sharples said in a statement. "Focusing on this idea of solidity and slow-time is a reaction to what has happened

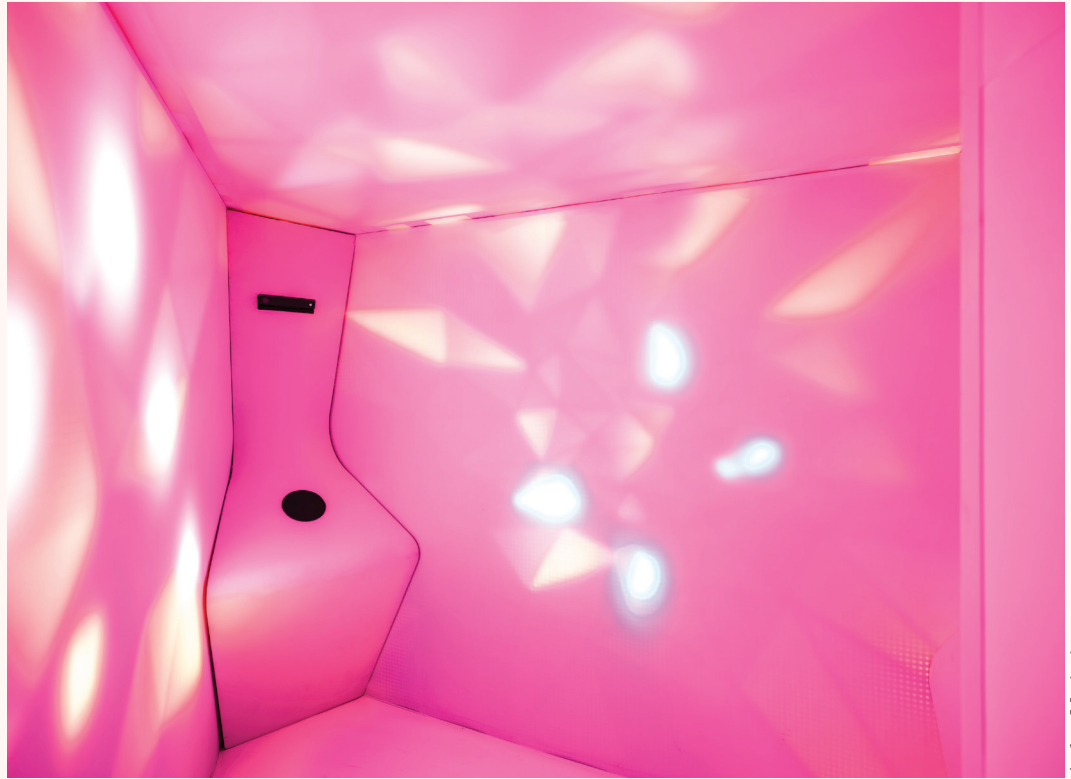
to a lot of architecture over the past few years—WAVE/CAVE asks us to slow down and get back in touch with the weight and pace of architecture from other eras."



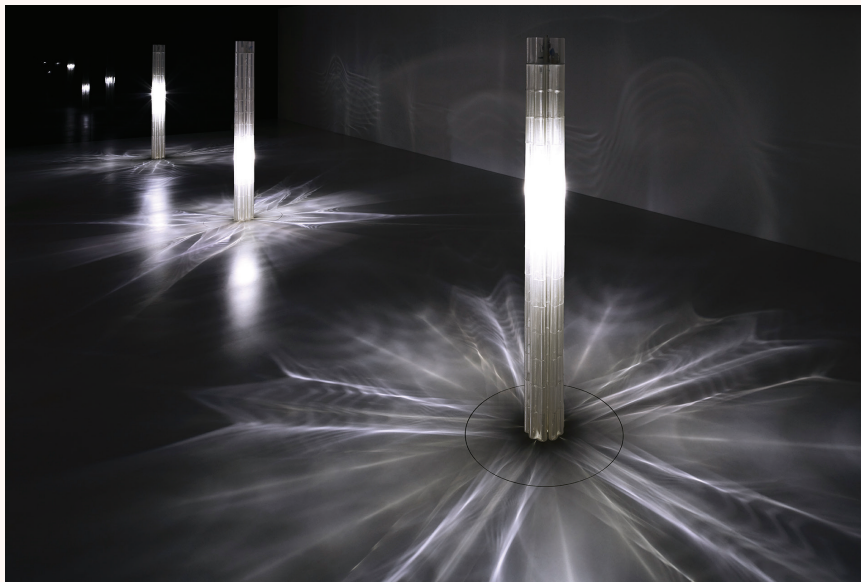
Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti

Right

The Joyful Sense at Work installation was part of the biennial Workplace 3.0 exhibition at Salone del Mobile. Ben van Berkel of UNStudio and Jeff Povlo of SCAPE created immersive spaces aimed at reducing stress. The resulting built RESET (Responsive Emotional Transformation) modules track human response using Ambient Intelligence technology. For example, the “Intimacy pod” (shown) tracks the user’s heartbeat and helps it to slow down, reducing anxiety. “I’m fascinated by the fact that we spend almost 80 percent of our time indoors and yet there is so little focus on the creation of healthy environments,” van Berkel said. “The invitation to participate in the exhibition enabled us to further research and develop this specific theme in relation to the future workspace. As a result, we have now developed a prototype for a fully immersive modular structure that features scientifically proven stress reduction methods in a playful and interactive way.”



Andrea Mariani



Neri Oxman and The Mediated Matter Group, MIT Media Lab/Lexus

Left

Architect, designer, and professor Neri Oxman of the MIT Media Lab and her research and design team, the Mediated Matter Group, used lights encased in 3-D printed glass columns (A cutting-edge technology, there are only a few 3-D glass printers in the world.) to convey YET, the theme and name of the exhibition sponsored by Lexus at La Triennale di Milano, the Design and Art Museum in Parco Sempione. “We wanted to create a space that is rounded yet suspended,” Oxman said in a video. She also wanted the design to make viewers feel grounded in the space and also feel compelled to look to the sky, leading her to create mechanized lights that gently move up and down, displacing the refracted light.

Right

Jimenez Lai of Bureau Spectacular, came to Milan Design Week for the announcement of the Swarovski Designers of the Future for Design Miami/ Art Basel (June 13–18). He worked with Swarovski to find a unique way to celebrate the company’s crystals and to create an architectural installation within which all of the award winners’ projects would be displayed. “I mapped out how much time I spent on various

activities throughout the day—eating, sleeping, sitting, etc.—and translated that amount of time into proportions for the design. So, for example, since the vast majority of my time is spent sitting, the majority of the structure can be used for sitting.” The installation will be made up of crystal terrazzo, which reuses crystals that would otherwise be discarded.



Courtesy Swarovski