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I comment on art exhibitions around the world.

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Is Ikea The End Of Design? See The Italian Counterattack At This Powerful Milan Design Exhibit

Future archeologists studying the material culture of austerity need look no further than the Ikea catalogue. Even in Milan, the design capital of Europe, people under forty are likely to eat on a *Tärendö* table and to sleep in a *Fjelsse* bed – if they're not couch-surfing on the *Knislinge* sofa of a temporarily-employed friend. They'll blame it on economics – a legitimate justification for their lapsed Italian taste – yet one that's hardly encouraging for an economy powered by good design. Is there an alternative? That's the question posed by an important [exhibition at Milan's Triennale Design Museum](http://www.triennale.org/en/exhibitions/present/3428-vii-triennale-design-museum-auto-da-se-il-design-italiano-tra-autosufficienza-austerita-e-autoproduzione-en) (<http://www.triennale.org/en/exhibitions/present/3428-vii-triennale-design-museum-auto-da-se-il-design-italiano-tra-autosufficienza-austerita-e-autoproduzione-en>).

This is not the first time Italians have faced austerity. In the 1930s, with the rise of Fascism, Italy endured crippling trade sanctions imposed by the League of Nations. And in the 1970s, the Italian economy was derailed by the OPEC oil embargo. (To manage the energy shortage, the government outlawed Sunday driving and late-night television.) As the Triennale exhibit shows, Italian designers were not deterred by either crisis. In fact, both episodes invigorated Italian design.



Enzo Mari, *Proposta per un'autoprogettazione, tavolo 1123 XI, 1974*. Courtesy Galleria Luisa Delle Piane.

The central problem faced by Italian designers in the '30s was access to raw materials. Deprived of imported iron ore, Italian industry needed alternatives. So manufacturers developed a veritable encyclopedia of substitutes, taking advantage of native aluminum and newly-developed plastics. Exotically-named substances such as Buxus and Lautal and Zoolite inspired designers to reshape familiar household products. They also took up old materials in new ways. For instance, the Turin manufacturer Vianzone designed a stylish bent-wood bicycle.

The 1970s crisis also had a material side, since plastics were made from petroleum. Yet the end of the oil embargo was only the beginning of economic struggle, an enduring period of austerity with more than a passing resemblance to the present.

The hardship radicalized design. In Naples, the designer Riccardo Dalisi experimented with what he called “poor technology”, creating architecture and furnishings from trash. Even more extreme, Enzo Mari – who was already celebrated for his stylish consumer goods – designed a range of furniture that could be made by anyone using nothing more than rough-hewn planks of wood. He made his plans freely available to anybody who contacted his Milan studio, and encouraged people to modify what they made, sending him photos.

Mari’s DIY tables and chairs and wardrobes and beds anticipated Ikea in terms of their simplicity, but philosophically they were Ikea’s antithesis. Making design participatory and leaving manufacturing to the consumer, Mari offered an alternative to industrialized standardization. He presented austerity as an opportunity for every Italian to become a designer: to exercise creativity and develop self-sufficiency.

Over the ensuing decades, Mari has become notoriously misanthropic, cursing the success of architects and designers ranging from Rem Koolhaas (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/03/style/03iht-design3.1.17414904.html>) to Ron Arad (<http://www.iconeye.com/404/item/4245-enzo-mari>), not to mention the hegemony of Ikea (which he’s hyperbolically accused of “genocide” (<http://www.iconeye.com/404/item/4245-enzo-mari>)). These days he likes to say that “design is dead”. Just maybe he’s right, but it’s a cruel irony coming from the man who brought out the best in austerity, making design a source of life.