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All the Rage in Milan

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* Most English speakers would not immediately associate the word "slobs" with chic. In Italy, however, slobs are not only at the cutting edge of design, they have initiated a completely new style of shopping.

In the Brera quarter, the most fashionable part of ever-fashionable Milan, you can find some of the best examples of 19th-century architecture, now given over to elegant, expensive apartments. In one such street, a discreet nameplate by the front door is all that hints that this flat is not all that it seems. Two floors up, you arrive at an apartment that is not quite a home, nor exactly a shop. Or then again, perhaps it is both.

The five people who make up Barbara Vergnano's family have lived on permanent display for the past seven years. Total strangers wander in and out of the kitchen, the sitting room, the bedrooms, commenting on what they see and even removing the furniture if they take a fancy to it. This is Slobs, a concept unique in Milan, its name chosen, says Vergnano, to reflect a new trend in which apparently discordant styles are shown to combine successfully.

In this home, everything is for sale. In the sitting room, retro leather sofas sit on geometrically painted floors. In one of the teenagers' bedrooms, a chest of drawers is covered with a collage of Topolino cartoons. The wardrobe in the hall is also covered - this time with the pages of an ancient dictionary. The dining room has a chandelier of cement and gauze and on the wall is a mirror with a frame of gilded lead so soft that you can bend it into a new shape every day.

Vergnano is not the designer, but her flat is the perfect way to showcase some of the city's best new talent. In a real home, she believes, you see how a piece works in a domestic setting, what it goes with, how it fits the space. So, every weekday from 3pm-7pm, she opens her doors to the public.

"The furniture and the decorative items all change at least once a month," says Raffaella, Vergnano's assistant, who shows me around. "And the paint techniques change regularly, too." Isn't it disorienting not knowing if there will be somewhere to sit in the evening? She assures me they are happy with the arrangement, though certain doors remain shut as not everyone is thrilled with the idea of exhibiting their dirty socks.

Generally, though, shoppers do not walk off with the bed or table but order one to suit their own style. And these are stylish customers. Slobs showcases hot new talent and the look is sophisticated, witty and young. You can find paintings, furniture, objets, decorative techniques and textiles all thrown together with an offhand elegance.

Elegance and image are everything in Milan. Davide Leonardi of the city's personal shopping service Luxury Street, a Slobs regular, explains, "Everything in Italy is fashion - even food. We breathe style with the air." This doesn't come cheap. At Slobs, a console table made of lava costs around E1,800, a faux rococo chandelier E1,250.

It has been so successful that other Milanese are getting on the same wavelength. Celeste Dell'Anna has The Rooms, an extravagant set of, well, rooms. However, no one else has yet dared to live in them at the same time. Hardly surprising when you consider the feeling of unreality induced by your home constantly changing its personality.

Slobs' success is about ideas as much as anything, and a very personal service. It puts you in touch with people who will build you a wardrobe or paint stripes on your walls and is always happy to design to your personal taste. And that is another reason for Slobs' appeal. Any piece you see is a one-off. You know that once it is in your place, no one will ever have seen anything quite like it.