

Australian designers are fast-tracking their way to international exposure at the world's most respected furniture fair. But the going's not always easy.

Stephen Procter, was on a tight budget for his first show at Salone Satellite.

"The glamorous image of designers at the Milan furniture fair was not a reality for me," Procter says. "I almost abandoned coming several times because of the high cost. It seemed especially excessive while I was concentrating on earning a sensible income for my family."

Procter's first child was born last year and he decided to create a range of baby furniture for his entry into the highly competitive Salone Satellite. Based in Sydney, Procter's unlikely day job is designing and making church lecterns that are sent around the world.

"I knew if I wanted to make an impact in Milan I had to come up with something new: not chairs, tables and lights," Procter says.

The designer's submission to exhibit for Salone Satellite was accepted in November last year. By January, he was making MDF prototypes in his backyard on a Bunnings' trestle table with an electric handsaw.

Although he knew it was important to have a strong theme for his show, he also had to keep the costs of making and shipping his products to Milan as low as possible. Like a Victorian inventor, Procter has a passion for mechanical or moving parts in furniture and tried to make each of the pieces foldable, stackable or able to be easily flat-packed.

After much experimentation, he created a range of glossy white baby furniture with a futuristic yet retro edge: think 2001: A Space Odyssey.

"I ended up taking my products as luggage on the plane, without paying excess," he says. "I had to use all the tricks in the book including flying via the United States because I could take more baggage. I only took a minimum of clothes - and only the shoes I wore - to keep the weight down. In the end, I just freighted the stand's cardboard wall.

"I stayed at a one-star hotel and took a trolley so that I hand-carried all my products across Milan to the fair using the metro."

In the rarefied atmosphere of alta moda design where sculptural chairs you can't sit on and giant vases with no space for flowers are the norm, answering the prosaic needs of children is something out of the ordinary.

Salone Satellite's long corridors are filled with 570 designers from around the world showing surreal experimental prototypes. But the biggest crowd was scrambling to see Procter's collapsible pram, highchair, clothes-horse and change table.

"It was mad," he says. "I would show the products one after the other, sit down for five seconds, then do it all again. This went on pretty constantly from 10am until 7pm."

What Procter didn't know was that among the crowd were the judges for Salone Satellite's prestigious design report award for the year's best stand.



The 5000 pound (A\$12,500) prize is awarded by a jury including Giulio Cappellini, Tomoko Azumi and funded by companies such as Thonet and Vitra.

The jury unanimously named Procter the winner and, as a result of the prize, he was able to meet the heads of other design companies. Scandinavian, Japanese and Italian firms have expressed interest in producing his work.

"In a way, the disadvantages of coming from Australia became advantages because the products were born out of the difficulty of coming from a faraway land," Procter says. "One of the reasons for creating the foldable children's products was that they would be smaller and lighter, making them easier to get over to Milan.

"In the end, these things became the point of differentiation for what I showed and helped to win the prize."

Australia's consul general and senior trade commissioner in Milan, Tim Gauci, visited the Australians exhibiting at the fair and at the Fuori Salone events held around the city centre. He believes Australian designers should consider exporting their work both for cultural and economic reasons.

"I do think it is necessary for Australian designers to come over here," he says. "Although we have a great level of respect and pride for our own products and design, Australia has only 20 million people. In order for some designers to make a good living, they need to be in the global marketplace.

Young Australian designers may feel intimidated by this market, especially Milan, but the quality of work I've seen is very high. It is just having the courage to come over here and show what you can do."

By Jeanne-Marie Cilento
The Age newspaper
May 15th 2007