

The Design (Eco) System. Research and Reflections on Milan Design Week

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Abstract

Milan Design (Eco) System is a research project, devised and funded by the Salone del Mobile.Milano, with scientific oversight by the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano. The objective of the project was to share a first guide for the systematic analysis of a globally unique event: the Milan Design Week, of which the Salone del Mobile fair is an international catalyst and an accelerator of business and project culture, along with the increasingly extensive programme of events that has been transforming the city into a global stage in April for many years, with a plurality of governance. In the report, Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week are observed, discussing their common local impact, inspiring reflections for the Design ecosystem of Milan, which also provide a paradigm reference for creative cities around the world. The study has found that the key to its success lies in the organic integration of design activities and urban identity to form a unique cultural and economic model. Through the coordinated operation of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week, the city has built an innovative network that emphasizes public-private collaboration, business and culture, and a dynamically balanced design ecosystem, while creating the world's most vital urban creative design platform mechanism. This system has achieved in-depth interaction between the public, creative activities and urban spaces, and continues to strengthen Milan's global influence as a "Design City". The work that has been done by the Design+Strategies Lab (directed by Prof. Francesco Zurlo) and the Design Policy Lab (directed by Prof. Stefano Maffei) from POLIMI is partly included in this edition of report so as to share more knowledgeable experience with the Cities of Design in China hoping to open up more possible dialogues for future exchange. Due to the length limits, for more content of the whole report, the authors would like to share it through the following reports in this Bluebook Series.

Keyword

Design Eco System, Urban Design, Milan Design Week, Salone del Mobile.Milano, Design Week

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1. Design, City, Ecosystem

In 1997, Bruce Nussbaum, Business Week director and well-known design journalist, declared that the golden age of design had officially begun (Molotch, 2005)¹. At that time, Design was already recognised as a fundamental economic and cultural sector in Milan, where the first Design fair event had been running since 1961 and the Design Week since the 1990. Design has been defined by the scholar Saskia Sassen (2005)² as value-adding creative work which has the effect of repositioning the so-called creative work in central global economy's circuits. Designers contribute to the economic development at a regional and local level both directly and indirectly through the provision working opportunities for others (designer or not); improvement in the quality and sustainability of products, service, and places; creation of new knowledge and development of local identities (Vinodrai, 2009)³, supporting competitiveness and success of metropolitan areas (Lacroix, 2005)⁴.

Understanding and studying the interaction of various networks of actors, institutions, and contexts is therefore crucial to understand the ecosystemic nature of the design matter (Kumari et al. 2019⁵; Eckhardt et al., 2021⁶). Far from being only a business ecosystem, Design is for Milan a catalyst for the creation of an innovative ecosystem, since, compared to business ecosystems, innovative ones are more oriented to value-creation than to value-capture (Eckhardt et al., 2021; De Vasconcelos Gomes et al., 2018⁷).

The Salone del Mobile.Milano and Design Week are the epiphany of an ecosystem that has produced an organic set of actions, relations and interactions between individuals, organisations and institutions, undergoing constant transformation and reconfiguration in the sociocultural and economic environment of the city. In 2024 Salone del Mobile.Milano involved the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano to conduct a study on the fair and Design Week phenomena in order to trace a contemporary picture and a forward looking report on the role and impact of the initiatives framing them into the wider context of Design institutions, stakeholders, and networks constituting the Milan

¹ Molotch, Harvey, *Where Stuff Comes from: How Toasters, Toilets, Cars, Computers, and Many Others Things Come to Be as They Are*. (New York: Routledge, 2005).

² Sassen, Saskia, "Globalization and Unsettling: whither design?", *New Design Cities*, ed. Marie-Josée Lacroix (Montréal: Les éditions Infopresse, 2005) (256-265)

³ Vinodrai, Tara. "The Place of Design: Exploring Ontario's Design Economy." *Ontario in the Creative Age Working Paper Series* (Toronto: Martin Prosperity Institute, 2009).

⁴ Lacroix, Marie-Josée, *New Design Cities* (Montréal: Les éditions Infopresse, 2005).

⁵ Kumari, Richa, Ki-Seok Kwon, Byeong-Hee Lee, and Kiseok Choi, "Co-Creation for Social Innovation in the Ecosystem Context: The Role of Higher Educational Institutions." *Sustainability*, 12 (1), 2019, 307.

⁶ Eckhardt, Jennifer, Christoph Kaletka, Daniel Krüger, Karina Maldonado-Mariscal, and Ann C. Schulz, "Ecosystems of co-creation", *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, 642289, 2021.

⁷ De Vasconcelos, Gomes Leonardo Augusto, Ana Lucia Figueiredo Facin, Mario Sergio Salerno, and Rodrigo Kazuo Ikenami, "Unpacking the innovation ecosystem construct: evolution, gaps and trends", *Technological forecasting and social change*, 136, 2018, 30-48.

Design (Eco) System. The report outcoming from the study highlights the fact that this ecosystem is origin and consequence of a Milan Design System, made up of activities, resources, skills, stakeholders, and materials connected with design that has played, over time, a prominent role in the position the city has attained in socioeconomic competition at a regional, national and international level. It has become one of its most highly valued and recognised assets, with a very powerful effect on the shaping of the city's identity (Milan as "the" City of Design). Like the ecosystems of the natural world, socioeconomic and cultural ones have biotic components, such as people, social and interest groups and institutions, and abiotic ones, such as infrastructure and economic and technological resources. The interactions between these elements – residents, designers, operators, companies, educational institutions, trade fairs, museums, galleries, magazines, communicators, etc. – produces the flow of communication, data, resources and activities that gives rise to a common social capital which is essential to the functioning and development of this ecosystem (Folke et al., 2016).¹ As presented in Chapter 5 of the report, the phenomenon presents some unique and different characteristics and generates innovation, economic growth, international appeal and urban transformation, but also raises some critical issues (Santagata and Bertacchini, 2011;² Bruzzese, 2015³). This design-driven social capital and its particular setting tends to grow and be consolidated through processes of constant elaboration and transformation brought to bear by its system of players-producers (Landry, 2006)⁴ and functions as a catalyst of the interaction between the system of creativity and other economic sectors, creating synergies between different dimensions of urban development such as innovation, enterprise, tourism, commerce and culture (Manzini, 2015)⁵.

The complexity of this configuration makes it anti-fragile (Taleb, 2013)⁶, deriving from its hypertrophy and intricacy, the factors behind its success. For a long time, the Milanese recipe of this major international event has been based on the ecosystemic complementarity of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and its fringe in the city (the Milan Design Week, often called *Fuorisalone*, representing all the other events, exhibitions and initiatives that happen outside the fair), with its diffuse network of urban events. The comparison with other competing trade fairs reveals the unique character of this complementarity, for the emergence of this engine of cultural and social production does not stem from a pre-established strategic process from the top-down but from a set of unique and bottom-up conditions linked to the design-driven social capital mentioned above. The interdependence of the Milan Design System, the pervasiveness, structure and stability of its system of relationships, vascularises the space of the city, giving rise to a unique phenomenon and turning the city into a circulatory system of expertise in design (and other fields), fostering experimentation, innovation, the exchange of ideas and learning (Maffei and Zurlo, 2000a and 2000b)⁷. This not only promotes the generic innovative capacity of the city, but also plays a central role in the definition of Milan's identity and its narration, making it in fact a centre of global importance for the world of design and innovation.

This complementarity acts as a trigger for an event that produces unparalleled economic and cultural energy and attracts an impressive number of visitors. Moreover, Salone del Mobile.Milano, staged for the 62nd time in 2024, has a lot of experience under its belt, accompanied by the ambition to explore possible openings for the sector beyond its national dimension. This ability to boost international exposure has gone hand-in-hand with the development of the entrepreneurial system of the furniture industry (with FederlegnoArredo, pillar of one of the fundamental economic sectors

of the Italian manufacturing system) and with the consequent transformation of this event into by far the most important trade fair at a worldwide level.

Milan Design Week is, instead, a set of decentralised and self-organised events (Caruso, 2021)⁸ involving companies, independent designers and cultural and civic institutions that are staged in parallel to the Salone del Mobile. It consists of a series of exhibitions, installations, workshops and events of various kinds held in the city's private and public spaces, often located in emblematic districts like Brera, Durini, Tortona, Isola, Porta Venezia, etc. Since its birth⁹, it has undergone exponential growth, involving not just Milanese entities but also national and international ones (Ch. 3). As it has grown, it has progressively attracted other sectors of design in addition to the original one of wood and furniture: certainly, fashion with brands like Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Cartier among others, and then the automotive sector with international players like Audi, Kia, Land Rover, Mini and BMW and that of consumer electronics with Apple, Panasonic, Sony, Canon, etc. The fluid and participatory nature of Design Week, in addition to the continuous cultural research carried out by the Salone del Mobile.Milano with an extensive programme of talks, forums, site-specific installations and major exhibitions at the trade fair, as well as in Milan's principal museums, has also helped to broaden the concept of design itself, including such themes as sustainability, social inclusion and interdisciplinarity (Bruzzese, 2015)¹⁰. At the same time, it has stimulated an interaction with art and architecture in public and private urban spaces, making the week a global attraction able to draw in an ever larger and non specialised public and celebrating, in one way or another, all the forms of creativity that see the discipline of design extend beyond the confines of the product (Maffei, 2020 and 2021¹¹; Dell'Era and Verganti, 2010¹²; Zurlo 2010¹³; Carella and Zurlo, 2024¹⁴). The Design Week is based on a tacit model of self-regulation that has so far been able to withstand global challenges. It can be described as a model of self-organisation¹⁵, characterised by the capacity of players and institutions to create and dynamically adapt their interactions and structures without a centrally defined and implemented strategy. Self-organisation is manifested in the ability of the players – in the field of design and others – to coordinate themselves spontaneously on the basis of emerging needs and opportunities, promoting a cycle of positive feedback that fosters innovation and the growth of the sector (Bertola and Teixeira, 2003)¹⁶.

1.1 Principles of Interconnection, Sharing, Reconfiguration, Redundancy

The pull of the Salone del Mobile.Milano is recombined in the city without a unified organisation but by a network of events that permits cooperation between independent actors. This model allows the maintenance of a dynamic equilibrium between competition and collaboration, favouring the resilience of the system even in times of crisis or global change. De Toni et al., 2011¹⁷ have suggested some principles behind the generation of phenomena of self-organisation that seem to apply in a significant manner to the constituent dynamics of the event in Milan. *Interconnection* is the first; it underpins the social networks of the city's week, exploiting the small world effect (familiar to the general public in the version known as six degrees of separation). The nodes of these systems are strongly connected with one another through hubs that, generally speaking, are places and people which have a high number of contacts with those outside the system and, at the same, with ones inside it.

As reported in the Report' chapter 2 (Section 2.a), in 2024, for example, the Salone del Mobile.Milano registered an attendance of 370,824, 53.9% from abroad (+20.2% vs 2023; of these, 276,059 were

professionals, +28.6% vs 2023), including over 6,900 journalists (who often act as hubs of these small worlds), 14,683 students, 600 young designers from 36 countries, 22 universities and design schools from 14 countries, etc. . Other hubs that help to bring people together are, for instance, the Bar Basso in the Città Studi area or the Cena del Cento where, at her space, Rossana Orlandi makes these small worlds visible every year, with the aid of the culinary skills of Aimò and Nadia.

Linked with interconnection is the principle of *Sharing* that derives from a cellular organisation which works (and is effective) if it acts in a coordinated manner. Li Edelkoort writes: «Milan as an abstraction, a vague entity that comprises everything that makes this city animated by design, what it is for all of us. A place to get together, the promise of spring, a weakness for good food, the experience of abundance, meeting other people, talent spotting, the test of time and a platform for the production of ideas and the promotion of convictions and, in the end, a place to do business too...» (Edelkoort L., in Finessi et al., 2021, p. 19)¹⁸. Evident in these words is a general feeling, with shared principles, values and experiences that favour the adoption of a common purpose by all the entities in the ecosystem (Hurst, 2014)¹⁹, allowing the identity of the system to be preserved through its continual discussion and transformation.

Something that happens, moreover, thanks to the principle of *Reconfiguration*: the system – Salone del Mobile.Milano and Design Week – is dynamic and works to modify itself continually, evolving its identity in parallel; an example is the adoption by the Salone del Mobile.Milano of a strategy and means for the sustainable management of the events (it has had ISO 20121 certification since 2023) that reconfigures the ways in which the stands of the fair are mounted, eliminating composite materials in favour of recyclable ones without this affecting the quality of the exhibition spaces and presentation of the products. Reconfiguring signifies finding, for instance, new strategies for one's own brand and the stream of operators passing through the Salone del Mobile facilitates this. Likewise the designers and companies that decide to present their new products in their showrooms and at the independent events in the city during Design Week are doing so predominantly to professionals already known in the sector, while the – Salone del Mobile.Milano reconfirms – from year to year – its nature as an international platform that favours the development of a sort of brokering of technical, manufacturing and consulting expertise that reconfigures value chains with the promise of new connections with new suppliers, distributors and companies, also providing concrete opportunities for an exchange with the business world to the under 35 designers who show in the context of the SaloneSatellite; in contrast for small companies or start-ups a presence at Milan Design Week can offer exposure and first contacts.

Another generative principle is that of *Redundancy* (in the sense in which the word is used in engineering), which regards capacities and skills, where 'everyone learns to do everything': a producer that becomes a producer of culture, or a group of professionals and communicators (Recapito Milanese) that was responsible for a first example of urban transformation in the Tortona area, where the first design district structured from 2001 onwards, which then became an inspirational organisational and cultural model. This redundancy is evident in the over 1,300 events staged during Design Week in 2024, offering a range of creativity, experimentation, exploration and presentation over the space of a few days that has no counterpart anywhere else in the world.

In terms of its economic impact, the Salone del Mobile.Milano makes a significant contribution to Milan's growth, generating direct economic flows through tourism, commerce and international

professional and entrepreneurial cooperation (Santagata and Bertacchini, 2011). The research department of Confcommercio Milano, Lodi, Monza e Brianza has estimated a spin-off for 2024 equal to almost 275.1 million euros, an increase of 13.7% with respect to 2023 due in part to foreign visitors, who accounted for 69.4% of the entire business, a sum equivalent to 191 million euros²⁰. It also contributes indirectly to the same phenomenon that extends to Design Week in the city.

The overall impact on models and processes of cultural production also reinforces the city's reputation as the international capital of design, promoting innovative approaches that influence other fields, like fashion, architecture and industry. A possible example is the work of experimentation and research straddling the realms of art, technology and design carried out by Kia over several years under the title *Opposites United: Intersections beyond boundaries*²¹ and presented at the Museum of Permanent.

1.2 Emerging Challenges in Governance, Accessibility, and Innovation

Design Week in the city has challenges to overcome as well. One of the biggest is the difficulty of reconciling its growth with social inclusion and democratic accessibility. Some of the events staged during Design Week are aimed at a specialist public and so access can be limited by reputational, economic and social barriers. Keeping a border that is permeable to talents and to creativity and innovation, permitting a dialogue between a system of entrepreneurship innovation and the wider and emergent independent one, is a challenge that remains open. But this openness to access by the general public may have adverse effects. Design Week can be a victim of its own success, creating increasingly complicated conditions of access linked to phenomena that can be likened to overtourism (overcrowding, problems with general services, lowering of the quality of exhibitions and cultural proposals, negative spectacularisation, commercialisation of space and an increase in costs for residents and specialised operators)²².

This opens up a gap between those who have access to creative resources and those who are excluded, limiting the possibility of promoting a more inclusive and participatory approach to design (Manzini, 2019)²³ and risking the prospective loss for the city and its Design Week of that essential characteristic of an open social and creative workshop. Leaving aside the other significant challenge linked to the international dynamics of the market for design, where the competition from other global cities like London, Paris and Copenhagen to attract talents, resources and investments is growing. To this pressure on Milan's leadership can be added the challenges posed by digitisation and emerging technologies, which are transforming the way in which design is conceived, produced and consumed. Their integration requires new expertise and innovative models and processes that are ever more glocal and interdependent, demanding from the city continual investments in capital, learning and private and public experimentation.

A second compelling area of challenge for the Milan Design System is the one represented by environmental and social sustainability. Contemporary design has to meet the growing demand for solutions that are sustainable and respect the environment. This includes the use of environmentally friendly materials, circular design and reduction of the environmental impact of manufacturing processes. In this context, the Salone del Mobile.Milano, is an example of organisational learning, has introduced for some time strategies and good practices that are both measurable and measured. An approach taken by the municipality of Milan as well, with the definition of policy guidelines,

communicated through the public notice for inclusion in the programming of Milano Design Week.

The excess of success has resulted, over time, in attempts at response and coordination on the part of private and public players. Since 2017, in order to rationalise and coordinate cultural events with the promotion of tourism in the city, the Municipality of Milan has come up with a diverse programme of weeks, with Milano Design Week²⁴ included amongst them. A significant contribution to the development of the Design Week has been made by INTERNI, which was responsible for the first initiative of coordination of operators in the field of design in the city. Another actor is the platform of digital communication Fuorisalone.it – a trademark registered by Studiolabo with offshoots devoted to China and Japan – that over the years has been chosen by manufacturers of various commodities and designers for the promotion of events staged during Milan Design Week. Since 2023, the Salone del Mobile.Milano has promoted a joint action with Fuorisalone.it to publicise , in the section Salone in città, events staged by companies showing at the Salone del Mobile elsewhere in the city too, at their own showrooms or dedicated venues, in an example of synergy between key players in the ecosystem.

Thus the relationship between the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week is still today one of good practice based on a balance between governance and self-organisation. This complementarity between formality and informality, between an organised centre and a decentralised system, offers the whole of the Milan Design (Eco) System the possibility of maintaining its dynamism and attracting and communicating a broad and diverse public. We could define this, as has been suggested by some students of innovation, as ambidexterity: i.e. the ability of an ecosystem to exploit its existing capacities on the one hand and emerging new opportunities on the other (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008)²⁵. Out of this tension between the exploitation of expertise and strategic positioning and exploration, understood as the capacity to experiment and look for opportunities, seems to emerge a key of interpretation.

The picture of the phenomenon is a blurred one, due to the speed and scale of general change with its set of high-impact challenges. The Report Milan Design (Eco) System indicates some emerging signals that point to a possible different interpretation of the phenomenon: it is increasingly the ability to understand the dance between these two poles (of exploitation and exploration) that leads to incubation of the most significant experiences of innovation. The objective is to present a first collection and interpretation of the relevant (and available) datasets and a research conducted in the field that shows the interdependence of the ecosystem. The final picture that emerges outlines a range of possible strategies with endless nuances of emphasis between the commercial and the speculative, the Instagrammable and the data-driven, the formal and the informal, the technological and the cultural, in an effort to come up with an initial structural vision of the ecosystem and its emerging (and momentous) challenges.

Two significant phenomena stand out. First of all, the emergence of possible secondary attractors, such as -for example- in the case of the Alcova phenomenon or the development of new nomadic formats, disconnected from the concept of urban zones/districts and able to establish connections outside the city limits as well; the second, connected with the first, is the metropolisation and even regionalisation of the networks and territorial impacts that make this event an example of the

boundless city described by Aldo Bonomi (Bonomi, 2004)²⁶. Phenomena that intersect in a sort of instantaneous and multiscalar entanglement with urban and metropolitan reality, with the Italian production base and with global flows of communication, knowledge and capital.

2. The City's Commitment

The Municipality of Milan dialogues with a variety of stakeholders, promoting an ecosystemic, service-based governance to counteract the polarizing effects that may potentially affect the various districts, and to return value (economic and otherwise) to the city. To achieve this, as discussed in the third Chapter of the Report, Milan's city government implements a variety of policies.

A brief historical overview shows that since the 2000s, the Municipality of Milan established a unit specifically dedicated to fashion and design, today known as the Directorate of Urban Economy, Fashion, and Design, which acts as an interface between industry players and the city's authorization system. A decade ago, the first consultations between the administration and Design Week players were organized. Such panels continue to this day, with multiple meetings throughout the year.

In 2017, the city's Design Week became part of the city's official weeks, under the name Milano Design Week. Back then, the city issued its first public call to catalogue initiatives and simplify the granting of sponsorship and financial incentives. In addition to the consultation activities with subjects participating in the Design Week, the call was demonstrated to be a useful tool for developing governance that could increasingly address issues highlighted by those players and citizens, identifying specific priorities in a collaborative manner on topics such as circularity, accessibility, and opportunities for young designers.

In December 2023, the Municipality of Milan issued a public call for submitting initiatives and events to the official Milano Design Week 2024 program.

The call's main goal was to consolidate Milan's position as the world capital of design, supporting businesses and professionals in the sector, and facilitating dialogue among businesses, industry, and domestic and international stakeholders. The call aims to include proposals for design projects and events of public interest in the program. The call for proposals requested that applicants clearly address the listed priorities, such as whether the event was fully accessible, supported young designer participation and visibility, and adopted solutions promoting the circular economy by reusing materials from previous exhibitions.

A total of 192 out of 206 initiative applications⁸ were selected to be included in the events program (encompassing a total of 1,326 appointments), made available on the YesMilano platform.

The projects' estimated total value was €19,454,140; this often-underestimated amount refers to 147 out of the 192 initiatives, reflecting figures indicated by applicants when applying to the public call. The total revenue¹ for the city administration coming from Milano Design Week 2024 exceeded €445,000. The value of benefits from the Canone Unico Patrimoniale (CUP) granted to initiatives featured in the schedule was over €390,000. This amount represents actual savings for the organizers, resulting from the reduction or elimination of CUP coefficients for both cultural and promotional occupation of public space, in addition to advertising provisions.

The Municipality of Milan puts a significant focus on public spaces, their occupation, and use. The Municipality implements specific measures to reduce Milano Design Week's areas of congestion and

⁸ It should be noted that the Municipality of Milan uses the term initiatives to define events composed of multiple appointments.

improve its fruition by the wider public, realizing, for example, the temporary pedestrianization of certain streets, in alignment with existing policies to promote a slower city experience and improve the quality of life for residents and visitors. A total of 8,700 square meters of public space was temporarily pedestrianized.

A total of 7,473 square meters of public space was granted, divided equally between cultural and promotional activities². Promotional activities were required to ensure that their commercial nature aligned with the goal of creating spaces for interaction and socialization, allowing the public to freely engage with the products on display, to be included in the list of events.

Another policy promoted during the last two editions of Milano Design Week is to grant use of prestigious but disused municipal properties to encourage their temporary reuse and potential future regeneration. In 2023, the Istituto Marchiondi Spagliardi, designed by the architect Vittoriano Viganò between 1953 and 1957, was proposed; in 2024, the former Casa dell'Acqua on Via Giacosa (Parco Trotter) together with four disused municipal commercial spaces were offered. A commission comprising the Municipality of Milan, Triennale Milano, ADI, and the Politecnico di Milano evaluated the projects put forward for these spaces. The management of public spaces and use of disused buildings highlight the city's desire to be more accessible, liveable, and focused on urban and social regeneration, during and beyond the Design Week.

3. Notes and Considerations on the Impacts

The conclusion of the Report Milan Design (Eco) System is a first exploration of the ecosystemic relationship that links the great attractor of the Salone del Mobile.Milano to the self-organised group of stakeholders who stage Design Week in the city and the place that hosts them, Milan, with its social capital, its production resources, its material infrastructure, its policies and its players and other interested parties; in other words, the city, in its metropolitan dimension.

The Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week are a telling example of how a city can use a precise theme to shape hard and soft factors that define its identity and attractiveness. According to Saskia Sassen (1991)², global cities like Milan are central locations for the world economy due to their ability to concentrate resources, infrastructure and capital, as well as to foster social dynamism and cultural flows, crucial aspects of their power of attraction. During the Salone del Mobile.Milano, Milan becomes an international hub for the exchange of ideas, able to draw thousands of visitors, entrepreneurs and professionals, designers, architects and creatives from all over the world. In his work on the creative class, Richard Florida (2002)³, argues that the economic success of modern cities depends not only on their material resources, but also on their capacity to attract, whether permanently or temporarily, talented people with their creativity and innovation skills and networks. So, events like the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week are not just showcases for products or services, but catalysts of encounters between creatives, entrepreneurs, investors and users in an urban setting that favours the exchange of ideas and the development of experimental practices, from strategies to products and services. Allen J. Scott (2000)⁴ points out that cities which invest in cultural economies, like that of design, are able to generate considerable added value. Design should be understood as a process of not only material but also cultural production, exerting a profound influence on the perception of the city as a place devoted to innovation and creativity. Milan, with its history of industrial and artisanal excellence, finds in this event a perfect synergy between the legacy of a material cultural heritage and its contemporary version, in which know-how

is mixed with the ability to create. Finally, Musterd and colleagues (2007)⁵ assert that the competitiveness of cities does not depend solely on their system of material resources and infrastructure – although these are necessary to make a city competitive on the global scene – but also on whether they are places people want to live in. For some, i.e. one part of the professional and general public, Milan on the occasion of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milano Design Week becomes not just a productive city but also an attraction, where the streets, neighbourhoods and public spaces are animated by events, installations and activities open to all, nurturing a sense of inclusivity and participation. But this opinion is not held by everyone and some of its stakeholders and inhabitants think that the phenomenon has reached a tipping point between its positive and negative effects. It is precisely in order to investigate this possible contradictions that the phenomenon was studied as an ecosystem based on an unstable and unguaranteed between important specialised attractors like the Salone del Mobile.Milano, which represents an indispensable driving force, hard factors like the city's infrastructure and material resources and soft factors, like creativity and connected intelligence (Anzoise and Sadini, 2022)⁹. This ecosystem not only reinforces the image of Milan as the capital of Design, but makes an active contribution to its economic growth and global appeal.

The study here presented has set out to conduct a quantitative analysis of some of the main sources of aggregate data (relating to the years 2023 and 2024), drawing on open public data as well as seeking to integrate a wide range of databases provided by a large group of data holders. The available temporal baselines and their observational granularity informed the delineation of broad analytical chapters within the report. These represent a first attempt of what could become the framework of a future system of monitoring and strategic analysis operated by a Permanent Observatory of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week.

A number of significant themes have emerged with regard to flows of tourism and accommodation, the use of digital payments by tourists, analysis of urban mobility, and various aspects related to sustainability (specifically, the circular economy). Interpreting this impact is a classic example of a 'wicked problem'⁶, i.e. the difficulty of interpreting a highly complex phenomenon, knowing that not all the in-depth variables (data) of representation of the system are available and thus raising a first question of method, concerning the delimitation of the phenomenon itself. For instance, only a partial data set regarding the city were available; the inclusion of additional set of data would allow to show that some of the impacts (mobility, accommodation, tourism) extends to a wider metropolitan or even regional sphere.

It is also evident that the fair and Milan Design /megaek constitute a major event that extends the interrelations of interpretation; indicators of this are i) the large number of exhibitors and visitors and their complex mix (in 2024 the Salone del Mobile.Milano hosted 1,950 exhibitors from 35 countries and recorded an attendance of 370,8247 with a very wide variety of origins and types of use); ii) the mobilisation of economic resources and the differentiation of their causes/ effects (a spin-off of about 275 million euros estimated by Confcommercio in its Salone del Mobile 2024 report⁸); iii) a complex and integrated offer by the great attractor Salone del Mobile.Milano, along with a very high number

⁹ Anzoise, Valentina, and Carla Sadini, "Fiere ed esposizioni: strategie di produzione dei luoghi", *Enciclopedia Sociologica dei Luoghi, Volume 6*, ed. Giampaolo Nuvolati (Milano: Ledizioni, 2022) (131-150).

of events/urban interventions that indicate on the one hand prospects of possible urban regeneration, and -on the other- overexposure in the media; iv) complexities of attractiveness for foreign players and transformation of the daily life of the population (comparable to phenomena of over-tourism).

If this exploration is looked through the lens of major/mega events, in addition to strengthening urban identity, stimulating the economy and promoting the city at a global level, events can act as a critical catalyst for its regeneration, growth and internationalisation (Roche, 2000)⁹. Specifically, this interpretation fits into the framework outlined by Getz (2005)¹⁰, who has analysed how big events have long-term impacts that are not just economic but also cultural and social. Their strong effect on urban branding, known also as *showcase effect*, shape a city's image and reinforce brand value, indicating potential positive impacts on tourism and city perception, often thanks to a narrative that links a city to sectors and/or factors, in Milan's case, to design and creativity (Malchrowicz-Moško & Rozmiarek, 2017¹⁰; Frost and Laing, 2018¹¹). Even people who have never been there view Milan as the City of Design (as Charles Landry points out in the Report): this phenomenon, linked to the perception of reputation, known as the *halo effect* (Lee and Lockshin, 2011)¹². It strengthens the city's urban identity and international appeal, making the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week a fundamental asset in the positioning of Milan as one of the world capitals of creativity. During Design Week, various districts of Milan undergo a temporary transformation, with installations, exhibitions and design interventions bringing about an urban re-signification that reinforces the connection between its inhabitants and its private and public spaces. But does all this have a cost?.These (temporary) processes of transformation do not always have the so-called *feelgood effect* (Porsche & Maennig, 2008)¹³ represented by the positive reactions of individuals who personally participate in the experience. As Landry has written (Landry, 2009; p. 341)¹³ «the creative city is more like a free jazz session than a structured symphony...». Like jazz, Design Week in the city is also a collective form of democratic improvisation, which runs the risk of turning from something harmonious and engaging into a chaotic event with a negative impact. Over time, an osmotic relationship has been established between Salone del Mobile. Milano, the range of individuals and entities that come up with and propose initiatives, events, and projects and the municipal institutions that support them, making public spaces/places available as the settings for such events. A phenomenon that requires a form of dialogue and coordination that acts on the current configuration to maximise its collective advantages and reduce its negative externalities.

The diffuse cultural production (of design) complements and enhances the acknowledged capacity

¹⁰ Malchrowicz-Moško, Ewa, and Mateusz, Rozmiarek, "Impact of European Junior Swimming Championships in Poznan on Tourism and City Image in the opinion of Athletes", *Studies in Sport Humanities*, 22, 2017, 65-71.

¹¹ Frost, Warwick, and Jennifer Laing, "Avoiding burnout: the succession planning, governance and resourcing of rural tourism festivals", *Rural Tourism*, 2018, 166-185.

¹² Lee, Richard, and Larry Lockshin, "Halo effects of tourists' destination image on domestic product perceptions", *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 19.1, 2011, 7-13.

¹³ Porsche, Marcel, and Wolfgang Maennig, *The Feel-Good Effect at Mega Sport Events-Recommendations for Public and Private Administration Informed by the Experience of the FIFA World Cup 2006*, Hamburg Contemporary Economic Discussion Paper, 2008, 18.

of enterprises to come up with innovative visions that animate the city: its neighbourhoods, its affluent areas and its neglected ones (Sennett, 2024)¹⁴. Thus a virtuous circle is created between the Salone del Mobile.Milano, the great international attractor, and the spontaneity of significant phenomena like those of Design Week, which give the city the characteristics of a tourist destination. This interconnected dimension offers Milan the possibility of becoming an eventful place: in other words a place in which the whole range of things on offer link to its identity – the Salone del Mobile.Milano and events staged in the city – are well integrated into daily life, and their planning can be to some extent connected with civic objectives, i.e. those of the city as a whole (Richard and Palmer, 2012)¹⁵. It is precisely the prospect of civic creativity that is revealed, in fact, when we imagine that the public sector might learn to be more entrepreneurial and the private sector more socially responsible in pursuing joint aims and the willingness to share power, with a goal of having greater influence over an enlarged more successful whole (Landry, 2009). In Landry's view, Milan supports this capacity as it fully meets the characteristics of a city that learns by its mistakes and is strategic (Landry, 2009).

So, a city is considered as a stage, as Sennett puts it (Sennett 2024)¹⁶, where the collective performance of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milano Design Week become a means of personal and collective expression, and a vehicle of social and cultural transformation¹⁷, how can we make this performance resilient? How can we make sure that the Milanese ecosystem uses, amplifies and maintains this capacity? Through what individual and collective actions? To be sustainable the ecosystem has to attract the right quantity and quality of visitors in a transparent and balanced relationship with its inhabitants, and the right mix of activities to ensure quality of life, and to produce an economic benefit for the area, without compromising it (d'Angella et al., 2021)¹⁸.

A difficult but not impossible task, that will require a consolidation of the analysis of its data sets and interpretative frameworks, and a collective reflection on the governance of the ecosystem along with its entire range of stakeholders.