

MILAN DESIGN (ECO) SYSTEM

Salone del Mobile.Milano
Annual Report 2025



Salone del Mobile.Milano



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DI DESIGN

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Milan Design (Eco) System 2025

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City, impact, transition

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5.2

The Salone del Mobile.Milano and Design Week are unique in the calendar of major global events: the former being the most important, concentrated professional showcase of its kind, which is in turn connected to the latter, a widespread constellation of events that together transform the city of Milan into a creative laboratory. To understand the impact of these events on the city they must be framed in a set of interpretative structures that range from the *experience economy* to the *theory of temporary organizations* (Söderlund *et al.*, 2025), to *design-driven innovation* and the phenomenon of *mega-events*. A first point of reference must be made to the work of Bathelt and Sydow (2025), who represent fairs as an expression of new *temporary markets* and *creative clusters* that generate communities, *global buzz* and shared learning processes. In this regard, Charles Landry (2000), the pioneer of *cultural planning*, uses the *creative city* concept to describe cities that can activate latent cultural resources. At the end of the 1990s, Pine and Gilmore (1999), in turn, introduced the concept of *experience economy* whereby companies (as well as institutions, cities and regions) compete by creating memorable experiences for their customers and stakeholders. These theories suggest that events such as the Salone and Design Week not only produce economic but also associative and relational value. A second position from which to understand their impact on the city is connected to the definition of *temporary organizations* given by Söderlund, Stjerne and Zerjav (2025, p.1; Goodman 1982) who describe them as follows, they: ‘...are distinct forms of organizing that involve participants who are brought together to complete a specific task during a pre-defined period of time while working toward a common goal...’. Verganti (2009) and Battistella *et al.* (2012) define *Design Driven Innovation* (DDI) as a meaning-making strategy that integrates desirability, technological feasibility, and economic sustainability. This permits us to maintain that an example of DDI in action is specifically represented by certain Design Week *cities* (Han *et al.*, 2024) that operate as creative platforms for interdisciplinary collaboration, the integration of regional resources and global exchange, mobilizing academia, industry, and civic organisations according to the *principle of the quadruple helix* (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009)¹. The final interpretative mode is supplied by the literature on *mega-events* (Roche, 2000), that is those large-scale cultural, commercial, and sporting events that are *impressive* and have mass popular appeal and international significance. In Roche’s description, such great events are typically circumscribed initiatives such as World Expos or major sporting events like the Olympics. However, even the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Design Week can be considered *mega-events* given their international popularity and the impact they have on the everyday life of the city, occupying physical spaces and services and engaging a multitude of audiences of varied typologies. Moreover, we can say that Milan Design Week belongs to that subcategory of *mega-events* that Roche himself calls *hallmark events* (Roche, 2000). A hallmark event is a permanent institution rooted in its community; it is a short-lived, high-profile event with the massive involvement of local operators and clients from large and diverse catchment areas. Its identity is inseparable from that of the host city and its fame helps define and promote the location’s image and brand. The mega-event, in its various forms (including hallmark events), is a multidimensional social phenomenon involving various stakeholders, and it has more recently increasingly seen the reuse of existing urban structures, the reorganisation of existing areas, and the deployment of strategies aimed at redefining the city’s image (Gold & Gold, 2008). Through exhibitions, events, and installations, Milan Design Week has consistently engaged in the activity of using, converting and reclaiming aspects of the city’s heritage – buildings and locations that are often inaccessible at other times of the year – making the activation of these heritage sites a key factor in the initiative’s visibility (and success). Even the event’s relationship with the media seems to mirror what happens with major events. Indeed, although Design Week is a brief,

concentrated event (coinciding with the days of Salone del Mobile.Milano), it generates extraordinary media coverage, particularly in specialized national and global media, but also in the more generalist local, national, and international press. The literature on major events also focuses on another important issue for assessing impact: the *legacy* these events leave behind for their host cities. In the case of major sporting events (primarily the Olympics), a particularly relevant aspect is that the remaining infrastructure sometimes changes areas of the city, fostering economic and social development. Milan Design Week has a *targeted* temporal impact, but on the other hand being a recurring phenomenon, it nonetheless generates influence in the medium to long term (Salone del Mobile.Milano & Politecnico di Milano, 2024, pp. 169-205). Driven by the event's success, areas of the city have been transformed and adopted different identities, sometimes displacing the original inhabitants who historically lived in these areas, triggering processes of gentrification. In this way, the schedule of events forming Design Week connect to existing processes of gentrification, strengthening them and contributing, for example, to the increase in real estate and rental prices in historically working-class neighbourhoods such as Isola and Tortona. The phenomenon is therefore seen as an emblematic case of how the discourse on creativity (and its media resonance) can become a tool for urban repositioning, optimizing real estate values in line with the theories of authors such as Sharon Zukin (2010). Moreover, it must also be considered that this dynamic, which is manifest during Milan Design Week, is rooted in, and contributes to, strengthening a design ecosystem that, although less visible, is continuously active throughout the rest of the year. Such events never have a neutral impact on the locations in which they occur, and they always produce varied results. On the one hand, they promote a region and its identity – in the case of Milan, the *home of design*, according to the definition of YesMilano the *Agenzia di Promozione Turistica del Comune di Milano e della Camera di Commercio* (Tourism Promotion Agency of the Municipality of Milan and the Chamber of Commerce) – and on the other, they impact local residents and gentrification processes. In the dedicated literature, the topic of *governance* is widely covered in relation to major events. Typically, a major event has a steering committee that coordinates the proposals and requests of a multitude of stakeholders, including national and local governments, organizing committees, private sponsors, suppliers, security forces, local communities, and volunteers. In the specific case of Milan Design Week, the absence of top-down governance is evident, instead giving way to forms of self-organization, typical of complex systems, with flexible and polycentric governance models and forms of structured negotiation between players with differing bargaining power (Salone del Mobile.Milano & Politecnico di Milano, 2024, pp. 108-115). Studies on temporary creative clusters such as *Beijing Design Week* (Zhu *et al.*, 2018) show that Design Week events act as catalysts for innovation and creative governance, but, as in the case of Milan (and every other Western context), the differing political and cultural contexts must be considered. During Milan Design Week, initiatives on public land coexist with many others in private contexts. Consequently, the role of the municipal administration is geared towards regulating the use of public buildings and land. In this context, it embraces a model similar to *nudging*, i.e. giving a gentle push that encourages the adoption of a virtuous patterns of behaviour that can contribute to the emergence of sustainable urban-use models. In this sense, the *Assessorato allo Sviluppo Economico e alle Politiche del Lavoro del Comune di Milano* (Department of Economic Development and Labour Policies of the Municipality of Milan), which maintains the *Delega al Design* (Design Delegation), promotes an important initiative (the *Avviso Pubblico*² or Public Notice) which selects and recognizes events, exhibitions, and meetings that specifically involve the occupation of public property, taking into account the cultural (rather than commercial) aspects of the event, as well as aspects regarding

accessibility and inclusion, the sustainability of the installations, and the involvement of young creatives. Simultaneously, moreover, there is a dynamic of *colonizing private space* that is no longer solely cultural and experimental, but is increasingly mixed with commercial prospects, at times of a high-quality nature. What seems to be specifically lacking, however, is a *reward system* that positively encourages these high-quality public or private activities, as suggested by the *Cues, Action, Rewards* approach (Combs & Brown, 2018). The *cues* are specifically textual, visual, and environmental invitations to adopt sustainable behaviour that aligns with the desired values of the community. *Actions* are the actual responses that produce the desired change (for example, the adoption of accessible design solutions for people with disabilities). What is consequently foremost is the *reward*, a form of positive recognition that can help reinforce such behavioural choices and the perceived value of this kind of action. The hypothesis worth testing, then, may be one of constructing a *reward system* that encourages and supports collaboration between private and public stakeholders. Indeed, a lack of adequate rewards is seen to lead to a failure to consolidate virtuous behaviour in the way the city is used, and to the failure of any policy aimed at regulating the impact and consequences of events. In this context it is unclear what might be perceived as a *reward* by the stakeholders of Milan Design Week and the Salone del Mobile.Milano organization as a whole. A virtuous example in the area of sustainability (following the ISO 20121 standard guidelines) – use of energy from renewable sources, circular economy initiatives and reduction of mobility-related emissions – implemented by Salone del Mobile.Milano, points to a possible path for the ecosystem, in a form of *soft power*. However, this policy also poses internal issues of *reward* for the stakeholders who follow its example and yet struggle to be recognized in reputational terms for their contribution. In conclusion, the comparison between the 2024 and 2025 editions confirms that the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week are more than a trade fair: they are devices for cultural and social innovation that generate economic, symbolic, and urban value. As internationalization, quality of experience and attention to sustainability increase, Milan's role as a global design capital and a laboratory for innovative urban policies is consolidated.

¹ The *quadruple helix* is a model of innovation in which universities, businesses, public administration and citizens collaborate to create shared solutions and sustainable development.

² See: *Avviso pubblico per la presentazione di progetti e iniziative da inserire nel palinsesto ufficiale della Milano Design Week 2025*, Deliberazione di G.C. n. 939 del 2 agosto 2024. https://servizi.comune.milano.it/en/dettaglio-contenuto/-/asset_publisher/pqxq/content/avviso-pubblico-per-la-presentazione-di-progetti-e-iniziativa-da-inserire-nel-palinsesto-ufficiale-della-milano-design-week-2025, accessed 14 September 2025.