MILAN DESIGN (ECO) SYSTEM

Salone del Mobile.Milano Annual Report 2025

Salone del Mobile.Milano

POLITECNICO MILANO 1863 | SCUOLA DEL DESIGN | DIPARTIMENTO DI DESIGN

Milan Design (Eco) System 2025

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1 Salone del Mobile.Milano 2025

2 Milan Design Week 2025

3 Milan Design System

4 Design culture production in Milan

5 Salone del Mobile.Milano and Design Week: local impact

Appendix

Working Tables
Milan Design (Eco) System
Design Culture @Milano
Present and future of design's cultural production in Milan

Figures

Design culture production in Milan

4

Design culture: a history of encounters

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4.2

Writing about design culture from a historical perspective – particularly in Milan – by tracing a path that leads us to reflect on what it is today, and perhaps what it will be tomorrow, is a challenge that brings to mind certain themes I have already addressed, which I have sought to weave together under the title *Design Culture: A History of Encounters*. Before arriving at these 'encounters', let us first attempt to clarify what is meant by *design culture*, considering that this cultural recognition of design was formed and developed in Italy – and, as we know, particularly in Milan – within a lively exchange of ideas and projects after the end of the last world war (an expression that today has a certain resonance), in a positive and optimistic period of rebirth following the twenty-year Fascist dictatorship. Within a single decade – spanning the late 1940s and early 1950s – rich with ideas, projects, meetings, debates and cultural intertwinings among the arts, technologies and industries (for which intertwinings the Politecnico di Milano has always been, and remains today, a worthy home), there emerged a new awareness and maturity in Italy's design culture. This process achieved, as is well known, its first major international recognition with the organisation of an important inaugural international conference on Industrial Design during the 10th Triennale in 1954. Later on, focusing more directly on the proposed theme of encounters, I shall attempt to trace further steps in the development of this design culture in Milan. We can therefore say that, both yesterday and today, design culture should be understood as a broad, interdisciplinary field of reflection. (Lately, there has been much discussion about the international use of the term 'expanded design', which suggests this continual extension – an issue that we also addressed at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano in an international symposium of design historians.) This is therefore an area that transcends the boundaries of mere object production, engaging instead with aesthetic, social, economic and environmental questions. To speak of design culture thus means to investigate not only design practices but also their historical matrices, shared values and networks of meaning that allow design to become an integral part of contemporary cultural processes. As Richard Buchanan observes in *Wicked Problems in Design Thinking*, 'design is a field of integrative thinking, capable of connecting and reinterpreting different disciplinary domains.' (Buchanan, 1992, pp. 5-21). From its nineteenth-century origins, design has positioned itself as a mediator amid art, industry and society. The considerations of William Morris and the protagonists of the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as those of the Bauhaus, testify that design was perceived from its very beginnings not only as a productive activity but also as a cultural construction. Tomás Maldonado, emphasised that design in the twentieth century is situated at the crossroads of science, technology and society, with the function of critically organising the form of everyday life. Its birth is tied to the processes of industrialisation and to the need to mediate between technology and form, between serial production and aesthetic quality. In this sense, design culture cannot be reduced to a collection of objects; rather, it takes shape as a system of knowledge and values defining the relationship between human beings, technology and the environment. One of the central aspects of design culture is its interdisciplinary nature. As mentioned earlier, design activity has progressively extended from the material object to the environment, to services, and to complex systems and digital interfaces. Victor Margolin, a renowned American design historian and theorist, in his book *The Politics of the Artificial*, defined this expansion as the passage from a design of products to a design of systems of meaning: 'design produces not only objects, but also relationships and narratives that define our cultural experience.' With the term 'encounters' I shall return precisely to this theme of 'relationships and narratives' (Margolin, 2002, p. 10). Its interdisciplinary nature draws from art history, architecture, sociology, philosophy and, more recently, media studies. This interweaving fosters a continuous redefinition of disciplinary boundaries: design is no longer only the

design of products but also of services, experiences, interfaces, processes and narratives. Design culture does not merely generate tangible forms; it contributes to shaping the material and immaterial culture of societies. Designed objects convey symbols, identities and values, contributing to the definition of lifestyles. At the same time, design also promotes new immaterial practices such as data management, future scenario modelling and the elaboration of sustainability strategies. In recent decades, critical reflection on design has assumed a central role. Design culture is no longer conceived merely as a functional practice but also as a tool for critical thought. Experiences such as critical design or speculative design demonstrate how design can question social models, established habits and visions of the future, stimulating processes of collective awareness. Alongside its productive function, contemporary design culture takes on a critical and speculative role. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, in their book *Speculative Everything*, have shown how critical design can 'stimulate alternative imaginaries and challenge the normality of technological systems.' (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 189). I would observe that our great Italian designers – just think of the brothers Piergiacomo and Achille Castiglioni – were, in my view, already practising a kind of critical design ahead of their time in their celebrated projects. This approach reveals that design is not only a tool of efficiency but also a cultural practice, capable of questioning values, social models and visions of the future. Achille Castiglioni used to tell us students: 'Design is not so much about designing objects, but above all about designing behaviours' which, along with his provocative remark – 'If you're not curious, what are you doing in this school?' – already says much about the health of critical design during that golden age of Italian design. Contemporary design culture is traversed by urgent issues: environmental sustainability, technological innovation, artificial intelligence and social equity (I am thinking here of the beautiful 24th International Exhibition of the Triennale currently dedicated to the theme of *Inequalities*). Ezio Manzini, pioneer of design for sustainability, affirms that 'design today is called upon to imagine and construct scenarios in which people can live better, consuming fewer resources and generating new forms of community.' (Manzini, 2015, p. 5). Design culture, therefore, cannot be reduced to an assemblage of aesthetic objects; it constitutes a dynamic cultural process that integrates technology, society and imagination. It is simultaneously a material and symbolic practice – a tool for innovation, a shared language, and a form of critical reflection capable of guiding transformations in everyday life. I now propose that we read this story – our story of design culture in Milan – as a history of encounters. We have already reiterated that design, understood not as a mere formal activity but as a design culture, represents a field that engages values, relationships and ways of life. As a key to interpretation, it may be interesting to reread all this through the lens of the great Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (a central figure of seventeenth-century rationalism, well known to many of our Italian design masters who had a classical education), particularly his theory of encounters, which offers an ethical and ontological perspective capable of illuminating the function of design as a relational practice. This small contribution of mine aims to show how design culture can be read, in light of Spinoza, as a device for organising encounters – capable of increasing or diminishing the power of individuals and collectives. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza defines the human being as part of an infinite network of relationships. Every individual strives to persevere in his or her own being (*conatus*), yet this power can grow or diminish depending on encounters: when two individuals of a different nature meet, writes Spinoza in his *Ethics*, it may happen that both or only one of them are modified so as to preserve more or less of their power of acting (Spinoza, 1677). A positive encounter is one that enhances our capacity to exist and to think, generating joy (*laetitia*); a negative encounter, on the contrary, reduces our power, generating sadness. In this sense, Spinoza's ethics is a philosophy of relations: to

understand, orient and cultivate good encounters means to promote the growth of life. Design culture, especially from the twentieth century onwards – as we have already noted – has progressively expanded its scope, moving from the production of objects to the design of complex systems, services and interfaces. We earlier cited design historian Victor Margolin and spoke of 'relationships and narratives'. In this sense, every project is already an encounter: between bodies and artefacts, between individuals and communities, between society and environment. Design, in fact, organises the material and symbolic conditions of encounters, influencing their quality and their consequences.

This Spinozian reading allows us to conceive design as an applied ethics of encounters: the designer does not merely create forms, but also generates conditions that orient relationships – and thus the vital power of people. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, with their above mentioned critical design, have shown how design can stimulate alternative imaginaries, destabilising conventions and fostering new encounters: 'Critical design seeks to generate debate, not solutions; to raise questions rather than provide answers.' (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 43). This idea resonates with the Spinozian perspective, according to which adequate knowledge of encounters leads to greater freedom. In both cases, value lies not in the object itself but in its capacity to transform relationships. To bring design culture into dialogue with Spinoza means recognising that design is not a neutral act (as, moreover, Enzo Mari also argued – indeed, to be more precise, he defined it as an act of war, a compelled commitment against a reality that must always be improved). The project, therefore, is an ethical intervention in the web of encounters that constitute social and individual life. Design thus becomes a form of practical philosophy – an art of organising the world so that encounters enhance the power of living, generating more freedom, more joy and more community. But, as I promised, let us now see – briefly – which places and situations in Milan have been the settings where designers, together with architects, artists and intellectuals, but also entrepreneurs, artisans, engineers and technicians, have met, creating and participating in the high and low networks of intellectual and material culture in our city. We have already mentioned an important place such as the Triennale Milano, undoubtedly an essential point of reference to this vocation, for encounters and dialogue. Since 1933, with the Milanese headquarters of the Fifth Triennale, the sacred temple of design culture in the city was established, involving the entire country and engaging with the world. But let us not forget, on another plane – still in the realm of exhibitions – the Fiera di Milano, the historic *Fiera Campionaria*, which inevitably leads us to the Salone del Mobile.Milano. In this regard, we must always keep in mind that Milan's historic vocation, more than industrial, is above all commercial: and what could be more stimulating for encounters than fairs and markets, as the history of all times and all corners of the world teaches us? More generally, around this design culture, we must also recall the primary role of schools, which are by definition places of cultural encounter. In Milan, first and foremost, we must recognise the historic primacy of the Politecnico di Milano, founded in 1863, whose very name speaks of interdisciplinarity – not only technical but also humanistic – further reinforced by the establishment of the School of Architecture in 1926 and later by the first Degree Course in Industrial Design in 1993. On the first day of class, I always tell my students that they must not only learn from their professors, but also from the city of Milan itself – with its wealth of cultural variety – and, above all, they must learn from one another, with their differing attitudes, learning (a crucial skill for all designers) to work together, in groups, by confronting and exchanging ideas. Milan is the world capital of design and, certainly, also the capital of design schools. From all over the world, people come to 'rinse their clothes', Manzoni-style, in our cultural Arno (though of course not in our little Lambro), let us say in our great cultural reservoir

that extends across and dots a vast metropolitan territory. By cultural reservoir I also mean all the artisanal workshops and the rich experiences of know-how within our industries, where Italian design – and much celebrated international design – has been formed and developed, thanks to so many fruitful encounters. In this sense, this reference to enterprises brings to mind the important role, since 1956, of the ADI, the Association of Italian Designers and companies, which, through its early link to the history of the famous *Compasso d'Oro* award, has continually fostered cultural interest and recognition for the role of Italian design in the world. I also feel personally involved in mentioning the importance of design archives, which deserve to be supported – as the design historian Fulvio Irace recently wrote – because they are the gold of Milan. With pleasure I recall and note that on 30 September, the Mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, cut the ribbon inaugurating the new, large headquarters of CASVA at QT8 – the archive of modern design integrated into the system of Milan's Civic Art Collections. To this world we must add the importance of libraries as well as bookshops – and this also reminds me of specialised journals, which have served as chosen places of encounter and intellectual exchange (physically, too, in their various editorial offices). In Milan these have flourished, at times in great numbers, and have been – and we hope will continue to be – a point of international reference. And finally (I shall surely forget other important situations), I would also like to reflect on the role of what are now called 'third places', a concept introduced by the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place* (1989). These are social spaces that coincide neither with the first sphere (the home, the place of private and family life) nor with the second (work or school, the places of productivity and responsibility). They represent therefore a 'third space' where people can meet freely, converse, build relationships, and create communities and collective identities. They are, so to speak, halfway between the places of work and study and those of home and rest, forming a dense, underlying network within the city: public places where people meet to relax and have fun, to share an aperitif or dance, to eat together – from the famous Bar Craja of the 1930s to the many Biffi cafés, Scofone beer hall, Bulloni wine bar, Tumbun de San Marc, Santa Tecla, Bar Giamaica, Bar Basso, Oreste, up to the Plastic nightclub (which has recently closed), where in the 1980s and 1990s Andy Warhol and Elio Fiorucci, Giorgio Armani and artists Keith Haring and Basquiat mingled – alongside many young designers, for instance those of the Memphis group. I am no longer of the age to know which are the new meeting places, but I hope there are many, and that they may bear good fruit, perhaps forming even in social centres or impromptu raves. Having said all this, to return to our thread: design emerges as a cultural practice capable of orienting behaviours – as Achille Castiglioni said – fostering a balance between productive needs, ethical responsibilities and community values. The challenge is to transform design culture into a device of mediation between global complexities and local needs, between innovation and memory. Design culture is therefore not a mere aesthetic accessory of industrial and post-industrial societies but – as art historian George Kubler (1972) has taught us so well – a true shared language – a field of symbolic and material production contributing to the definition of our cultural identity. Within it, the historical and the projectual dimensions, the search for meaning and tension towards the future intertwine: elements that make design not only a discipline but a cultural practice, capable of reflecting upon and transforming society.

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