

MILAN DESIGN (ECO) SYSTEM

Salone del Mobile.Milano
Annual Report 2025



Salone del Mobile.Milano



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Milan Design (Eco) System 2025

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A complex and dynamic journey involving the whole city

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7.1

The 2025 Report confirms the strength and vitality of the Milan Design Ecosystem, adding a new layer of analysis focused on the design cultural production within the ecosystem. This exploration shows how design culture mirrors the dynamics of the wider ecosystem: a complex network of actors, places, information, exchanges and initiatives that interact not only during Design Week but throughout the year. This process is sustained by the city's openness – to people, cultures and ways of living – a cosmopolitanism that has always defined Milan. It can be observed, for instance, in the growing number of companies founded by foreign professionals and in the appeal of Milan's design schools to students from all over the world. In this context, diversity acts as a driver of innovation: the encounter between different cultures generates new combinations and fosters the ability to explore unprecedented and original perspectives.

Grasping the relationship between design and culture is not a straightforward task. In many contexts, design is still perceived as a technical or professional activity aimed at resolving operational or functional constraints, defining forms, materials and production factors to create what Tomás Maldonado called a *technical individual* – those artefacts we commonly call products. This view reinforces a conception of design as a predominantly technical act, with strong implications for its interpretation. In particular, for Italian design – long understood as a reflective practice in dialogue with the productive, craft and industrial worlds, and attentive to supporting the typological, formal and functional logic of everyday objects – this reading remains crucial. Yet, when we look more closely at the evolution of Italian design, although production and labour are integral to the dense networks of knowledge and skills that define it, we discover a system that goes beyond simple *know-how* to explore not only *know-what* but also *know-why*. The artisans and manufacturers of Brianza – and beyond – seek engagement with the world of design not only to renew their traditional repertoire but also to expand their cultural horizons. The vision and emancipation brought about by design culture thus become drivers of change in technical and productive domains. Since the post-war period, the search for differentiation has turned local needs into universal opportunities, creating competitive visions and enduring narratives that continue to define the distinctive Italian approach to design. Today, more than ever, the relationship between design and enterprise must anchor its innovative offerings in a solid cultural framework to capture the often-fleeting attention of an educated, conscious and global society.

The cultural ecosystem of Milanese design can be understood as a complex adaptive system – an implicit guiding mechanism: an interweaving of relationships and interdependencies in which every change in the global reference environment can be detected, discussed and interpreted – thus producing effects across the entire local ecosystem. This dynamic evolves while remaining in a state of constant disequilibrium: it requires a continuous flow of energy, internal or external, to keep regenerating itself. Without variation in flows and interactions, without disturbances or unforeseen elements, the system risks becoming rigid and gradually fading away.

The nature and survival of a complex ecosystem such as Milan's require embracing unpredictability as a positive condition: it is impossible to anticipate the effects of a disturbance. This is its strength and, at the same time, its challenge – one that demands adaptability, responsiveness and an organisational culture capable of transformation. In this context, what role can be played by those who choose to engage with these processes? Drawing on Charles Landry's concept of the creative bureaucracy, the importance of building enabling platforms emerges: frameworks that foster the sustainable evolution of adaptive systems

while preserving their vitality and competitiveness. On a cultural level, multiple actors can help define the boundaries of these platforms and promote their adoption among stakeholders within the Milanese – and more broadly, Italian – design cultural ecosystem. The very ability to build and maintain such platforms over time stands as one of the key indicators of a system's maturity. These platforms are not only physical or institutional spaces but genuine cognitive, social and symbolic infrastructures that enable design knowledge to circulate and renew itself. They foster connections between seemingly distant worlds – business and research, schools and craftsmanship, culture and technology – creating fertile ground for experimentation and collective learning. The presence of incubators, foundations and applied research centres helps consolidate this fabric, offering opportunities for intergenerational and cross-sectoral exchange that strengthen the city's relational capital. Within this framework, Milanese design assumes a role of cultural mediation between local instances and global trajectories. It acts as a language capable of translating social needs, values and identities into tangible and shareable forms, and at the same time as a tool of cultural diplomacy, able to build bridges between disciplines, communities and regions. The city thus becomes an enabling platform for new forms of creative entrepreneurship, where design serves as a device for connection, interpretation and the regeneration of urban contexts.

Another distinctive element of the Milanese system is its capacity to cyclically regenerate its collective imagination. The cultural ecosystem of design does not merely reproduce established models but constantly incorporates new sensibilities: ecological transition, the digital dimension, social inclusion and attention to the common good. This convergence gives rise to a hybrid field of experimentation where disciplinary boundaries dissolve in favour of more transdisciplinary and systemic approaches. In this sense, Milan emerges as an *open laboratory*, where creativity is not just an individual expression but a *form of collective intelligence* aimed at building desirable futures. Such a perspective entails greater cultural and political responsibility. Design, understood as a critical and reflective practice, is called to question the logics of production and consumption and to promote fairer, more sustainable and participatory models. Innovation can no longer be seen as an end in itself but rather as a process of continuous learning that brings together the aesthetic, ethical and economic dimensions of design. The ability of the Milanese system to remain relevant in the global landscape will therefore depend on its capacity to integrate knowledge and awareness, form and content, vision and responsibility. Looking ahead, the challenge for Milanese design will be to preserve its evolutionary identity, continuing to treat cultural and social transformations as opportunities for regeneration. Its strength lies precisely in the dynamic balance between memory and innovation: tradition becomes a living material, constantly reinterpreted through new forms of expression, materials and technologies. In this ongoing process of adaptation, Milan remains a global reference point – an ecosystem that not only produces design but also culture, meaning and the future.