

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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The paradox of showing

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2.6

Milano Design Week is a phenomenon that can be read through the lenses of urban anthropology and the sociology of consumption. As Marc Augé (1996) argues, global events of this kind produce temporary *non-places*, ephemeral spaces that suspend everyday use and create collective rituals of symbolic consumption. The experience of Design Week, with its queueing and waiting, is configured as *social performance* in which access itself becomes a *commodity* (Couldry, 2019). At the same time, the growing participation of *brands* from outside the design world generates processes of urban *festivalization* (Richards, 2020), where cultural capital is converted into economic capital and vice versa, with effects of exclusion and *symbolic gentrification*. This dynamic reveals tensions between cultural authenticity and commodification, a key nexus in the contemporary sociology of the creative industries (d'Ovidio & Pradel, 2025). If Design Week is interpreted as an urban ritual, the relations of power and belonging that traverse the city, and its temporary spaces can be highlighted.

THE QUESTION OF SHOWING

The question is one of *showing*: how *goods* are *shown* or *show* in the late capitalist society of the twenty-first century, transformed as they are into a permanent spectacle where the exposition becomes the very means of producing desire. In *Passages (Das Passagen-Werk)* Walter Benjamin (2000) observed that the commodity appears as a *chimera*, concealing its use-value behind the exchange-value: '...the commodity form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things...' (Marx, 1976/1867, Vol. I, Ch. 1, §4, p. 165). Benjamin reworks the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism, transforming it into a spectacularisation of commodities within a cultural universe characterised by wonder and seduction. In Design Week, commodities are not only shown. *They show* as well: they are the protagonists of urban activations and sensory narratives. This principle is amplified nowadays: not only are objects shown; commodities *show* through immersive installations and experiential strategies that blend together consumption and entertainment. One example of this is the Google installation *Making the Invisible Visible*. Curated by Ivy Ross, Google's chief design officer, and realised together with the artist Lachlan Turczan, it was presented at Garage 21 during Design Week 2025. This project transformed the physical space into a sensory environment of light, rendering abstract ideas tangible: an immersive installation that offered visitors a sensory and creative experience made up of modular spaces, dynamic projections and participatory installations. The exposition thus becomes a device of symbolic construction, in which there is a reference to *the brand more than to the work* (Debord, 1967). The logic of exposition shifts from the product to the context, from possession to shared experience, creating a *permanent staging of consumption*. This showing does not just communicate use quality anymore, but belonging, desire and social identity. Contemporary exposition, therefore, tends to saturate the urban semiosphere, generating *social showcasing* (Codeluppi, 2021), where public life, consumption and spectacle blend together, elevating the commodity to an embodiment of desire and collective identity. But where does this dynamic manifest itself today? How does this process of showing take place?

THE FAIR AS A DEVICE AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS TODAY

The model of the fair as a cultural and commercial device became established between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, with

universal exhibitions and fairs showcasing products, technical innovations and symbols of national prestige. These structures had a performative function, based on *showing* as a means of constructing value, potential incubators of innovation and network building. The trade fair paradigm remains central today, as can be seen in Milan Design Week: it is a system in which showing, trying out, negotiating and selling converge, but in ways that have changed profoundly. The key question is whether this device remains effective or if it needs to be adapted. The theme of showing, and at the same time of trying out and negotiating, understood as cultural actions, has evolved from the notion of a static exposition to that of a performative and immersive experience. Trade fairs traditionally presented objects, prototypes and models; nowadays, the *exhibition* is frequently transformed into an installation, an ephemeral event, a happening. The *trying out* is not simply about touching or observing; it is sensorially and mediatically engaging. The *negotiating* acquires a symbolic dimension: the presence of the *brand* becomes an experience as well as commercial bargaining. Adapting the concept of showing to contemporary times requires critical reflection: while the significance of showing is still that of conveying value and representing ideas of belonging, it must be carried out today in the context of a semiotic overload. The exposition must engage with authentic narrative forms that correspond to the ability to produce cultural and entrepreneurial value, rather than simply shouting the loudest.

CRITICISMS OF DESIGN WEEK: VISIBILITY, ENVY AND SYMBOLIC GENTRIFICATION

International critics, such as Max Fraser, argue that Design Week has become a stage for a diverse range of brands. Fraser (2025) denounces a kind of *brand tourism*: ‘...Understandably others want a slice of that cool cake. For many years now, the week has been commandeered by a broad swathe of related industries, including fashion, art, beauty, technology and automotive. Big consumer brands are great at identifying and hooking onto key hotspots to ‘activate’. Milan Design Week has definitively become the hottest target for those looking to broaden their market penetration...’. The expansion indeed produces a phenomenon that distorts and trivialises the event, acting as the prelude to an anti-design model. There has also been significant criticism of the event’s visual and cultural pollution, characterised by a saturation of signs that makes decodification difficult for those working in the industry, resulting in frustration and unsatisfactory experiences. This is in contrast with the patient and enthusiastic ranks of non-specialist audiences. An article in the *Financial Times* entitled ‘At Milan Design Week, fashion is centre stage’ (Perry, 2025) highlights the growing prominence of the fashion industry during the event, indicating how high-profile brands are dominating exhibition setups and popular public visibility. The article describes how ‘...fashion brands are no strangers to activating Milan’s architecture through exuberant installations. The city is a capital of fashion as well as design, after all. But recently, they have brought more of the catwalk-show spectacle to the design world, and design – its cultural cachet on the up, no longer trailing behind art – is in turn attracting more of the fashion crowd...’, where the spectacular activations of the big brands end up redefining the experience of the average visitor: ‘...At Milan, it’s undeniable that luxury fashion brands have the cultural and financial capital to attract top names and stage grand, ambitious events. Perhaps the furniture brands feel shown up, but in many ways it’s an invitation to up their game...’ This observation highlights the tension between popularity and quality of experience: the queue serves as an advertising success, the paradox being that the professional *sees almost nothing*.

COSTS, COMPLEXITY AND URBAN PRIVATISATION

The Design Week model comes with high costs: branding, communication, exhibition setups and public events require resources that traditional furniture companies often cannot afford. The result is (the risk of) a *privatised city* à la *Blade Runner* or *Minority Report*, where public space is colonised by branded installations and marketing. The complex fabric of public and private actors with different expectations creates tensions: the incident when the Filarete courtyard was occupied¹ during the Amazon event is emblematic of conflicts between alternate visions of the use of public space, with potential reputational damage (and loss of visibility) for the event as a whole. There is an increasingly widespread lack of authenticity: experiences perceived as being overly commercial and forced, provoke resistance from local communities. The presence of certain brands and product categories is viewed as invasive. This process can consolidate the dynamics of cultural gentrification, leading to an unjustified increase in the price of services, entertainment and hospitality for residents and a resulting loss of meaning and accessibility of public space.

GOVERNANCE OF UNCONTROLLED PHENOMENA:

A CULTURE OF ROBUSTNESS AND RELIABILITY

The *boiling frog* metaphor, attributed to Noam Chomsky, is apt for describing the gradual but potentially degenerative evolution of the Milan Design Week model: the escalation of brand tourism, corporate drives and the temporary privatisation of urban space could grow without prompting an effective reaction. To counter it, there is a need for an organisational culture capable of managing the *unexpected*, which inevitably results from a bottom-up phenomenon such as Design Week. An interpretative framework for understanding how to address phenomena as challenging as those described was proposed by Weick & Sutcliffe (2001; 2007) with regard to High-Reliability Organisations (HROs) and the principles that enable them to manage the complexity of such phenomena.

These organisations have five key characteristics:

1. *Preoccupation with failure*: they are constantly alert to ‘near miss situations’ and weak signals of potential failure.
2. *Reluctance to simplify interpretations*: they reject misleading simplifications and are receptive to multiple perspectives (Weick *et al.*, 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).
3. *Sensitivity to operations*: they display an awareness of the dynamics taking place at the ‘front-stage’, the result of real interactions between agents, space and events, and they listen to what these actors have to say.
4. *Commitment to resilience*: they have the capacity to react, reorganise and learn from the unexpected.
5. *Deference to expertise*: they trust situated competence, regardless of formal hierarchy.

To apply these principles to Design Week it is necessary to define roles responsible for detecting and resolving looming failures in *showing* processes; to create a dialogue between stakeholders so as to avoid simplistic explanations; to value the experience of those working in the field (exhibition fitters, residents, curators) and the solutions they are capable of providing; and to develop organisational flexibility so that, instead of just reacting after the event, issues are remedied promptly (as happened, for example, in the case of the *supersalone* 2021, coordinated by Stefano Boeri, to substitute the Salone del Mobile.Milano as a special edition conceived to relaunch post-pandemic design with an innovative and sustainable fair format), instead of reacting *ex post* perhaps through the pool of young talent

and the collective tacit skills with which the city is endowed. In a similar manner to consolidated models of local participation, such as the *Transition Town* movement (Hopkins, 2008), a *pact* could be established *among stakeholders*, including brands, public institutions, local communities and cultural operators, to share governance, costs and benefits. Such a pact would facilitate sharing the city as a *common good*, with a collective redistribution of the positive effects. The lessons of HROs imply the need for *distributed responsibility*, requiring the recognition of differing authorities (curators, residents, businesses, government bodies, etc.) to create new processes of listening and decision-making for the negotiated construction of individual and collective actions. This is a way of preventing trivialisation, valuing authenticity, and dealing with the unexpected.

CONCLUSIONS

Showing in Milan has been effective for constructing symbolic experiences of international value. However, its contemporary application presents structural limitations: semiotic saturation, cultural exclusion, over-commercialisation and organisational fragility. The paradigm needs to be actively rethought if these limits are to be overcome: from reliance on quantitative visibility towards the quality of experience; from a model that is an end in itself to one that is oriented towards the common good; from corporate governance to an ecosystemic governance based on a culture of awareness, listening, resilience, deference to expertise and shared responsibility. Applying the principles of HROs to the urban and cultural context could help to avoid the *boiling frog* condition and favour a paradigm shift, a *leap-frog* for the complex system of organising the event and the region. This is the only way Design Week will be able to maintain and expand its *leadership in showcasing*, restoring Milan's contemporary and sustainable effectiveness.

¹ For a detailed account of the episode, see *la Repubblica*, 10 April 2025: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2025/04/10/news/fuorisalone_studenti_bloccano_ingresso_installazione_amazon_statale_chiostro_farmacia-424119278/, accessed 14 September 2025