

# Design Tensions Between Attractiveness and Inclusivity in Milan Public Universities: The Case of a Student Housing Orientation Service

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## Abstract

As Milan public universities compete globally to attract economic capital and student flows, they simultaneously face growing challenges in addressing the housing affordability crisis affecting their student populations. This paper reflects on the design tensions emerging within the service ecosystem of Politecnico di Milano, starting from the shortcomings encountered during the development of the multidisciplinary research-action project *StudMIHome: Students Living in Milan*; a study on student housing conducted by three research departments of the university, with the objective of prototyping and testing a housing orientation service for students.

*service design, design tensions, public university, student housing*

## Introduction

Universities play a fundamental role in shaping the urban fabric of metropolitan cities worldwide, as they attract large numbers of national and international students each year. To such an extent that the type of *gentrification* (Zukin, 1987) experienced by some city neighbourhoods surrounding university campuses due to this growing influx of students has come to be known as *studentification* (Kinton et al., 2018; Smith, 2004).

The capacity of the most sought-after Italian cities to host this transient population is lowering every year, since housing costs are outpacing wage growth in many urban centres. In Milan, the scarcity of affordable housing is the result of interconnected socio-economic factors, a decrease in welfare policies, and a steady

increase in national programs that have actively promoted access to private property since the 1960s, such as tax breaks for homeownership and sustained support for residential real estate investments (Tosi, 2017). These policies have gradually contributed to the polarization of the housing system, and incentivized rentier forms of the economy over productive ones, making access to sustainable dwellings increasingly difficult for residents on an average income (Gainsforth, 2025).

The city's narrative, which tells the story of an increasingly attractive and successful economic capital (Tozzi, 2023), contrasts with the growing vulnerabilities experienced by the population of its key workers. Indeed, those who ensure the functioning of essential city services, such as nurses, drivers, teachers, social workers, waiters, small business owners, struggle to cope with the rising cost of housing in the city (Bricocoli & Peverini, 2023). This dynamic also affects the student population, whose challenges gained national visibility in May 2023 precisely in Milan, when the *Tende in Piazza* protest at the Politecnico di Milano Leonardo campus brought public focus to the precarious living conditions faced by university students (Costa, 2024).

In this regard, this paper reports on the research project *StudMIHome: Students Living in Milan*, launched in October 2023 as part of the Polisocial Award initiative promoted by Politecnico di Milano for the funding and development of scientific research with a social impact. The project involved three college departments and a diverse range of stakeholders in the metropolitan city, with the objective of grasping the phenomenon of student housing in Milan and prototyping a housing orientation service for students to be tested in 2025. This interdisciplinary project provided an opportunity to explore the challenges of designing housing-related services for public universities in Italy's foremost *global city* (Sassen, 2005) and to present key points of discussion for practitioners working in similar contexts. The first part of the paper briefly introduces the housing affordability crisis in Milan and its impact on the public university ecosystem. The second and third sections present the work carried out within the *StudMIHome* project, outlining key research findings and then examining the design process and outputs. Finally, the discussion builds on the challenged emerged during the service implementation to reflect on strategies for design-led change amid the emerging tensions of Milan public universities.

## 1.0 Context overview

### 1.1 The housing 'crisis' in Milan

In many urban centres of the globe, housing prices have become unsustainable not only for the working class but also for high portions of the middle class due to the

growing disparity between house prices and average income (Wetzstein, 2017). In the European Union, house prices have increased by an average of 48% in less than 10 years (Eurostat, 2025), from 2015 to 2023, which, in most countries, was not followed by the same increase in average household income.

In Italy, the interplay between market tensions, decades of urban planning policies incentivizing property acquisition and land consumption, along with the ongoing productivity stagnation, has resulted in a dramatic deterioration of housing conditions (Bricocoli & Peverini, 2023; Gainsforth, 2025; Tosi, 2017). Indeed, for households who neither own nor have inherited property, not only is it no longer possible to access a mortgage, but it is also extremely difficult to pay the rent. Already in 2014, the percentage of the population whose housing costs exceed 40% of disposable income (the Housing Cost Overburden rate) was 31.9% for those renting a house at market prices (Tosi, 2017). Ten years later, this condition has led high portions of low-income households in the Metropolitan city of Milan to face for short or prolonged periods, situations of *houselessness* (temporary place to sleep in institutions or shelter), *insecure housing* (insecure tenancies or eviction) or *inadequate housing* (illegal campsites, unfit housing or extreme overcrowding)<sup>1</sup>, leading to the reappearance in the city's rental sector of those traditional forms of housing inadequacy that had tended to decline since the 1960s (Gainsforth, 2025). The situation is so widespread and chronic that the phenomena can be referred to as *housing crisis*, following the name of the special committee established by the European Parliament at the end of 2024.

## 1.2 The Milan model in the *global city* competition

To contextualise the contradictions of the housing affordability crisis in Milan, we must look at what has happened within the neoliberal framework that in the last fifty years has progressively 'economized' and privatized every aspect of human life (Guattari, 1982), leading metropolitan cities worldwide to compete to attract economic capital (Florida, 2017; Vanolo, 2017).

In the *global city* (Sassen, 2005) competition, Milan is a success story. Its city branding, characterized by the format of the *Weeks*, has become a well-known model (Tozzi, 2019) so much so that in 2022, it was the 30th largest city in the world for the value of investments in the real estate sector, as certified by the Milan Observatory of Assolombarda (Gainsforth, 2022). From the biggest productive centre of Italy in

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<sup>1</sup> Categories defined according to the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) framework, developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA).

the years of the post-war reconstruction (commonly known as *economic boom*) it has become, since Expo 2015, a modern global capital ready to attract consumers seeking a particular lifestyle that straddles technological innovation, finance, cultural activities, and leisure (Tozzi, 2023). The massive regeneration projects of Porta Nuova, Rho Fiera, Tre Torri, Scalo Farini, up to the most recent Olympic Village for Milano Cortina 2026 in Porta Romana have indeed been designed to accommodate a new type of citizen—or more accurately, short-term *user* (Martinotti, 1996)—characterized by the willingness to pay a high price for a short period to invest in his career, education or touristic experience (Brollo & Celata, 2022; Gainsforth, 2019).

As Tozzi suggests (2023), cities have often competed with grandiose operations over the course of history to attract flows of economic capital, but the peculiarity of these recent endeavours is the city branding's attempt to ignore their expulsive nature. The narrative promoted by Milan, which began with Expo's tagline *Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life*, is, in fact, one of inclusion and sustainable development, which is directly contradicted by the consequences of its policies.

### **1.3 Impact of Milan's housing affordability crisis on the public university ecosystem**

The paradox between the *win-win* narrative and the reality of the housing affordability crisis is most evident within institutions and organizations responsible for delivering accessible services in the city, such as public entities, social cooperatives, nonprofits, cultural and educational facilities. On one hand, these service providers are pushed to relentlessly attract capital and user flows by responding to open funding opportunities and invest in marketing strategies to secure sponsorships; on the other hand, they are by design required to uphold principles of inclusivity, despite limited financial and human resources.

Public universities are precisely among those institutions facing these contradictions. The process (*gentrification*) of expulsion of the lower and middle classes from the city centre affects, with the same expulsive force students, researchers, professors and key administrative workers. The insufficient stock of public university residency in the city, which is less than 5% of the overall demand (Frangioni & Costa, 2024), and the average wages for the sector do not allow off-site fellows, students and employees to sustain the increasing costs of housing in the market.

In such a context, higher education becomes an increasingly exclusive system. The university struggles to offer equal opportunities to a heterogeneous student population, thus decreasing the quality of the education provided to each student and hindering its role as a centre for innovation (Chandler, 2025).

## 2.0 The Project StudMIHome

### 2.1 Overview

The *Students Living in Milan* project was developed in response to the numerous student testimonies collected over the years by the project's principal investigator professor Giuliana Costa, and was conceived with two primary objectives: to research the relatively unexplored student housing affordability crisis in Milan and to prototype an integrated housing orientation service for Politecnico di Milano, that could then be scaled to other institutions. The project shares some objectives with the larger European Union HOME project and has seen the collaboration of three research departments: Architecture and Urban Studies (DASU), Architecture, Built Environment, and Construction Engineering (DABC), and Design; along with twelve partners, including student associations and unions, tenants' and landlords' unions, and third-sector organizations working on social housing.

### 2.2 Students Living in Milan: research findings

Research findings confirmed that students are key actors in contemporary rental market dynamics in Milan (Frangioni & Costa, 2024). On one hand, they represent a privileged group compared to the most fragile segment of the population facing chronic housing vulnerability or homelessness; on the other hand, they are the target of speculative investment strategies by rental market actors, such as the *roomification* of spacious apartments in the city and the construction of massive private student hostels by foreign financial players. These trends are often justified by the paternalistic view that assumes students can endure poor or overpriced housing for a few years "to 'pay their dues,' as they are destined for well-off lives after graduation" (Sotomayor et al., 2022: 2).

The research focused on mapping the exploitative practices and patterns in students' housing pathways in Milan that cause *setbacks* and *falls* (Costa, 2024) in students' career paths and the main peer-to-peer strategies adopted by scholars to overcome them. The study analysed both digital and physical channels used by students to look for apartments, share information, and seek help, to build a coherent understanding of students' behaviours and relationship with the host university. The methodology included, among others, seventy semi-structured interviews with students and key stakeholders and a survey which yielded 4,613 valid responses, 3,274 of which from off-site students enrolled in Politecnico di Milano (Frangioni & Costa, 2024).

The research confirmed that most of off-site students in Milan (80% of the survey respondents) share an apartment in the private rental market, while student



residences, whether public or private, make up only about 10% of the available housing options.

The costs vary widely depending on the type of accommodation, with a significant disparity between Italian and international students. Indeed, the chronic mismatch between housing demand and supply in Milan has empowered landlords and intermediaries to act with minimal accountability, leveraging on student's inexperience and language barriers. Many landlords are small-scale private owners who view students as temporary, low-risk tenants who can pay premium rent, thereby prioritizing profit over housing adequacy or accessibility. The lack of timely regulatory enforcement creates a permissive environment for exploitative practices, such as non-contractual arrangements, upfront payment demands, and discriminatory selection criteria to access housing.

International students are disproportionately affected by these practices, with only 17.81% of the survey respondents reporting no negative experiences (Frangioni & Costa, 2024). Indeed, the study found that the most vulnerable actors in the market are low-income international students from Global South countries (UNCTAD framework) since, as they find themselves at the intersection of multiple social identities, they experience compounded and multi-layered forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 2013). Specifically, the structural obstacles they face include racial and intersectional ethnic-gender discrimination, language divide, difficulties in accessing the local informal market channels working on word-of-mouth (which usually offer the most affordable solutions), bureaucratic constraints in accessing immigration documents and, in some cases, family requirements that discourage sharing accommodation with people of the opposite gender, which limits the housing stock available. The consequences of these exploitative practices are severe and multi-faceted: almost half of the students reported losing money, while many others faced psychological distress and delays in their academic careers.

Despite these considerable challenges, many students declare having difficulties in obtaining timely or adequate assistance from the university. In some cases, students affirm that the lack of structured support from academic institutions not only does not mitigate the problem but exacerbates its consequences, leaving students to rely on peer-to-peer help or adopt legally questionable strategies. The research highlighted the need for the university to bring attention to the issue of housing, even beyond the problem of affordability, and devise a multilevel strategy to counteract its negative effects on the students' well-being.



### 3.0 The ‘action’ in a research-action project: design process and output

The design activities carried out in parallel with the sociological research were a fundamental component of the overall strategy of the project. They not only focused on designing the orientation service but also enriched the research outcomes with a multivocal perspective. Specifically, the activities consisted of (see Figure 1):

1. Co-design of research tools and objectives through workshops with students, researchers, and project partners;
2. Primary research to gather first-hand insights on how the university service ecosystem overlaps with student housing pathways;
3. Participatory research and dissemination activities to enrich the research findings and engage student associations and local stakeholders;
4. Prototyping and testing of the housing orientation service.

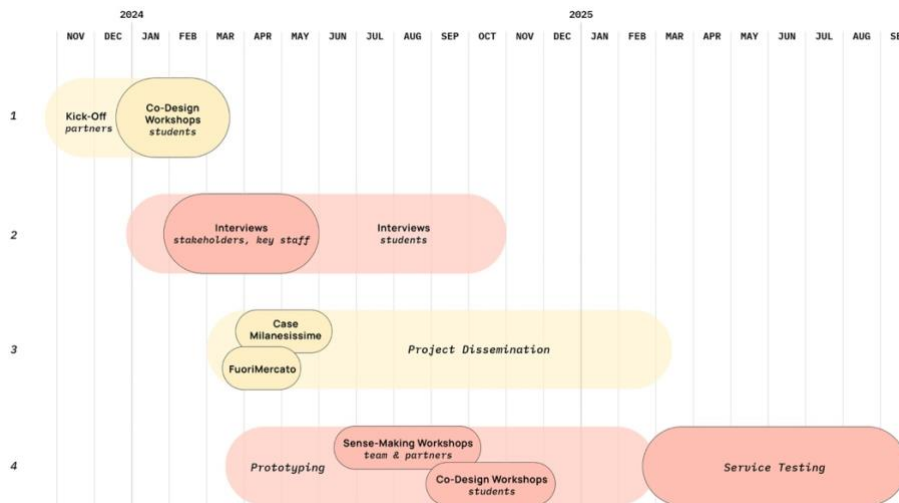


Figure 1. Gantt chart illustrating the design activities carried out during the project.

#### 3.1 Co-design of research tools and objectives

In December and January 2024, near after the project kick-off meeting, the team conducted two co-design sessions with twenty students, including elected student representatives, to review research tools and objectives before starting the sociological investigation. The participants were divided into two groups with distinct objectives. The first group focused on how to best represent student experiences in the questionnaire and interview script drafts; the aim was to minimize the need for future testing and adjustments by reducing the likelihood of artificial, omitted, or

overly guided responses. On the other hand, the second group worked on mapping informal modes (channels, content, motive) of information circulation related to housing search, with a focus on the peer-to-peer channels used during critical stages of the journey such as finding accommodation, resolving disputes with landlords, and seeking support after scams or conflicts. Guided brainstorming (Figure 2) helped to articulate individual and collective experiences with the support of visual analytical tools: multilayered timelines to categorize housing-related events along temporal (before, during, and after renting) and situational dimensions (formal and informal), and taxonomies to classify information by channel, intent, and type of interlocutor.



Figure 2. The first group reviewing the drafts of the interview and questionnaire scripts after a guided brainstorming.

### 3.2 Primary research

Alongside the research carried out with the sociology team, additional primary work involved interviews with key university stakeholders (Student Affairs, Campus Life, Communication and Public Engagement offices) as well as students employed in front-desk peer-to-peer support services ('Buddy System' network, '200 hours' collaborations, 'Ask-a-Student' online desk). This mapping process helped identify key issues, such as the fragmentation of the information related to housing support, residency, visa and off-site scholarships requirements, and pinpoint leverage points to improve the existing organizational structure through the integration of the orientation service to be prototyped.

### 3.3 Participatory research and dissemination

In spring 2024, leveraging on the opportunity for visibility offered by the events organized around the renowned Milan's furniture fair week, the so-called *FuoriSalone*, the team staged two initiatives of participatory research and dissemination: the open call and exhibition *Students Living in Case Milanesissime* (Figure 5), and the talk *FuoriMercato: The Furniture Fair in a Homeless City* (Figure 3), a dialogue between students, the university and representatives from tenants' unions and citizens' associations.



Figure 3. Representatives from tenants' union and citizens' association debating during the talk *FuoriMercato*, hosted at OffCampus NoLo, 18 April 2024.

The open call *Students Living in Case Milanesissime* was conceived as an extension of the *Case Milanesissime* editorial project (Aaltissimo, 2021), an ironic commentary on Milan's housing market collecting one hundred surreal floor plans of imaginary apartments supposedly available for rent in the city. The call, designed in collaboration with the author, invited students in Milan to represent their housing conditions through satirical architectural floor plans (Figure 4). Twenty projects were selected, curated, and exhibited for one week at spazioSERRA (Figure 5), a former newsstand in Milano Lancetti railway station. The exhibition space was curated by VuotoCollettivo, a multidisciplinary collective from Politecnico di Milano.

The exhibition offered more than a display of creative outputs: it constituted an act of narrative re-appropriation, where scientific research and artistic practice intertwined. The floor plans converged around three main themes characterizing student living spaces: spatial compression, the disproportion between price and quality, and the fragility of social relations in shared settings. These representations delineate a critical cartography that gives shape to the aggregated survey data and interview testimonies on the quality of students' dwellings.

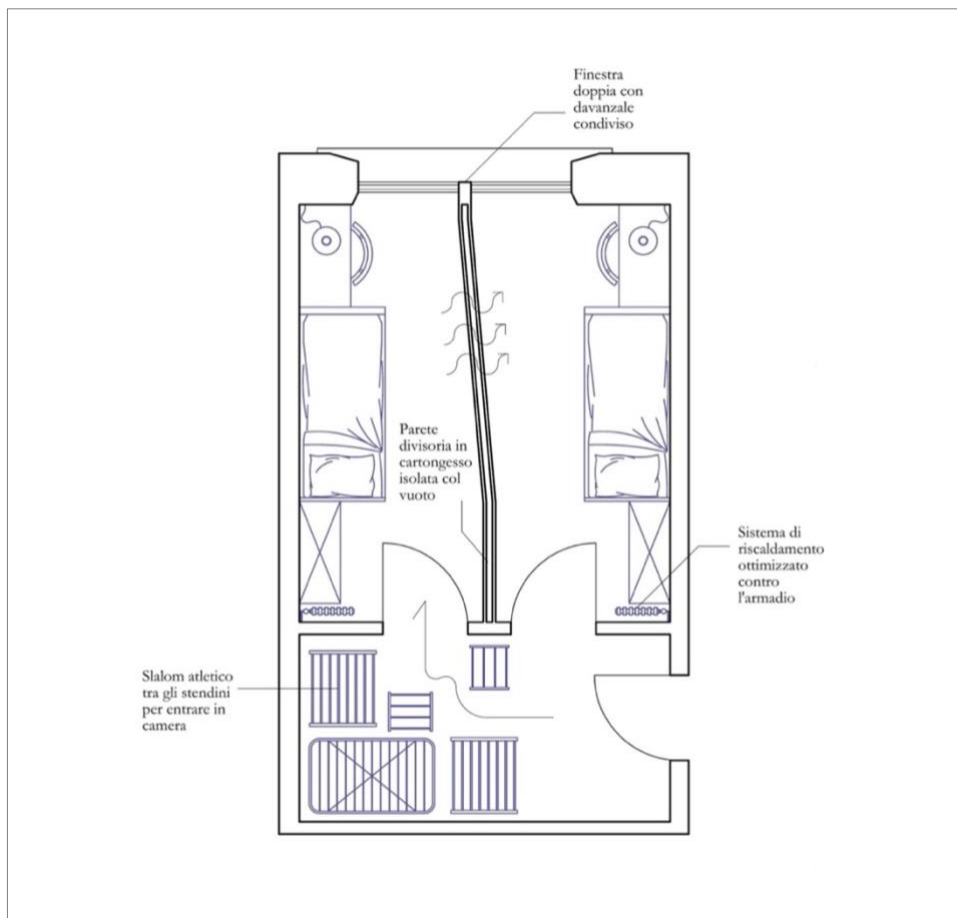


Figure 4. Planimetry of one of the selected floor plans from the open call *Students Living in Case Milanesissime* titled *Stanza con-divisa*. [Italian word play that means both 'shared bedroom' and 'bedroom with a partition wall']. Notes, from the top: 1. Double window with shared sill; 2. Flimsy drywall partition with hollow core; 3. Optimized heating system placed directly behind the wardrobe; 4. Athletic slalom through drying racks to enter the room.



Figure 5. Exhibition at spazioSERRA of the floor plans selected from the open call.

### 3.4 Prototyping the housing orientation service

The prototyping process unfolded through three co-design sessions conducted within a *Passion in Action* program carried out from September to November 2024, involving approximately fifteen students. These activities aimed to ground the service output and reinforce the research findings.

The first roundtable focused on reviewing and discussing the research data outcomes with students and then, using case studies from other universities, collaboratively brainstorming solutions that could be implemented at each stage, as extensions of the university's existing support services. To do so, participants created user housing journeys structured around the university timeline, following the phases of application, enrolment, and attendance. Their proposals were incorporated into the report that the research team presented to the university administration. In the second session, participants co-designed the content and structure of the housing orientation platform. In the first part (a two-hour workshop), students were asked to formulate questions regarding rental agreements and housing regulations, with the support of the project's legal advisor, to inform the design of the FAQ and glossary pages (Figure 7). The discussion revealed the tense relationship between students and landlords and included questions on the legality of rent increases, tenant rights and responsibilities, protections in cases where landlords retained deposits, and obligations related to housing maintenance.

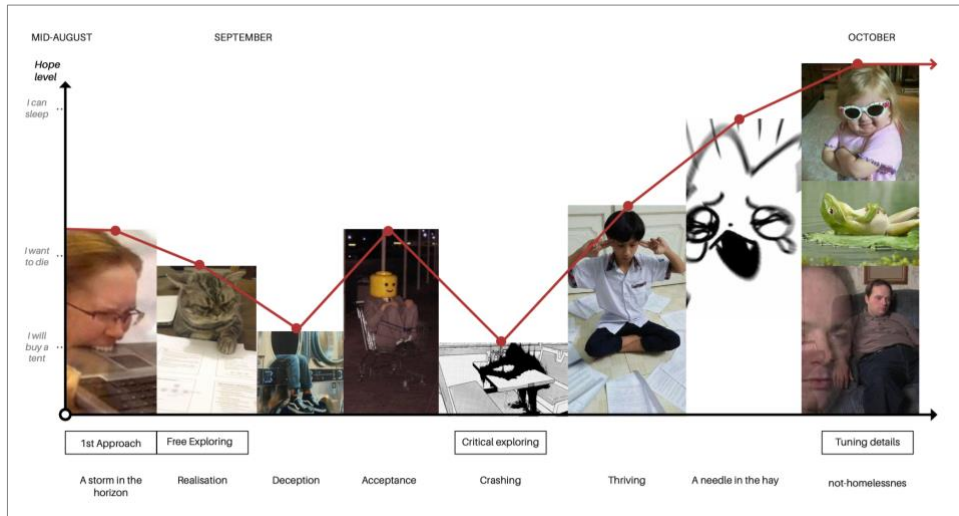


Figure 6. Example from an icebreaking activity in which students were asked to represent their housing experience journey using memes.

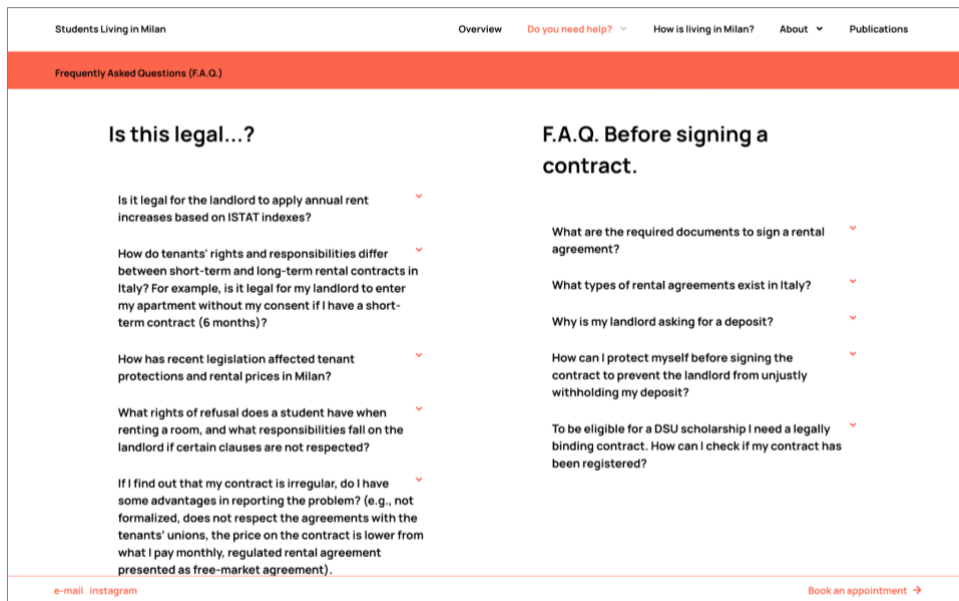


Figure 7. FAQ page of the housing orientation platform [www.studentslivinginmilan.polimi.it].

The second part of the activity featured representatives from two of the largest international student organizations at the university: the Iranian and Indian student communities. This session aimed to assess the barriers faced by students from Global South countries (UNCTAD framework) and to explore how to redesign more inclusive university support services, particularly in relation to bureaucratic procedures and interactions with university support offices. These students frequently

reported feeling overlooked by the institution when dealing with administrative obstacles in visa and scholarship applications or discrimination in the housing market. The university was widely perceived as lacking adequate support mechanisms, especially initiatives fostering peer-to-peer integration between Italian and international students. This absence, compounded by the unequal representation of international students in academic governance, emerged as a key factor contributing to the fragmentation and isolation of these student communities.

Finally, the last workshop focused on co-designing two complementary pages of the platform. One group explored ways to challenge Milan's idealized lifestyle by foregrounding the everyday housing struggles of students. They proposed dedicating a section of the platform to student-produced multimedia artefacts (Figure 8), offering prospective undergraduates a more grounded and plural account of Milan's urban life. Meanwhile, the second group (see Figure 9) refined the platform's legal information sections drawing directly from participants' anonymized rental agreements: they generated new questions, insights, and content that helped clarify legal ambiguities and lexicon.

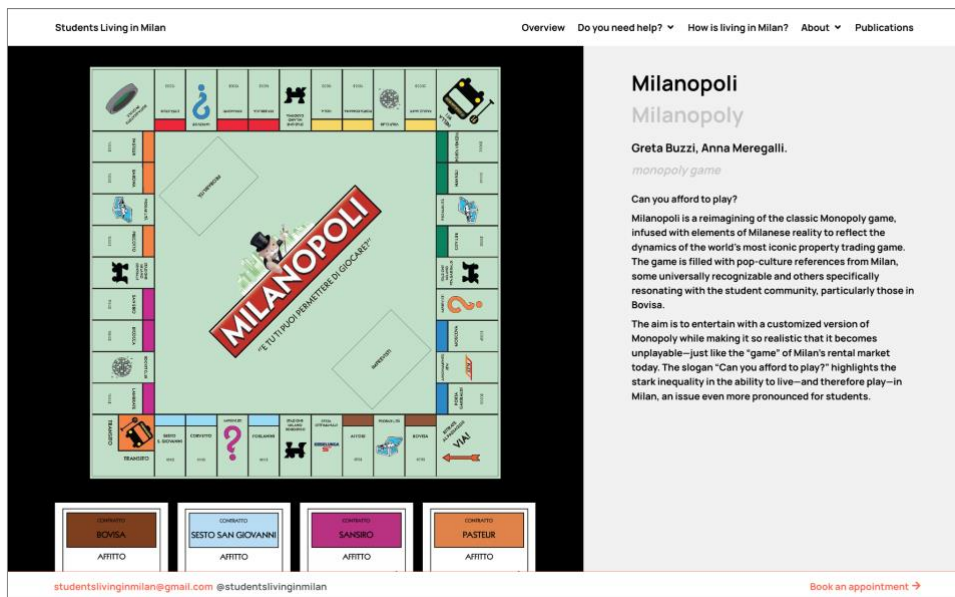


Figure 8. A preview of the project *Milanopoli. Can you afford to play?* designed by students G. Buzzi and A. Meregalli and uploaded in the *Over to Students!* platform section. The project was conceived for the open call *Caro Affitto, Ti Progetto!* [Dear Rent, I Redesign You!], organized by the student collective VuotoCollettivo in 2024. Milanopoli adapts the classic Monopoly game to the context of Milan.

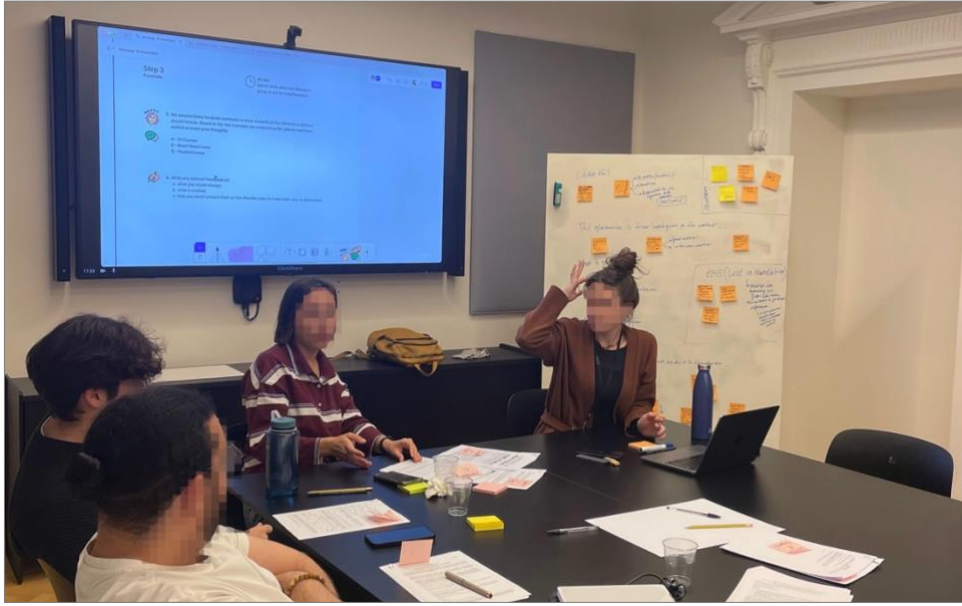


Figure 9. A group of students reviewing the content for the platform's legal information section, November 2024.

### 3.5 Design output and preliminary results

The main design outcome of the project is a housing orientation service prototype conceived to prevent exploitative practices within Milan's student housing market. Structured as a multichannel and bilingual (Italian and English) service, it operates through a web platform, an email, and a bi-monthly hybrid (online and offline) legal desk. The orientation desk is managed in collaboration with SUNIA, the National Union of Tenants and Public Housing Allottees; students receive assistance from one of their lawyers to review rental contracts and related expenses, report unlawful or discriminatory practices, and obtain tailored legal advice.

Piloted in April 2024 at *OffCampus NoLo*, a multifunctional space managed off-campus by the university with the Municipality of Milan, the service was later restructured around a digital booking system to provide online consultations for incoming students. The legal desk is currently in its third and final prototyping phase, with the overall impact set to be evaluated in September 2025, when the university will decide on its permanent adoption. As of June 2025, after six months of testing, approximately fifty students received customized assistance, either through scheduled meetings or via email correspondence. This number is steadily increasing, thanks to word-of-mouth and dissemination through partner organizations' channels. The most frequently reported issues align with those identified during the research phase: invalid or incomplete rental contracts, failure of intermediary agencies to deliver services promised in the agreement, scams, unlawful withholding of security

deposits, unauthorized landlord visits, attempted evictions, and discriminatory behaviour based on ethnicity.

Preliminary results suggest that the service not only addresses students' individual needs but may also have a broader influence on the Milanese housing market. Indeed, given that a relevant portion of international students' rental supply is managed by medium and large intermediary companies, a single student consultation can potentially lead to the regularization of dozens—or even hundreds—of contracts held by the same agency or landlord. Within just six months, SUNIA initiated inquiries against two agencies managing a significant share of apartments. One agency has not responded yet, and SUNIA is currently evaluating possible legal action, the other agreed to a supplementary agreement that would compensate current tenants while ensuring better conditions for future ones. In addition, several small-scale property owners have proactively reached out through different project channels, expressing interest in renting their property to students. This suggests an opportunity to develop a matching service connecting students with landlords willing to offer affordable rents upon institutional guarantees and mediation. Such an extension would expand the stock of affordable housing available to students and align with the service offered by the public housing agencies already operating in each municipality of the metropolitan area.

## 4.0 Reflections on designing amid tensions

Starting from a personal contemplation on the design challenges that emerged during the unfolding of the project, this section presents some insights on the tensions arising within the Milanese public university ecosystem and the strategies that service designers can adopt while working amid these tensions.

### 4.1 On attractiveness and inclusivity

In the context of public universities, *attractiveness* refers to the institution's positioning within global dynamics of competition for financial resources. This model frames the university as an actor whose legitimacy derives from the continuous evaluation of performance. Milan public universities have increasingly succeeded in attracting more international students through the expansion of English-language programs and a set of (involuntary) competitive advantages, such as low tuition fees and lower living costs compared to other European countries. According to *StudMIHome* data (Frangioni & Costa, 2024) in the 2022/2023 academic year, approximately 64,500 off-site students were enrolled in Milan-based faculties, out of which 11,500 (17.8%) international. This capacity to *perform* is not merely a technical

or contextual attribute but is deeply intertwined with the construction of the creative city through strategies of staged visibility (Tozzi, 2023): impression management strategies intended to enhance the economic value of the educational service in front of a global audience of prospective students, companies, philanthropic foundations and other, so-called, *stakeholders*.

As educational landmarks whose campuses often lend their names to entire neighbourhoods (e.g., Città Studi), Milan universities are overwhelmingly pressured to showcase cutting-edge educational curriculum offerings, excellent faculty, campuses rich in extracurricular activities, and the dream for future students of entering adult life with a stable work contract in the best international companies (Brooks et al. 2016). The result is public education's growing dependence on private partnerships and students' enrolment; a trend that not only hinders the institution's intellectual independence but widens the gap between the scale of the problem (the number of students that need housing every year) and the scarcity of available resources (the stock of affordable housing and administrative support). This process disproportionately affects low-income off-site students, who lack both the means and the economic resilience to avoid or recover from housing setbacks along their academic paths.

Drawing on the *service-as-theatre* metaphor (Grove & Fisk, 1992), we argue that the pressure to compete in the global market compels Milanese public universities to concentrate their —already insufficient—resources on improving the *front regions* of their educational services, at the expense of the less visible aspects of student life that extend beyond the university perimeter. Yet it is precisely through engagement with “the place of refuge from public performance” (ibid., p.459) that services can become truly inclusive. Addressing these *back regions* is essential for universities that aim to provide genuinely equitable educational environments. However, in Milan several tensions persist that hinder the implementation of targeted, systemic responses.

While students do not expect the university to take full responsibility for mediating their relationships with the private housing market, they do expect the institution to acknowledge the challenges they face by adopting more flexible regulations for off-site scholarship requirements, and equip them with the tools to make informed decisions before enrolment. When this support is lacking, students may feel disregarded and reduced to mere “educational tourists,” as one participant described during a co-design session. Such perceptions have tangible consequences for the university's reputation, including a loss of credibility and the spread of negative word-of-mouth. By revealing the contradictions between institutional promises and students' lived experiences, these dynamics ultimately undermine the long-term attractiveness of the university's offerings.

## 4.2 Design insights

The design process revealed three key insights on how practitioners can address such tensions and contradictions, each offering strategic entry points for design-led change at the macro, meso, and micro levels of the service ecosystem.

### Macro entry-point: Shared Institutional Reputation

By presenting to the university administration concrete examples of the contradictory and often paradoxical situations encountered by students, the project team was able to initiate a broader reflection on the institution's strategic priorities. This awareness led to an expanded dialogue involving stakeholders from the municipality of Milan, including the city's councillor for housing, and served as a catalyst for confronting the shared reputational risks on both the university and the municipality.



Figure 10. The project PI, presenting *StudMIHome* research results to the municipality stakeholders in February 2025.

### Meso entry-point: Service Governance Framework

Beyond developing the orientation service, the team presented to the university administration a roadmap for improving secondary services indirectly related to housing within the institution's existing governance framework. Drawing on testimonies from students and the DSU, Student Affairs, and Campus Life offices, the team was able to map the university's service ecosystem and clarify which aspects of the current delivery could be addressed directly, and which were constrained by national or regional regulations, particularly those concerning scholarships requirements, visa timelines, and administrative time-consuming procedures.

In this regard, a range of tailored interventions was presented to the administration, each outlining the required human resources, estimated costs, procedural changes, and expected benefits.

### **Micro entry-point: Students' Agency**

The final design of the housing orientation service and platform, as well as each phase of the design process were structured to enhance student agency.

Co-designing research tools, prototyping the information architecture of the platform and organising participatory initiatives and dissemination activities fostered peer-to-peer collaboration and empowered students not only through legal literacy but also through the creation of safe spaces for collective expression. In this regard, the design process worked as a short-term strategy to nurture a more grounded and critical understanding of the housing market within enrolled student groups.

## **Conclusion**

While the housing affordability crisis in Milan inevitably requires a joint, multi-level effort from local, regional, and national public administrations primarily focused on revising tax distribution systems, market regulation policies, and urban planning, public universities in the city are called upon to redesign and strengthen their services to address students' access to housing and preserve their legitimacy as democratic institutions. Indeed, the ability of the student's population to access secure housing is not only essential to guarantee attendance, but it constitutes one of the fundamental bases for guaranteeing what Rodotà (2012) has defined the *right to have rights*, during and after graduation. In this sense, Milanese public universities are asked to reconceptualize housing not as a supplementary service, but as a fundamental component of their institutional responsibility: a service infrastructure enabling the right to education itself and meeting students' expectations for their future selves (Ng and Forbes, 2009). However, since in the current context this process is hindered by the mounting pressure universities face to appear competitive and attract economic capital in the global education market, there is a growing need for these institutions to understand how to balance these performative imperatives with a concrete response to students' housing challenges.

By reflecting on the tensions encountered during the design and implementation of a student housing orientation service prototype at Politecnico di Milano, this paper illustrates how service design can operate within institutional complexity to render such tensions visible and actionable. In doing so, it shows how design can help reorient public university services toward inclusivity, positioning them as sites of democratic renewal.

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