

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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Capital and cultural production and the renewal of the Milan Design Ecosystem

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4.3

WHY EXPLAIN THE MILAN DESIGN ECOSYSTEM AS A DISTRICT-ECOSYSTEM OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION.

To consider Milan as a district-ecosystem of design (Salone del Mobile.Milano & Politecnico di Milano, 2024) means recognizing that design cultural production is not an accessory feature, but rather the enabling factor, that integrates economies, institutions, and social practices. Local cultural capital, tacit knowledge, shared values, production memories, and educational networks, together operate as a living infrastructure for coordination, trust, and situated learning. An ecosystemic interpretation introduces digital and green dimensions and requires orchestration skills among varied players, to align resources and objectives along trajectories of transition (Kominos, 2022; Burström, Lahti, & Parida, 2024). This contribution integrates a theoretical framework with operational examples: specifically examining the production of explicit design culture and strategies that link its value to the overall optimisation of the Milan Design Ecosystem. What we intend by the specific production of explicit design culture, are those activities that translate design knowledge into shared content: exhibitions and installations; catalogues, magazines and podcasts; public programmes (debates, workshops); open studios and urban itineraries; digital platforms and open archives, etc. These expedients transform implicit, received skills into situated narratives, making design a cultural medium that produces meaning, even before it does products. In the Milanese context, the calendar of events, institutions, thematic weeks, museums, foundations and schools, act as *attractors* of international attention and as the infrastructure of transfer to the local supply chain. Specific cultural production performs three functions: (i) it makes process and criteria of quality visible: *cultural accountability*; (ii) it enables collective learning and matchmaking between stakeholders: the project as platform for interaction; and (iii) it builds reputation and symbolic capital, that can be used in the market. This type of co-design format with businesses, cultural institutions and communities – allows for the fine-tuning of terminology and audiences, avoiding both self-referential technicalities and promotional simplifications. Examples of replicable formats include micro-exhibitions in production spaces with a focus on tools and processes; publications documenting *behind-the-scenes* design processes, decisions and trade-offs; thematic podcasts featuring the voices of designers, artisans, and users; experimental hackathons bringing together companies, students, and researchers; and urban tours that map laboratories, archives and workshops. Every such format must be designed to spark conversations between different worlds and generate tangible legacies (open data, toolkits, networks), avoiding the logic of the ephemeral event.

COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE AND POPULATION OF BUSINESSES

The Milanese (and Lombard) design ecosystem is, before even being a collection of companies, a community of people. The population of businesses includes furniture and product manufacturers, subcontracting chains, design studios, creative agencies and advanced services, with a key role played by small and micro businesses, capable of uniting around projects. The driving force is human capital, regenerated by schools and universities, internships and professional networks that accelerate entry into the workforce and circulate standards and languages. The literature on *communities of practice* shows how learning and professional identity emerge from engagement in shared practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), while knowledge management highlights the ongoing interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Alongside the big players, individuals and independent studios experiment with language, control niches and implement *low-threshold* incremental innovations, reducing the technological and cultural risk for the entire system; many follow hybrid entrepreneurial trajectories, oscillating between consultancy, self-production and micro-publishing.

A LEARNING ECOSYSTEM: FROM 'INDUSTRIAL ATMOSPHERE' TO CONTEMPORARY ORCHESTRATION

The distinctive feature of the *district* is widespread collective learning: exchange of *know-how*, mutual observation and repeat collaborations. Marshall's notion of an 'industrial atmosphere' describes environments in which information and skills circulate almost by osmosis (Marshall, 1890; Becattini, 2000), while the centrality of tacit knowledge explains the resilience of high-density proximity contexts (Polanyi, 1966). Today, this atmosphere extends to digital platforms, fab-labs, university laboratories, and coworking spaces; places of interaction – museums, galleries, festivals, research and training centres – act as conversational triggers in which practice and terminology hybridize. The practice of ecosystem orchestration provides an operational lexicon to guide shared goals, integrate varied resources and enable rapid cycles of experimentation. In this context Milan can serve as a *convergence hub* for digital and green transition, where design becomes a platform for aligning manufacturing, services and cultural supply chains.

SHARING VALUES, LANGUAGE, AND WIDESPREAD ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Milanese design community shares a symbolic and technical language: criteria of quality, aesthetic canons, feasibility standards and professional ethics that reduce transaction costs and nurture trust. This shared cultural foundation allows the navigation of conservative markets and the negotiation of innovations acceptable to both supply chains and public. In terms of *communities of practice*, the entry of young professionals accelerates learning that consequently not only occurs individually, but within the ecosystem itself, where knowledge is constructed and transmitted through active participation and *collaborative work* (Wenger, 1998). Specialized media, critics, and cultural institutions contribute to making this shared lexicon explicit, transforming tacit skills into narratives, exhibition formats and evaluation standards. In the Milanese context, work has a cultural value that is learnt through mentoring and refined through interaction with peers and clients. The result is a work ethic focused on quality and widespread entrepreneurship: designers founding micro-businesses, workshops becoming brands, graphic design studios launching publishing houses, artisans evolving into services and consultancy. The fluidity between the roles of designer and entrepreneur accelerates the emergence of hybrid models capable of combining production, services and cultural content.

SOCIAL AND PRODUCTIVE INTERDEPENDENCIES

The interdependency between economic and social players are amplified by digital networks and hybrid spaces of interaction. The coexistence of professional relationships, friendships, mentorships and associations create paths of trust and exchange that accelerate innovation. These networks connect different clusters on brief trajectories, favouring the dissemination of information and accelerated experimentation (Watts & Strogatz, 1998; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005). Today, these networks are mixed, both physical and digital, allowing for rapid project-based connections, but they require awareness of access biases and strategies to broaden participation. To evaluate the production of design culture from an eco-systemic perspective means moving beyond purely economic indicators to integrate quality of life, social cohesion, and environmental regeneration. Multilevel indicators can measure the accessibility of design services for SMEs (small and medium enterprises), the capacity for co-design with communities, the intensity of research and development with universities and cultural institutions, as well as the reduction of the material and energy footprint throughout the product life cycle. Frameworks

and metrics must ensure fairness and transparency, in line with the principles of *design justice*, which: '...is a framework for analysing how design distributes benefits and burdens among various groups of people [...] and a community of practice which aims to ensure meaningful participation in design decisions...' (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 42).

HISTORIC MEMORY, TRADITION, AND REGENERATION

Artisanal and manufacturing memory forms the foundational identity of district specializations. Corporate museums, archives, collections and schools have consolidated a recognizable design culture, *but memory must not become rigid*. Tradition is regenerated when it engages with new codes and sensibilities, including practices of reuse and *second-hand* which younger generations associate with forms of *connoisseurship* and *sustainability* (Abdelmeguid *et al.*, 2024). This convergence of memory and circular practices supports new cultural meanings and market trajectories. The enhancement of the ecosystem therefore requires intentional strategies that connect specific cultural production, production chains, and ongoing transitions.

Below are some strategic guidelines:

- Orchestration platforms: adopt common platforms for *knowledge sharing* (materials, processes, standards); integrate living-labs and testing spaces in cities and encourage collaborative direction between businesses, schools and cultural institutions (Shen *et al.*, 2024; Komninos, 2022).
- Policies and procurement: use public procurement to attain quality-of-use and regeneration (*Design for Public Procurement*); design vouchers for SMEs; residency programmes and urban challenges to drive demand for circular and inclusive solutions.
- New training models for design: consider transition processes, particularly those related to digital technologies and sustainability emergencies.
- Internationalization and talent attraction: coordinate exchange programmes for design students and professionals to connect the ecosystem to European and global networks, transforming mobility into a virtuous cycle of skills and opportunities.
- Circular transition and *servitization*: support businesses and designers towards services and *pay-per-performance* models, with tools for circular design (disassembly, digital material passports) and lifecycle evaluation (Sgamaro *et al.*, 2024).
- Data-informed cultural production: support curation and evidence-based public programmes (impact storytelling and data literacy), experiment with hybrid (physical-digital) formats to broaden audiences and promote accessibility, inclusion and active participation.

METRICS, GOVERNANCE AND LEARNING

To transform specific cultural production into systemic competitive advantage requires shared metrics and open governance. An ecosystem dashboard can include indicators of cultural capital (participation, publications, exhibitions); collaboration (multi-stakeholder projects, school-business partnerships); green transition (regenerative materials, reuse rates, avoided emissions); and social impact (inclusion, accessibility, new skills). These metrics support collective learning processes and guide public and private incentives. In terms of governance, a *light orchestration* can coordinate diverse players while safeguarding project autonomy. The goal is not to standardize, but to connect: to build bridges between

manufacturing and services, between schools and businesses, between cultural institutions and neighbourhoods. The logic is that of the ecosystem: multiple roles, clear rules, widespread *accountability*. Understanding Milan as a *district-ecosystem* therefore means enhancing the specific production of design culture as civic infrastructure, that makes knowledge visible, enables alliances and guides transitions. The resulting agenda combines investments in talent and training; spaces and platforms for collective learning; support for widespread entrepreneurship; collaborative governance and shared impact metrics. In this framework, the project is simultaneously an economic practice and a cultural mediation: a device for generating economic, social, and environmental value and for uniting the received identity and the future aspect of the Milan Design Ecosystem. The city plays a significant role in the location choices of those involved in the ecosystem of design culture. It evidently contains the available resources that have fuelled and continue to fuel the ecosystem, and it serves a role attracting outside attention. This infrastructure, connected to the production of design culture, is in fact a *local collective asset for competitiveness* (Crouch *et al.* 2004), that must be supported and enhanced to create opportunities and preserve Milan's unique role in the global scene of design cities.