

# Notes and Considerations on their Impact

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The conclusion of this *Report* is a first exploration of the ecosystemic relationship that links the *great attractor* of the Salone del Mobile.Milano to the self-organised group of stakeholders who stage Design Week in the city and the place that hosts them, Milan, with its social capital, its production resources, its material infrastructure and its players and other interested parties; in other words, the city, in its metropolitan dimension.

Up to this point the Report has looked at the Salone del Mobile.Milano in its role as a major implementing entity of international significance (Chapters 1 and 2), supported by a picture updated to 2024 of the multi-player and polycentric dynamics of Design week (Ch. 3) and an analysis of the Milan Design System, i.e. the socioeconomic and cultural network of design, a permanent production base of practices, services and knowledge that finds its most unequivocal expression in the Design Week (Ch. 4).

Thus, the city of Milan becomes the overall scenario for the definition of an approach to investigating the impact of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week. This complex phenomenon presents objective difficulties if tackled with a purely quantitative method of analysis owing to the fragmentation and lack of integration of the databases. For this reason, we have adopted an explorative phenomenological approach that is in part a consequence of the difficulty encountered in reconstructing the system of data holders<sup>1</sup>, and in the identification of individual sources of data checked for completeness, continuity, organisation and granularity. These aspects will also serve as the starting points for the future project of a Permanent Observatory that will be set up on the basis of this first *Report*.

The Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week are a telling example of how a city can use a precise theme to shape hard and soft factors that define its identity and attractiveness. According to Saskia Sassen (1991)<sup>2</sup>, global cities like Milan are central locations for the world economy due to their ability to concentrate resources, infrastructure and capital, as well as to foster social dynamism and cultural flows, crucial aspects of their power of attraction. During the Salone del Mobile.Milano,

Milan becomes an international hub for the exchange of ideas, able to draw thousands of visitors, entrepreneurs and professionals, designers, architects and creatives from all over the world. In his work on the creative class, Richard Florida (2002)<sup>3</sup>, argues that the economic success of modern cities depends not only on their material resources, but also on their capacity to attract – whether permanently or temporarily – talented people with their creativity and innovation. So, events like the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week are not just showcases for products or services, but catalysts of encounters between creatives, entrepreneurs, investors and users in an urban setting that favours the exchange of ideas and the development of experimental practices, from strategies to products and services. Allen J. Scott (2000)<sup>4</sup> points out that cities which invest in cultural economies, like that of design, are able to generate considerable added value. When we think of design, we should see it as a process of not just material but also cultural production that has a profound influence on the perception of the city as a place devoted to innovation and creativity. Milan, with its history of industrial and artisanal excellence, finds in this event a perfect synergy between the legacy of a material cultural heritage and its contemporary version, in which know-how is mixed with the ability to create. Finally, Musterd and Murie and colleagues (2007)<sup>5</sup> assert that the competitiveness of cities does not depend solely on their system of material resources and infrastructure – although these are necessary to make a city competitive on the global scene – but also on whether they are places people want to live in. For some, i.e. one part of the professional and general public, Milan on the occasion of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milano Design Week becomes not just a productive city but also an attraction, where the streets, neighbourhoods and public spaces are animated by events, installations and activities open to all, nurturing a sense of inclusivity and participation. But this opinion is not held by everyone and some of its stakeholders and inhabitants think that the phenomenon has reached a *tipping point* between its positive and negative effects.

It is precisely in order to investigate this possible contradiction that we have chosen to look at the phenomenon as an ecosystem based on an equilibrium – an unstable and unguaranteed one – between important specialised attractors like the Salone del Mobile.Milano, which represents an indispensable driving force, hard factors like the city's infrastructure and material resources and soft factors, like creativity and connected intelligence (see de Kerckhove's text in this *Report*). This ecosystem not only reinforces the image of Milan as the capital of design, but makes an active contribution to its economic growth and global appeal.

Our study, therefore, has set out to conduct a quantitative analysis of some of the main sources of aggregate data (relating to the years 2023 and 2024), drawing on open public data as well as seeking to integrate a wide range of databases provided by a large group of data holders. On the basis of the temporal baselines available and their granularity of observation, we have put together some broad chapters of analysis. Obviously, these represent just the embryo of what could become the framework of a future system of monitoring and strategic analysis operated by a Permanent Observatory of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week.

A number of significant themes have emerged with regard to flows of tourism and accommodation, the use of digital payments by tourists, analysis of urban mobility and various aspects linked to the question of the circular economy. Interpreting this impact is a classic example of a 'wicked problem'<sup>6</sup>, i.e. the difficulty of interpreting an extremely complex phenomenon knowing that not all the in-depth variables (data) of representation of the system are available and thus raising a first question of method concerning the delimitation of the phenomenon itself. For instance, we have a complete and highly significant set of data on the great attractor Salone del Mobile.Milano but only a partial data set regarding the city. In addition, there is considerable evidence to show that some of the impact (mobility, accommodation, tourism) extends to a wider metropolitan or even regional sphere.

It is also evident that we are dealing with a major event that extends the interrelations of interpretation: indicators of this are the large number of exhibitors and visitors and their complex mix (in 2024 the Salone del Mobile.Milano hosted 1,950 exhibitors from 35 countries and recorded an attendance of 370,824<sup>7</sup> with a very wide variety of origins and types of use); the mobilisation of economic resources and the differentiation of their causes/effects (a spin-off of about 275 million euros estimated by Concommercio in its *Salone del Mobile 2024* report<sup>8</sup>), a complex and

integrated offer by the great attractor Salone del Mobile.Milano along with a very high number of events/urban interventions that indicate on the one hand prospects of possible urban regeneration, and on the other overexposure in the media; complexities of attractiveness for foreign players and transformation of the daily life of the population (comparable to phenomena of over-tourism).

If we view this exploration through the lens of major events, we will see that, in addition to strengthening urban identity, stimulating the economy and promoting the city at a global level, it can act, according to authors like Roche (2000)<sup>9</sup>, as a critical catalyst for its regeneration, growth and internationalisation. Specifically, this interpretation fits into the framework outlined by Getz (2005)<sup>10</sup>, who has analysed how big events have long-term impacts that are not just economic but also cultural and social. Their strong effect on urban branding, as Müller and Gaffney (2018)<sup>11</sup>, suggest, defines a narrative that links a city to sectors or factors: in Milan's case, to design and creativity. Even people who have never been there see it as the City of Design (as Charles Landry points out in this *Report*): this phenomenon, linked to the perception of reputation, is called the *halo effect* (Lee and Lockshin, 2011)<sup>12</sup>. It strengthens the city's urban identity and international appeal, making the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week a fundamental asset in the positioning of Milan as one of the world capitals of creativity. During Design Week, various districts of Milan undergo a temporary transformation, with installations, exhibitions and design interventions bringing about an urban re-signification that reinforces the connection between its inhabitants and its private and public spaces.

But does all this have a cost? As Landry has written (Landry, 2009; p. 341)<sup>13</sup> «the creative city is more like a free jazz session than a structured symphony...». Like jazz, Design Week in the city is also a collective form of democratic improvisation, which runs the risk of turning from something harmonious and engaging into a chaotic event with a negative impact. Over time an osmotic relationship has been established between Salone del Mobile.Milano, the range of individuals and entities that come up with and propose initiatives, events and projects and the municipal institutions that support them, making public spaces/places available as the settings for such events. A phenomenon that requires a form of dialogue and coordination which acts on the current configuration to maximise its collective advantages and reduce its negative externalities.

The diffuse cultural production (of design) complements and enhances the acknowledged capacity of enterprises to come up with innovative visions that animate the city: its neighbourhoods,

its affluent areas and its neglected ones (Sennett, 2024)<sup>14</sup>. Thus a virtuous circle is created between the Salone del Mobile.Milano, the great international attractor, and the spontaneity of significant phenomena like those of Design Week, which give the city the characteristics of a tourist destination.

This interconnected dimension offers Milan the possibility of becoming an *eventful* place: in other words a place in which the whole range of things on offer link to its identity – the Salone del Mobile.Milano and events staged in the city – are well integrated into daily life, and their planning can be to some extent connected with civic objectives, i.e. those of the city as a whole (Richard and Palmer, 2012)<sup>15</sup>. It is precisely the prospect of *civic creativity* that is revealed, in fact, when we imagine that the public sector might learn to be more entrepreneurial and the private sector more socially responsible in pursuing joint aims and the willingness to share power, with a goal of having greater influence over an enlarged more successful whole (Landry, 2009). In Landry's view, Milan supports this capacity as it fully meets the characteristics of a city that learns by its mistakes and is strategic (Landry, 2009).

So, if we consider the city to be, as Sennett puts it (Sennett 2024)<sup>16</sup>, a stage, where the collective performance of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milano Design Week become a means of personal and collective expression, and a vehicle of social and cultural transformation<sup>17</sup>, how can we make this performance resilient? How can we make sure that the Milanese ecosystem uses, amplifies and maintains this capacity? Through what individual and collective actions? To be sustainable the ecosystem has to attract the right quantity and quality of visitors in a transparent and balanced relationship with its inhabitants, and the right mix of activities to ensure quality of life, and to produce an economic benefit for the area, without compromising it (d'Angella et al., 2021)<sup>18</sup>.

A difficult but not impossible task, that will require a consolidation of the analysis of its data sets and interpretative frameworks, and a collective reflection on the governance of the ecosystem along with its entire range of stakeholders.