

# MIAAW

# 2022

## Re-inventing schools

Politecnico Di Milano

School of Architecture Urban Planning  
Construction Engineering



## MIAW

The MIAW-Milan International Architecture Workshop is the international intensive programme at the Politecnico di Milano, School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering, that provides an international design forum for schools, teachers and students, but it is also an informal platform to discuss issues and share ambitions that education implies. Its aim is to stimulate cross-over thinking between researches and practitioners in the design field, involving different scales and encouraging an interdisciplinary approach towards design problems. Each class has an international guest professor of high profile whose activity and interests are related to the different study courses and disciplinary areas characterising our School.

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# Architecture for education

## The evolution of Bocconi University and Politecnico di Milano

*Giulia Setti*

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### **Milan International Architectural Design Workshop 2022: an introduction on the topic choice**

The urgency of rethinking school construction in Italy is a decades-old issue, calling into question the role of architecture in public service and the management and updating processes for the public building stock, which are often slow, blocked, and unable to respond to the rapid changes in contemporary society and the needs for increasingly diverse and flexible spaces (Belloni and Manganaro 2021). Forgotten some great examples of integration between architecture, education, landscape, and city, taking, for example, the case of the Olivetti kindergarten in Ivrea (Protasoni 2021), today the design of educational spaces appears much more uncertain and problematic. When, with Camillo Magni and the scientific committee, we began thinking about the proposal of design themes for the international workshop MIAW 2022, we immediately identified the school as the issue demanding most urgent attention. Calling on the academic sphere to address issues of such current character may seem a gamble, however, we see this as the prime way to engage with the debates currently underway in Milan and Italy.

Since its origins more than a decade ago, the MIAW workshop has consistently dealt with issues currently in debate in the city of Milan, not so much to propose alternative solutions as to reason with and discuss the choices of the public administrations, and to propose projects – sometimes utopian, sometimes extremely realistic – that free the imagination and fantasy in developing new visions for Milan. The nature of MIAW, with international Visiting Professors leading the different *ateliers*, enables renewed approaches to the national debate, nourished by inputs from very different conditions, processes, and design

cultures. The very first exchanges with the professors involved in the 2022<sup>1</sup> edition immediately brought to light ideas and insights on how to approach the design of the contemporary school, which increasingly signifies a hybrid and innovative space, capable of overcoming rigid divisions and offering useful solutions to original experimentation in design.

In searching for direction for the workshops, we referred to a research project already underway at the Politecnico di Milano, called *Inventing Schools*, coordinated by Barbara Coppetti and Elvio Manganaro in collaboration with the Municipality of Milan, aimed at developing a census of school buildings in the Milan area that need transformation or adaptation with respect to current needs. In proposing cases for MIAW 2022, however, we decided to favour situations where the school buildings would need to be completely rethought, demolishing existing structures, thus affording total freedom to professors and students on the design strategies to be advanced and applied. This current volume collects and illustrates the resulting projects, which articulate and describe the philosophies introduced by the different professors, and their approaches to the complex issue of school building. What emerges is a multifaceted fresco, in which architecture assumes the leading role in a change that we hope will take place in the very near future; where the building is designed to accommodate different activities, and at the same time to build relationships with open space, courtyards, and gardens, which serve as the main places of sharing. What emerges is an aptitude to design and imagine school buildings and on the typologies proper to these spaces that are much more current and practiced by our international colleagues, who brought to bear their experience in projects, studies, and research conducted in various genres on this topic. Among the different experts involved, I would especially like to note Giancarlo Mazzanti and *equipo Mazzanti*, his Colombian studio, and their constant pursuit of research and design on the educational theme, demonstrating how the school is not only a field of experimentation for architecture but also a tool to foster the recovery of neighbourhoods, characterised by social inequalities and poor access to public services.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2022 MIAW involved five Visiting Professors: Karin Hofert, Mladen Jadric, Giancarlo Mazzanti, Elsa Prochazka, Mia Roth.



## **Milan and the adaptation of educational spaces**

### **The case of the Bocconi and Politecnico Campuses of Milan**

The ongoing transformations in Milan have involved some educational institutions, but these have mostly concerned the adaption and expansion of university campuses. The MIAW workshops instead focused on primary and secondary public school buildings, and therefore on the years of compulsory<sup>2</sup> education. Over recent decades, the successive state governments have reduced the funding or provided little for new projects to enhance the architecture dedicated to such educational services.

The aim of this essay, however, is to tell the parallel stories of two university campuses, the Bocconi University and the Politecnico di Milano, that have in different forms promoted projects to transform and improve educational architecture, and which we can consider at least partially successful. These are two different stories, but both involving design experiments that have developed effective methodologies and processes for the updating of educational spaces, in rapid time, while also providing significant new urban landmarks.

Iconic, in this respect, is the project for the expansion of Bocconi University, with the recently completed construction of the new campus designed by SANAA studio. This is a large and complex project involving six new buildings that have redesigned the area of the former Centrale del Latte. Bocconi University has pursued an expansion strategy for some time and is not new to operations of this kind. A first piece was the design and construction of a building by Grafton Architects in 2008, representing an early step in the contemporary evolution of a campus that already hosted buildings designed by great architects, first of all, Giuseppe Pagano, and then by protagonists of the Modern Movement, such as Giuseppe Muzio and Ignazio Gardella.

The other interesting example, explored in this short text, is the transformation of the Politecnico di Milano Campus, still in progress, but in recent years involving numerous projects in both the Città Studi and Bovisa campuses.

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**2** In Italy, attendance in education is compulsory for at least 10 years, covering the ages of 6 to 16 years. The educational system provides a first cycle of elementary or primary school, from ages 6 to 11, and a second cycle called “first level secondary education”.

The projects implemented on the two campuses of the Politecnico di Milano are different in nature and address various themes. However, both cases take valid approaches in adapting traditional campuses, proceeding through specific projects that integrate and maintain what exists. Another interesting aspect is that of the processuality and technical actions to accelerate operations that would normally take a much longer long time to be completed. It appears useful to study both the architectural and procedural choices that enabled innovations within an institution as complex and rooted as the Politecnico di Milano.

The two cases show abilities in understanding how the needs of current education demand both spatial-architectural and functional updating of spaces. Both the Bocconi and Politecnico cases recount the realities of universities projected toward tomorrow, with the courage and strength sufficient to imagine the near future of university education.

## **The Bocconi Campus: a precious catalogue of architecture for education**

The history of Bocconi University is a “beautiful story” as Marco De Michelis says (De Michelis 2021; 8) in the introduction to the volume *“The growing city: the new Bocconi campus in Milan”*: a book that not only documents the most recent construction – the campus extension by SANAA, inaugurated in 2021 – but also traces a complex history beginning as far back as 1937, with the foundation of the private university by Ferdinando Bocconi and the commissioning of Giuseppe Pagano for the building design. The Bocconi campus designed by Pagano rose in a suburban area, still on the city periphery, where the architect designed a building inspired by the Bauhaus headquarters of Walter Gropius, constructed in 1925. As we can see, the story begins many years ago, and then never ceases.

Subsequent expansions were designed by Giuseppe Muzio and Ignazio Gardella, then more recently by Yvonne Farrell and Shelly McNamara, of the Irish firm Grafton Architects. The story here is one of the development of a beautiful university campus, where the qualities of the individual projects blend and complement one another, even without an initial unified design. The latest episode in this transformation, at this point lasting more than half a century, is the campus expansion designed by the Japanese firm SANAA, founded by

Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, in the area of the former Centrale del Latte. For the second time following the selection of Grafton Architects in 2008, the University resorted to the instrument of the invited international competition, in this case for the transformation of the former Centrale del Latte. The strategy was successful: among a dozen proposals<sup>3</sup>, the SANAA project emerged the winner, doubtless in consideration of the radical approach to the urban condition of the site, but also in large part for the typological and spatial innovation in conceiving the spaces dedicated to training, teaching and education; “[the project] is an independent object that slips into the block’s geometries”, said Camillo Magni in the article for Casabella examining the completed SANAA project (Magni 2021, 73). The project for the Bocconi Campus can be further understood by reading Pippo Ciorra’s essay “*Introduction to SANAA*”<sup>4</sup>. Ciorra interprets the few education projects completed by Kazuyo Sejima and his studio demonstrating their links with the domestic architecture of the home, which even though not usually considered, remains at the core of Japanese design experimentation. Ciorra expresses the fundamental aspects of SANAA’s design poetics and explores the significance of certain design and material choices, above all the relationships between the humans, space, and transparency, central to the architecture of Sejima and Nishizawa, and within which the person assumes a key role. “The first [aspect] is the presence of the building’s inhabitants. Human figures catch our eye and miraculously make the transparency turn into space” (Ciorra 2021, 28).

The design choices involved in the Bocconi campus can also be read and understood through comparison with two other projects emblematic of the work of SANAA on educational spaces: the Rolex Learning Center in the campus of Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, completed in 2010, and the Grace Farms River Building, completed in 2015 in New Canaan, Connecticut. Both are buildings which, in different forms, subvert traditional educational typology

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**3** The studios selected for participation in “*Campus Urbano: International Competition*” were: OMA - Rem Koolhaas; David Chipperfield Architects; Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas; Mario Cucinella (MCA); Cino Zucchi (CZA); Miralles Tagliabue (EMBT); Sauerbruch Hutton; Morphosis; SANAA; Odile Decq and finally Jean Nouvel, who chose not to submit a proposal.

**4** The competition process is reported in: “*The growing city: the Bocconi campus in Milan*” edited by Marco De Michelis and published by Domus.

and embark on new ways of understanding such spaces. For SANAA, open spaces of movement and circulation always prevail over the closed and static space of classrooms. Classrooms dissolve and become spaces delineated by the presence of a few chairs or defined by the spontaneous gathering of people around a reader. The different educational and recreational functions of Grace Farms facility seem randomly placed within a transparent and sinuous volume, descending a gentle slope and surrounded by vegetation.

The floor plan of the Rolex Learning Center is almost a diagram (Ito 1996; Corbellini 2007, 42) and the form becomes one with the structure of the building; the inhabited spaces are the corridors, which shed their classically regular and cramped shape and become the protagonists of the design. The voids become patios, sculptural excavations boring through the two curving structural slabs, and spaces accommodating activities so specific as to require separation from the fluid collective space.

In the buildings of the Bocconi Campus, we find the synthesis of these two approaches in a unique and visionary project, interpreting the traditional urban form of Milan in a fresh and original aspect. Sejima and Nishizawa have imagined the university as a large park, a public space in continuity with the nearby Ravizza Park, where people meet, stop, observe and study.

This is an obvious idea for a place intended for education, but too often ignored when opportunities have arisen for innovating the Italian school heritage. Diagrams that explain the overall project and the ground floor plan reveal clearly how, in this approach, the educational activities face onto a series of parks and courtyards, in a manner recalling Milan's dense urban fabric, yet at the same time breaking its compactness through a careful system of transparencies, allowing glimpses of different horizons as the individual moves between the ground floors of the different buildings. The cladding of perforated aluminum sheet modulates and controls the interior transparency, while the sequences of sinuous pathways through the different floors and buildings closely recalls the characteristics of Grace Farms. The sinuosity of the paths and volumes and the skillful development of transparencies fuses public with private space, university with city. Within the Milanese context, SANAA's project is unique for its development of a complex system of spaces using gestures of absolute simplicity.

## The Politecnico di Milano campus: design by grafting

Since the 1990s, numerous proposals have been advanced for the transformation and updating of both the Bovisa and Città Studi campuses of Politecnico di Milano<sup>5</sup>. The most emblematic case concerns the area of the so-called “Goccia”, with its gasometers. This much-discussed area, abandoned for decades and then the subject of infinite debates and interventions, has still not arrived at a definitive solution. In 1990, the Politecnico faculty themselves took the entire area of the gasometers and Goccia as the subject for the design of a completely new campus. Among the subsequent initiatives, competitions, and calls, the most interesting have been a masterplan for the recovery of the area, designed by OMA in 2007, which won an international competition<sup>6</sup>, and also the “*Call for Ideas: A park for research and work at Bovisa*”<sup>7</sup> promoted by the Politecnico di Milano in 2016 (Moro 2017). The latter competition saw numerous professors from different departments of architecture, urban planning, and design submit projects for the transformation of the gasometer area as a campus and research center (Setti 2022, 95).

Given the urgency of adapting existing spaces to new needs, the University has redirected its strategies for the two campuses, in particular through the creation of an internal design group called *Vivi.Polimi.lab*<sup>8</sup>, unceasingly engaged in transformation projects for the two campuses (Biagi and Magni 2022, 23). These have included targeted interventions for the rearrangement of the open

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**5** The research on the quality and design of university spaces in Milan, and around the world, has been the subject of an important series of exhibitions held at the Politecnico di Milano during the XXI Triennale in 2016, entitled “Campus Contro Campus. Architetture per studiare e ricercare” which consists of three volumes (Postiglione, Rocca, Bassanelli 2016; Baglione, Dulio, Cozza 2016; Biraghi, Valente 2016).

**6** On these events and plans, the reader can refer to the “Bovisa Masterplan” by OMA, 2007, <https://www.oma.com/projects/bovisa-masterplan>

**7** and the *Call for Ideas “Un parco per la ricerca e il lavoro a Bovisa”*. The 2016 Call for Ideas led to the realisation of ten projects, by multidisciplinary working groups from different international departments, for the redevelopment of the Goccia area as a technological and research hub.

**8** *Vivi.Polimi.lab* is a working group composed of professors, researchers and research fellows, coordinated by Emilio Faroldi, Vice Rector of the Politecnico with responsibilities for Building, Spaces and Sustainability.

spaces, such as the “Giardini di Leonardo”, inaugurated in 2021 in the Città Studi campus, but also far more extensive ones such as Renzo Piano’s project for the construction of a new classroom building, and the rearrangement of the open spaces facing the Trifoglio and Nave buildings through a series of additions and subtractions, aimed at street level reconnection and the definition of a large treed space, which in only a few months became the heart of students’ and professors’ activities (Biagi and Magni 2022, 22).

The strategy adopted by Politecnico di Milano board and Vivi.Polimi.lab is to obtain much faster implementation times through centralisation of project management and control, in some cases also favouring external contributions from *alumni* and well-known external professionals, such as Renzo Piano and Eduardo Souto de Moura, who designed the Domus Politecnica, providing spaces for faculty and students, currently under construction among the historic buildings adjoining Piazza Leonardo da Vinci.

The most recent piece realised by Vivi.Polimi.lab is the building known as “La Collina degli Studenti”, or “Students’ Hill” on Via La Masa of the Bovisa campus. The building introduces a new topography to the area by creating a landscaped hill, fitting between repurposed warehouses and teaching spaces. The basement, hidden from the view, hosts the warehousing spaces and laboratories of the Department of Mechanical Engineering. The central volume of this linear building features extensive glazing, connecting the interior spaces with the roof terrace and the new hill. This main linear volume terminates at either end in sculptural volumes clad in Corten steel, housing the vertical connections of stairs and elevators.

This new building introduces a visually striking element to the Bovisa flat landscape, generally characterised by the somewhat fragmentary spatial effect of a succession of various warehouses. The building accommodates a study space and meeting rooms, available to students by reservation, as well as spaces for faculty activities. This is an open place, designed for the community, accomplished through the manner of overlooking the new hill and the grand sequence of windows: a public meeting space intended for the community life of students and professors.

The projects for the Bocconi University and the Politecnico di Milano illustrate two different stories in terms of the instruments for project management and the development of design choices, but both evidence the very real possibilities of adapting the existing heritage. In some cases, as at Bocconi, this is done by expanding the current assets with projects of great strength; in other cases through more mediated forms of grafting on, of addition and subtraction, such as in interventions for the Politecnico campuses.

What we are witnessing is a revolution that puts the educational institution – in all its forms – at the centre of the project, and which forces us to think of how to actualise a school heritage that otherwise can no longer support the challenges of contemporaneity. Our hope is that soon we can describe, recount, and visit further new schools, in Milan and in Italy, that describe a new season in the design of educational spaces.

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**Francesca Gotti** is an architect and researcher. Since 2015, she has been coordinating collective initiatives of reuse of urban commons in the city of Bergamo, while consulting for related projects in other Italian regions. Since 2016, she has been part of the editorial board of ARK magazine, curating the column "La Città Rimossa". Between 2019 and 2022, she has been research fellow at Politecnico di Milano for the European project En/counter/points, on the reactivation of neglected urban spaces; as part of this, she has been co-author of the book "The Design of Tactics" (DPR Barcelona, 2022). She is currently a PhD candidate at Politecnico di Milano and studies projects of anarchy and empowerment, in contexts of social urban poverty in South Europe. Since 2021, she is a teacher assistant in the studio Neotopia of Léopold Banchini, at the USI Academy in Mendrisio.

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