

Design, City, Ecosystem

Stefano Maffei

Full Professor

Francesco Zurlo

Full Professor, Department of Design – Politecnico di Milano

The Salone del Mobile.Milano and Design Week are the epiphany of an ecosystem that has produced an organic set of actions, relations and interactions between individuals, organisations and institutions, undergoing constant transformation and reconfiguration in the sociocultural and economic environment of the city. This *Report* highlights the fact that this ecosystem is the origin, and circular consequence, of a Milan Design System (Ch. 4), made up of activities, resources, skills and materials connected with design that has played, over time, a prominent role in the position the city has attained in socioeconomic competition at a regional, national and international level. It has become one of its most highly valued and recognised assets, with a very powerful effect on the shaping of the city's identity (Milan as *City of Design*). Like the ecosystems of the natural world, socioeconomic and cultural ones have *biotic* components, such as people, social and interest groups and institutions, and *abiotic* ones, such as infrastructure and economic and technological resources. The interactions between these elements – residents, designers, operators, companies, educational institutions, trade fairs, museums, galleries, magazines, communicators, etc. – produces the flow of communication, data, resources and activities that gives rise to a common social capital which is essential to the functioning and development of this ecosystem (Folke *et al.*, 2016).¹ The phenomenon presents some unique and different characteristics and generates innovation, economic growth, international appeal and urban transformation, but also raises some critical issues (Ch. 5; Santagata and Bertacchini, 2011;² Bruzzese, 2015³). This *design-driven* social capital and its particular setting tends to grow and be consolidated through processes of constant elaboration and transformation brought to bear by its system of players-producers (Landry, 2006)⁴ and functions as a catalyst of the interaction between the system of creativity and other economic sectors, creating synergies between different dimensions of urban development such as innovation, enterprise, tourism, commerce and culture (Manzini, 2015)⁵.

The complexity of this configuration makes it *anti-fragile* (Ta-

leb, 2013)⁶, deriving from its hypertrophy and intricacy the factors behind its success. For a long time, the Milanese recipe of this major international event has been based on the ecosystemic complementarity of the Salone del Mobile.Milano and its fringe in the city, with its diffuse network of urban events. The comparison with other competing trade fairs reveals the unique character of this complementarity, for the emergence of this engine of cultural and social production does not stem from a strategic process pre-established from the top-down but from a set of unique and bottom-up conditions linked to the *design-driven* social capital mentioned above. The interdependence of the Milan Design System, the pervasiveness, structure and stability of its system of relationships, vascularises the space of the city, giving rise to a unique phenomenon and turning the city into a circulatory system of expertise in design (and other fields), fostering experimentation, innovation, the exchange of ideas and learning (Maffei and Zurlo, 2000a and 2000b)⁷. This not only promotes the generic innovative capacity of the city, but also plays a central role in the definition of Milan's identity and its narration, making it in fact a centre of global importance for the world of design and innovation.

This complementarity acts as a trigger for an event that produces unparalleled economic and cultural energy and attracts an impressive number of visitors. Moreover Salone del Mobile.Milano, staged for the 62nd time in 2024, has a lot of experience under its belt, accompanied by the ambition to explore possible openings for the sector beyond its national dimension. This ability to boost international exposure has gone hand-in-hand with the development of the entrepreneurial system of the furniture industry (with FederlegnoArredo, pillar of one of the fundamental economic sectors of the Italian manufacturing system) and with the consequent transformation of this event into by far the most important trade fair at a worldwide level.

Milan Design Week is a set of decentralised and self-organised events (Caruso, 2021)⁸ involving companies, independent designers and cultural and civic institutions that are staged in parallel to the Salone del Mobile. It consists of a series of exhibitions, instal-

lations, workshops and events of various kinds held in the city's private and public spaces, often located in emblematic districts/zones like Brera, Durini, Tortona, Isola, Porta Venezia, etc. Since its birth⁹, it has undergone exponential growth, involving not just Milanese entities but also national and international ones (Ch. 3). As it has grown, it has progressively attracted other sectors of design in addition to the original one of wood and furniture: certainly, fashion with brands like Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Cartier among others, and then the automotive sector with international players like Audi, Kia, Land Rover, Mini and BMW and that of consumer electronics with Apple, Panasonic, Sony, Canon, etc. The fluid and participatory nature of Design Week, in addition to the continuous cultural research carried out by the Salone del Mobile.Milano with an extensive programme of talks, forums, site-specific installations and major exhibitions at the trade fair, as well as in Milan's principal museums (Ch. 1, Section 1.d), has also helped to broaden the concept of design itself, including such themes as sustainability, social inclusion and interdisciplinarity (Bruzzese, 2015)¹⁰. At the same time, it has stimulated an interaction with art and architecture in public and private urban spaces, making the week a global attraction able to draw in an ever larger and nonspecialised public and celebrating, in one way or another, all the forms of creativity that see the discipline of design extend beyond the confines of the product (Maffei, 2020 and 2021¹¹; Dell'Era and Verganti, 2010¹²; Zurlo 2010¹³; Carella and Zurlo, 2024¹⁴). So the Design Week is based on a tacit model of self-regulation that has so far been able to withstand global challenges. It can be described as a model of self-organisation¹⁵, characterised by the capacity of players and institutions to create and dynamically adapt their interactions and structures without a centrally defined and implemented strategy. Self-organisation is manifested in the ability of the players – in the field of design and others – to coordinate themselves spontaneously on the basis of emerging needs and opportunities, promoting a cycle of positive feedback that fosters innovation and the growth of the sector (Bertola and Teixeira, 2003)¹⁶.

The pull of the Salone del Mobile.Milano is recombined in the city without a unified organisation but by a network of events that permits cooperation between independent actors. This model allows the maintenance of a dynamic equilibrium between competition and collaboration, favouring the resilience of the system even in times of crisis or global change.

A number of authors (De Toni *et al.*, 2011)¹⁷ have suggested some principles behind the generation of phenomena of self-organisation that seem to apply in a significant manner to the constituent dynamics of the event in Milan: a prime one is that of *Interconnection*, which underpins the social networks of the city's week,

exploiting the small world effect (familiar to the general public in the version known as six degrees of separation). The nodes of these systems are strongly connected with one another through hubs that, generally speaking, are places and people which have a high number of contacts with those outside the system and, at the same, with ones inside it.

In 2024, for example, the Salone del Mobile.Milano registered an attendance of 370,824, 53.9% from abroad (+20.2% vs 2023; of these, 276,059 were professionals, +28.6% vs 2023), including over 6,900 journalists (who often act as hubs of these small worlds), 14,683 students, 600 young designers from 36 countries, 22 universities and design schools from 14 countries, etc. (Ch. 2, Section 2.a). Other hubs that help to bring people together are, for instance, the Bar Basso in the Città Studi area or the Cena del Cento where, at her space, Rossana Orlandi makes these small worlds visible every year, with the aid of the culinary skills of Aimò and Nadia.

Linked with interconnection is the principle of *Sharing* that derives from a cellular organisation which works (and is effective) if it acts in a coordinated manner. Li Edelkoort writes: «Milan as an abstraction, a vague entity that comprises everything that makes this city animated by design, what it is for all of us. A place to get together, the promise of spring, a weakness for good food, the experience of abundance, meeting other people, talent spotting, the test of time and a platform for the production of ideas and the promotion of convictions and, in the end, a place to do business too...» (Edelkoort L., in Finessi *et al.*, 2021, p. 19)¹⁸. Evident in these words is a general feeling, with shared principles, values and experiences that favour the adoption of a common purpose by all the entities in the ecosystem (Hurst, 2014)¹⁹, allowing the identity of the system to be preserved through its continual discussion and transformation.

Something that happens, moreover, thanks to the principle of *Reconfiguration*: the system – Salone del Mobile.Milano and Design Week – is dynamic and works to modify itself continually, evolving its identity in parallel: an example is the adoption by the Salone del Mobile.Milano of a strategy and means for the sustainable management of the events (it has had ISO 20121 certification since 2023) that reconfigures the ways in which the stands of the fair are mounted, eliminating composite materials in favour of recyclable ones without this affecting the quality of the exhibition spaces and presentation of the products (Ch. 1, Section 1.g). Reconfiguring signifies finding, for instance, new strategies for one's own brand and the stream of operators passing through the Salone del Mobile facilitates this. Likewise the designers and companies that decide to present their new products in their showrooms and at the independent events in the city during De-

sign Week are doing so predominantly to professionals already known in the sector, while the Salone del Mobile reconfirms – from year to year – its nature as an international platform that favours the development of a sort of brokering of technical, manufacturing and consulting expertise that reconfigures value chains with the promise of new connections with new suppliers, distributors and companies, also providing concrete opportunities for an exchange with the business world to the under 35 designers who show in the context of the SaloneSatellite; in contrast for small companies or start-ups a presence at Milan Design Week can offer exposure and first contacts.

Another generative principle is that of *Redundancy* (in the sense in which the word is used in engineering), which regards the theme of capacities and skills, where ‘everyone learns to do everything’: a producer that becomes a producer of culture, or a group of professionals and communicators (Recapito Milanese) that was responsible for a first example of urban transformation (in Tortona, the first design district structured from 2001 onwards), which then became an inspirational organisational and cultural model. This redundancy is evident in the over 1,300 events staged during Design Week in 2024 (Section 3c), offering a range of creativity, experimentation, exploration and presentation over the space of a few days that has no counterpart anywhere else in the world.

In terms of its economic impact, the Salone del Mobile.Milano makes a significant contribution to Milan’s growth, generating direct economic flows through tourism, commerce and international professional and entrepreneurial cooperation (Santagata and Bertacchini, 2011). The research department of Confcommercio Milano, Lodi, Monza e Brianza has estimated a spin-off for 2024 equal to almost 275.1 million euros, an increase of 13.7% with respect to 2023 due in part to foreign visitors, who accounted for 69.4% of the entire business, a sum equivalent to 191 million euros²⁰. And it contributes indirectly to the same phenomenon that extends to Design Week in the city.

The overall impact on models and processes of cultural production also reinforces the city’s reputation as the international capital of design, promoting innovative approaches that influence other fields, like fashion, architecture and industry. A possible example is the work of experimentation and research straddling the realms of art, technology and design carried out by Kia over several years under the title *Opposites United: Intersections beyond boundaries*²¹ and presented at the Museum of Permanente.

Design Week in the city has challenges to overcome as well: one of the biggest is the difficulty of reconciling its growth with social inclusion and democratic accessibility. Some of the events staged

during Design Week are aimed at a specialist public and so access can be limited by reputational, economic and social barriers.

Keeping a border that is permeable to talents and to creativity and innovation, permitting a dialogue between a system of entrepreneurial innovation and the wider and emergent independent one, is a challenge that remains open. But this openness to access by the general public may have adverse effects. Design Week can be a victim of its own success, creating increasingly complicated conditions of access linked to phenomena that can be likened to *overtourism* (overcrowding, problems with general services, lowering of the quality of exhibitions and cultural proposals, negative spectacularisation, commercialisation of space and an increase in costs for residents and specialised operators)²².

This opens up a gap between those who have access to creative resources and those who are excluded, limiting the possibility of promoting a more inclusive and participatory approach to design (Manzini, 2019)²³ and risking the prospective loss for the city and its Design Week of that essential characteristic of an open social and creative workshop. Leaving aside the other significant challenge linked to the international dynamics of the market for design, where the competition from other global cities like London, Paris and Copenhagen to attract talents, resources and investments is growing. To this pressure on Milan’s leadership can be added the challenges posed by digitisation and emerging technologies, which are transforming the way in which design is conceived, produced and consumed. Their integration requires new expertise and innovative models and processes that are ever more global and interdependent, demanding from the city continual investments in capital, learning and private and public experimentation.

A second compelling area of challenge for the Milan Design System is the one represented by environmental and social sustainability. Contemporary design has to meet the growing demand for solutions that are sustainable and respect the environment. This includes the use of environmentally friendly materials, circular design and reduction of the environmental impact of manufacturing processes. In this context, the Salone del Mobile.Milano, in an example of organisational learning, has introduced for some time strategies and good practices that are both measurable and measured. An approach taken by the municipality of Milan as well, with the definition of *policy* guidelines, communicated through the public notice for inclusion in the programming of Milano Design Week (Ch. 5, Section 5.f).

The excess of success has resulted, over time, in attempts at response and coordination on the part of private and public players. Since 2017, in order to rationalise and coordinate cultural events with the promotion of tourism in the city, the Municipality

of Milan has come up with a diverse programme of weeks, with Milano Design Week²⁴ included amongst them. A significant contribution to the development of the Design Week has been made by INTERNli, which was responsible for the first initiative of coordination of operators in the field of design in the city (1990). Another actor is the platform of digital communication Fuorisalone.it – a trademark registered by Studiolabo with offshoots devoted to China and Japan – that over the years has been chosen by manufacturers of various commodities and designers for the promotion of events staged during Milan Design Week. Since 2023 the Salone del Mobile.Milano has promoted a joint action with Fuorisalone.it to publicise – in the section *Salone in città* – events staged by companies showing at the Salone del Mobile elsewhere in the city too, at their own showrooms or dedicated venues, in an example of synergy between key players in the ecosystem.

Thus the relationship between the Salone del Mobile.Milano and Milan Design Week is still today one of good practice based on a balance between *governance* and self-organisation. This complementarity between formality and informality, between an organised centre and a decentralised system, offers the whole of the Milan Design System the possibility of maintaining its dynamism and attracting and communicating a broad and diverse public. We could define this, as has been suggested by some students of innovation, as *ambidexterity*: i.e. the ability of an ecosystem to exploit its existing capacities on the one hand and emerging new opportunities on the other (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008)²⁵. Out of this tension between the exploitation of expertise and strategic positioning and exploration, understood as the capacity to experiment and look for opportunities, seems to emerge a key of interpretation.

The photo of the phenomenon is a blurred one, due to the speed and scale of general change with its set of high-impact challenges. This *Report* indicates some emerging signals that point to a possible different interpretation of the phenomenon: it is increasingly the ability to understand the dance between these two poles (of *exploitation and exploration*) that leads to incubation of the most significant experiences of innovation. The objective is to present a first collection and interpretation of the relevant (and available) *datasets* and a research conducted in the field that shows the interdependence of the ecosystem. The final picture that emerges outlines a range of possible strategies with endless nuances of emphasis between the commercial and the speculative, the Instagrammable and the *data-driven*, the formal and the informal, the technological and the cultural, in an effort to come up with an initial structural vision of the ecosystem and its emerging (and momentous) challenges.

Two significant phenomena stand out: the emergence of possible secondary attractors (the Alcova phenomenon or the development of new nomadic formats, disconnected from the concept of urban zones/districts and able to establish connections outside the city limits as well) and the metropolisation/regionalisation of the connections and territorial impacts that make this event an example of the *boundless city* described by Aldo Bonomi (Bonomi, 2004)²⁶. Phenomena that intersect in a sort of instantaneous and multiscale *entanglement* with urban and metropolitan reality, with the Italian production base and with global flows of communication, knowledge and capital.