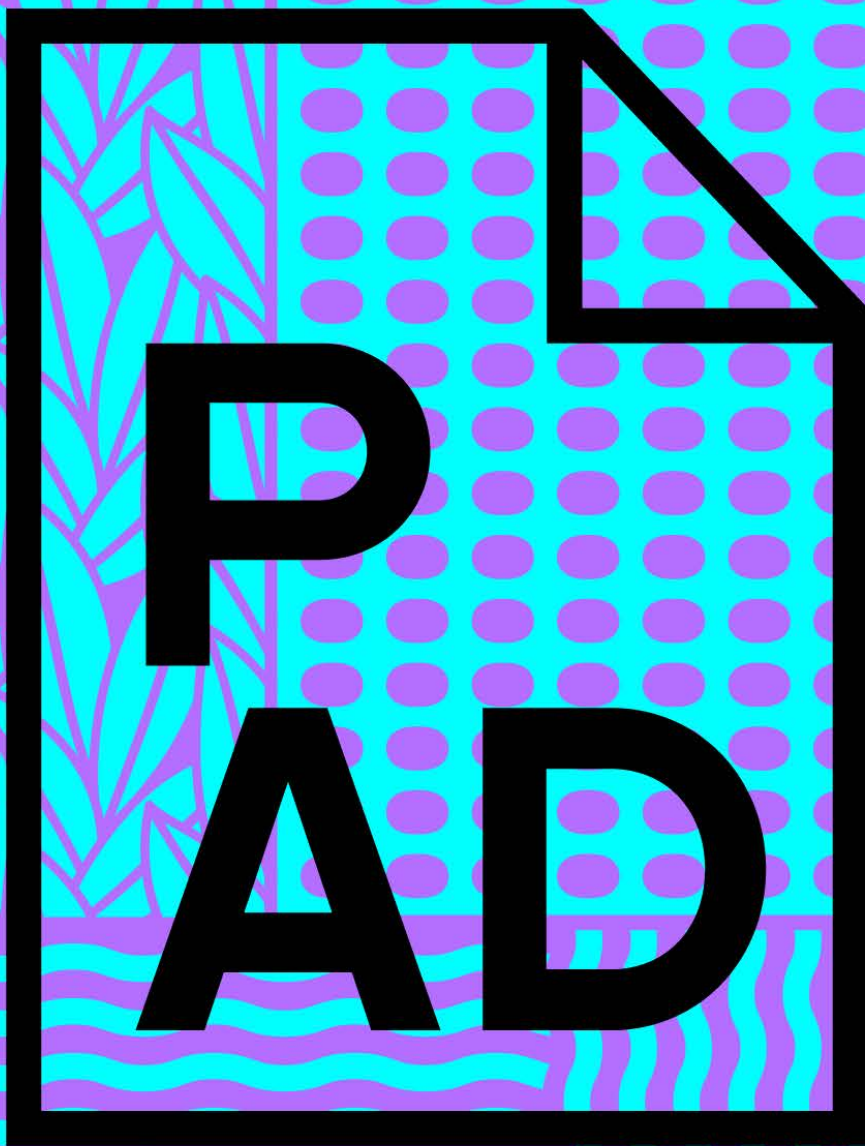
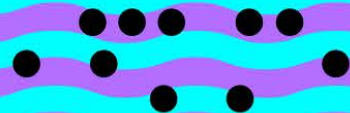


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PAD. Pages on Arts & Design

Digital double peer-reviewed Journal
founded by Vanni Pasca in 2005

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Pad © ISSN 1972-7887

Numero 13, Dicembre 2016

Publisher

LetteraVentidue Edizioni S.r.l.

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96100 Siracusa - Italy

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Milano, Zona Tortona. Understanding a place branding strategy built upon history, visions and design.

by Carla Sedini and Luca Fois

METADESCRIPTION

The present paper talks about the place-branding project of Zona Tortona (Milan) which is going to be analyzed according to specific theoretical concepts.

KEYWORDS

Place branding, Territorial Capital, Creative Industries

ABSTRACT

In this paper we are going to tell the story of Zona Tortona, a project a whole area of Milan was named after. This area is commonly known as “the” place for design. The project Zona Tortona has had a very strong influence on the development and recognition of this territory’s identity.

To answer the question of how the area developed this identity, first, we are going to interpret its story according to specific concepts that will help explain the success of this pioneering bottom-up renovation process. Then, we are going to look specifically at the role of design and events as triggers of innovation, renovation and consolidation of the identity of places.

This territory has always been in a state of development – from economic, social and cultural points of view – being able to maintain a strong relationship with the present and the future. In 2000, the project Zona Tortona was developed in a context composed of knowledge and skill, with physical resources also being revisioned and potentially transformed.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rhetoric of creativity has been used as a driver for territorial development and competition from the neighborhood to national scales, with creativity and culture becoming both object and subject of the governance processes (Pratt, Jones, Lorenzen, & Sapsed, 2014). On one side, strategies able to favour the innovation and development of economic sectors, which are not defined as creative, are put in place, while on the other, the so-called creative sectors are incentivized and the territories are increasingly defined as places for creativity or are themselves creative. This interest in the creative and knowledge economy is not recent; in 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer were among the first scholars to talk in a critical way about the “culture industry” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). However, it is the image of cities that has received more attention because of globalization, which makes places similar to each other, and for this reason the game they play is based on very small and intangible differences (Harvey, 2009; Richards & Wilson, 2004). Cities lost their identities as places for production and became places for leisure and consumption.

Territorial marketing and city branding played a fundamental role both in the success and in the strategies put in place to support cities and regions in the passage to new models of activities, residences and inhabitants. In many cases, these transformations were necessary, where, for example, whole quarters (or even cities) became empty due to the loss of their manufacturing and production processes. This left not only physical empty spaces, but also a lack of meaning.

In this paper we are going to present the Milanese case of *Zona Tortona*. This case study is particularly interesting because it happened at a time when the creativity rhetoric, as

we name it, wasn't yet a rhetoric. As we will see, the design strategy of the *Zona Tortona* branding project had very solid foundations in a socio-economic past that was in line with the evolution of this neighborhood framed by Navigli and the railways.

2. Zona Tortona: evolution, resilience and identity

The Milanese area now known as *Zona Tortona* is a rich and complex case history of urban regeneration because of its multiple transformations, which have been of interest to a variety of groups over the years.

Its size and well-defined position allow an interesting interpretation of the relationship between the choices taken by the institutional, economic, cultural and social actors and the consequences that followed. Some changes, which happened over time, were determined by specific choices, others as consequences of those choices, and yet others were completely unexpected.

Even if it's not possible to say that a unique meta-design for the territory was put in place, single projects and strategic visions considerably influenced the coherent evolution of the area.

It is, however, possible to say that the history of the neighborhood has always been strongly characterized by the innovative production of services and goods in an economic frame, which was not only local. The area never suffered due to its transformations but has always been characterized by subjects that tried to manage them in a sort of wide forward-looking vision.

The identity of this area is very complex and it tells of the

resilience of a territory made by goods, people and relationships that have always been in a dynamic harmony with the evolution of difficult situations.

Therefore, we are going to analyze the case of the *Zona Tortona* area in light of three concepts, which we find particularly important for the activation of a coherent and successful design strategy. First, we will look at the evolution of the area using the topic of *Path-Dependence*; second, we are going to analyze the topic of *Resilience* in light of strategies and activities put in place to consider social and economic change; and third, we are going to deal with the identification of the *Territorial Capital* of the area defined by its historic, geographic and socio-economic characteristics and resources.

The last section of the paper will focus on the *Zona Tortona* branding project, which will be analyzed according to specific key concepts of the design strategy.

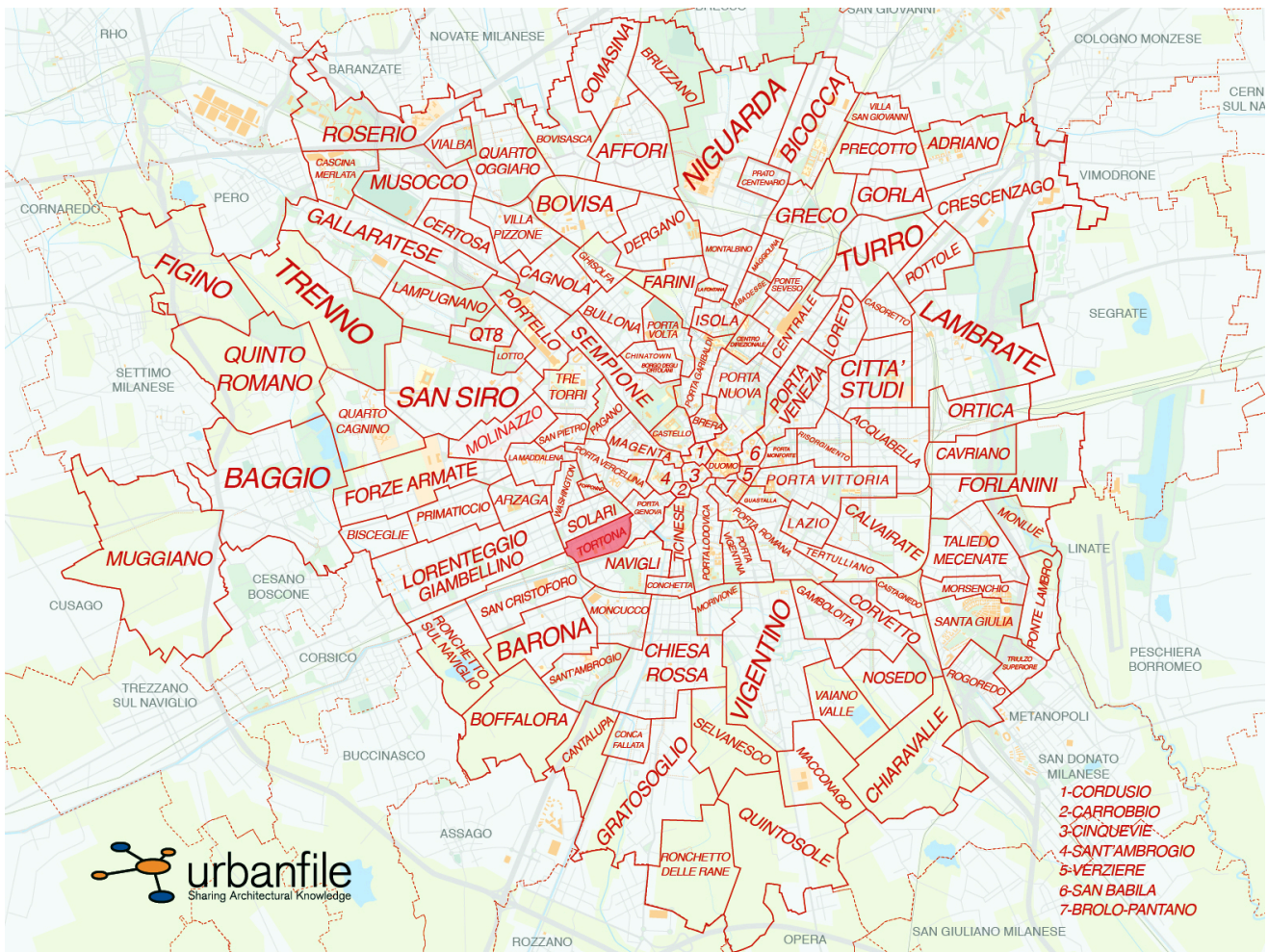
Evolution. The Path-Dependence of Zona Tortona

“History matters”. This phrase should be at the foundation of every kind of territorial branding strategy. Indeed, several scholars have identified a possible explanation for the socio-economic evolution of places in the economic theory of *Path-Dependence* (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995).

For example, Musterd and Gritsai (2010) stressed the importance of *Pathways*, which include structural, historical and contemporary territorial factors, in favoring the localization of creative and knowledge clusters and in attracting workers to these sectors.

It is clear that *Zona Tortona* has always been a very reactive place, with change and innovation at the core of its identity. The area often preceded trends that later spread through the rest of the city and beyond. Its isolation was not

a disadvantage but actually made the quarter a sort of laboratory for innovation. The mixed composition of its population (both inhabitants and *city users*) was probably one of the most important elements of the area's innovativeness.



The location of Zona Tortona. Source: <http://blog.urbanfile.org>

Zona Tortona is located in the southern part of Milan, close to the city center, and its image is characterized by the Navigli canal system. It has always been an important place for commerce, because it connected Milan with the port of Liguria and other towns in the south-west. Several major city routes radiated from *Zona Tortona*: Corso Genova, Savona street, Tortona street, and Voghera street. All these names indicate places, directions and pathways: elements of a

modern *wayfinding* project and historical and cultural reference for the birth of the *Zona Tortona* brand, as we will see later.

Thus, it is a meeting point of water routes, roads and railroads (Porta Genova railway station was constructed in 1873), a connection between the “real” city and the “real” countryside. Indeed, before the Industrial Revolution, *Zona Tortona* was an agricultural and farming landscape with productive economic activities, connected to one another, such as farming, wagons and carriage building, blacksmith and carpenter shops, etc.

The territory was composed of inhabitants and those we today call *city users* (Martinotti, 1993). This diverse composition, which continues today, characterized the area and made it very various.

In the second half of the 1800s, the Milanese south-west railway network was improved to support the creation of a dense industrial area.

The construction of the Milano-Mortara railway divided the Tortona and Savona streets from Navigli and from the city center. This created a sort of *enclave* of about 5km², which was named *Zona Tortona*. Very important and cutting-edge manufacturing enterprises were located within the area and close to it, including Riva Calzoni (production of agricultural machinery, and later turbines), Zanoletti foundry, Richard Ginori ceramics factory, and Bordoni glassmaker. Several foreign enterprises were also located in the area that bought out the Italian ones, such as Züst, AEG, Ansaldo, General Electric, etc.

This industrial concentration on a relatively small area resulted in it being recognized as a center of manufacturing and labour, and in 1906 a quarter with workers’ housing was



Porta Genova Railway Station (vintage photo). Source: www.milanodavedere.it

built by the Società Umanitaria.

Therefore, it is clear how innovation – when the rhetoric of creativity of 3Ts (Technology, Talent and Tolerance) (Florida, 2002) was yet to come – was already part of what would become a unique characteristic for an always-changing neighborhood. This innovation wasn't only represented by the technological and industrial capacities in the area, but also by the possibilities offered by its physical and cultural connections.

In the 1970s and '80s several industries closed and the remnants of the industrial past became both a problem and an opportunity. Therefore, that innovative spirit changed again, but not the identity of this Milanese area, which was, first of all, agricultural, then industrial and later dedicated to services activities.

Resilience. Zona Tortona as pioneer

Resilience practices (planned or not) are established in very different places, but in the area we are talking about it is particularly clear how the presence of forward-looking people with design skills and executive resources allowed social and economic transformation to be recognized and addressed, and this is still ongoing.

Resilience is identified as the capacity of communities and institutions to manage environmental and socio-economic problems, activating innovative practices (Colucci, 2012; Graziano, 2013; Pinto, 2015; Rodin, 2014; Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004). Surely then, design can be identified as an activator of the right conditions and practices that fit with the territory they are focusing on (Fassi and Sedini). In addition, it must be said that after the recent economic recession, cultural and creative industries showed a strong capacity for reaction and high levels of resilience (Sabatino, 2016).

Therefore, it is clear how, even when creativity wasn't "fashionable", it could be identified as a trigger for resilience and development.

After the closure of parts of the industrial complex, property developers were – as often happens – the first to see the possibilities for improvement of the area. They bought several properties to renovate and resell, foreseeing what was to later become a territorial strategy. They identified the so-called Creative Class as a target, theorized 20 years later by Richard Florida (2002).

Also the re-definition of the neighborhood followed a forward-looking process, going from *education* to *business*, and *leisure*, passing by – as we saw – the permanent and continuous (sometimes unnecessary) creation of new residences. One of the first steps was the installation of the Domus

Academy (1982) and then of other initiatives oriented to the fashion, communication and design fields.

The process was already ongoing and was based on the economic dynamics of that time. After the growth of importance of Milan as “the” place for fashion and the rise of the so-called creative professions (in particular advertising, photography and publishing), the increasing costs of the more central spaces forced businesses and service industries to look for new locations.

The ex-industrial spaces, conveniently renovated, offered the opportunity for the installation of activities that needed both large spaces and specialized environments along with accessible costs.

Photography studios were one of the main activities hosted by Superstudio, which in 1987 was installed inside former General Electric spaces.

During the same period, the architect Citterio re-designed a building used for the production of barley and malt, to house the designer Ermenegildo Zegna. The Scala Theatre workshops were located in a wing of the ex-Ansaldo building. And, regarding fashion Armani (the former Nestlé buildings), Diesel, Della Valle, Fendi and others were established in the area, bringing value to the vast area of the Riva Calzoni.

In more recent years, there have been public interventions: in 1990 the Municipality of Milan acquired the ex-Ansaldo area to create a big cultural center. Indeed, a large part of the area has recently been redeveloped, with the Museo delle Culture (Museum of Cultures - MUDEC), designed by Chipperfield, and other spaces being given to a group of associations and enterprises, BASE, for socio-cultural activities. The Municipality of Milan is also interested in the former Osram

and Loro Parisini areas for residential and business purposes; these reclaiming activities were part of the Piano Integrato di Intervento (Integrated Plan of Intervention).

These are some of the most important activities which, together with others focused on creativity, design, fashion, arts and communication, can illustrate the transformation of the neighborhood.

The success of this renovation, which raised the value of the territory both from the real estate and economic points of view, cannot be assessed merely according to numbers but also to the several factors and opportunities developed inside and in the immediate vicinity of the area.

In the following paragraph we will talk about the elements of consolidation of the identity of this quarter, which today is commonly considered as the place for innovation and creativity.

Identity. Zona Tortona's Territorial Capital

Previously, we started to outline what can be called *Zona Tortona's Territorial Capital*, that is the tangible and intangible resources that characterize this area.

The concept of Territorial Capital has its foundations in four capitals identified by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1994):

1. Economic Capital (money, means of production)
2. Social Capital (social networks)
3. Cultural Capital (languages, tastes, ways of living, etc.)
4. Symbolic Capital (validation symbols).

The availability, in different measure, and the different combinations of all these capitals influence the identity of a territory. We have already seen the evolution and transformation of *Zona Tortona*, and we will now describe its most

recent history and the critical moments when these capitals were combined and exploited in a way that defined the area and its identity as we know it today.

The isolation of this part of the territory, surrounded by the railway and residential quarters, and its post-industrial characterization as the place for creative and design activities, ensured a strong, easily recognizable identity for the neighborhood.

Three main factors represent the basic reasons for the success, even if they might not guarantee it: consistency (availability of spaces), spatial flexibility (variable dimensions of the spaces), central position (initially the area was attractive for its low prices).

The enlightened and entrepreneurial vision of the private sector was essential for the type of urban transformation that was oriented to attract those with talents, and made possible by a mix of *hard* and *soft* factors of attraction (Musterd et al., 2007; Sassen, 1991; Scott, 2000).

However, this does not fully explain the success of this area and it is necessary to mention the general context of the whole city and of the role of two economic sectors: design and fashion, we are going to focus on the first.

The relationship between Milan and Design, in particular Furniture Design, had its origins after World War II, when some well-known artisans from Brianza wanted to modernize production styles and processes from “bespoke design” to “mass-produced design”. The relationship between artisans and architects, and between design and manufacturing influenced the beginning of a process that made Italy, and especially Milan, as *the* place for design.

The positive values of the territory were represented by the *genius loci* on which entrepreneurs and professionals were

able to build a contemporary path, first of all for Italian, then European and finally, global users. This was an evolutionary process which is not simply the sum of individual innovations but has to be looked at as a long-term progressive strategy.

It occurred by systemic logic which started with product design, which spontaneously generated innovation in the process, the production, and retail and communication sectors.

In a short period of time Milan became host to: the Fair (1920); the first magazines for the design sector (Casabella and Domus in 1928); Triennale (1933), which in 1954 focused for the first time on Industrial Design; Federlegno (1940), which in 1961 founded Cosmit, the society that in the same year organized the first *Salone del Mobile*.

In 2016 the *Salone* hosted 1,300 national and international exhibitors and it drew 300,000 visitors, mainly from abroad. In this context of continuous growth since 1961, Milan is now internationally recognized as the Capital of Design. Similarly, the *Milano Design Week* is the most important worldwide event for buyers, retailers, entrepreneurs, CEOs, media, designers, architects, landscapers, marketing managers, professors, students and also *design lovers*, who, in a single place in a short time, want to see state of the art design and know what the current design trends are.

Even more relevant are the events of *Fuori Salone* (literally “outside” the *Salone*), which, since 1990 have been listed in the well-known *Guida d’Interni* (a guide made by *Interni* magazine). *Fuori Salone* events were (and are) particularly relevant to the consolidation of the identity of Milan as capital of Design and of *Zona Tortona* as a neighborhood with a strong creative disposition. There were many, diverse consequences of *Fuori Salone* events taking place in this area: higher numbers of tourists (not only during the *Milano Design*

Week); an increase of satellite activities in the whole area; and reinforcement of the identity of the quarter.

As far as the image of the area Tortona/Savona is concerned, the creation of the brand *Zona Tortona* formalized and strengthened the identity of the area. The next paragraph will be devoted to the process which led to the ideation of the brand and what it represents. Before describing the branding project of *Zona Tortona*, it is necessary to explain the role and capacity of design, on one side, and events, on the other, in creating the accurate values, networks and *buzz* (Sedini, 2011) able to give shape to, and consolidate, the image and the identity of places.

3. Design and events as catalysts. *Zona Tortona* branding project.

Design can be identified as the sector of the creative economy, which, more than others, has gained a central role in debates about the economic development of metropolitan areas. Design is an economic sector, which intercepts arts, business and technology.

Saskia Sassen defines design a kind of “value-adding creative work” that also has the effect of repositioning so-called ‘creative work’ in circuits, which are central to the global economy (2005, p. 257). Tara Vinodrai stressed (Vinodrai, 2009) that designers contribute to economic development at a regional and local level both directly and indirectly. As we have already said, this includes: creating new working opportunities in the same sector and then in others; increasing the quality of places and improving their aesthetic aspects; favoring the development of a local identity thanks to the

involvement of local communities and identities.

It is evident that festivals and fairs are essential in defining a city as specializing in a certain economic sector. Design fairs and events constitute a distinct example of a *Field-Configuring Event* (FCE) (Lampel & Meyer, 2008). An FCE is identified as a temporary network where individuals, groups, and organizations congregate. Initially, an FCE can be sporadic, but can become more periodic and structured. The importance of FCEs is linked to the possibilities fairs, conferences and contests have in favoring both competition and collaboration in a particular economic sector. In addition, events are able to strengthen the self-identification process of a certain place and its features.

Having clarified the specificities and capabilities of design and events, we are now going to present the birth of the *Zona Tortona* brand.

Zona Tortona: the first international design district

In the previous paragraphs we outlined the landscape in which, in 2000, the *Zona Tortona* branding project was initiated. After organizing several small events in the 90's in their location in Savona street, the *Recapito Milanese* association was invited by Superstudio to manage its launch and then its consolidation as a new super-location. As mentioned above, Superstudio was located in the former spaces of General Electric, about 10,000 m² in the middle of Tortona street (the location was then named Superstudio-più).

Thus, the initial project began. The *Recapito Milanese* group was composed of architects, designers, and people with experience in communication, design management and entrepreneurial, media and professional fields.

The detailed elements of the project are:

- *Scenario*: an industrial engineering space that wanted to “open” in April, during Design Week, with the launch of an initial, important, and highly significant event.
- *Short-term goal*: introduce and promote Superstudio-più as an innovative and appealing post-industrial location, suitable for hosting events in the design and fashion fields, outside the institutional environments located mainly in the usual Fair spaces.
- *Mid-long-term goal*: communicate and establish the area as a point of reference for the city and for the rest of the world during and after *Fuori Salone*, stressing its innovativeness, quality, consistency, attractiveness and ‘fit’ for a variety of fields (design, fashion, arts, food, etc.).
- *Constraints*: zero budget, short timeline (three months), the dimension and typology of the space (still to be emptied and renovated), a not very well-known area.
- *Opportunities*: big spaces, intriguing atmosphere, loft design, freedom of use, novelties to discover, presence of *Fuori Salone* inside *Guida d’Interni*, connection with the *Salone del Mobile*.
- *Concept*: temporary events, organized initially with all the local stakeholders, characterized by their highly recognized international standing in design, with the objective of renovating a district, and reinventing its DNA in tune with contemporary movements.
- *Launch project*: an international, alternative, very attractive event able to generate *buzz* and word-of-mouth publicity not only about the event itself, but also about the location and the area. For this reason, a strong leader was needed. Analyzing the context and using data, together with the property owners, it was decided to involve Giulio Capellini, who was already located “outside” the traditional

exhibition spaces. In summary: major international visibility of the brand as an icon of the best Italian design, great international reputation as talent scouts, quality and innovation of goods, new communication, and point of reference for *Fuori Salone* events.

- *First operative project:* the project envisaged the works of other exhibitors around the Giulio Cappellini exhibition space – in particular high quality, small productions of great Italian and foreign design. This choice offered a wider panorama of design along with the concept and the strategy. The event was a big success both for the contents and the public (there were more than 20,000 people at the opening) and it was an important starting point of a relationship with the international media. This model was replicated in 2001 with an initial important extension of the event locations being spread around the quarter and not just inside Superstudio-più.
- *Development of the project:* analysis of feedback from visitors, exhibitors, designers, journalists and – most importantly – local stakeholders, provided the team with important ideas and directions to improve the contents and services of the *Zona Tortona* area. In this way it was possible to start thinking extensively about the identity and the image of the area. First, it was clear that the project would be a shared project in particular with local stakeholders, the owners of former industrial spaces that were becoming more available, and which were offering different possibilities of dimension, composition, position and type of renovation of the spaces. The increasing availability of these locations was in line with the demand for alternative spaces that were particularly suitable for specific scenography, site-specific installation and settings.

The experience of *Zona Tortona* was therefore born from a single specific location, with a specific goal and a temporary event, and was then disseminated around the whole quarter, which in a short period of time became one of the most important and recognized design districts of the world. We are going now to closely look at the design brand project.

The branding project

The design strategy of the *Zona Tortona* brand was the “secret” of its success. It was actually designed by thinking about the area it had to represent: an almost unknown urban area.

Two words were chosen: *Zona* which is also easily understandable in English (“zone”) and *Tortona*, which is the name of the principle street of the quarter. The brief was therefore based on the selection of a “topographic” name that indicated a precise area, was easy to pronounce and was understandable in many languages.

The red dot, in which the two words were written in white and with a sans character, was chosen in answer to a specific



Left: Zona Tortona brand in 2002 Source: www.indesignlive.com
Right: Zona Tortona brand in 2009/2010

problem: how to clearly and simply point out to visitors the existence of dozens of events spread around the area? Indeed, these events took place in several locations and were “lost” in a neighborhood of factories, workshops, shops and residences, which created a difficult route to follow.

A map would have been the most obvious tool, but it was decided this wasn’t sufficient because of the physical characteristics of the place and its availability in a pre-smartphone era.

In addition, there was the need to communicate in a clear way with the media about the ever increasing number of events being held.

Fairytales were very inspiring, specifically *Hansel and Gretel* by the Grimm brothers. Thus, the red dots were used to indicate the path: 3,600, 12 cm diameter red dots, made from thin pvc, were stuck (and then removed) every 2 meters along the sidewalks starting from the subway station of Porta Genova, going up to the famous iron bridge and through the streets of the area, into the courtyards and the event locations.

The red dot became famous because it was useful, simple, effective and free to use. With its white writing, the *Zona Tortona* logo went viral: everyone used it to ask for information, to make appointments, as invitations, and as a way of celebrating their presence (“We are in *Zona Tortona*”).

However, the complex and well-structured project of “hospitality”, created by services and communications, and defined differently for the needs of different local stakeholders, was one of the most important parts of the strategy.

A very important tool for the involvement of the stakeholders, together with co-design, was the foundation of the *Zona Tortona Association*, wanted by *Recapito Milanese*, owner of

the *Zona Tortona* logo and general representative of the project. For several years *Recapito Milanese* had played a very important role in managing the project. However, after some years the owners of the locations chose to coordinate with common interventions and investments made in the area. In 2010 some other corporative issues contributed to the fragmentation of the common purpose and collaboration that was at the root of the success of *Zona Tortona*, which, in our opinion, today needs some additional integrated projects (in some ways this is what BASE is doing). In addition, the social situation is no longer sustainable in terms of the effects that the whole operation (over time) has had on the territory: rental and sale prices are very high for business and private properties. So for this reason, other areas of the city, such as Ventura-Lambrate, Porta Romana, are attracting creative workers and other residents.

However, the life-cycle of “attraction-clustering-expulsion” is very hard to deal with and the balance between private interests and the common good is very delicate.

4. Conclusions

As Maurizio Carta states, creativity and innovation shouldn't be associated only with the attraction of population and activities, but they should be used in order to generate new economies, improving the quality of life, and to promote civic virtue (Carta, 2014).

We cannot claim that the project *Zona Tortona* was able to deal with all these matters and, as we have said, there have been some civic and social issues connected with (if not provoked by) the renovated identity of the area. However, we

can definitely state that this project was successful and forward-looking for the multiple reasons mentioned above and it can also be studied as a pioneer project of its kind.

We can identify four main values that were integrated under the *Zona Tortona* project umbrella: visibility, attractiveness, hospitality, and fulfillment. These values also became part of every single integrated project and of specific events, before, during and after Design Week; everything was planned according to these values.

The Design Week model is actually an international model (Lacroix, 2005) with more than fifty-five cities hosting their own Design Week. The *Zona Tortona* model and its method have also been used by several other areas of Milan, such as *Brera Design District*, *Ventura Design District*; while other areas focusing on future development of a design district area are Porta Venezia (with *Porta Venezia in Design* project), Porta Romana, Porta Nuova, etc.

It must be said that public institutions did not take part to the *Zona Tortona* process. Only in the last few years, especially with Expo 2015, did public institutions begin to appreciate the strategic value of (well-planned and designed) temporary events. The branding of *Zona Tortona* and the general clustering of the neighborhood happened without any institutional intervention and outside urban planning policies.

Therefore, can the process that made *Zona Tortona* “the” place for design be considered a project of Design for Territories?

If we think about the traditional design process, which starts with a commission and a defined brief, then the answer is “no”.

If, however, we think about the common vision, which was at the root of the different initiatives; the creation of a

community of stakeholders, who were all different but similar in their intentions, then the answer is a resounding “yes”.

As we have said, the identity of this area has to be re-imagined again, since places and – as a consequence – their identities are not fixed but change through time. Seeds of this re-generation of *Zona Tortona* identity have been planted by initiatives such as BASE and MUDEC, with the participation of the Municipality. Any new vision should go beyond business and open up to experimentation and innovation for the quality of life of all citizens and city users. Today we cannot talk about innovation without being aware that every innovation should – first and foremost – be social.

Milan is the perfect city to experiment with change, because of its size, its history, and its community, all of which constitute its Territorial Capital. And being able to deal with change, innovation and evolution is precisely the province of design.

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