

# MIAAW

# 2021

## 2026 Olympic Games and the City

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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# Porta Romana railyard and Olympic village: reflections and contributions from MIAW 2021

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## Introduction

Italy has hosted the Winter Olympic Games on two occasions: the first at Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1956 and the second at Turin in 2006. In 2019, the International Olympic Committee awarded the 2026 Games to Milan and Cortina – a great opportunity for the two cities, for the Lombardy and Veneto regions and for the whole macro-region of Northern Italy, which will directly or indirectly experience the main and collateral events. In addition to the opportunities, however, there are risks of poor planning and management, which internationally have been evident in many mega-events, among the most famous of which were Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Sochi (Russia)<sup>1</sup>.

The 2021 Milan International Architecture Workshop (MIAW) has contributed to the current reflection on the development of the former Porta Romana railway yard, which is intended to accommodate some of the functions of the Olympic Games, and the long-term impact of the proposed transformations

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1. Major mega-events include the Olympic Games, the Football (Soccer) World Cup, World's Fairs (Expos), regional games and individual sports games, such as the Super Bowl (Müller 2015). The Sochi Games in Russia were intended to become a reference point for local sustainability, but in reality they led to an ecological disaster (Müller 2015b). However, all Olympic Games since 1960 have gone over-budget (Müller 2015), and in many cases, the social price has also been high: the Rio de Janeiro Olympics exacerbated existing social differences through large forced relocations from the favelas of Rio. In that case, the situation had already become difficult because of the series of major events that had occurred in the city in the previous decade (McGuirk 2016).

on the city of Milan. MIAW 2021 was an open online event<sup>2</sup> held on February 12–20, prior to the announcement of the winning project<sup>3</sup> for the railyard; it was led by high-level international guest professors and ended with the presentation of the students' work.

### **The framework of intervention between mega-events and Milan railway yards**

The working group organising MIAW 2021 focused on issues related to one of the most important transformations taking place in the city of Milan – that of the railway yards – which is entwined with another topic of great importance for the future development of the city – that of the Milan and Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic Games. The topic was framed with a long-term view of the project area, investigating the possible developments after the Olympics and integrating the site into the broader framework of Milanese urban development and regeneration, in synergy with the network of former railway stations. Today, the railyards<sup>4</sup> are among the most substantial urban voids requiring intervention, and the debate and process of formulating an agreement<sup>5</sup> between the municipality and the owner, Ferrovie dello Stato, was long and laborious. Nevertheless, the development guidelines for these seven vast areas have been very clear since the beginning (the first formulations date back to 2005): real estate improvement, green space with road and cycle networks, and the reactivation of part of the

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2. Researchers on the topic of mega-events and participants in the ongoing railyard development contributed to the opening and closing events, including Pierfrancesco Maran, the Councillor for Urban Planning, Greenery and Agriculture of the Municipality of Milan, and the Laboratorio Permanente studio - the joint winner (with OMA) of the competition to redesign the Farini and San Cristoforo railyards with their Agenti Climatici plan. <http://www.scalimilano.vision/concorso-scalo-farini/> last visited April 26, 2021

3. The Campo Selvatico project, nominated on March 31, 2021, won the tender for the Porta Romana site. It was created by a team that included Outcomist, Diller Scofidio + Rendro, PLP Architecture, Carlo Ratti Associati and ARUP. <https://www.scaloportaromana.com>, last visited April 25, 2021

4. The former Milanese railway stations are Farini, Greco-Breda, Lambrate, Porta Romana, Rogoredo, Porta Genova and San Cristoforo, and they trace a semi-circle around the Milanese centre, covering a total area of over 120 ha (Infussi, Montedoro and Pasqui 2019).

5. Agreement signed in July 2018.

track transportation (Infussi, Montedoro and Pasqui 2019). These areas could become an important system of open spaces by erasing the interruptions and barriers they have generated, so the projects for them must also aim to reconnect the diverse and long-divided urban sections.

The city of Milan has had recent experience of redevelopment and international repositioning, starting with Expo 2015, and of repopulation and tourist improvements of the Alpine area. The strength of the city's Olympic candidacy is of looking beyond the realisation of the event, with a view to long-term sustainable development of the entire involved area, a more contextually integrated design and a series of actions on different scales that would bring a widespread improvement to the region (Di Vita and Basso 2020).

Mega-events have often been detrimental to host cities - creating urban voids, economic losses and social tensions (Müller 2014, 2015, Kassens-Noor 2016). Expo 2015 was problematic, but it was ultimately positive: the local political conflicts and episodes of corruption that emerged a year before the event fuelled considerable difficulties, yet the Exhibition was a success in terms of the number visitors, the legacy of the infrastructure, the improvement of public spaces and the extended cultural production in the city beyond that focused on the Exhibition site (Di Vita and Basso 2020). The view of the Olympic Games is therefore positive and part of the process of the city development that is already underway and is positively accepted by the citizens. The proposal developed between Milan and Cortina brings together very different areas and dynamics; it involves small towns, 17 UNESCO sites, cities of art and iconic places, and it reuses existing sports facilities with a high symbolic value<sup>6</sup>, such as the stadium and the sliding centre built for the 1956 Cortina Olympics. In this context - of the railyards and the Olympic Games - more than 150 students of the Politecnico worked, led by the international professors invited for the tenth MIAW: Roberto Cavallo (TU Delft), Hervé Dubois (ENSA Paris - Val de Seine), Donatella Fioretti (TU Berlin), Sebastián Irarrázaval (Universidad Católica de Chile) and José María Sánchez García (Escuela Politecnica de Madrid). Each teacher approached the topic based on his or her experience, sensitivity and professionalism, but following the direction to think of spaces

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6. With the exception of the Palaitalia sports hall planned for the Santa Giulia area of Milan.

that would allow the reuse of this part of the urban fabric and its inclusion within the broader city development. The workshop was also held remotely, and this allowed, with a didactic innovation forced by the current pandemic, the development of further reflections on working methods and experimentation with new methods of teaching and interaction.

### **The organisation of the workshop: an online MIAW**

Having defined the theme, the area of intervention and the title of the workshop - MIAW 2021 The Olympic Games and the City - The challenging urban regeneration of Milano Porta Romana rail yard - the search began for bibliographic materials on the topic of mega-events and for graphics, cartography, photographs and artistic framing of the area of Porta Romana. After confirming that it would not be possible to deliver the workshop in person, the didactic activity was organised with a calendar of introductory, educational and institutional online appointments. The programme was also enriched by a series of short events open to the public: the Lunch Talks, which were daily sessions during which the invited teachers could create their own professional path and design experiences. The teachers were supported by tutors and super-tutors who coordinated the work in the Teams platform virtual classrooms with the support of other sharing tools (Mirò, OneDrive, WebEx etc.). Furthermore, to ensure participation in the workshop in spite of the remote format, particular attention was paid to communication through the blog and social media<sup>7</sup>. Finally, having sacrificed the in-person element, a virtual exhibition and this publication were created.

### **Characteristic features and main results of the five ateliers**

Despite the diversity of the design and didactic approaches of the five visiting professors, the initial approaches were consistent, but they later diverged in their organisation and development. The ateliers – all mindful of the substance and identity of Porta Romana as an important piece of the history of the city – focused more on life after the Olympic Games than on 2026 itself. The evaluation of each group was therefore born from a solid awareness of the area's importance

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7. <http://www.miaw.polimi.it> and <https://www.instagram.com/miaw.polimi.architecture/>

and history, and this resulted in proposals firmly rooted in the context with a consequently greater chance of success and acceptance. Basic information was taken from a preliminary investigation – made available by the organisers of the workshop – and by an inspection of the area that, for many of the participants, was conducted remotely using smartphones and video calls.

The following is a brief characterisation of the approaches of each atelier:

Roberto Cavallo's Multi-Layered Porta Romana was based on the concept of the city as 'a system of systems' in which the impact of the area on the urban system is crucial. The resulting projects took into account the needs of the Olympic Games and proceeded with a design approach comprising overlapping layers of necessity and time. In the first phase, the students were asked to work individually to formulate their personal opinions; they were then grouped into multidisciplinary groups for the formulation of project ideas.

Hervé Dubois' atelier, Linear Infrastructure, addressed the issue with a multi-scalar and multi-thematic approach, designing a linear infrastructure strongly focusing on international networks and local connections. The macro-project imagined a linear element connected with the nearby landscape of the Alps, providing raised public and green spaces along the old railway line. The students worked in groups that focused on parts of the building: two on the definition of the structure, six on the vertical city and two on the road-in-the-sky. The result was a harmonious and holistic project.

Donatella Fioretti's atelier, entitled Designing the Railyard's Elusive Palimpsest, had a critical attitude towards the demands, dimensions and volumes of the buildings required by the Olympic plan, and it focused on a reinterpretation of the identity of the Porta Romana void. The students, partly in person, partly at a distance and coming from very different cultural contexts, were organised into four working groups; on the recommendation of the teacher, each had to formulate a landscape, urban and typological proposal.

Sebastián Irrázaval's atelier, Sew the Edge, was grounded in the idea that the design activity and its results must be oriented and guided by a profound vision, taking into account the functional demands, tools and problems posed by the context. The assumptions for the realisation of the projects were based on five cultural guidelines: the coexistence of the plant and animal worlds; the zero footprint; autonomy; equity and the social inclusion of age and gender; and

spaces to fight isolation.

Finally, José María Sánchez García titled his atelier Infrastructural Condition, conducted the work as a collective and presented the result in which the city - considered as an infrastructure - is reconnected by reconnecting what the Porta Romana railyard has divided: the dense historical urban fabric with the industrial city and the urban with the rural. The workshop included lessons on the presentation of references, with significant involvement from the tutors, which led to an analysis and discussion that ended with a theorisation that, in the final presentation, was presented as a collective theatrical representation narrating the soul of the place.

### **MIAW 2021: innovations and contributions to the regeneration process**

Thinking of the railyards as places that create urban quality, the developed projects contribute with transformative ideas to the reflections on the Porta Romana railyard from the viewpoint of giving the city a new landscape and a place capable of both welcoming life and creating relationships with the context. The different characterisations of the ateliers and their varied approaches to enhancing the identity of the area and the programme of the Olympic Games produced a rich diversity of works and ideas. Some themes were touched on by all the projects as essential design elements, including Porta Romana as a border area - a break in the urban fabric that separates one Milan from another - and the railway as a place with a strong cultural identity for the city. To these were added the topics of nature and landscape, which were present in all the solutions and differently developed. All the projects saw in the railyard a piece of the city of which it had been deprived and the opportunity to turn the void into a green space to be returned to the city and to its citizens by rediscovering the fluidity of the paths and the continuity of the urban fabric and by respecting the local memory.

Perhaps the proposals presented have a major shortcoming: that of not being firmly inserted within the system of the city of Milan, contextualised both in the framework of the actions planned for the Olympic Games and in the dynamic regeneration path either begun or foreseen in the other six railyard areas.

The relationship with the Winter Olympics and with the city of Cortina could have been investigated more in detail, although the aim of the workshop

was to produce projects for only a segment of these urban spaces and systems, which are already connected by a wider and more complex urban project.

MIAW 2021 was an opportunity to deepen research on the identity of Porta Romana and to highlight the need to preserve it in the design proposals.

Ideas were also stimulated on the risks of bad management of a mega-event, inspired by both international case studies and the recent Milanese experience of the 2015 Universal Exposition.

The Politecnico was thus able to offer the municipality new reflections and new perspectives on the city, developed by highly qualified designers from very different contexts. Finally, from a didactic point of view, it was possible to experiment with a new online formula for an international workshop, which enriched the educational offerings, the teaching skills and the communication and information tools. In this context, a need was seen for this publication, which differs from those of previous events mainly in the greater number of written contributions, which seek to compensate for the lack of fluid and open discussion during workshop days. The virtual exhibition is also configured as an interactive moment in which to use further new means of communication and representation to share ideas and elaborate content at a distance.

In conclusion, the workshop produced significant and interesting project results; it is evident that the in-person modality is of fundamental importance - particularly in our profession and our faculty - for establishing a direct connection with the context to be understood and transformed, but it was nevertheless still possible to develop valuable proposals. The hope is that these reflections and design ideas will not remain merely an exercise within the academy but may represent an effective contribution that influences the actions of the municipality of the Porta Romana area.

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