

**KEY WORDS:**

Industrial Design Districts, Urban Regeneration, Public Space, Urban Identity, Milan

## **The Changing Role of the Contemporary Public Realm: Case of Industrial Design Districts in Milan**

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**ABSTRACT**

The deindustrialization process in Europe resulted in many large-scale factories to be shifted out of their city-limits and aimed to redevelop cities as centers of creative productions. In Milan, Italy, this process left distinct voids in its urban fabric due to its defined urban morphology and separation from its heritage core. The process of re-adapting this industrial infrastructure into sites of innovation resulted in a new typology of public space. The juxtaposition of the two notions of public spaces; the traditional, mixed-uses at the heritage core and the institutional industrial districts called for integration strategies to be formulated at a city-scale. The paper analyses Lambrate Industrial Design District as a model for adapting public functions within its built forms, inclusive creative networking at a city-scale and sustaining local micro-businesses. The transformations include maintaining the structural integrity of the industrial morphology as a key to conserve its industrial past. At a city-scale, vacant pockets allow for flexibility in the master plan that caters to the inclusive needs of cities in constant flux.



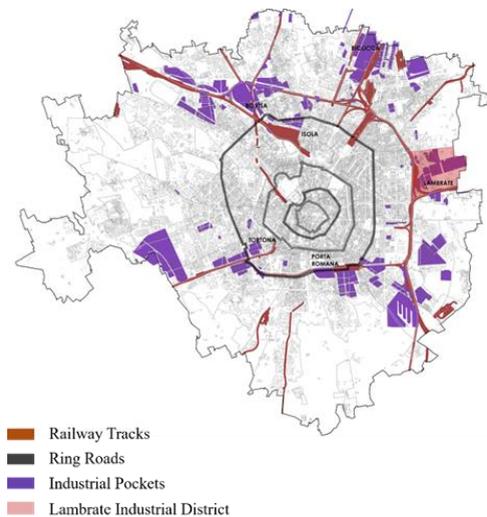
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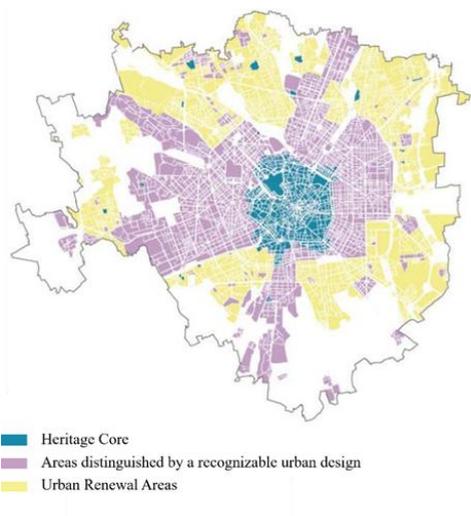
## Introduction

Milan's urban development has been undergoing polycentric projects of varying temporal and spatial natures. The urban regeneration processes, which began during the early 2000s, has resulted in its current dynamic urban fabric. This resulted from a shift of its Fordist Planning<sup>1</sup> that developed cities as centres of industrial production, towards a new model of human-centric cities, allowing creative spaces to occur. As a result, during the 1970-80s, the heavy industries in Milan were shifted out of its city-limits to the outskirts. There was an increase in abandoned areas, such as industrial districts and unused railway lands, causing splintered developments in the city. Thus, there was a need to frame a new masterplan.

The new phase of planning in Milan began at the start of the 1980s. This urban plan included providing areas for the production of specialised services and knowledge-based creative economy. It identified large, vacant areas for the development of future projects as well as entire industrial districts for renewal (**Figure 2**). The majority of industrial lands are located towards the northern and eastern peripheral areas, consequent to the Milan Metropolitan historic core (Arondi, 2017) (**Figure 1**). The university district of Bicocca was developed in the former Pirelli industrial complex, and the design districts of Tortona and Lambrate are adapted within the former cluster of warehouses and industries. Social-public spaces such as exhibition spaces, art galleries, co-working spaces, maker spaces, labs, design studios, etc. were incorporated within the industrial built fabric.



**Figure 1:** Map of Milan indicating the industrial pockets across the railway lines, the ring roads concentric to the heritage city core.



**Figure 2:** Documento di Piano/ Strategic Plan of Milan (source: PGT 2012)



**Figure 3:** The axial streets leading to the landmark historic city centre



**Figure 4:** Large-scale public project at Porta Nuova

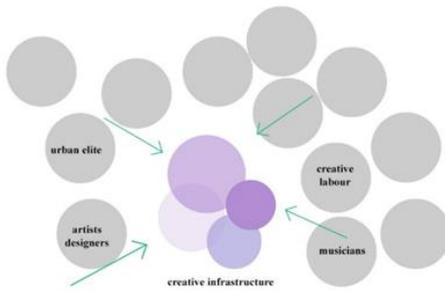
## Changing Notions of Public Space

### The types of ‘publicness’<sup>2</sup> in Milan

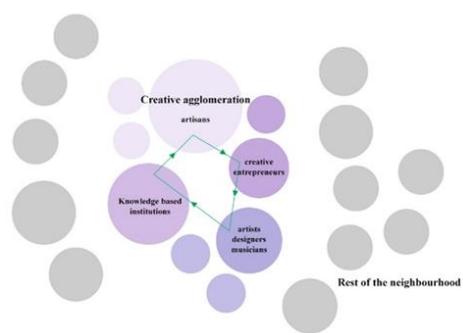
The urban landscape of Milan is composed of public spaces of varying experiential factors. Here, discussing the predominate types of formal public spaces that co-exist, categorized on the basis of their urban morphology.

At the heritage core, the axial streets leading up to the cathedral piazza, enable a constant visual engagement between the user and the urban form (**Figure 3**). The arcaded side-walk cafés and informal performances at the piazza are the spectacle at eye-level. As the gaze moves upwards, the building façades are read as a narration of its historical past and continues towards the landmark spire protruding over the low-rise buildings. The urban morphology here is orchestrating an active public realm at all times.

Towards the northern-periphery of the heritage core are the contemporary, large-scale urban renewal projects. The ‘Porta Nuova’ urban renewal project is built on former industrial plots and unused railway lands (**Figure 4**). It is an on-going phase-wise project. The central plaza completed in 2012 is an example of a single-developer driven, green field project. It follows the functionalist planning model of central business districts that are characterized by high-rise luxury skyscrapers, shopping mall plaza and large-scale parks- a scheme that is often seen in new developments across Indian metros cities. The skyscrapers anchor the free-flowing landscape and become the spectacle of the site. This was a conscious strategy towards creating polycentric notions of public space in the city, shifting from the traditional Italian urbanism idea of “introverted exteriors”. In the historical city centres, the social activity works in interwoven patterns, circumstantial to enabling diverse interaction (Gehl, 2011), and in contrary, the specialized, functional districts of modernist planning is an opportunity to explore contemporary “unguided” patterns.



**Figure 5:** Creative Infrastructure built to attract a Creative Class<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 6:** Social Segregation due to Excess Branding Strategies in Creative Districts

### Industrial estates as sites of urban regeneration

The transformation of industrial districts is another form of a public regeneration project. The industrial morphology is characterized by continuous compound walls, large spanned roofs and windowless, metal facades. The industrial urban fabric was primarily built for machinery, warehouses and factories. With the absence of traditional street edge of

storefronts, open cafes and active street edges, the contemporary former industrial estates have manifested an institutionalized public urban identity.

There is a value in preserving the industrial morphology in cities. “The industrial built environment is purely material and purely expressive” (DeLanda, 2006). Industrial aesthetics is an important component to developing urban identity. The expressive role of the building is a representation of the historic past of the city. Within design districts, the juxtaposition of the industry compound and the factory building narrate a strong industrial character, making it ideal for artistic displays (DeLanda, 2006).

The built-form expressions are redefined as an urban attraction, giving rise to a certain type of ‘themed space’, a ‘city as an artefact’, representing the post-industrial aesthetics (Zhang, 2015). Thus, the factory buildings are seen as affordable spaces to display art and as a social expression of industrial heritage by their materiality and built form.

### Challenges of transformation

The primary aim of the municipal plans was to upgrade the brownfield industrial districts into “new sites of innovation”, demarcated as ‘urban renewal areas’ (Figure 2), thus activating a contemporary socio-public realm (Armondi, 2017). In today’s cities, a productive urban space is one that enables the exchange of creative ideas. A creative district is conceptualised as zones of production for creative exchange, interaction and flexibility in land use that invariably impacts the economic potential of the city (Florida, 2014) (Figure 5). “Connections” are what urban planners and designers seek in the new-age of ‘informal environments’- connections between universities, businesses and allied

networking for social interaction. To not only allow multiple users to function simultaneously in a singular location but to also seek interdependency between multiple activities. Thus, drawing importance to the interface between the spatial form of regenerated industrial buildings and the productivity of the landscape.

As developing countries such as India, are in the process of regenerating its urban areas, there is a need to identify a context-specific transformation process. However, the risk of the transformation process following a top-down branding strategy often results in an exclusive, elitist district, where gentrification negatively impacts the existing neighbourhood causing social segregations (**Figure 6**).

## Research Aim

This paper aims to analyse the possibilities of adapting public activities within an Industrial District, discussing the limitations in its urban morphology and the mechanisms of its functioning within the framework of its spatial environment and socio-cultural perceptions.

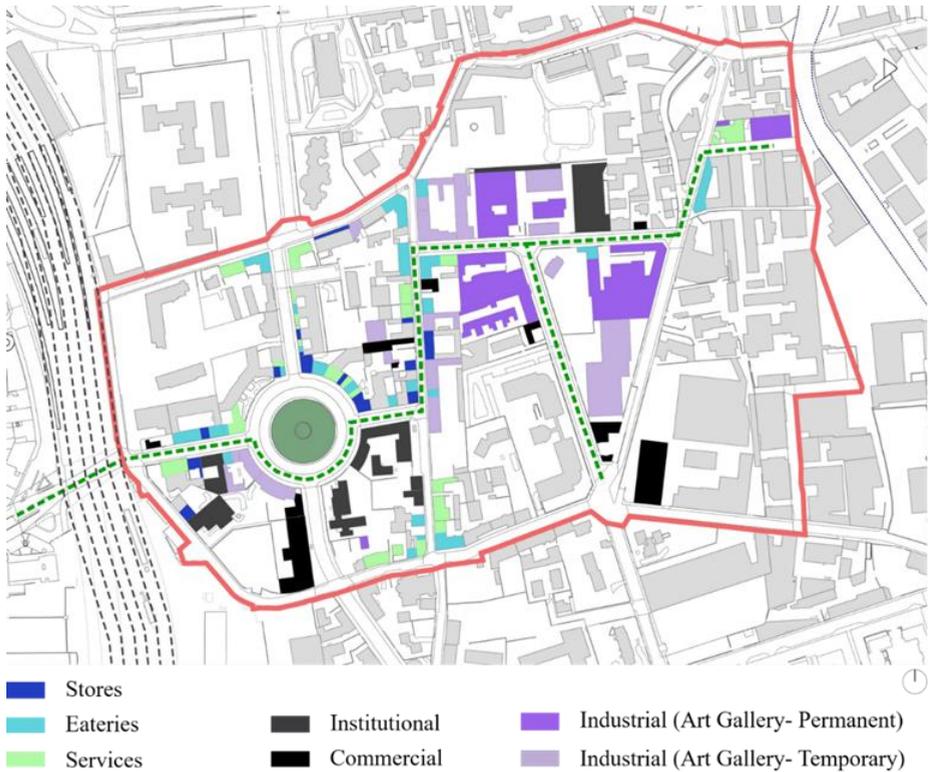
Lambrate Industrial Design District is analysed as a 'model of a sustainable urban regeneration' that inclusively integrates with the local community and the larger context of the creative city. The paper analyses the permanent and temporal activity changes within the spatial environment of the built-form typologies, exploring the notions of 'publicness' within the institutional and public-open spaces of the site.

## Lambrate Industrial District

Lambrate Industrial District is relatively newer in undergoing the transformation process which began in the early 2000s. It is situated in the north-eastern peripheral edge, across the railway tracks (**Figure 1**). In the district, conversion of several derelict industrial buildings is still in process and the brand image of the district hasn't been overtaken by high-end stores. The district still functions on family-run stores and micro-scale businesses, hence it hasn't quite seen the process of gentrification – a character that sets itself apart from other design districts, such as Tortona Industrial Design District in Milan (Knox, 2014).

The Lambrate Design Initiative started in the year 2010, intending to renew the suburbs as an epicentre of design. Since then, various organizers collaborated with the design stores and studios in the district to host public social activities related to the design sector, fashion, art and culture (Lambrate Design District, n.d.).





**Figure 8:**  
*Building uses identified at street level along the path taken by visitors accessing the design district*

entry points to the neighbourhood. The railway tracks create a distinct physical separation between the heritage city and the contemporary industrial district (**Figure 8**). The street edge, via delle Rimembranze di Lambrate, still displays porosity, such as street-level storefronts with windows and translucent visibility connectors.

## Via Conte Rosso

### Spatial character

Via Conte Rosso acts as a connecting street between the two areas – the existing residential neighbourhood and the industrial district. As the only access to the industrial design district from the railway station, the stores and cafes that line the street edge, cater to the daily users of the district, and thus a forced interaction is enabled between the local businesses and the users. The public activities at the ground floor of the 3 storey buildings, are characterized by small scale micro-businesses such as the handmade product store



**Figure 9:** Section through the street indicating the openings at street level leading to the courtyard spaces and plan indicating the series of courtyards located off via Conte Rosso



**Figure 10:** Transformations on via Conte Rosso (L-R) Industrial warehouse used as a Mercedes Benz office; the setback space used for pop-up shops during Design Week; courtyards from the street viewed through a framed opening; Pop-up shops occupy the courtyards and industrial warehouses

*Redroom*, started by a graduate design students from nearby Politecnico University, *Riparzione Elettroniche Industriale* a family-run business that has been present before the regeneration project and benefits from the new creative infrastructure.

The industrial buildings are located off the main street across courtyards. They function as private offices and studios. The buildings along the street edge are interrupted by industrial plot compound walls and gateways, offering glimpses of its character (**Figure 9 & 10**)

### **Mechanisms of public functions**

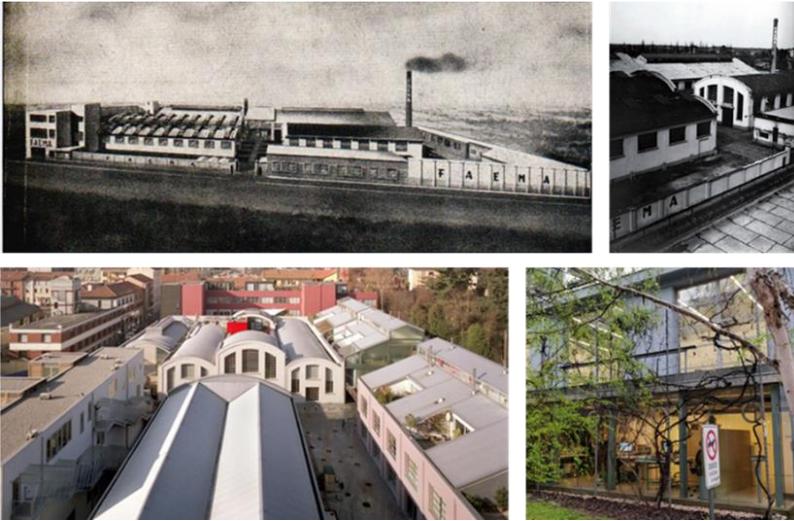
The nature of the public space is in the form of fragmented courtyards, visually disconnected from the main axis. The courtyards provide a semi-public interaction space for the offices during the daily working hours, while the shopfronts anchor the public space.

Temporal events such as the annual Lambrate Design Week works in collaboration with the studio owners, stores and art galleries of the district. The street-level shops, offices and warehouses convert as display space for the city and pop up shops utilize the vacant courtyards and abandoned warehouses (**Figure 10**). Thereby, allowing for 'free movement' space at the ground level. The absence of landmarks and visual anchors is compensated by creating visual connections; banners and markers on the sidewalk, as a means of forming a connected path that users can follow. The collaboration allows the public space to operate as an interdependent, cohesive unit.

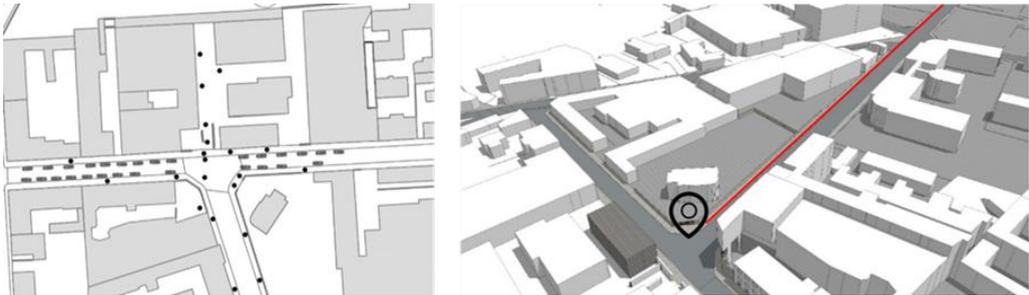
## **Via Ventura and via Massimiano**

### **Spatial Character**

Via Ventura and via Massimiano are two perpendicular streets that comprise of the major large industrial complexes, the important ones being former Faema coffee machine and Hyundai Industries. The Lambrate regeneration project aimed at revitalizing the neighbourhood by converting the derelict industrial buildings into art galleries, art schools, institutions and co-working areas. The former industrial building of the Faema coffee machine manufacturing company was first set up in 1952. The complex is an area of 10,600 square meters and consisted of vaulted arches units, manufacturing sheds and administrative buildings, all enclosed within a marked compound wall. The masterplan was transformed and completed in 2009 by Mutti & Associati that houses a publishing house, a design school, galleries and art studios (**Figure 11**).



**Figure 11:** Transformation of the Faema Industrial Estate (L-R): Faema factory complex in 1952; Vaulted arches and compound walls (source: [cafeoblog.wordpress.com/tag/via-ventura/](http://cafeoblog.wordpress.com/tag/via-ventura/)); Transformed Faema factory complex in 2003 (source: Lambrate Design District); Introduction of skylights and glass walls to accommodate office and co-working spaces



**Figure 12:** Junction at via Ventura and via Massimiano acting as a congregation point.

The physicality of the space is characterized by blank compound walls that run continuous up till the junctions, high above eye-level, acting as a visual barrier between the user on the street and the activities within the industrial complex. The group of galleries and institutions at this junction becomes a congregation point. The proximity of their entrances becomes a sort of the anchor of the area, creating a pause point for users to interact and to engage with the industrial character (**Figure 12**). Façade and materials play a key role in establishing the identity, by drawing the eye to the building height. Translucent materials have replaced the former metal walls to allow for light and ventilation and enable habitable functions, such as co-working spaces and schools (**Figure 11**).



**Figure 13:** At via Massimiano, warehouse plots opened to public access during the Design Week

The building façade reinforces the industrial aesthetics of the district. The Luna Industrial building has modified its façade by providing punctures at street level, establishing a visual connection, enabling breaking the solid industrial façade at ground level, yet conserving the industrial aesthetics. The façade interacts with the pedestrians by retaining its industrial aesthetics, conserving its industrial aesthetics, by also creating punctures at the ground level to enable visual porosity with the institutional space.

Here, the nature of the public space lies in the production of infrastructure for creative innovation. The institutions, art galleries and co-working spaces are an opportunity for creative interaction and exchange of ideas. In this case, the public realm isn't designed to be active throughout. Some of the functions work 24/7, such as the co-working space on via Ventura enables certain parts of the district to be active through the night. Planning for a night-time economy allows auxiliary functions, such as café, supermarkets, to also generate activity.

During Design Week, the inactive street opens its gates and permits social activities within the complex's open spaces and warehouses (**Figure 13**). This street is the last stop in the design week's tourist map. Activities such as bicycle rentals, food stalls, art exhibitions, seating spaces are the major pull towards this node. Eatery-stalls and vendors occur at the junctions when events take place inside the institutional spaces. Thereby, setting up an interdependent activity network in the area. Thereby, not only making use of vacant spaces but also allowing the district to convert into makeshift spaces as an opportunity to interact, integrate and communicate with the rest of the city.

## Conclusions

The Lambrate Industrial District's urban regeneration project is analysed as an 'ideal model of sustainability and integration', without isolating the local neighbourhood and linking various public spaces in the city. It also takes into consideration the current context of European cities, where there is a conscious developmental goal set up towards the transformation of derelict industrial estates. Lambrate Industrial district is a sample of the different scales and built-forms that comprise the industrial morphology. The key factors that contribute to the functioning of a regenerated industrial district as discussed below.

**Formation of Creative Networks** is enabled by collaborating with other institutions of similar nature to provide for auxiliary knowledge support. The Politecnico University near Lambrate is an institutional space that allows for awareness of activities related to the Lambrate Design District. Many institutional spaces across Milan, such as the *Triennale*, allows for free public access within certain parts of the building, like the public reading or library areas. Here the "publicness" lies outside the traditional notions of public space and within the areas that allow for creative networking, working in collaboration with other creative allied labs and institutions.

**Temporality of Masterplans** is the idea in spatial planning that allows flexibility within the urban dynamics. Not having permanency as the only solution to place-making serves as an opportunity to address the current needs of the community. Vacant spaces are an opportunity for temporality in the masterplan, giving rise to flexible activities, working in conjunction with the events, and open up to host social gathering spaces, food stalls, etc. Thereby, anchoring the public realm further beyond the formal institutions.

Defunct peripheral areas are potential spaces to creatively express the needs of society. It allows for creative demonstrations, to actively regenerate the urban landscape. In the face of the 'functionalistic top-down strategies of traditional urban planning', this allows for alternative urban functions. They signify a bottom-up approach, representing the local neighbourhood and utilizing art as a method to bring to light the temporal nature of cities. The transformations, thereby, creates new dynamic phases of development within the historic framework of the Milanese Metropolitan landscape.

**The cultural context of a city** plays a key role in the regeneration programme to engage in citizen participation and to develop a programme that links tradition to contemporary needs. The city of Milan is historically an important centre for culture and the arts. Its economic structure and social composition have been key to developing Milan as the centre for contemporary arts and fashion. Therefore, the urban culture has been progressing towards developing contemporary spaces and being associated with supporting infrastructure and lifestyle. Planning efforts have been made towards promoting and organizing events of contemporary elements that can enable new urban functions.

The socio-cultural aspects of the city plays a vital role in encouraging activity within the industrial districts. Such contemporarily planned neighbourhood allows participation of

varied strata of society, allowing freedom of expression and social diversity. The planned events invite universities, local businesses and also establishes international connections.

The citizens appreciate the distinct identity of industrial aesthetics; the variation and scale of events from the city centre to the possibilities of activities found in certain types of events. Such as the East market, where large numbers of people gather to participate within the transformed industrial warehouse. In contrast to socially regulated spaces, derelict industrial site on the margin accommodates dynamic public activities. The aesthetic of derelict industrial buildings offers a glimpse into the industrial past of Milan's history, enabling "a tactile encounter with space and materiality" (Edensor, 2005). The role of the businesses owners and local communities is to implement socially-conscious policies by engaging together in design week networking. There exists an awareness of the importance of social and cultural integration and initiating inclusive programmes and activities within the neighbourhood, developing an association with the city's industrial past. ■

## Acknowledgement

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Fordism is a form of a capitalist industrial system based upon the mass production of standardized goods and in the 1970s, emerged the post-Fordist concept of rejecting mass production and replacing it with creatively involved production and consumption systems. Milan is one of the important examples of post-Fordist city reorganizations (Tickell & Peck, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> In this context, "publicness" refers to as the notion of freely-accessible public space, not restricted to the traditional components that comprise public and private spaces.

<sup>3</sup> (Florida, 2014) defines the 'creative class' as a group of highly-educated, liberal thinkers that when brought together in an urban agglomeration, can to influence the economic growth by their diversity, innovation and tolerant outlook.

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