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Territorial branding strategies *behind* and *beyond* visions of urbanity

The role of the *Fuorisalone* event in Milan

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The interest of this paper concerns the relation between territorial branding strategies and the creation of urban “visions” tied to creative industries. The aim is to understand these relations through a focus on the role of the *Fuorisalone* event towards new spatial configurations in Milan.

Fuorisalone – the annual event of the international Milan Design Week – was one of the triggers for the creation of new images for specific areas in Milan and the consequent branding process, establishing a network of attractive zones.

But what is *behind* and *beyond* the uses and the perceptions that this new paradigm of visual images, languages and marketing tools is able to create? The paper offers an investigation around the dichotomies between the construction of brands and the urban spaces within an overlapping of physical configurations, social interactions, media representations and temporary perceptions.

Keywords: Territorial brand, urban regeneration, creative industry, Milan, *Fuorisalone*

1. Introduction: Milan: a global node for fashion and design

Milan is an international node for design and fashion production, in terms of trend setting and related manufacturing. Being known worldwide as a fashion and design capital, the city and the wider Lombardy



Region are characterized by a spread distribution of small, medium and large businesses connected to this kind of production; furthermore, Milan is a major R&D and formation center for design and fashion subjects (Jansson and Power, 2010).

The choice of focusing the research on this particular city and on how the relation between territorial branding strategies linked to particular events and the creation of urban “visions” tied to creative industries are shaped in it, comes from many rooted reasons linked not only to the contemporary global image, myth or brand that Milan embodies, but also to a cultural tradition made of artisanal fashion and design products, age-old handicraft and firms varying in size from multinational corporate groups to local micro-firms that goes back to the ‘50s (Bosoni, 2003; Branzi 2003).

Furthermore, given the global status of Milan in fashion and design, the specificity of the fairs and events and the scale, variety and number of participants, this city demonstrates a sort of breadth and intensity of activity and could be considered an ideal and quite unique case to study the widest range of phenomena and of dichotomies between the construction of brands and the urban spaces.

Indeed promotional events, like the design and furniture trade fair – *Salone del Mobile* - have literally changed large parts of the city, exploiting that certain vocation and diffused knowledge about design and creativity that are “in the air” in Milan.

In this perspective the cycle of events that merge together Milan with those creative activities, happen in certain places within the city and it’s arranged within an almost continuous global network which increases itself year after year. It seems that there are some clear hierarchies and strategies that are taken in account to implement the circuit of places to brand.

This dense concentration of functions, with their specific features and stories, responds to a precise territorial branding strategy that is both an important business in its own right, as well as a constituting an heterogeneous set of interlinked stories, images and narratives on the city.

Research methodology

This research work is part of a wider research project started in 2010, which looks at *Milan as a creative city* and investigates some specific creative areas, their processes and effects within the urban environment (Botti 2012, Giuliani 2010¹). Analysis and data collection took different forms: fieldwork conducted during repeated visits, walks, and explorations to the branded areas both during the *Fuorisalone* weeks and in regular periods of the year; direct observation, conversations and interviews at different levels of formality with event visitors, promoters, exhibitors, retailers and inhabitants within an ethnographic approach to focus on participants; qualitative analysis of published and online materials – documents, websites, magazines, press releases, catalogues, brochures, guides – produced within the documentation of the event.

2. Milan and its ‘creative atmosphere’: between urban concentrations and temporary locations

The city of Milan is composed of a complex and changeable geography of activities related to the sectors of immaterial production (fashion, design, arts, communication and exhibition spaces) that take shape and meaning within the city following permanent and temporary logics (Botti, 2012; Giuliani, 2010). These presences are growing and spreading into the urban territory interesting not only the core of the city – traditionally characterized by representative centres of cultural consumption – but also affecting new semi-peripheral areas (Bonomi, 2010; Bolocan, 2009).

A first interesting feature of the Milan ‘creative atmosphere’ is related to the spatial distribution of creative industries. A dense presence of activities and operators is clear within specific parts of the city that can be

1 Antonella Bruzzese was the supervisor of both the master thesis by Ilaria Giuliani in 2010 – “Dismissione industriale e città creativa. Due processi di trasformazione urbana tra riqualificazione fisica e strategie di promozione del territorio: i casi di Zona Tortona e Ventura Lambrate a Milano” – and by Claudia Botti in 2012 – “Territori in trasformazione nel segno della nuova economia: “addensamenti urbani creativi” a Milano sud-est”. (Urban Planning and Policy Design Master, Faculty of Architecture and Society, Politecnico di Milano).

considered as *creative urban concentrations* (Botti, 2012).

This urban phenomenon is visible at different scales. On one hand, there are specific neighbourhoods mostly characterized by the presence of small and medium-sized disused (15-17.000 sqm) industrial buildings that have been reused as locations for creative industries. This is the case of the areas around Porta Genova (Giuliani, 2012), Lambrate (Giuliani, 2010), and in some areas of the southern-eastern part of the city (nearby Viale Spartaco, Via Tertulliano and in recent years also around Via Ortles) characterized by different concentrations of creative production operators (Botti, 2012).

On the other hand more punctual episodes can be found. In this case the presence of creative production activities is related to singular former industrial areas of important dimensions. Similar dynamics interested some big complexes in Milan such as *Fabbrica del Vapore*, *Frigoriferi Milanesi* and the *Mecenate* area.

In both cases the presence of abandoned industrial buildings represents a crucial point for the development of physical and functional transformations and for the attraction of new uses tied to immaterial productions. The availability of spaces, the structural quality of the buildings and the real estate operations to foster the regeneration processes are the principal conditions for the creation of creative urban concentrations. The proximity of workers belonging to similar productive sectors is also able to attract more activities, create new urban profiles and increase the visibility of specific territories.

The Milan 'creative atmosphere' is also made of events and temporary occasions related to the immaterial production that show their presence within the city during particular periods of the year. This is the case of some international well-known events according to the fashion, design and art sectors.

The widely affirmed *fashion weeks*, the annual *Milan design week* and the more recent *MiArt fair* represent some of the most important dates. During these events many temporary functional transformations and new practical uses interest specific parts of the city that become important attractive areas and central node of events and exhibitions.

Creative urban concentrations and temporary locations of events often overlap each other on the Milan urban territory creating a strong relationship between them and emphasizing the image of specific parts of Milan as real "centres of creativity".

3. The role of the *Fuorisalone* in Milan

Milan's annual International Furniture Fair – globally renown as *Salone del Mobile* – is one of the most influential events happening in Milan - which attracts trade visitors, journalists and exhibitors from all over the world.

Started in 1961, the fair has developed along the years into a family of concurrent trade fairs, branded *Milan Design Week*, covering furniture but also lighting, kitchens, bathrooms, textiles, etc.

Thus during the design week, Milan's official fairground – just outside the city – accommodates all these trade fairs, while the rest of the city is given to the mercy of more punctual creative activities.

At the beginning of the 1980s this last uncodified and spontaneous phenomenon involved only young and emerging designers seeking alternative locations around the city, but year after year this trend gradually expanded, giving birth in the 1990s to the *Fuorisalone*, the biggest satellite event that now fills every industrial space, street, showroom and gallery with endless initiatives, events and exhibitions and involves several districts of Milan.

3.1 The launch of the *Fuorisalone* within Tortona Area: the pivotal case

The story and the development of *Fuorisalone* event is strictly tied to the transformation process of the Tortona area, which has been deeply and inextricably sustained by the creation of a new image for this territory.

Located in the south-western part of Milan and bound between the Naviglio Grande canal and the railway, Tortona is characterized by a huge variety of urban elements composing the landscape, belonging both to the productive and residential vocation of this area.

The location of vast industrial sites dismantled in the 1960s – together with a flourishing network of small and medium enterprises, handcrafts laboratories, workshops, garages, railway tracks, traditional architectural typologies as the *case di ringhiera*, eating houses and social housing neighbourhoods – constituted the opportunity to trigger the regeneration phase, achieved by a self-organizational process and launched by the aggregation of individual building renovations.

It has been argued that this bottom-up preservation case has mainly involved two different patterns of transformation: the built environment renovation on the pending ex-industrial areas to settle creative industries and cultural firms, and the territorial identity creation (Giuliani, 2010, 2012).

This last immaterial dimension made of promotion and communication strategies was precisely initiated by the role of those unedited designers who in the 1980s exploited the renovated ex-industrial spaces to showcase their work contextually with the Fair.

When *Interni Magazine* published the first volume of the *guide to Fuorisalone* in 1992, the inseparable binomial between Tortona area and the *Fuorisalone* was officially established. Somehow this event constituted the spark that triggered the promotion strategies, then fulfilled in 2002 into the creation of the territorial brand *Zona Tortona* (promoted by the agency *Recapito Milanese*). Its function was basically the one of gluing together all those initiatives that were already and independently well established, including them in an acknowledged symbol as part of the same entity. The red round logotype (figure 1)² became unmistakable and was used in producing flags, pocket maps, guidebooks and road markings for the *Fuorisalone* week events.



Figure 1. Evolution of the 'Zona Tortona' logotype

3.2 The *Fuorisalone* and its territorial branding strategy

Along with the consolidation path of the event, more and more locations and several parts of the city – in different way attached to creative or cultural sectors and productive or consumptive activities – have been involved by this huge phenomenon, implying the necessity to identify new visions and consequently formalize them through territorial brands (fig. from 4 to12). In the perspective of creating a dense network of design districts, urban branding is not merely a process of image construction, but it is fundamentally a process of image communication and consumption (Jansson, Power D, 2006)

Interni is still nowadays handling the management and coordination of all the events and activities referred to *Fuorisalone*, animating unconventional spaces through creativity, opening parts of the city that are usually closed, letting them become public spaces for a week and fostering great impact for the territorial promotion and international visibility of those areas of Milan.

Among the most relevant stakeholders that created the *Fuorisalone* event we find *Studiolabo*, which coordinates the relations between events and locations through the portal *fuorisalone.it*, and *Esterni Magazine*, which sets up performances and stands all around the town.

All these subjects collaborate and cooperate in a perspective of city marketing, which, following the success of the Tortona area pivotal case, aims to launch and infuse the event everywhere in the city, and

² In 2011 Design Partners srl – the evolution of the company that founded the brand of Zona Tortona – bankrupted following legal issues. A new name and a new logotype under the name of *Tortona Design Week* were created for the event by the *Tortona Area Lab* association, a no-profit organization set up in 2010 by the big names pioneer of the regeneration of the area.

push the image of Milan as a capital of fashion and design on the global panorama of quality creative economy (Hannigan, 2003).

We argue that the strength of this event does not consist only in its innovative and creative contents, but especially in its different shapes of bonds with the territory.

In this sense, *Fuorisalone* proposes a different urbanity for Milan that, in certain cases, lasts even after this unique week. This new urbanity has not been planned at all top-down by local governments – quite differently from other examples of territorial marketing strategies and creativity policies traceable in other European cities or in literature – rather it presents a self-organizational nature of all the initiatives, talents and energies that are embedded in the territory.

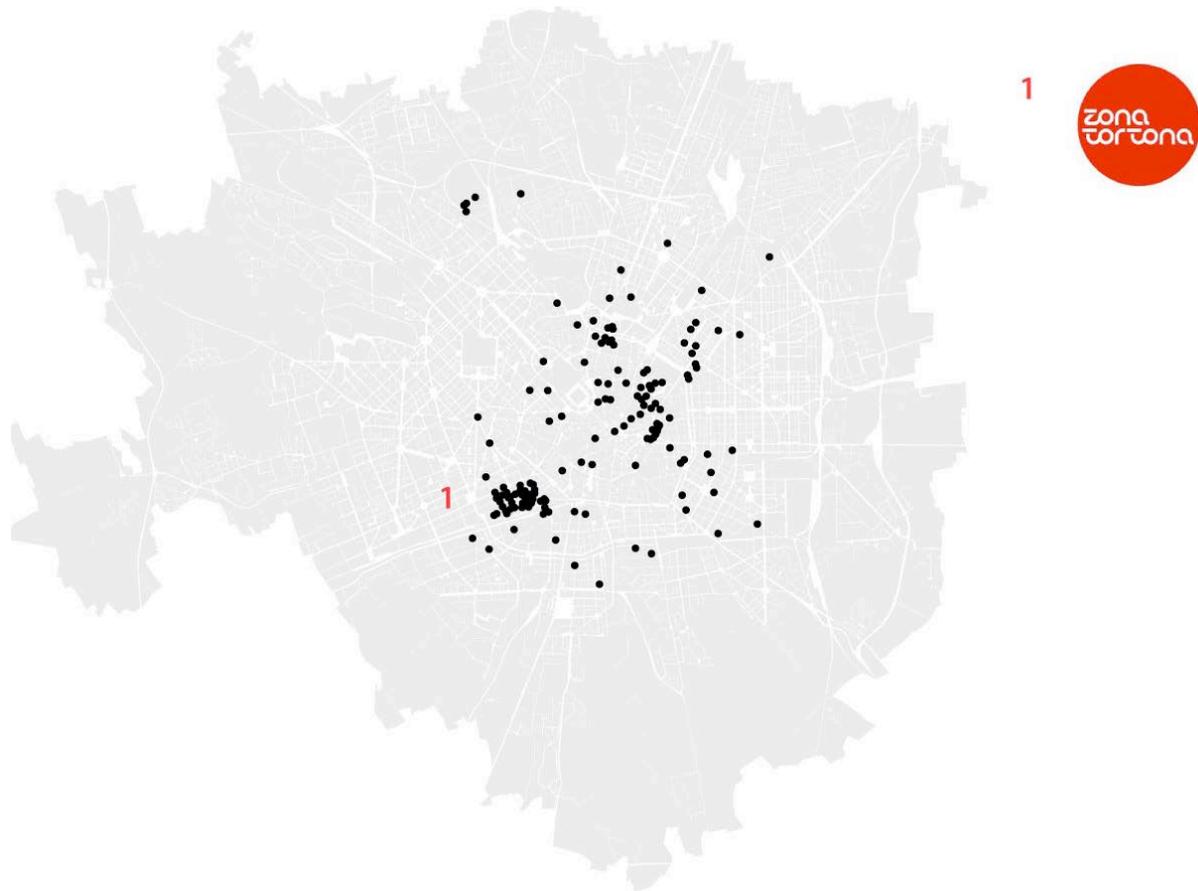


Figure 2. *Fuorisalone* 2006 – Source: *Fuorisalone.it*

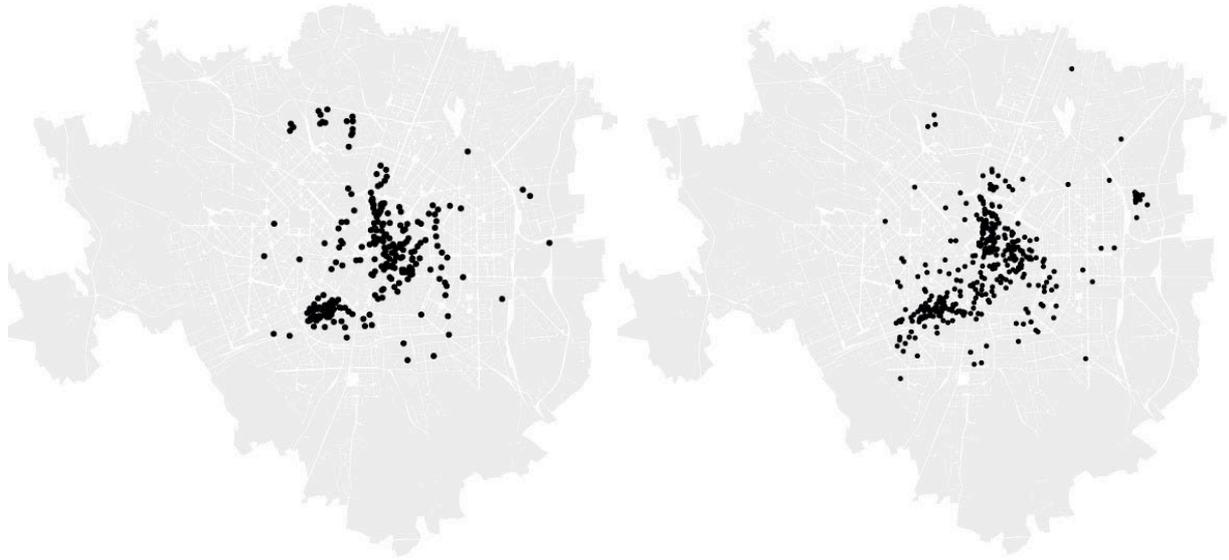


Figure 3. *Fuorisalone 2008*; Figure 4. *Fuorisalone 2011*

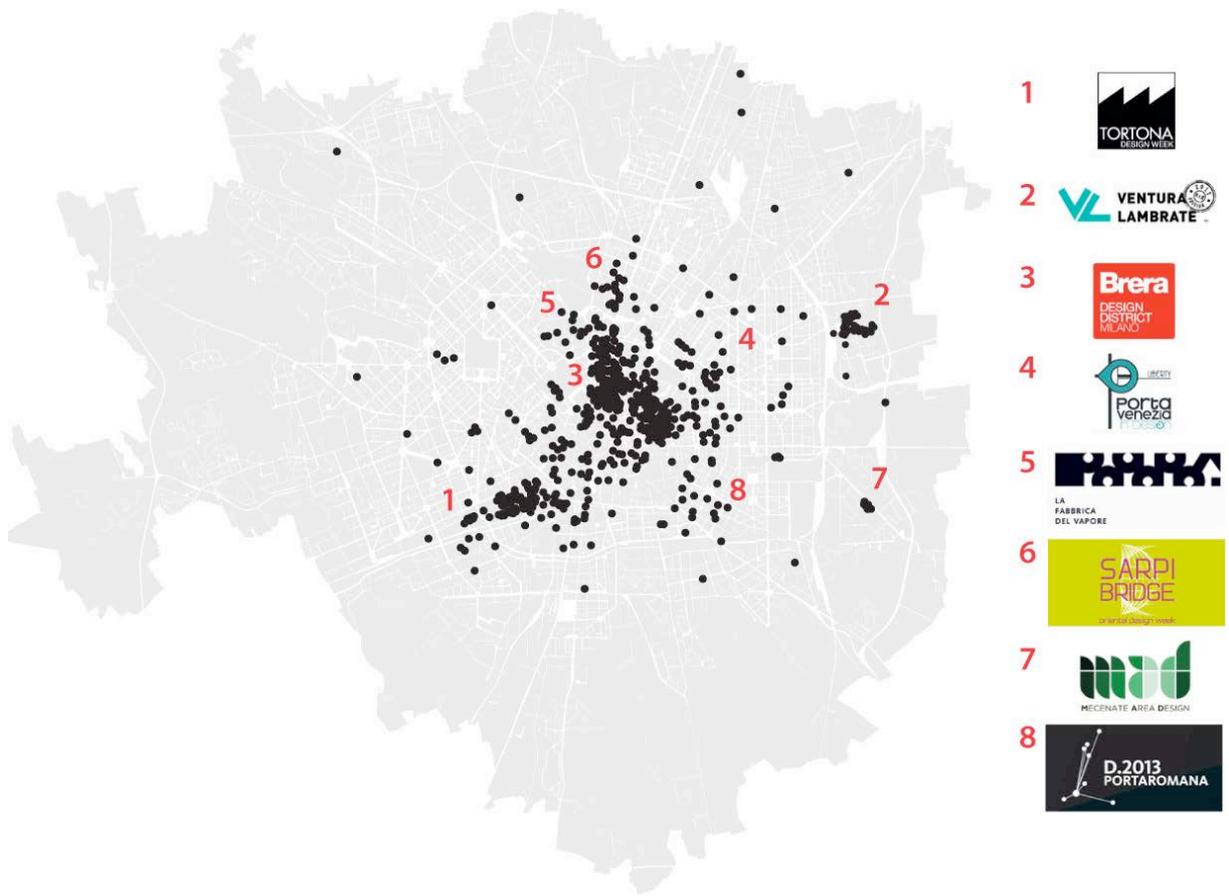


Figure 5. *Fuorisalone 2013* – Source: *Fuorisalone.it*

4. Between “hard” and “soft” transformation: the role of branding strategies

The territorial branding strategies linked to *Fuorisalone* progressively growing in the city during years show a sort of coincidence between the *activities* to promote and the *places* where they take place.

What has been promoted is not only the presence of showrooms and creative activities, but a whole "zone". This does not necessarily corresponds with the idea of the neighbourhood, of which definition in the past was based on the presence of significant centres for everyday life (the church, the square, the market, the main neighbourhood shops). The “zone” is defined by the presence of a series of other places: design or fashion studios, art galleries and so on. “Zones” and neighbourhoods have the same urban scale. Nevertheless, the term zone, in the branding rhetoric, from one hand emphasizes the distance from the dimension related to daily life and inhabitants. But at the same time implies the identification of creative functions on a territorial basis, strongly situated, which can easily be also extended to other activities (bars and restaurants in the first place, but not only) able to build what Zukin (1995) calls "atmosphere". It is not a coincidence that guide-books in recent years have begun to be organized by areas and districts and not just for "monuments" and attractive places, and Lambrate Ventura is named the “Chelsea of Milano”: it confirms the relevance of the diffuse atmosphere of an area that marketing campaigns try to promote.

Through marketing languages and tools (brochures, internet communication, video, advertisement), the brand Zona Tortona and Zona Ventura and other similar (like as Brera Design District, Porta Romana etc) have tried to promote specific areas in the cities following processes of *self-recognition*. The same entrepreneurs who had the main role in the physical interventions of the areas, at a certain point of the process, identified the great potentialities linked both to urban transformation and construction of atmosphere able to attract new and different city users. This perception of potentially being a new area with a strong identity and a new centre linked to the design circuit, fed the branding campaign.

The promotion of the different Zones and the new images of those specific parts of the city is definitely linked to the *Fuorisalone* events. Without this frame the marketing of the areas have not had the same success.

But which is the relationship between branding campaigns and urban changes in these “zones”? Or, in other words, between "soft" transformations - mainly related to the logics of communication - and "hard" transformations of spaces and artefacts? Observing the case studies in Milano, we can recognize at least four different kinds of relationship that can help us in defining the role of *Fuorisalone* events, and the urban images it promotes, in the process of urban transformation.

a. Synergy

In the case of Zona Tortona, and to some extent also for Zona Ventura, the definition of the brand is coming up at some point in the process of "hard" transformation. The historical reconstruction of the events (Giuliani, 2010) shows how the same entrepreneurs who have settled with their activities in those areas invited media professionals to devise marketing strategies and to promote in those spaces the localization of events related to *Fuorisalone* while the process of transformation in neighbouring areas continued to involve other lots. This seems to outline a relationship that could be considered *overlapping and mutual influence* between transformations of spaces and uses and a new image. An image - apparently linked to the events, the presence of creative industries and addressed mainly at a specific kind of user - that tried to super-impose to the district, also facilitating the process of further concentration of activities, which take place simultaneously.



Figure 6. *Zona Tortona, Fuorisalone 2010*; Figure 7. *Brera Design District, Fuorisalone 2013*
Figure 8. *Mecenate Area Design, Fuorisalone 2013*

b. Framework

A second kind of relationship between transformations and branding strategies is the one that we can recognize observing Brera or Porta Venezia. Even here, the *Fuorisalone* has arrived and communication agencies have created the brand “Brera design district”. These histories and places are totally different from the previous ones. The transformation of an historical area of the city centre in a venue for showrooms, mainly concerns the internal structure of the building’s ground floor. (done by big design firms, although the localization in "downtown" is not directly linked to the economic size of different actors). In these areas, the attempt of *Fuorisalone* to build the image and the brand of new zones or design districts proposing new urban identities is limited to the period of Design Week and overlaps with other urban images of those places. The relationship between spatial transformations and brand building – here more than anywhere else temporary and overlaid on a more rooted urban image – takes on other forms. In Brera, in particular, the brand “Brera Design District” arrived when the concentration of these creative activities and its role as a central area in the itineraries of *Fuorisalone* was already well established. The brand is just a *frame* set up “ex post” succeeding processes that have followed other paths, a label that does not seem to have played a role in the "hard" transformation process. It is worth noting, however, that it has been useful for the actors, firms and entrepreneurs present in Brera to connect themselves to this brand (being and communicating that even Brera is a “design district”), practising a sort of self-recognition as a geographical area, and making a kind of communication "alignment" to other zones.

c. Feeble attempts

In other situations this relationship between hard transformations that can attract the concentration of similar functions and making a new brand for the area is struggling to foster synergies or to have "success" from the point of view of the construction of new urban imagery. It happens for several reasons: because the transformations are recent and therefore not yet ripe, and because of the lower number of transformation areas involved in the processes. One of the strengths of the cases mentioned above was precisely the fact that they are placed in partially peripheral urban sectors but with a great potential for transformation, which was subsequently recognized by other operators who decided to invest there creating these sort of “urban creative concentrations”.

The areas close to via Mecenate in the east part of the city, or the areas close to the *Fabbrica del Vapore* in the west part are both examples of situations where some interesting “hard” transformations happened (done by private investors in the first case and by the municipality in the second one), followed by equally interesting attempts to build a territorial brands. However, they still struggle to take root or to go beyond inefficient communication projects. Branding strategies arrived after the physical transformations of some specific ex industrial buildings, being clearly inspired by models that have been successful elsewhere. But here, at the moment, they still are isolated episodes, and the branding attempts to promote a new image of the area seems ineffective.

d. Anticipation

Another mode is the one that we can finally recognize in Porta Romana. Here we find an urban environment in which various transformations of former industrial buildings have taken place over the years. The interventions are characterized by the presence of activities related mainly to fashion (which has a traditionally different impact on the city, compared to design). The interventions on ex industrial buildings are strongly introverted as the Foundation Prada, Etro, etc. (Botti, 2012) and often are not able to change the nature of public space out of the period of events. The attempt of *Fuorisalone* to establish a Zona Porta Romana appears in this case as a weak attempt to create a network of some functions already present in a neighbourhood not well characterized by the presence of design related activities. In these cases the promotional dimension looks like an attempt of *anticipation* of possible uses, with the belief to make more evident some potentialities not yet taken.

Final remarks and research agenda

The relationships between urban marketing strategies related to the events of the *Fuorisalone* and the way in which the areas in Milan mentioned above have been transformed in spaces and uses over the last 30 years are different and allow us to suppose different roles of branding strategies, "behind" and "beyond" the physical transformation of the city entertaining relationships of mutual influence, indifference, or attempts to trigger a new imagination with different levels of effectiveness.

In the more consolidated cases (Tortona, Ventura and Brera) where the number of visitors during the Design Week is high and the image promoted by branding strategies in the common discourse (and in tourist guides) is established, the relationship is, in the first case, of *synergy* with the transformations in progress, playing an active role in having fuelled the process of "creative urban concentration"; in the second case, the relationship is of *confirming* an already established identity and little is added to on going urban transformation processes related to the physical dimension of buildings. In the cases that are still under development, the deployment of branding strategies appear not entirely successful to entrench new "vocations" in urban imagination, fuelling new images of the district. Firstly, they start from individual buildings and venues of creative activities that are still quite isolated, and secondly because they try to build networks between functions in the hope that branding can work as an engine for further transformations.

It is worth repeating that the case of building the brand of Zona Tortona in Milan has worked as a model to be replicated and that others have taken it as a reference.

Despite the differences of location and situation, what is common to all these cases, however, although the role and the position is different in the process, is the need for *self-recognition* - expressed by actors - of a synthetic label capable of conveying the name within certain circuits. By shifting the emphasis not only from activities to the districts -allowing different and complementary functions like shops, restaurants or houses to adapt themselves to the dominant image promoted - but also by moving from an *image* that covers the entire city (Bruzzese 2004) to a more *localized one*, involving specific areas and by adopting new promotional languages. Brands are "situated", linked to a network of streets that identifies neighbourhoods or "zones".

The role of these promotional strategies is certainly linked to the *Fuorisalone* and to a set of initiatives that have made some parts of the city the stage and/or the showcase of different events. In the last 15 years of the *Fuorisalone*, exponential success and growth have occurred, amplifying not only the activities promoted but also the places where these events take place. To some extent, these activities and new uses have also changed the geography of urban centres albeit temporarily.

This indeed fuels the difference between the ordinary city of daily life and the extraordinary city, the one of events. As known, the images promoted by branding strategies help to build those that 15 years ago Giuseppe Dematteis (1995) called "external images", directed not so much to those who live in places but rather those who use them for different reasons. The relationship between external and internal images, between the ordinary and extraordinary city, and the coexistence of these two often-conflicting dimensions still remains an open problem.

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