

1. On the post-war Italian design network: challenges for a 21st-century widespread heritage

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1.1 Reimagining post-war heritage

Stemming from the 1980s Italian debate on cultural heritage and environment, and the concurrent discussion concerning industrial heritage, this essay seeks to re-evaluate the traditional concept of cultural heritage. It aims to explore how this concept can be expanded to encompass Italian design heritage, particularly the narrative of post-World War II production, which has profoundly shaped the country's landscape.

Current circumstances necessitate adopting a broader perspective, especially in light of legislative measures such as the declaration of historical and artistic interest outlined in the *Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape* (Legislative Decree 42/2004, as amended by Law 136/2023). This legislation encompasses items over 70 years old, including those from the post-war era, notably objects from the 1950s. This complex subject spans our past, present, and future, compelling cultural practitioners – such as scholars and curators within traditional institutions like galleries, libraries, archives and mu-

seums – to assume a crucial role. They must safeguard and promote new forms of art and expression, offering fresh insights into the *ordinary* objects that populate our lives as integral components of collective memory. Moreover, they must adopt updated practices for the preservation and enjoyment of these artifacts, within the framework of sustainable development.

1.2 Preserving and sharing heritage

While the concept of industrial archaeology was forged in the United Kingdom in the 1950s, the discussion on widespread heritage in a mutable post-industrial society in France led to the concept of the eco-museum in 1971. This concept built on the idea of the museum without walls by museologist Georges Henri Rivière (1897-1985) and subsequent experiences by archaeologist and museologist Hugues de Varine (b. 1935). It was only years later that archaeologist Andrea Carandini (b. 1937) put forth the notion of industrial archaeology as the material culture of capitalist societies (Carandini, 1978), spurred by such growing interest in industrial heritage. Henceforth, economic and architectural historians went on to found the Italian Association for Industrial Archaeological Heritage (AIPAI) in 1997, in association with the International Committee for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage (TICCIH). These bodies, commendable for their contribution to broadening our understanding of the recent past, have primarily addressed *monumental* emergencies, such as architectural vestiges failing to restore their complex history, as part of an intertwined process of production, distribution and consumption connected to the social and historical conditions in which they developed. In 2008, the Council of Europe made a valuable effort to embrace a more comprehensive perspective by including the European Route of Industrial Heritage (ERIH) in the list of European cultural routes. As a result, European countries' industrial histories and milestones were brought to the attention of citizens, forming part of a shared narrative.

However, these commendable actions need to be reconsidered when discussing the realm of design, especially Italian design.

As early as 1972, the celebrated exhibition *Italy, the New Domestic Landscape*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, emphasized Italian design as a cultural phenomenon extending beyond commercial trends. One could envision it within the history lineage as a *museo diffuso* or *widespread museum* (Emiliani, 1985), embracing ordinary people, professionals, architectures, factories, archives, museums and places. Such expression underlines the idea that Italian cultural heritage is not confined to traditional conservation institutions – e.g., archives, libraries and museums – but it is deeply embedded in everyday life in cities, towns and the countryside. The interconnection of these components could help us understand it from a broader perspective, reminding us how design history transcends (administrative and geographical) boundaries, leaving a mark on our society and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950). In 1974, art historian Andrea Emiliani (1931-2019) highlighted the inherent contradiction between the need to protect Italy's widespread artistic heritage and its vibrant presence in everyday life and connection with the territory (Emiliani, 1974). Such aporia could extend to the design universe, with particular emphasis on post-war Italian design, which combines traditional craftsmanship and modern aesthetics in an eternal tension between one-off pieces and small series.

Building on the importance of 1950s production for Italy's economic, political and social resurgence, and the forging of a renewed identity on the post-WWII world stage, expositions such as *Il Design Italiano degli Anni '50* (Milan 1981), *Anni Cinquanta* (Milan 2005), and *Il Modo Italiano* (Montreal-Toronto-Rovereto 2006-2007) showcased Italian design. These exhibitions highlighted its aesthetic values and complexities, presenting a creative universe deeply entrenched within the country's tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Fuelled by a widespread network of artisans, manufacturers, artists, craftspeople, designers and architects, Italian design built on a solid relationship with the territory. Highlighting these distinctive connections, design historian and academician Giampiero Bosoni noted how the history of Italian design emerged from small groups of designers and entrepreneurs collaborating in artisans' workshops, small and medium-sized companies, cultural salons, and art galleries (Bosoni, 2006).

Architect and designer Andrea Branzi expressed such peculiar circumstances in this way:

this seeming general weakness, this ever-broken modernity, this relationship with a small to medium-sized industrial fabric, this continuity with handicraft practices and with a historical memory that has never been completely abandoned, have laid the grounds for developing a unique local model of cooperation between companies and design, between technological research and linguistic experimentation, between the universe of the fractioned markets and the ability to produce small runs, and the relevance of experiences based on values such as the concrete community and the territory... excellent conditions to work in post-industrial markets and in a global world (Annichiarico and Branzi, 2009, p. 155).

This inherent complexity poses obstacles but also presents a unique opportunity when addressing historicized objects and determining the best ways to display and narrate their story to a wide audience.

1.3 On the many narratives of Italian design: new trends

Over time, the distinctive nature of design pieces, which encompass aesthetic and technical aspects, naturally led them to appeal to different types of institution. They transcended disciplinary boundaries, finding their place in museums dedicated to decorative arts (often seen as precursors to modern design items), design museums (within a sectorial narrative), science and technology museums (for their technical features), or industrial museums (as part of the progression of mass production) (Bulegato and Dalla Mura, 2022).

Nowadays, corporate museums further advance the storage of historical memory, building on early experiences from the 1950s (for a survey on this with a focus on Italian museums, see Amari, 1997). By combining cultural, commercial and promotional aspects,

these museums exhibit the industrial and cultural heritage of individual companies. Through their own narrative, they also reflect a collective memory.

In 2001, many of these museums in Italy joined forces under Museimpresa, the Italian Association of Business Archives and Corporate Museums, with the support of Assolombarda and Confindustria (the Italian Entrepreneurial Association). This collaborative effort has indeed been instrumental in showcasing the history of Italian production to a broader audience. However, the network remains fragmented in both space and time, lacking a cohesive narrative. Despite some exceptions, this network fails to fully reflect how industrial culture and its products, many of which are considered iconic Italian pieces, have influenced the lives of ordinary people, becoming integral to individual and collective memory, as well as their impact on territories and local communities.

Building on new trends in museums, which are increasingly open to reshuffling and refreshing their collections every 2-3 years to offer multiple narratives (Bishop, 2013), in 2023, the ADI (Association for Industrial Design) Design Museum in Milan presented in its multi-functional venue an original attempt to stitch individual stories into a comprehensive storyline, featuring a chronicle of projects which have won the Compasso d'Oro award (established in 1954 by celebrated architect Gio Ponti).

Figure 1.
Milan, ADI Design
Museum, Showcase of
objects awarded prizes
in 1954, Milan 2023.
Photo by Paola Cordera.



Furthermore, Milan's Triennale Design Museum has innovated by extending its exhibition arena in original ways. Since its inception, it has endeavoured to expand beyond its historical walls with the inauguration of the TBVS Triennale Bovisa (2006-2011) – designed as a temporary exhibition space while the Triennale's headquarters underwent significant renovations – and the opening of a satellite location at the Milan Linate Air Terminal in 2021, showcasing objects from the Triennale collection to an international audience. More recently, as part of an extensive restoration project of its historical headquarters in the Palazzo dell'Arte, the museum inaugurated a new space called *Cuore* (Heart). *Cuore* serves as a Research, Study and Archives Centre, aiming to share the Triennale's archives, library and collections with a broader audience, including people, professionals, scholars, academics and the scientific community. This initiative provides access to historical documents and unveils behind-the-scenes stories, while fostering connections with new audiences and offering participatory experiences (Simon, 2010). Through such efforts, the Triennale aims to establish a closer relationship with stakeholders, signalling a growing disintermediation in the research process (Hvenegaard Rasmussen, Rydbeck and Larsen, 2022).



Figure 2.
Milan, Triennale Design Museum, Cuore, Showcase with wooden models of objects, architectures, and devices created by model-maker Giovanni Sacchi, Milan 2024. Photo by Paola Cordera.

Such practices demonstrate how design museums in Italy employ diverse strategies to share their heritage with the public, with the aim of educating, inspiring, and fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and history. However, they also underscore the dominant persistence of a top-down approach (for a critical look at different approaches, cf. Sabatier, 1986).

1.4 Different approaches for new times

As is well known, the closure of museum sites due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced an extensive digital transformation of museums. Social distancing measures posed unprecedented challenges, prompting the exploration of digital tools, expansion of online and distance learning (ODL) strategies, and creation of digital resources to engage with audiences (Agostino, Arnaboldi and Lampis, 2020; Luck and Sayer, 2023). This shift to digital accelerated the process of digitizing museums and archives, resulting in the construction of databases, collections and digital archives to offer a wide range of educational resources and experiences to diverse audiences. By providing access to their collections in digital formats, curators are tasked with processes of remediation, which involve interactive engagement and exchanging experiences with audiences through social networking platforms.

It is widely acknowledged that the future of museums in a post-pandemic world hinges on their efforts to maintain the institution's appeal by offering a combination of physical, digital and virtual experiences. Aligned with the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) new definition (Prague, 2022), museums are striving to provide meaningful *traditional* on-site experiences while leveraging digital technologies to enhance accessibility, engagement, and sustainability both online and onsite, for the benefit of broader community participation.

This shift emphasizes engaging experiences for education, enjoyment, and knowledge sharing, particularly in the realm of design cultural heritage.

For example, valuable practices have emerged from the history

of the Olivetti firm. The inclusion of Ivrea – the cradle of the celebrated company – in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites List 2018 revitalized broad interest in Olivetti's industrial, architectural and social heritage. In 2022, the Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti (Olivetti Historical Archive Association) launched the *La mia Olivetti* (My Olivetti) project, an initiative aimed at recording, collecting and conserving the *voices* of the Olivetti community. Individuals participated by sharing interviews recounting personal memories of the Olivetti company's history in Italy and worldwide. These videos were then integrated into the online Olivetti historical heritage. This approach allowed ordinary people to actively engage in cultural processes, drawing upon individual memories while recognizing, constructing and sharing a collective narrative (Becattini, 2013). Such efforts embody the observations of economic historian Augusto Ciuffetti (2013–2014), who emphasizes the importance of connecting not only with those who designed buildings or worked inside factories, but also with all those who contribute to the shared history of industrial sites. By doing so, works evoke emotions that contribute to the narrative of a place, a factory, and a community, enriching the understanding of their heritage in ways that traditional surveys cannot achieve.

In this context, by 2022, the program *Welc-Home to MyHouse*, fostered by territorial administrations and national institutions, promotes a series of events such as guided tours and conferences to valorize the private and industrial building heritage of Olivetti's history. Historical sites open to a broader audience on selected weekends, involving the participation of residents who live within the UNESCO site. Landlords and homeowners welcome visitors, actively promoting the heritage. These practices enhance community engagement and contribute to the promotion and preservation of heritage sites through the development of sustainable, environmentally friendly practices tailored to specific contexts. They offer the possibility of boosting local economic growth, by shifting from a mere appreciation of objects to offering memorable experiences within the context of the *experience economy* (Pine and Gilmore, 2019). They connect communities with an awareness of the relevance of intertwined stories of art, industry, design and entrepreneurship, boosting a collective narrative for the future (Edmond 2020; for further repercussions on Italian soil,

cf. Bettiol, 2015). Additionally, they represent a concrete attempt to contribute to a broader circulation of national and international tourist flows directed towards Italy's artistic and manufacturing heritage. By offering valuable *slow tourism* experiences, inspired by Carlo Petrini's 1980s Slow Food philosophy (for connections with the tourism field, cf. Lowry and Lee, 2016), this approach aims to reduce tourist congestion in popular major cities like Rome, Milan, Venice and Florence. Instead, it focuses on addressing lesser-known destinations, thereby fostering sustainable tourism principles, including more equitable distribution of tourist flows, and responsible travel practices that minimize negative impacts on the environment, heritage sites and local communities, by aligning with the United Nations targets in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Promoting the Italian design heritage could benefit from a systemic approach that harnesses the country's cultural heritage, *terroir* beauty – including its social, cultural, and physical environment – culinary traditions, and local identities. Such an approach builds on the powerful force of Italian design for social cohesion and inclusiveness.

The benefits of networking in cultural domains have already been demonstrated in projects such as the *Basilicata 2019 Cultural Park* project, which leveraged literary parks networking to increase tourism opportunities and improve the quality of life for locals (Colangelo, 2017). Similarly, the Umbria Regional Museum System has been lauded as «the most successful and innovative form of large-scale sharing of strategies, services, organizational structures, cultural policies, scientific content and administrative and technical equipment» (Montella, 2014).

A systemic approach that integrates collective cultural heritage with the objectives of cultural institutions could greatly enhance the preservation and promotion of the historical heritage of design. The recent regulation for the reorganization of the Ministry of Culture reflects an awareness of the complexity of the issues at hand. The Ministry has been divided into four departments: the Department for General Administration, the Department for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, the Department for the Enhancement of Cultural Heritage, and the Department for Cultural Activities. Additionally, there has been a consolidation of the technical and scientific commit-

tees for archaeology, fine arts and landscape into a single committee (on the benefit of such a reorganization, cf. Carandini, 2023).

However, implementing actions can be complex, particularly when historical brands and collections or corporate museums serve as communication assets for operating companies, as exemplified by the Ferragamo Museum in Florence. These challenges are not unique to Italy, as demonstrated by Gril-Mariotte and Cousserand-Blin (2023) in France. The complexity is further compounded when considering design objects, given their integration into the collective imagination and their aspirational nature, especially in the case of luxury goods. Many Italian design pieces have become fixtures in our homes and pantries, and they possess the ability to communicate their stories, which then become intertwined with our own and those of our friends.

By drawing inspiration from the past and incorporating it into contemporary practices, communities can contribute to a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between human societies and the environment. Such an approach stands to benefit both culture and business alike.

1.5 Conclusion

The exploration of post-war Italian design heritage challenges us to expand our traditional notions of cultural heritage. Legislation recognizing the historical significance of objects from this era underscores the need to incorporate design artifacts into broader narratives of collective memory and social history. Cultural practitioners play a pivotal role in safeguarding and promoting these artifacts, necessitating updated preservation practices within sustainable development frameworks.

Traditional approaches to preserving and sharing heritage often prioritize monumental emergencies over comprehensive historical narratives. However, Italian design heritage, deeply embedded in everyday life, requires a more inclusive approach. Recent innovations in design museums signal a shift towards more holistic storytelling. Yet, challenges persist in achieving cohesive narratives and engaging diverse audiences effectively.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of museums, prompting the adoption of digital tools and online engagement strategies. This shift underscores the importance of maintaining physical, digital and virtual experiences to enhance accessibility and engagement. Leveraging digital technologies facilitates the dissemination of cultural heritage while providing opportunities for interactive engagement and community participation. Some initiatives highlighted the importance of community engagement in preserving and promoting heritage. By fostering local participation, and offering memorable experiences, these actions contribute to sustainable tourism practices and equitable distribution of tourist flows. They also align with broader sustainable development goals, promoting social cohesion and inclusiveness.

Integrating collective cultural heritage with the objectives of cultural institutions can enhance the preservation and promotion of design heritage. Networking initiatives demonstrate the potential for collaborative approaches to heritage preservation. However, challenges remain, particularly regarding the communication assets of historical brands and corporate museums, necessitating careful navigation of commercial interests within cultural preservation efforts.

In conclusion, preserving and promoting post-war Italian design heritage requires a multifaceted systemic approach that incorporates inclusive narratives, digital engagement, community involvement and sustainable tourism practices. By embracing these strategies, we can ensure the continued appreciation and relevance of Italian design heritage in the 21st century.

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