Why *Design Philology*? Re-reading the past to understand the present and imagine the future

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Two years ago, as we began to contemplate the upcoming 30th anniversary of our School of Design, we asked ourselves a simple question: *how can we meaningfully celebrate such a milestone?*

Celebrating 30 years of our School of Design meant not only confronting questions about our future and the challenges that lie ahead, but also, inevitably, looking back on our past to reflect on the challenges already faced and the paths that have been forged. Suspended in this emblematic state, which Walter Benjamin poignantly described in his famous essay inspired by Paul Klee's renowned painting *Angelus Novus*, symbolizing the angel of history flying forward while gazing back, we conceived this ambitious program of archiving and philological reflection, which was named *Design Philology*.

Let us begin with a fundamental axiom: without history, there is no future. This principle, imparted to us by our mentors, may seem self-evident, yet it bears repeating, as it is all too often overlooked.

Such a straightforward statement may, to some, sound like a platitude, offering little in substance. For this reason, certain clarifications may be necessary; first and foremost, history is not merely a collection

of dates, names, and places to be memorized – though without these, nothing can truly be defined. Rather, history is the flow and intertwining of countless events, diverse narratives, or, more accurately, varied experiences. These experiences are lived not only by a few key figures but are shared, in various roles – active or passive, positive or negative – by all involved.

In this sense, history demands not only knowledge but, above all, awareness and a deeper consciousness of these intertwined narratives. It involves embracing the fact that there is not a single history but rather multiple histories, all interwoven on various levels. With a shared foundation of the most objective data, these perspectives can be dialectically discussed, allowing them to intersect and inform one another. These foundational principles guided our journey into history – a history composed of many stories – that has shaped and accompanied the School of Design since its inception 30 years ago. Thanks to this historical reflection, we believe the School can now look toward the future with even greater confidence and momentum.

The first Bachelor's Degree Program in Industrial Design in Italy, and one of the few formally established in European universities, was inaugurated at Politecnico di Milano in October 1993.

Seemingly late compared to internationally renowned initiatives – the early Bauhaus School (1919-1933) and the Ulm School (1953), both German, the latter closer to us not only in time – the Milanese school of design, however, has roots dating back to the debates of the 1920s and 1930s. It emerged from a strong foundation in the polytechnic culture of design inherent to our University and the entrepreneurial spirit of the city. Within the Faculty of Architecture, from the early 1960s onward, the first courses in *Progettazione Artistica per l'Industria* [Artistic Design for Industry] were launched, with renowned designers such as Achille Castiglioni, Alberto Rosselli, and Marco Zanuso taking on the role of university professors.

This 30-year history has supported the growth of the discipline across many universities in Italy and the recognition of design as a fundamental feature of Italian culture, a key component in the development and success of the country's manufacturing system, and its broader socio-cultural framework. By the early 2000s, a true *Design System* had taken shape at Politecnico di Milano, with the establish-

ment of the first Bachelor's Program in 1993, followed by the Faculty of Design in 2000 (now School of Design), a dedicated Department of Design in 2001, and the POLI.design Consortium in 1999, integrating teaching, research, and the promotion of continuing education and innovation.

Over the last decade, Politecnico di Milano's Design System has achieved international acclaim, consistently ranking among the top ten design schools worldwide (QS Ranking by Subject). This recognition is the outcome of a developmental trajectory in which, alongside its deep roots in Italian design culture, Politecnico di Milano's School of Design stands out for its capacity to explore cutting-edge topics, pioneering research and educational fields that have since gained a solid international foothold.

It must also be noted that this story did not simply spring up 30 years ago within our Politecnico; as mentioned earlier, its roots reach deep and coherently into the fertile soil of the polytechnic culture of this institution. This realization led us to trace these roots back through the significant events and influential figures who, from the mid-1960s onward, cultivated and shaped the culture of design within Politecnico di Milano – and, undeniably, throughout the city, the surrounding region, and the country as a whole-quickly earning admiration and numerous international accolades.

This premise inspired the *Design Convivio* exhibition, curated by myself and Paola Bertola, conceived as an interactive installation within the *Design Philology* project, which, as intended, literally *materializes* the origins of the institutionalization of design at Politecnico di Milano.

As we noted, history is never singular, fixed, or unchangeable; it is always a space for open, rational, and critical discourse on events, stories, and historical contexts. Our *Design Philology* archive, therefore, is designed to be a dynamic, ever-evolving structure. By collecting materials, documents, data, but above all, experiences and new in-depth, critical interpretations, we strive to uncover all paths and traces of our history. We hope that through this *philological* and historical reflection, we may draw the vital essence of a design culture that has consistently engaged critically with the pivotal shifts in its evolution.

All of this is undertaken with the goal of identifying the foundational elements that constitute an ideal red thread of our identity, now at the

core of a solid, thriving trunk, sustained by strong and extensive roots. From this trunk, powerful branches have already sprouted, with new offshoots poised to emerge – forming a great *Design Philology* tree of Design Culture, nurtured within the dialectical and stimulating enclosure of the polytechnic culture.

In this regard, the volume presents the research conducted over recent years that led to the launch of the *Design Philology* program. The first section showcases the collective effort of reflection and planning focused on honoring the history of the Design System at Politecnico di Milano. From the outset, historical and philological reconstruction was accompanied by a deep consideration of archiving, representing, and narrating the interwoven stories uncovered. The result is an open project: a digital archive, an editorial framework, and a platform for temporary exhibitions and hypertextual narratives – a multifaceted system reflecting the identity of Italian design and its polytechnic dimension, embracing diverse perspectives and often dialectical contributions in both theoretical-critical and practical design realms.

Following a theoretical introduction to the entire enhancement project by Paola Bertola and Agnese Rebaglio, the first part includes chapters on the relationship between archiving and a history in progress (Marco Quaggiotto and Walter Mattana); a communication project for an identity (Umberto Tolino, Andrea Manciaracina, Laura Carugati); the possibility of expanding the archive into a system of multiple narratives (Marco Quaggiotto, Arianna Priori); explorations of phygital applications in interactive exhibitions (Barbara Camocini, Raffaella Trocchianesi); an investigation into the historical foundations of design culture at Politecnico di Milano (Giampiero Bosoni and Marta Elisa Cecchi) and reflections on their exhibition potential (Ico Migliore).

The second part of the volume is dedicated to recounting some of the stories that form the complex identity of the Design System. Starting with a reconstruction of the polytechnic origins of the first Bachelor's Degree in Industrial Design (by Antonella Penati and Agnese Rebaglio), the chapters explore the evolution of doctoral research (Eleonora Lupo and Clorinda Sissi Galasso), teaching in the School of Design (Anna Meroni and Andrea Manciaracina), and the connections between the Design System and local and international contexts (Luisa Collina and Davide Fassi).