

## 2. Memories and documents: a digital archive for a history under construction

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### 2.1 A shared platform for memories and documents

Conceived on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Department of Design, [Design Philology. Platform](#) → [Design Philology](#) is a collaborative endeavor to reflect, commemorate, and celebrate the history of design at Politecnico



di Milano. Beyond the anniversary context, however, the project contributes to design research with a meaningful experience and with the experimentation in the design of a digital platform for gathering, describing, and organizing the many elements that contribute to the development of a design tradition, a community, and an institution. As its name implies, the project aims to be a reconstructive effort. By collecting, studying, and interpreting documents, written records, and partial artifacts, it seeks to shape the network of personal, professional, and institutional histories that collectively form the overarching history of design at the Politecnico di Milano. These narratives include the genesis of an ecosystem centered around design culture, leading

to the establishment of a School, Department, and Consortium; the portrayal of the visions and identities crafted by key figures within this ecosystem, which have significantly influenced the pedagogical and research paradigms; and the exploration of various ideas and themes that have been developed and refined through academic research, teaching, and practical application.

This conceptual framework, which encompasses a chronicle of events, relationships, and interactions that have left indelible marks on the cultural landscape, defines a precise commitment to documenting and contextualizing history, manifests itself in the creation of an open digital archive system designed not only for preservation but also for the collection, description, and interrelation of materials. This makes the heritage accessible to new generations of researchers and designers within the Politecnico di Milano and a global community, creating a dynamic channel for ongoing dialog and discovery in the design field.

To express and sustain this vision, the *Design Philology* group at the Department of Design of the Politecnico di Milano set out to develop an archive structure in line with the fundamental principles of their project. This structure aims to embody the dynamic and evolving nature of design by facilitating a digital infrastructure that allows for a considerable degree of flexibility, allowing the project to adapt over time while maintaining its core objectives.

Technologically, this digital infrastructure is designed to serve the needs of a project in constant development. This involves, on the one hand, the creation of a system that would allow for the collaborative management of entries and documents, ensuring that multiple contributors could seamlessly interact with and update the archive, and on the other, the design of an infrastructure that could be expanded both by allowing for the inclusion of a growing collection of items and by anticipating future adaptations to evolving types of content and descriptors. This extensibility, essential for the evolution of the archive's descriptive capabilities, also facilitates a degree of technological portability and flexibility, making sure that technology choices do not constrain the architecture of the archive itself.

From a conceptual point of view, the aims of the archive are distinctly human-centric, focusing on capturing the relational and personal dimensions of the history of design at Politecnico di Milano. From

this perspective, the archive is not intended to be a mere repository of documents, but a living record of pivotal moments, key actors, and central themes that have shaped the trajectory of design education and practice at the institution. This includes documenting the inception of the first design courses, critical discussions surrounding curricular developments, and the individuals who have influenced the evolving vision of design at the university.

To this end, the archive is designed to integrate both formal documents and informal narratives to provide a holistic view of the history it seeks to preserve and share. This integration allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the past, highlighting not only the formal milestones but also the informal exchanges and personal stories that have contributed to the development of design culture. By encouraging critical analysis and reinterpretation of these documents and narratives, the archive promotes a deeper understanding of historical contexts; it encourages scholars and visitors alike to engage in an ongoing dialogue with the past, improving their awareness of the evolution of the design discipline and its impact on contemporary practices (Duff & Harris, 2002).

## 2.2 Events, people, documents and relations

In accordance with the overarching goals of the *Design Philology* project, two major decisions have been made with respect to the design of the digital infrastructure that would be used to collect the elements of this historical narrative.

First, the project devised a database structure capable of housing, in a single repository, detailed descriptions of the events, individuals, institutions, and groups integral to the story, along with the documents that support these narratives. This dual capability enables the database to function not only as a repository of information, but also as a contextual framework within which the historical narrative can be understood.

Secondly, considerable emphasis has been placed on the relationships within the database, treating them with as much importance

as the entities and documents themselves. This approach makes it possible to specify free relationships between any elements of the database, allowing users to freely define and describe the nature of these connections. Such a relational focus enhances the utility of the database by facilitating dynamic exploration of the interconnectedness of historical data, enhancing the understanding of these design micro-histories.

Building on these choices, the database itself is structured on two descriptive levels, effectively merging a Knowledge Base with an archival function, maintaining a deep connection as two facets of the same historical continuum. The Knowledge Base serves as the foundational layer, identifying key moments, key people, relationships, contexts, and data. This layer ensures that each data point is not only stored, but also integrated into a coherent historical fabric that reflects the interconnected nature of design trajectories and cultural transformations.

Conversely, the archive layer collects the documentation of these key moments, exploring their content and form in depth and substantiating them with an array of artifacts and memories. This archival function provides the physical evidence necessary to support the abstract relationships and historical claims posited in the Knowledge Base, presenting the human narratives that lie at the root of academic and institutional histories.

Also, relationships emerge as a fundamental aspect of this database structure, linking not only entities to documents, but also documents and entities to each other. This bidirectional relational dynamic – where events and relationships are *documented* by materials, content, and testimony – makes history not only accessible, but also explorable. Scholars engaging with this database can trace the evolution of cultural shifts, examine the changing dynamics between individuals, institutions, and ideas, and explore thematic continuities and disciplinary developments, thereby fostering a more comprehensive and participatory understanding of design history.

### **2.2.1 Knowledge layer: actors and nodes in a history of design**

In designing the knowledge layer within the *Design Philology* database, a systematic approach was used to capture and describe the diverse elements that make up the institution's design history. More specific-

ly, the database groups these elements into entities that represent a class of content, each of which serves as a repository for data specific to its domain.

- *People*: this entity encapsulates individuals who have played significant roles in shaping the design landscape at the Politecnico di Milano, including faculty members, visiting designers, and distinguished alumni. Attributes stored for each individual include names, roles, contributions, affiliations, and related records. This entity is essential in connecting individuals to specific contributions, events, and the broader documentary evidence that supports their historical significance.
- *Groups and institutions*: representing collections of individuals or organizational bodies, this entity includes departments, laboratories, and research groups that have significantly influenced the design discourse at the institution. The comprehensive description of these groups includes not only their structural and functional aspects, but also their impact on the development of design education and practice.
- *Events*: this entity records significant events and time periods that have marked the history of the department, such as the introduction of new courses, departmental activities including lectures, exhibitions, workshops, and other notable milestones. Each event is documented with the aim to provide a chronological account of the main milestones and the significant events.
- *Relations*: serving as a dynamic connector within the database, this table allows for articulating relationships between different entities, such as people, events, groups/institutions, and documents. The flexibility of this entity allows for the specification of the nature and duration of each relationship, providing a nuanced understanding of the interactions within the design community. For example, the Person-Group relationship can detail not only a person's membership in a group, but also their specific role and the duration of their involvement.

This layered structure of the knowledge base not only ensures that each piece of data is embedded in a rich network of historical and contemporary relationships, but it also encourages the future integration of

additional elements that could enhance the network as a whole such as:

- *themes*: intended to encapsulate the key ideas or issues that have been explored within the design history of the institution, themes could range from specific design methodologies to broader cultural and societal issues that have informed the discipline's outlook and development;
- *data*: with the intent of capturing quantitative trends relevant to design history, data such as student enrollment statistics, faculty publications, or details of industry collaborations could be included in the database to provide context in terms of growth and development;
- *places*: with the goal of documenting the physical locations associated with the department's history, places such as buildings, lecture halls, and campuses could provide a spatial dimension to physically situate the historical narrative.

### **2.2.2 Documents layer: evidence for memories, elements for narratives**

The role of the documentary layer is to provide evidence and enhance the understanding of historical moments through a diverse collection of materials. This layer, deeply connected to the previous one, is essential in providing both a narrative and mnemonic function, capturing the multifaceted nature of design history through various forms of documentation.

As the archival component of the system, this database layer is designed to accommodate a wide range of materials, ranging from more formal documents such as academic papers and institutional reports, to less conventional communication items such as promotional materials and personal notes. This diversity extends to personal materials that offer insights into the individual experiences of people who have influenced or witnessed the development of design at the institution. Moreover, in addition to historical documents and materials, the archive is deliberately structured to include testimonies and first-hand accounts. These personal narratives provide a deeper insight into the events and experiences catalogued, offering layers of interpretation that go beyond the mere presentation of documents.

In order to reflect the heterogeneity of the materials contained in the archive, the database structure is developed to accommodate de-

scriptions that may vary significantly in depth and detail. This flexibility is essential as each item in the archive has its own unique narrative and historical significance, requiring a tailored approach to its documentation and interpretation. The ability to vary the depth of descriptions allows for a nuanced representation of each artifact, highlighting its individual context and contribution to the broader historical narrative.

Far from being an autonomous component, the archive is intimately connected to the knowledge layer, and their relationship is fundamental to the architecture of the *Design Philology* project. Each document in the archive – be it a formal document, an image, a personal anecdote, or a video – not only serves as a piece of evidence, but also functions as a narrative component that provides context and texture to the entities (people, events, groups, etc.) with which it is associated. This interplay between documents and entities encourages a dynamic historical narrative in which documents provide a tangible link to the past and entities provide the human, social and institutional contexts that frame these documents. Conversely, each entity gains depth from the documents relating to it, as these materials illuminate the background and conditions in which the entities operated or existed.

## 2.3 Documents: traces for memory and storytelling

In an archiving infrastructure defined as dynamic, implementable, and geared towards narration, the various activities of collecting, organizing, and studying the preserved documents must take into account the fundamental dimension of discourse, or as Foucault would say, of the statement, namely a conception of the archive as a place of discursive practices belonging to a community and an era (Foucault, 1980). In other words, it is about considering the fact that every material that becomes part of *Design Philology* – whatever its nature: documentary, textual, iconographic – not only represents a historical artifact to be preserved and transmitted but is destined to become, or to be able to become at a later time, part of a broader and more articulated narrative system. In this sense, even the examination of archival materials, the creation of contextual metadata, and their placement within the

Directus platform did not only respond to criteria of digital archiving but already worked in function of subsequent phases of interpretation and narrative elaboration.

At a more practical level, the documents collected in the initial phase of establishing the archive and implementing the platform can be divided into three main categories: digital documents from the *Archivi Storici di Ateneo* [University Historical Archives], printed materials produced by the School of Design in its first ten years, photographic and audiovisual documents.

### **2.3.1 From historical archives: an ever-present gaze from the past**

Regarding the historical materials deposited at the University, the request (coordinated by Maria Teresa Feraboli with the contribution of Vincenzo Ficco from the Historical Archives) focused mainly on documents related to the eight professors designated as protagonists of the *Convivio* exhibition – Franco Albini, Achille Castiglioni, Raffaela Crespi, Carlo De Carli, Gio Ponti, Alberto Rosselli, Vittoriano Viganò, Marco Zanuso – to which are added those of two other fundamental figures, those of Tomàs Maldonado and Maria Bottero. To complete the historical framework, extracts from the Student Guides' bulletins – in the period between 1962 and 1964 – were also found, among which the pages dedicated to the program of the first Artistic Design Course for Industry directed by Alberto Rosselli at the School of Architecture stand out: the first, real, act of foundation of the discipline of Design in our University and consequently the starting point of the narrative timeline of *Design Philology*.

It is a *corpus* of about four hundred digital documents of heterogeneous and sometimes fragmentary composition that required laborious examination of individual documents in order to identify the most relevant data and information both for correct placement within the Directus archival platform and for the subsequent phases of selection and processing of the material in function of the *Philology* website and the *Convivio* exhibition. Unlike the printed materials we will deal with later, their heterogeneity does not lie in their object nature – they are already digital files grouped by subject – but in their textual and sometimes iconographic content. In the folders of each individual teacher, there were, in a different way from each other, a



series of documents of the most varied, from strictly bureaucratic acts – service states, career transitions, ministerial decrees, competitions – to those concerning teaching and research activities – scientific reports, participation in conferences, teaching programs, faculty council minutes – up to the most personal testimonies – curricula and private correspondence, to the surprise of an original drawing by Gio Ponti presumably dating back to 1950 and dedicated to the Chancellor of Politecnico di Milano Gino Cassinis.

The task to face was therefore to explore all the papers made available to us not only to extract the data necessary for the exact placement in the digital archival platform but above all to bring out from the context of the individual document all the information capable of giving life to a historically narrative path; that is, to be able to read the various documents not only in their precious dimension of historical relic, of heirloom, but above all in their nature as fragments of a broader and more alive discourse that is completed only through the relationship with all the other fragments. In several cases, comparison with other documents allowed, as much as possible, the reconstruction of missing or not entirely explicit information, such as dates or subjects belonging to broader contexts, but not less important, such as the various ministers who have alternated in the Ministry of Education over the years or references to laws and decrees which, beyond the bureaucratic enunciation, always represent a moment of societal transformation.

In terms of a possible narration that intertwines the events of history with the more private ones of personal biographies, even the generally considered minor or even marginal details can instead turn out to be true *informants*: signs capable of providing explicit information that can be placed in time and space and within an already existing knowledge (Barthes, 1966). Elements through which we can complete and reveal passages otherwise unclear or incomplete, as often happens in excerpts from minutes, where it is often a detail placed in another document that reveals, even partially, the reasons for a discussion, a candidacy, or a scrutiny. But it is not only this. The examination of the original documents – even only in the form of digital copies – allows us to immerse ourselves in a historical context made of narrative suggestions through the contribution of all the signs present on the page, including those left by the passing of time. According to Barthes' func-

tional analysis (Barthes, 1966), the emergence of what are the clues of the narrative, or rather all those elements that refer to a character, a feeling, an atmosphere and that especially imply from the user a constant activity of decipherment. In this way, a signature, a handwritten note, the faded mark of a stamp, a passport photo applied in a corner, cease to appear to us as mere testimonies of a bureaucratic past now closed to become the iconic subjects of new and possible narrative experiences. Thus, the need is reiterated – within a project like that of *Design Philology* – to make the digitized archive visible, to allow the broader public to engage with a complete narrative experience and to allow scholars to reread and further recombine the informative and iconographic heritage of documents according to new interpretative strands.

### **2.3.2 From the school's cards: the paths of heterogeneity**

The archiving of publications produced by the School of Design required a different organizational approach, starting from the collection of printed materials which demanded a more thorough search for individual copies. Texts of this kind belong to the broad category that the collecting world, and not only, defines as *ephemera*: temporary publications destined for a short life and therefore not intended for preservation – periodicals, almanacs, programs, flyers, etc. (Twyman, 2000). In our case, there is also a deadline linked to the usefulness of the artifact itself; calendars and educational guides are replaced annually, invitations to exhibitions and events lose interest with the end of the initiatives they are associated with. The collection and initial cataloging of all this material had the purpose, first of all, of gathering and valorizing all the specimens still dispersed and poorly organized. The physical and objectual heterogeneity of these publications subsequently imposed the need to distinguish and group them according to distinct categories of formats – volumes, notebooks, brochures, leaflets, posters, and postcards – and subjects: student guides, educational regulations, academic calendars, educational paths, *Polimi Design System*, informative materials related to specific courses and masters or to specific events, such as *Open Lectures*, for a total of about 150 publications, including multiple copies. The organization of all the printed material recovered so far also responded to the need to

reconstruct with completeness the chronological continuity of publications, especially regarding those that were more strictly institutional and had a regular and punctuated succession over time.

As with documents from the historical archive, in this context too, the digitization of printed materials has allowed the creation of a textual and iconographic repository from which to draw to generate the thematic narratives that underlie *Design Philology*. Study material to reconstruct the history of design at Politecnico di Milano and its organizational, educational, and scientific developments, but also opportunities for reflection on the forms of self-representation elaborated over the decades by the School. Once again, a specific element, often hidden among the pages of a service publication, once placed within one of the dynamic narratives present on the website, changes its nature; a laboratory diagram, a group photo, the logo of a conference become true activators of memory, detached from their primary function and become part of a discourse that, while recounting the past, actually continues to reflect on its own narrative, on its own identity. An aspect that emerges strongly also in the pages of the website dedicated to the archive, crowded with scaled-down images that refer to the digital copies available online, but which is interesting even just to scroll through with the gaze, following the succession of different subjects to let oneself be suggested every time by a portrait, a cover, a text, the detail of a page, and perhaps start to think about another possible story to tell.

### **2.3.3 The iconographic contribution: between memory and testimony**

This brings us to the last of the three themes: the archiving of photographic and audiovisual images produced within the School of Design over the past few decades and their role within the *Design Philology*. From an iconographic perspective, the main contributions have naturally come from the LAB Immagine at the Bovisa campus, which has provided the entire photographic archive and has collaborated to various extents in the production of the audiovisual contributions on the website. Other iconographic documents (especially videos) have been provided by professors and offices that held copies, such as the video portraits produced for Honorary Degrees or those dedicated to Fran-

cesco Trabucco produced within the Communication Design laboratory directed by Marisa Galbiati, not to mention the precious VHS tape preserved by Antonella Penati regarding the coverage that the Super-Quark TV program dedicated to the School of Design.

In this regard, it is worth noting the – unfortunately predictable – observation of a lesser availability of video material compared to other forms of documentation; often reflecting a lower consideration of the value of audiovisual materials which, in this way – like ephemeral materials – risk disappearing or becoming invisible due to neglect or poor preservation. Conversely, it is within an open and dynamic archival structure that the testimonial value of iconographic contributions strongly emerges. A living testimony of the individuals who, in our case, have taught and worked in the School of Design through their portraits, gazes, expressions, and actual voices. Testimony of the activities that have marked and animated the history and life of this school. The considerations made so far in terms of relational contexts also apply to iconographic materials, especially regarding the reuse of audiovisual material in the form of fragments.

## References

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