3. Communication project. Expressing the evolution of a Design institution

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3.1 Memory and identity

Within the first 30 years since the inception of the first Degree Program in Industrial Design ↘ at Politecnico di Milano, there have been a succession of individuals, projects, students, and activities, often possessing their own communicative dimension. Within the Design System, there have been intellectual energies to develop over the years the distinctive elements of its communication, both internally and externally. Frequently, these have been outcomes of reflective practices underlying research and teaching activities (Bertola & Manzini, 2006), experimenting with modes and means to express the representative heterogeneity of a vast and articulated community.

This design journey has intersected various themes over time, generating multiple communicative outcomes, ranging from visual identity, promotion of cultural events, editorial composition of scientific publications, to communication campaigns in support of education and student services. Such experience laid the foundation for

the development of the visual identity of <u>Design Philology</u>, a project derived from the desire to celebrate the 3 decades of experimentation that led to the consolidation of the Design System at Politecnico di Milano, while simultaneously building a shared and collaborative online memory. The main component of *Design Philology* is indeed a digital archive, consisting of a wide variety of materials, heterogeneous in origin, type, support, and destination: official documents and acts, the aforementioned communicative outcomes, publications, photographs, student projects, video interviews, all comprise a panorama of fragments that offer a multifaceted and pluralistic account of the institution's history.

Design Philology. <u>Platform→</u>

From this idea of the fragment, intended as a *concrete trace* derived from the documentary collection that intercepted a broad community of faculty, researchers, and administrative technical staff, originates the *branding* project, consistent with the research objectives, which focuses on the investigation and application of innovative narrative modalities, based on hypertextual digital infrastructures, aimed at recomposing these individual elements into narrative aggregates of variable size and reading modes, making the extensive – and constantly growing – digital archive accessible to a wide audience.

3.2 The context

3.2.1 Communicating a public institution

The communication project for a public institution could be contextualized as the set of tools and actions that enable actors in the public sphere to relate to each other and collaborate synergistically for the common good (Faccioli, 2000) through symbolic activities capable of supporting their own viewpoint (Mancini, 2006) and thus transmitting their values.

In Paolo Mancini's *Manual of Public Communication* (2006), a possible classification of three distinct forms of public communication is outlined:

- *communication provided by public institutions:* this constitutes communication disseminated by public entities, aimed at clarifying the activities and functions of such institutions, improving their image, and disseminating legislative information;

- *political communication:* this variant originates from public institutions, political parties, or grassroots movements and focuses on disseminating content aimed at cultivating consensus;
- *social communication:* emerging from public, semi-public, or private entities, this form of communication is oriented towards generating public awareness regarding universally recognized social issues, the solutions to which are theoretically collectively shared.

The first form correlates with Faccioli's definition (2000) when discussing communication of institutional activities (making the public aware of the activities carried out) and communication for image promotion (highlighting the results achieved compared to the set objectives and the expectations of its target audience).

In the present chapter we are going to focus on this first form because, within *Design Philology* project, it was crucial to trace how the Design System at Politecnico di Milano narrated itself in its first 30 years or, as expressed by Falcinelli (2014), designed stories through visual language by means of communication modalities initiated internally, orchestrated and executed directly by the institution, which maintains control over its communication channels and disseminated messages, thus assuming responsibility for the resulting perceptions (Mancini, 2006).

3.2.2 The shape of communication for Design

Observing Design from a disciplinary perspective, it is necessary to move beyond a conception that tends to confine the term to a purely aesthetic dimension. To communicate Design in scientific and cultural terms, the use of attributive labels that precisely define its scope of study and application becomes essential. This connotation is crucial for delineating a field of interest, avoiding reductions and semantic distortions that would limit understanding and exploration (Bucchetti, 2000).

When communication extends beyond commercial promotion to encompass cultural and educational aspects, it highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of design practice. Given that sciences, more than ever, need to be communicated (Castelfranchi & Pitrelli, 2007), communication transfers the contents on which Design acts,

amplifying their effects; simultaneously, Design itself draws from the repertoire of languages, icons, and communicative processes to derive stimuli, articulating them in the various manifestations of the project (Martino, 2010).

3.2.3 The visual identity as multilayered narrative

The rapid evolution of digital technologies and the growing interest in data science (Manovich, 2023) have allowed communication design to expand its disciplinary horizon and enhance the communicative performance of its outcomes. Conceiving contemporary identity systems means creating adaptable *living organisms* that foster a more engaging and participatory dialogue with users (Guida, 2014b). This has led to the legitimization of multidirectional communication, emphasizing the distinctiveness of content and the sense of community. This perspective highlights the importance of integrated communication strategies, enriching the narrative by adapting it to different media (Ciastellardi, 2017).

Institutional communication has thus evolved the processes and interactions that occur at every level of an organization, extending from individual interactions to broader social contexts. This shift has moved away from the traditional metaphor of the container, instead emphasizing the complex and multifaceted nature of communication as a central activator of all activities, fostering a deep connection with the social dimension, in order to study peer influence, persuasive dynamics, and specific context understanding (Muhamad *et al*., 2019).

Communicating a system therefore means creating codes, languages, and products that are capable of conveying and reinforcing the values that constitute and determine the sense of identity of an entire community.

3.3 Design System at Politecnico di Milano

3.3.1 The subjects of communication

The Design System is an informal entity that groups together three subjects with substantially different purposes under the same disciplinary scope: the Department of Design aims to conduct its research

on nationally and internationally relevant topics, the School of Design provides university-level education, and POLI.design aims to offer post-graduate continuing education by guiding its students into the professional world. Keeping in mind the diverse specificities of these three subjects, we can refer to the *design system* as an organization composed of three distinct, complementary, and synergistic divisions. Subsequently, we will present some emblematic projects that traverse the visual identity of the three individual subjects and the system as a whole.

3.3.2 First website of the School of Design

The website of the School of Design has undergone numerous formal and content updates over time, constantly promoting the institution's identity to its students and the University. In its first version in 2002, emphasis was placed on the visual and interactive component of the project, which involved collaboration between designers and developers with the common goal of experimenting with some of the computer opportunities emerging at that time.

Operating within the visual identity framework dictated by the coordinated image rules of Politecnico di Milano, some elements were exploited to construct a kinetic and interactive graphic composition. The communicative style of this website was aimed at an audience interested in Design, which at the time was particularly attracted to innovative and dynamic television references. With these premises, the outcome of this initial

Figure 1.
The first website of the Faculty of Design, ADI Index 2002.
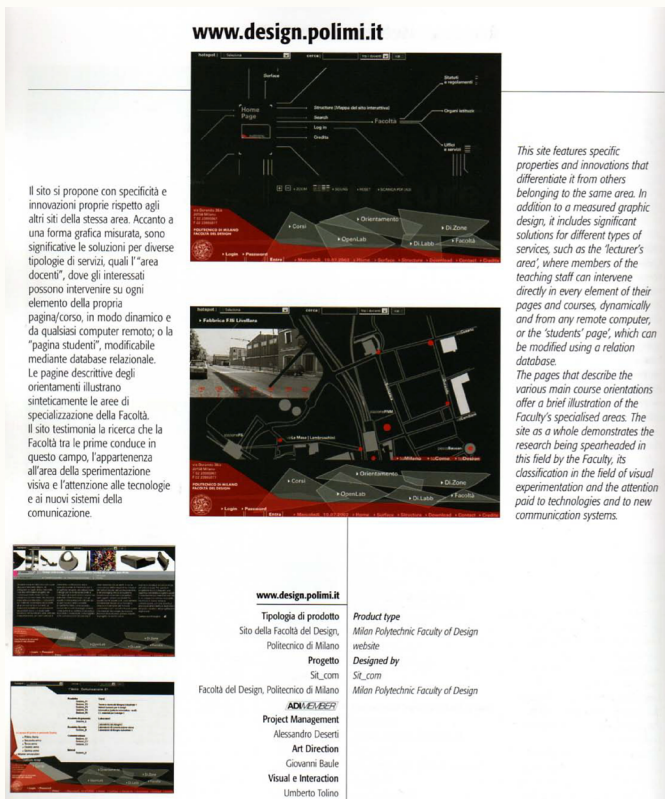
experimentation emerged as an institutional and highly recognizable communicative artifact, so much so that it was selected for the ADI Design Index in 2002.

3.3.3 Identity project for the Department of Design

Similarly to the School of Design, the visual identity of the Department of Design is also derived and regulated by the University's coordinated image manual. Over the years, efforts have been made to leverage the constraints and opportunities induced by this context to develop variations that could attract individuals, institutions, and entities interested in engaging with this research structure.

In 2019, a change in departmental leadership led to the formation of certain delegated responsibilities oriented towards overseeing specific areas, and one of these was dedicated to communication. The outcome of the first three years of work involved the design and development of environmental identity elements – to be applied to the new departmental headquarters – and the complete digital redesign of the website. This opportunity sparked a discussion on the project's perspective towards a *polytechnic* logic, so that this work could become a format applicable to other departments in a customizable and institutional manner.

The result of this process was articulated across various analog and digital media, based on the use of flexible and scalable formats.

3.3.4 Evolution of the POLI.design brand

The coordinated image of POLI.design follows its evolution and maturation as a founding entity of the Design System. Founded in 1999 as a consortium of Politecnico di Milano and over time becoming one of the reference entities for postgraduate education, POLI.design has undergone several changes that have consolidated its identity within the University. Transitioning from a consortium to a consortium company, it has faced an Italian and international market rich in competitive challenges.

The visual elements underlying this evolution have reflected a journey strongly linked to Politecnico di Milano, identifying in the representation of the *School of Athens* a strong cognitive and institutional connection. The first logo, created in 1998 for an educational
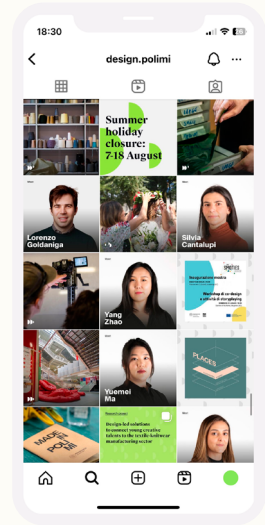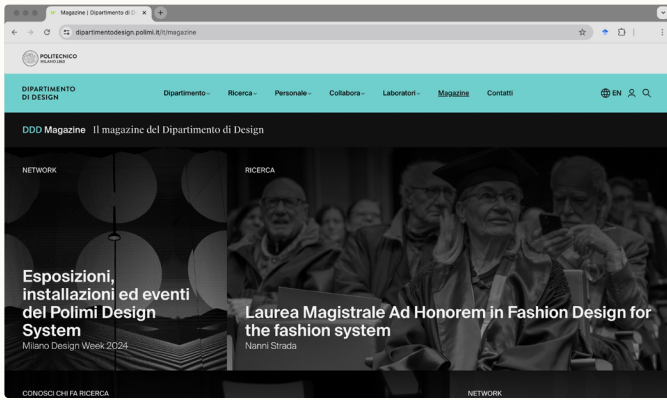
Figure 2.
Visual identity and web design for the Department of Design.

exhibition at the Triennale di Milano, featured the University's brand incorporated into typography composed with the Meta typeface, as if to declare the close generative cohesion of the two entities.

The subsequent evolution in 2002 saw the breakdown of that brand into a horizontal *cartouche* and the addition of the wording *Consorzio del Politecnico di Milano,* adopting the Futura typeface of the University.

In its current form, the logo embraces the latest transition, which saw a change in legal form from consortium to consortium company, assuming a more contemporary and abstract aesthetic derived from the elongation of the crown around the School of Athens, simulating a graphic dandelion accompanied by the new wording *Founded by Politecnico di Milano* in the Brandon Grotesque font used for the University's logo since 2013.

Figure 3.
The first logotype for the POLI.design Consortium, 1998.
Figure 4.
Redesign of the logotype for the POLI.design Consortium, 2002.
Figure 5.
Logotype for the POLI.design Consortium, 2013.

3.3.5 Communication design for Polimi Design System

The Polimi Design System is an informal yet recognized entity explicitly articulated within the Politecnico community. In fact, during the Design Week of 2016, a distinctive graphic symbol was defined to represent the communicative artifacts promoting the system as a whole: a multi-level sign symbolizing the synergistic action of three elements in contact and exchange, capable of conveying a unity of design thinking. The resulting

Figure 6.
Polimi Design System, logo.
Figure 7.
Polimi Design System, flyer.
Figure 8.
Polimi Design System, gadget.
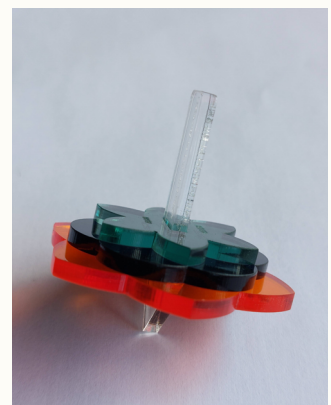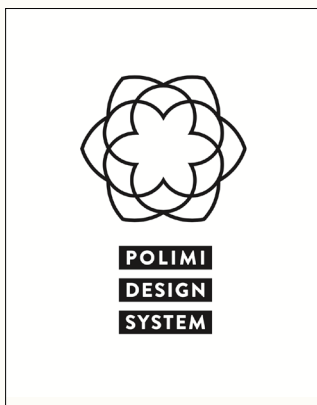
geometric flower becomes a symbol of the system's energy and finds its formal representation both in two-dimensional (graphic) and three-dimensional (merchandising) forms. It is featured on a series of promotional brochures, on the walls of system events, and also takes physical shape through a spinning top (composed of 4 laser-cut plexiglass elements by the School of Design's Model Laboratory) that can be assembled according to preference on a common stem.

3.4 Polimi *Design Philology*

3.4.1 The visual concept

Starting from the concept of *fragmentation and unity*, which represents a foundational pillar upon which the Polimi *Design Philology* project develops, there has been a desire to emphasize the deep research interest in the collection and valorization of documents, projects, and testimonies related to the first Degree Course in Design in Italy. This conceptual duality manifests in the identity project as an exploration of narrative complexity, where fragmentation serves as a tool to explore complex stories, facilitating the immersion of the viewer in a visual narrative rich with discoveries and interpretations. This approach allows navigation through the history of design from fresh perspectives, enriching understanding of its development and cultural influences. The dissemination of culture in this disciplinary context depends on the study of processes, translation practices, and the communication designer's ability to coordinate actions within these systems, enabling communicative interactions with the community addressed (Baule & Caratti, 2017).

This inspiration takes shape in the deconstruction of lettering into distinct elements, like small tiles placed at the boundary of the typographic form, dispersed in a sort of cloud of documents. This compositional solution not only visually reflects the theme of fragmentation but also invites reflection on the process of meaning construction through the assembly of isolated parts.

The color palette, dominated by warm tones of brass, imbues the project with a temporal dimension and evokes the contemplative atmosphere of libraries, as well as the value of prints from historical vol-

umes. This chromatic selection is designed to evoke the aesthetic and symbolic qualities associated with knowledge, historical continuity, and institutionalism, elements that contribute to creating a visual and conceptual bridge between the past and present of the Design discipline.

3.4.2 The implementation of digital and tangible experience

The execution of the graphic concept has unfolded with the application of visual identity, translating fragmentation into a visual and narrative exploration across different layers of experience.

Carlo Branzaglia (2003) distinguishes the function of identity from that of image, differentiating image as the communicative apparatus towards the external, what must be perceived by the public, while identity plays a role in internal communication, in the process. The formalization of this vision has been articulated through three main components: the interface of an interactive platform for accessing the digital archive, formats for communication on social media, and the graphic and signage system for *Design Convivio* installation. Each of these elements has contributed to delineating an integrated communication system, fostering a hybrid, digital, and tangible interaction between users and the density of content underlying the project, which has often shaped the nature of outputs and available channels. Projects, initiatives, exhibitions, and designers (faculty) themselves have become vehicles for consumption, often humanizing the adopted communicative language.

Figure 9.
The visual identity of *Design Philology* research project.

Through these tools, Polimi *Design Philology*'s identity project emerges as a visual experimentation of a narrative that explores the depth and variety of Design, promoting a greater understanding of its cultural and historical richness.
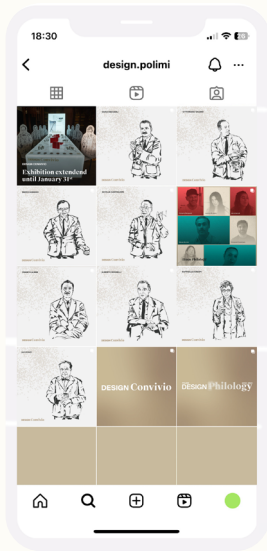
3.5 Conclusions and future developments

3.5.1 The current project

Design Philology is based on a hypertextual and multimedia approach, with the digital space as its main subject; however, the dimension of hybridization with the physical space is also crucial. The first experience of a physical location for *Design Philology* is represented by the

Design Convivio. Narratives→

Design Convivio exhibition, inaugurated on October 18th 2023 inside the Historical Library of the Politecnico di Milano: in this case, the visual communication of the project supported the exhibition curated by Giampiero Bosoni and Paola Bertola and designed by Ico Migliore with the Migliore+Servetto Studio, configuring itself in signage panels for the entrance of the location, the logo, po-

sitioned as a scenic sign in the corridor leading to the library. Subsequently, the temporary relocation of *Design Convivio* within the spaces of the ADI Design Museum (February 17th-March 6th, 2024) materialized as another moment of experimentation of the visual identity, adapting to a space different from the original exhibition venue and particularly to an existing exhibition structure, onto which specially designed panels were affixed to support the exhibition narrative and notably to signal and highlight the presence of the installation in a spacious area dedicated to the display of various contents from the institution's permanent collection, providing useful and immediate information for visitors. A further development for the *Design Philology* project, from a communication and visual identity perspective, concerns the future placement of *Design Convivio*. The intention is to give the digital archive a future physical dimension within the spaces of the Campus, the School, the Department, and the POLI.design Consortium.

3.5.2 From fragmentation to systematization

The design process described underscores how the creative process can evolve from a multitude of unorganized contents towards a cohesive and meaningful representation. This approach not only reflects the natural complexity of divergent research processes in Design (Bertola & Manzini, 2006) but also emphasizes the importance of careful systematic collection and interpretation of historical fragments that constitute the identity of a subject. Fragmentation thus becomes a metaphor for investigating the depth and diversity of the Design field, offering the opportunity to immerse oneself in visual narratives that invite discovery and interpretation of complex stories. Each individual element contributes to forming a broader and more comprehensive overall picture.

The Polimi *Design Philology* project effectively illustrates how the combination of fragmentation and systematization can enrich the collective discourse on Design, valorizing the communicative function of *bridging* between the past and the present, revealing new perspectives on how creative practices can influence and be influenced by the historical and cultural context in which they are embedded. That is, «communication design must be considered, as theorized by Victor Papanek (1983), a transformative tool that must embrace social and

ethical viewpoints, not necessarily for the thematic areas it addresses, but through the awareness that the designer must possess regarding the transformative consequences of their actions» (Bucchetti, 2000).

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