Design Philology Essays.
A Rhizomatic and Open Model

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This publication forms part of the trajectory that was presented and outlined on the occasion of the first release of *Issue Zero* of the series *Design Philology Essays* (Bertola *et al*., 2024). Since then, the *Design Philology* project has progressively consolidated and strengthened, taking on increasingly defined features as the result of a collective process of comparison and exchange that has enabled the development of an original model for preserving and enhancing the heritage of stories of the Design System at Politecnico di Milano. Among the multiple forms through which the projects outcomes have matured, the goals of the *Essays* apparatus were clear from the outset: it would respond to the need to equip the digital platform with spaces for scholarly in-depth inquiry, in the more institutional form of critical texts and discourses. In the four-part scheme that distinguished the aim of *archiving*, concretized in the digital repository, from *representing* the data through timelines and panoramic views, and from the function of *narrating*, explicated by the graphic-visual narratives authored by many contributors, the *Essays* constituted the realization of research discourse and scholarly elaboration aimed at the objective of *knowing*.

The object of knowledge is the articulated universe of memories, identities, and historical traces of the development and institutionalization of design teaching and research at Politecnico di Milano and, more broadly, within the Italian academic landscape (Penati & Rebaglio, 2024). Initial reflections – on the one hand concerning the historiographical approach, and on the other concerning the organization of the knowledge content inherent to the discipline of design itself (Bertola & Rebaglio, 2024) – led to the definition of a technological model capable by its very nature of accommodating multiple possibilities for approaches and for the elaboration of knowledge content.

Open Structure, Network, and Co-construction

The *Essays* section – an integral part of the *Design Philology* project and naturally embedded within the technological platform – adopts and interprets its constitutive and characterizing traits. In particular, this section specifies and amplifies certain questions concerning research processes and historical narration that have been profoundly transformed by digitalization and that also affect the expressive form of traditional scientific publications, especially in the field of design (Lupo, 2022). A first theme concerns the structure of the contents developed and conveyed in the *Essays*.

From a formal standpoint, they are conceived as hypertexts: the flow of the text is studded with links that point to contents on the digital platform and to web resources. The links may open individual documents stored in the digital archive – thus illustrating the original documentary apparatus that supports historical research – or they may point to specific sections of the *Narratives*, which present the organized and annotated apparatus of the digital exhibition pathways. In this way, the structure of the essays can be described, first and foremost, as rhizomatic (Landow, 1992; Millard, 2022), founded on the idea of multiplicity, namely an ensemble of elements that cannot be reduced to a single category, allowing readers to pursue multiple, branched, and customizable paths. Although they cannot be defined as full-fledged hypertexts organized into autonomous nodes of infor-

mation (the texts do maintain linear coherence thanks to the authors construction), the inclusion of links and references to various digital and multimedia expressions (images, videos, audio, animations, etc.) opens a reading experience that proceeds by associative connections not necessarily logical or linear but also semantic, conceptual, cultural, and even emotional. The text therefore provokes an interaction in which the reader actively participates in constructing meaning, enabling orientation across the information within the text and the platform as in a topographic writing (Bolter, 1991).

From a curatorial standpoint, each of the *Essays* focuses on one of the multiple facets of the history of the Design System at Politecnico di Milano and of other Italian academic contexts. Three macro-areas were identified that initially cluster the various contributions and specify the aims of the open call for new submissions: the domains and themes of research and teaching investigated by design in research, teaching, and cultural and civic projects; the figures – individuals as well as groups and institutions – relevant to the evolution of the discipline and its institutions; and the cultural, productive, and social contexts that have interacted with and reciprocally influenced university activities, together with the networks of local, national, and international actors that have collaborated with Politecnico di Milano in various ways.

Each collection of essays – and the present one is *Issue One* – therefore presents, also in a deliberately random manner, contributions across each of the above areas: the collection does not return a homogeneous or organized assemblage but rather a constellation of contributions, atoms of compartmentalized knowledge. A subsequent re-organization of the texts can then generate homogeneous sets by area, by content, or by affinity of meaning: tags and keywords enable intelligent data-mining tools (Aggarwal, 2015) to reconstruct reading orders and maps that are always different and personalized by the reader.

The ensuing consideration is that the curatorial project essentially constitutes an open work (Eco, 1962): the text is, in effect, a field of interpretive possibilities in which the user becomes a co-contributor by constructing their own reading path and thereby enacting a personal interpretation of documents, data, and readings. A second consideration concerns the nature of the knowledge developed and conveyed in this articulated, stratified, and indeed open form. Historiographical

narration that is as recent as this – the history of the first Italian degree course in design covers roughly the last thirty years – and that involves the narrators themselves, who are often also protagonists or direct witnesses, calls for attention to certain risks, such as an excess of celebratory narratives and individual testimonies that overlay the historical-critical account, jeopardizing partiality, detachment, and objective analysis founded on documentary sources. Nevertheless, this initial condition has from the outset been explicitly acknowledged as a value.

Narrating a history while it is still in the making generates knowledge as a process that is evolving, situated, dynamic, and unfinished. The outcome – materialized in the hypertextual artifacts described above – is, on the one hand, akin to the post-structural epistemological approach that also characterizes new forms of artificial intelligence: contingent, deconstructed, plural (Braidotti, 2013). The contributions are deliberately multiple, overlapping, and re-organizable; they are consumed hypertextually by readers in continuous dialogue with the network of original documents in the archive, which is constantly fed, corrected, and integrated. On the other hand, authors who engage with the historiography of the present bring to bear a knowledge of design that, although rooted in academic events, also interfaces with other fields of knowledge, pursuing a multidisciplinary narrative of the history of the present of our civilization in a Braudelian sense.

Genealogies, Platforms, and Frontiers of Politecnico Design

The expansion of design within the Italian university, with particular reference to Politecnico di Milano, is the result of a long process of *institutionalization* born from the encounter between a *strong cultural impetus* and a *productive fabric* capable of absorbing and amplifying innovation (Penati & Rebaglio, 2024). Since the post-war period, the interplay between theoretical debate, educational experimentation, and professional practices has created an ecosystem in which design has become an object of research, teaching, and knowledge transfer: the first initiatives in industrial design in the 1950s, often promoted in dialogue with associations and enterprises, inaugurated

a pioneering phase that laid the groundwork for an intrinsically interdisciplinary education, straddling technical, artistic, and social knowledge 1↘. This book documents, according to the *rhizomatic structure* described in the previous section,foundational moments and trajectories in the development of university education in design. The focus is not limited to the genesis of degree programs; it also includes the construction of disciplinary identities in different design areas and the emergence of frontier terrains where design measures itself against new epistemological and applicative contexts. Politecnico di Milano occupies a central position in this account. Since the early 1990s the University has consolidated a school of thought that has given shape to an articulated infrastructure for education and research: the PhD in *Industrial Design* (launched in 1990, now PhD in *Design*) 2↘, the first Bachelors Degree in *Industrial Design* (1993) and the establishment of the Faculty of Design (2000, now School of Design) 3↘, the institution of the INDACO Department (now Department of Design), the creation of experimental laboratories and consortia dedicated to education and knowledge transfer 4↘. Collectively, they position Politecnico di Milano's Design System as a hub integrating advanced research, education, and territorial partnerships, and they help articulate the discipline's international profile.

Against this backdrop, the contributions gathered in the volume are arranged along a trajectory that interweaves historical reconstructions, critical reflections, and case studies, allowing readers to move from contextual evidence to interpretive frameworks and back to concrete examples. The sequence is designed to surface both long-term continuities and moments of rupture, while clarifying how documental sources, institutional policies, and professional practices have co-shaped the field.

The volume opens with a historical reconstruction of the junctures that made possible the entry of design into the Italian university system. *Transformative Years. How Design Entered Italian Universities* (Paola Cordera) weaves documents, policies, and actors to foreground, from the post-war period through the 1990s, both fractures and continuities in the processes that led to the field's academic legitimation. The chapter shows how a culture of design became

progressively institutionalized while retaining its hybrid, laboratory-based character, offering a coherent account of the key passages and their historical interconnections.

The second chapter offers a map of advanced research infrastructures and international networks. *Platforms. International Network among Doctoral Programs in Design* (Beatrice Gobbo, Francesca Mattioli, Fabio Antonio Figoli, Lucia Rampino) outlines cartographies, shared glossaries, and practices of exchange, highlighting how platforms and doctoral mobility contribute to the formation of an epistemic community of design. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which shared vocabularies and methodological toolkits circulate across diverse local contexts, enabling comparability while preserving institutional specificities and disciplinary pluralism.

A substantial section revisits the emergence and evolution of degree programs and specializations that have shaped the identity of the School of Design. It opens with *Design for the Fashion System at Politecnico di Milano* (Valeria M. Iannilli, Alessandra Spagnoli), which reconstructs genealogies, educational devices, and research infrastructures that have made fashion a frontier field at the intersection of creativity, technology, and territorial supply chains, with a focus on belonging and disciplinary identity. *2003-2023. An Interior Design Story. Roots, Themes, and Evolutions of the First Interior Design Degree Program in Italy* (Francesco Scullica, Chiara Lecce) offers a twenty-year reading of Interior Design at Politecnico di Milano through themes, cases, and mappings that reveal the typological hybridization of contemporary space and the role of publications and exhibitions in shaping the field. *Yacht Design at Politecnico di Milano. Origin, Development and Future of the Research and Training Area in Yacht Design* (Silvia Piardi, Andrea Ratti, Arianna Bionda) retraces the trajectory from the original master's program to the current ecosystem of research and teaching, with attention to integration with naval and nautical engineering, collaboration with industry, and current challenges related to sustainability and digital transformation.

The volume also addresses frontier domains and interdisciplinary intersections that have helped redraw the epistemological and territorial boundaries of design in teaching and research. *Italian Space Design. Birth and Affirmation of an Avant-garde Discipline at Politecnico*

di Milano (Annalisa Dominoni) documents the consolidation of an area that, between microgravity, extreme human-environment interfaces, and systems for orbital and planetary habitats, functions as a methodological testbed where ergonomics, configuration, and aesthetics engage with stringent technological and operational constraints. *Infopoetry / Infopoesia. Data Visualisation between Design Method and Artistic Expression: An Experimentation* (Salvatore Zingale, Arianna Bellantuono) explores the boundary between information design and artistic practice, proposing infopoetry as a device that, through thetorical and semantic choices, produces situated knowledge beyond mere information. Finally, *Design, Systems and Territorial Networks. The Experience of the Wd_workshop Design in Morcone (2001-2005)* (Marina Parente, Vincenzo Cristallo, Alfonso Morone) shows how design can activate local networks and micro-supply chains in a place-based perspective, making the project an agent of connection among knowledge, actors, and materials.

Issue One closes with a profile of a protagonist who seeded ideas and practices that later converged in the establishment of the School of Design and, in particular, the Bachelor's Degree in *Design*. *Carlo De Carli and the Editorship of Interni. 1967-1971: Teaching, Publishing, and Furniture Design* (Graziella Leyla Ciagà, Maria Teresa Feraboli) highlights De Carli's editorial season at the helm of Interni as a platform for exchange among school, industry, and the culture of design, bringing out resonances and tensions with his teaching and with furniture culture during a period of profound transformation for the university and for a still-emerging Design System.

Taken together, these contributions compose a plural, evidence-based narrative that documents the institutional and disciplinary evolution of design. They bring into focus the stratification of voices, temporalities, and scales that have driven this process, from the genealogies of ideas to educational practices, from organizational devices to research infrastructures. What emerges is a pattern of continuities and discontinuities, accelerations and turning points, that restores the complexity of the relationship among design culture, disciplinary development, the industrial landscape, and technological and socioeconomic transformations. In its thematic and methodological heterogeneity, the volume offers insights that build and enrich the var-

iegated institutional memory articulated on the *Design Philology* plat-
form through new curatorial narratives, and it invites continued efforts
to collect, interpret, and interrelate archival materials.

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