

1. Transformative Years. How Design Entered Italian Universities

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1.1 Setting the Scene

In post-war Italy, cultural, industrial, scientific, and educational advancements led to the integration of design education into university curricula. The country's economic growth and modernization created a need for an academic framework that aligned with the expanding role of design in the production sector. This essay explores the dynamics that shaped this process, examining the institutional responses of various universities, the role of the professors involved, the educational challenges faced, and the curricula developed.

1.2 Beyond Academia: Bridging Theory and Practice

Unlike in other countries, post-war Italy lacked a national academic system for design education. This was partly due to the fact that most large industries used to rely on in-house technical staff for product

development, and did not perceive the need for dedicated academic programs (cf. Riccini, 2008 and 2018).

In the 1950s, public and private initiatives emerged to meet the growing demand for design education. This process sparked an intense debate involving architects, designers, critics, historians, and entrepreneurs, resonating widely through publications, conferences, and symposia. These discussions became more structured within key institutions such as the Associazione per il Disegno Industriale [ADI, or Association for Industrial Design], founded in 1956, and the International Council of Societies of Industrial Designers (ICSID), established the following year. These organizations not only played a crucial role in defining the role of design in contemporary society but also served as privileged forum for discussion, bringing together many key actors of this crucial period in Italian design.

The 1st *International Congress on Industrial Design*, held as part of the 10th *Milan Triennale* (1954) [↗](#), represented a pivotal moment, as it laid the foundations for a structured education in design.



1. *Mostra dell'industrial design. X Triennale di Milano (1954).*
[Document →](#)

It was in this context that the art historian Giulio Carlo Ar-

gan proposed the creation of a Grande Scuola di Design [Author's translation: Great School of Design]. At the heart of his vision was «l'idea della circolarità del sapere e l'integrazione tra aspetti tecnici e artistici con le esigenze sociali e culturali» (Bulegato & Chiesa, 2015, p. 77) [Author's translation: «the idea of the circularity of knowledge and the integra-



tion of technical and artistic aspects with social and cultural needs»]. This principle not only influenced contemporary educational programs but also contributed to redefining teaching methodologies, reinforcing interdisciplinary approaches, and promoting a deeper integration between theoretical knowledge and design practices. Within this framework, private initiatives played a crucial role in the development of design

education, fostering the diversification of education models through experimental models that encouraged innovation and creativity. Therefore, the discussion on design education was no longer confined to major cities such as Rome and Milan but gradually extended to other cities – including Venice, Urbino and Faenza – where emerging institutions contributed to this evolving landscape. In this context, the establishment of the Istituti Superiori d'Arte [Higher Institutes of Art], advanced courses in industrial design, and the Istituti Superiori per le Industrie Artistiche, or ISIA [Superior Institutes of Artistic Industries] played a crucial role in consolidating design education on a national scale.

A significant milestone in this expansion was the establishment of the higher course in *Industrial Design* at the Art Institute (Istituto Statale d'Arte, or ISA) in Venice (cf. Bulegato & Pastori, 2018). This initiative paved the way for the establishment of similar institutes in Florence, Faenza (specializing in ceramic technology), and Urbino, along with the advanced course in *Industrial Design* in Rome (1965) and Parma (1967). However, the gradual transition of design education to the university level, along with the lack of collaboration with local institutions, accelerated the end of these experiences.

In 1960, the establishment of the Venetian course developed within a particularly vibrant context, marked by intense cultural and industrial activity. Directed by Renzo Camerino – then dean of the institute and president of the Salviati glassmaker company –, the program em-

phasized practical learning and dialogue between academia and industry, leveraging local artisanal traditions while benefiting from proximity to international renowned cultural institutions such as the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, the Querini Stampalia Foundation, and the Giorgio Cini Foundation. Through this network, the program positioned the Veneto region as a key center for design education (Pansera, 2015, pp. 68-69). Such international recognition was further reinforced in 1961 when Venice hosted the 2nd ICSID Assembly, dedicating an entire day to design education [25](#). The event strengthened international dialogue on design education and helped shape the Italian approach to the discipline, highlighting the need for a curriculum that integrated artisanal tradition with industrial innovation.

2. Congresso dell'ICSID a Venezia, *Stile Industria*, 1961.

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1.3 Academic Programs

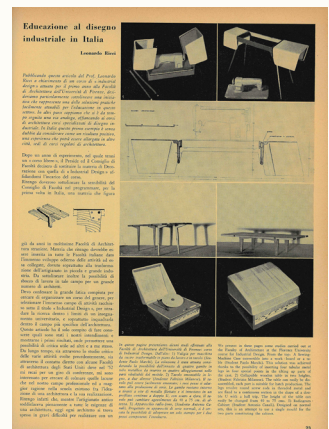
In the 1950s, courses in *Industrial Design* or *Artistic Design for Industry* (or *Progettazione Artistica per l'Industria*) were introduced in architecture faculties, reflecting the strong association between design and architecture. This overlap is understandable, as many Italian designers were trained as architects, and the terms *designer* and *architect* were often used interchangeably. Moreover, the post-war professional market, driven by the demands of reconstruction and housing, compelled architects to explore industrial product design as a means to meet their creative aspirations and respond to the growing industrialization of the country.

Florence was among the first Italian cities to institutionalize design education at the university level. In response to ongoing debates about industrial product design and the quest for a specialized educational path distinct from architecture, in 1955 the University of Florence introduced an industrial design course. Originally launched as a free course in *Decoration*, it transitioned into an industrial design program in 1956, under the title *Artistic Design for Industry*. Under the guidance of architect and professor Leonardo Ricci – a former student and collaborator of Giovanni Michelucci, who later served as dean of the university (1971–1973) –, the program aimed to train professionals capable of addressing the formal, economic, technical, and communicative challenges of design, while engaging with its societal impact and industry collaboration. The curriculum followed a structured progression: it began with an historical exploration of the evolution of form and taste, with an emphasis on connections between architecture, painting, sculpture, and the so-called *minor arts*, including industrial design. It then shifted towards technical developments and material experimentation, culminating in a student project where theoretical concepts were applied in practice [34](#).

This approach, underscoring experimentation and creativity at the intersection of art and design, was shaped by Ricci's exposure to American academic models during his lectures at US universities in the 1950s. His approach was further reflected in the 1964–1965 *Ornamental Plastics Course*, where



3. Educazione al disegno industriale in Italia, *Stile Industria*, 1956.
[Document →](#)



he guided students in exploring contemporary trends in painting and sculpture. Architect Pierluigi Spadolini provided a significant contribution. In his position as an assistant, he focused his academic work on industrial product design adopting a practice-oriented methodological approach, drawing on his Milanese professional experience. Financially supported by the electrical manufacturing company Magneti Marelli, the course fostered a collaboration between designers and industry, offering students hands-on experience with production processes and material techniques. Spadolini supervised student projects while addressing production challenges in a region like Tuscany, where industrial infrastructure was still developing. To bridge this gap, he encouraged students to collaborate with Florence's artisan workshops, applying theoretical skills in the local *Exhibition of Artisan Crafts* (Tonelli, 2007, pp. 230-231). This approach not only provided students with practical experience but also introduced local businesses to innovative design methods. Spadolini's increasing involvement in industrial design education earned him a professorship in the course in 1959.

Building on this academic foundation, in 1961, together with architect Giovanni Klaus Koenig, he launched a higher course in *Industrial Design* at the Florence Art Institute, further consolidating a practice-based approach to the discipline, in line with Argan's vision (cf. Trivellin, 2017). That same time, a parallel initiative was undertaken

in Naples under the leadership of architect Roberto Mango who in 1958 established the Free Chair of *Industrial Design* at the Faculty of Architecture of Università di Napoli (now Università Federico II) (Giardiello, 2008) [49](#).

With a background spanning both academia and industry, Mango brought a cross-disciplinary perspective, shaped by his experience as a product designer, art director of the magazine *Interiors*, and Italian correspondent for the magazine *Industrial Design*. His international network developed over years positioned him at the intersection of Italian and American design cultures, allowing him to introduce new methodologies to Naples' education. One significant outcome of these efforts was the 1960 *Circulating Exhibition on Design and Production in American Industry*, curated with his students. This initiative aimed to expand Naples' architectural discourse beyond re-

4. A Napoli un corso di disegno industriale, 1959, *Stile Industria*. Document →



gional boundaries, fostering deeper engagement with industrial design and its international reach.

By 1959-1960, the introduction of the course in *Artistic Design for Industry* complemented the *Interior Design* course. The integration of these two disciplines within a cohesive teaching framework aimed to train architects with a strong design sensibility and an understanding of industrial innovation dynamics. The objective was to promote an industrial design culture through a rigorous theoretical and methodological approach, expanding its influence beyond the disciplines' traditional confines. This ambition was realized through debates, experimental workshops, and exhibitions, which became defining features of Naples' design education model. The program connected the field to its broader cultural and productive context fostering interaction with large firms, artisan workshops, and regional production clusters (Jappelli, 2004).

Mango's focus on design research and social impact positioned design as a tool for addressing contemporary challenges, drawing upon historical traditions and local craftsmanship, with a keen awareness of material innovation. His expanding interest in the urban environment led to pioneering research in environmental design, culminating in his receipt of the *Compasso d'Oro* award 1967 for his contributions to the documentation and analysis of environmental design [5۷](#).

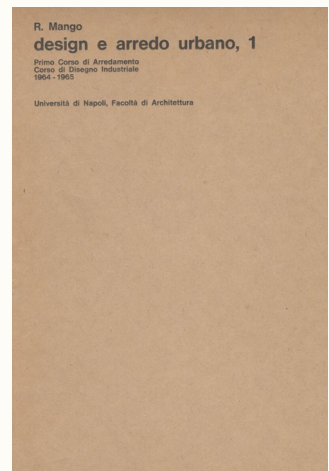
His legacy continued into the 1990s with the establishment of the School of Specialization in Industrial Design, aimed at preparing young architect-designers for professional practice (Cristallo & Morone, 2018).

Despite these early developments in Italian design education, in 1959 architect and designer Alberto Rosselli – a key figure in the design debate, thanks to his work as founder and director of the magazine *Stile Industria* (1954-1963) and his involvement in ADI – underscored the critical nature of the situation

in cui la nuova realtà scientifica, tecnica, economica [...] non si forma più nelle università ma nei centri di studio e di ricerca all'interno delle industrie [...]. La scuola di ordine superiore si è svuotata progressivamente della linfa vitale costituita dalla possibilità di una ricerca determinante e riceve via via dall'esterno gli stimoli di un rinnovamento.



**5. Primo Corso di
Arredamento. Corso
di *Disegno Industriale*,
1964-1965.
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[Author's translation: in which the new scientific, technical, and economic reality [...] is no longer shaped within universities but in research and study centers within industries [...]. The higher education system has progressively been drained of the vital lifeblood that comes from the possibility of conducting decisive research and instead receives external stimuli for renewal over time].

(Rosselli, 1959, p. 1)

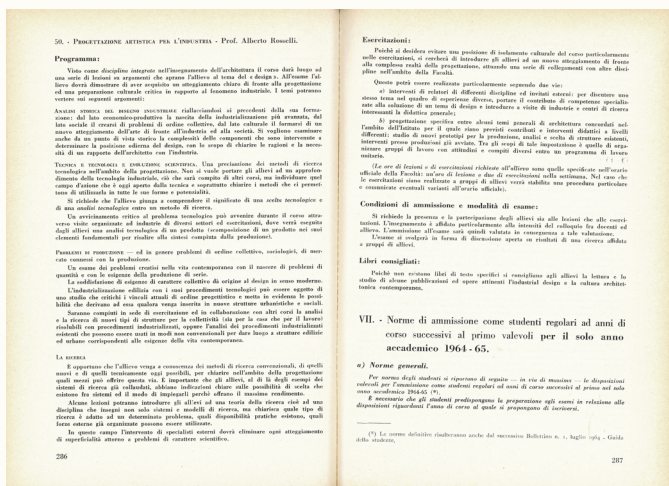
Even ADI seemed to overlook the experiences of Florence and Naples. At the exhibition dedicated to home and school during the *XII Triennale di Milano* (1960), prominence was given to foreign institutions such as the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm and the Royal College of Art in London, while the progress of design education in Italy was largely overlooked.

Meanwhile, in Milan, growing interest in design converged with relevant institutional efforts to integrate design education at the university level, reinforcing the city's role as a hub for industrial design. In 1963, the course in *Artistic Design for Industry* was launched at the Faculty of Architecture of Politecnico di Milano. Held by Rosselli, the course aimed to synthesized theoretical knowledge with industrial practice, providing students with a design education grounded in a strong historical awareness and a research-driven approach. The program was structured around expert-led lectures, offering diverse perspectives on shared topics and in-depth insights into design

challenges. This approach aimed to expand students' understanding of the multifaceted nature of design [69](#).

Given the absence of a dedicated textbook, students were encouraged to engage with a wide range of publications and scholarly works on industrial design and contemporary architectural culture. This approach aimed to strengthen theo-

6. Programma del Corso di Progettazione artistica per l'industria, in Bollettino Ufficiale del Politecnico di Milano. Document →



retical and methodological skills, providing essential analytical tools for the evolution of the field.

The curriculum included a comprehensive historical foundation on the key factors that had shaped the contemporary vision of design, with particular emphasis on the interaction between architecture and industry. Within this framework, advanced technological research methodologies were incorporated to foster critical engagement on the challenges posed by innovation.

The course was further enhanced through visits to industrial and research centers, offering students the opportunity to contextualize theoretical knowledge through hands-on experience, where they could analyze and critically examine the technological processes underlying industrialized construction. These dynamics aimed to offer opportunities for integrating innovative processes into urban and social infrastructures. Finally, the course encouraged active students engagement through design projects focused on architectural issues, including the development of new production prototypes, the evaluation of existing structural frameworks, and interventions in established production systems. These activities were designed to offer contributions at varying levels of complexity, fostering a progressive and interdisciplinary approach to design education.

The idea of design as a unified methodological approach across different scales – a notion endorsed by architect Vittorio Gregotti in issue 85 of *Edilizia Moderna* (1964), which focused on design – was the basis for the establishment of the *Industrial Design* course within the Faculty of Architecture in Palermo in 1970-1971, replacing the former course in *Interior Architecture, Furnishing, and Decoration*. For a brief period, the discipline was renamed *Artistic Design for Industry* before eventually reverting to its original name in 1977.

The course was assigned to architect Annamaria Fundarò – a former assistant in the *Elements of Architecture* course taught by Vittorio Gregotti –, whose pedagogical approach merged methodological rigor with a strong focus on the social dimension of design (cf. Ferrara, 2015; Trapani, 2018). By integrating local artisanal traditions with contemporary industrial methodologies, Fundarò employed historical precedents as analytical tools for addressing design challenges. Rather than following a linear historical narrative, the course adopted

a selective approach inspired by Gregotti's method: the focus was on key turning points, selected for their heuristic and demonstrative value. Initially, the course explored the relationship between consumer goods and users, applying the dialectical framework of *use value* versus *exchange value* as a methodological tool to examine consumption dynamics within an industrialized society. In the following years, the scope of inquiry expanded to encompass questions related to epistemological and practical issues associated with industrial design. Fundarò framed industrial design not merely as a technical or aesthetic discipline but as a field of inquiry that interrogates cultural, economic, and technological paradigms.

Emphasis was placed on the role of art in modern society, addressing the concepts of quality and function, and assessing the tension between design as an autonomous creative practice and its relationship with standardization. The impact of technological advancements was explored through a critical analysis of mechanization, serial production, and the intersection of technical reproducibility with labor structures and mass culture. Additionally, the course scrutinized the transformation of the built environment, elucidating how industrial processes impacted spatial, material, and socio-economic transformations. The study of the relationship between design and its users made it possible to question the nature of consumption as a form of information exchange and the extent to which industrial design shapes human interactions with material culture.

By promoting an analytical and historically situated understanding of design, the course played a formative role in shaping critical discourse on industrial production and its socio-cultural implications, marking a significant milestone in the academic study of design in Southern Italy.

1.4 Conclusions

The introduction of design education into Italian university curricula marked a pivotal moment in the development of the discipline, closely linked to the cultural, scientific, and educational transformations that the country underwent in the post-war period. From the early expe-

riences at the universities of Florence and Naples to the initiatives launched in Milan and Palermo, the establishment of dedicated university courses contributed to the progressive redefinition of the field, maintaining a constant dialogue with the career field.

Architects such as Leonardo Ricci, Pierluigi Spadolini, Roberto Mango, Alberto Rosselli, and Annamaria Fundarò played a key role in shaping new pedagogical approaches, drawing from international experiences – particularly those in the United States, which influenced Florence, Naples, and Milan, as evidenced by the numerous American references in the journal *Stile Industria* – while remaining deeply rooted in the local cultural and productive context.

The programs developed within this framework balanced creativity and pragmatism, including historical perspectives to varying degrees and promoting greater integration with the industrial sector – e.g., collaborations with Magneti Marelli in Florence and Alluminio S.p.A. and Arflex in Naples. These initiatives ensured that future designers acquired not only technical skills but also a solid critical capacity to analyze the cultural and social role of design.

In 1970, at the ADI's *1st International Conference on Design Studies* [7](#), Pierluigi Spadolini, while assessing Italian experiences, credited universities with



7. Atti del *Convegno Internazionale di Studi sul Design*, 1970. Figura di chiusura del fascicolo.
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aver sensibilizzato un vasto settore di operatori culturali ai problemi della produzione industriale, soprattutto a quelli relativi al rapporto tra design e architettura, inteso come rapporto tra nuovi modi di produzione e l'attività progettuale.

[Author's translation: raising awareness among a broad group of cultural professionals about the challenges of industrial production, particularly the connection between design and architecture, seen as the interplay between new production methods and design practice]. (Casabella, 1970, p. 51).

Nevertheless, he also noted the absence of «intenzionalità di formare così facendo un progettista preparato al controllo della metodologia della produzione industriale» [Author's translation: «a clear

commitment to training designers who can effectively master the methodologies of industrial production»], advocating for a restructuring of the educational framework to establish a new dialectical relationship between society and industry. The aim was to move beyond fragmented teaching methods in favor of fully integrating industrial design into architecture faculties.

In the same context, Alberto Rosselli observed that incorporating design education through complementary courses had little impact on the development of the discipline or the broader dissemination of design culture (Casabella, 1970, p. 61). He warned that this approach had created a fundamental ambiguity: on the one hand, design was treated as a subsidiary discipline within architecture, urban planning, and industrial production; on the other, its autonomy was acknowledged but remained difficult to integrate into a coherent academic framework.

These reflections highlighted both the limitations and possibilities of existing educational models, emphasizing the pressing need to reform design education in response to the shifting challenges of the environmental crisis. This transformation required a fundamental methodological reorientation to develop new design strategies and redefine the role of the designer within the contemporary socio-economic context. An ongoing debate that would shape the future evolution of the discipline.

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