3. *Design for the Fashion System* at Politecnico di Milano

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3.1 Identity, Belonging, and Polytechnical Culture

In October 1999, six years after the establishment of the *Industrial Design* Degree programme within the Faculty of Architecture at Politecnico di Milano 1↘ 2↘, and three years before the creation of the Faculty of Design (renamed the School of Design in 2013), a new study track in *Fashion Design* was introduced. This study trak was set to launch in the following academic year, 2000-2001 3↘.

The presentation took place during the 1999 *OpenLab* event 4↘ 5↘, which coincided with the start of the academic year. It transformed the Bovisa Campus 6↘ 7↘ 8↘ – home to the *Industrial Design* programme – into an exhibition space, hosting debates and exchanges, and welcomed the local community, professionals, businesses, faculty, and students. In this edition, the event is organised over three days. In addition to the presentation of the new *Fashion Design* pro-

1. Guida dello Studente – Corso di Laurea in *Disegno Industriale* – Supplemento. Document→

2. Corso di Laurea in *Design*. Document→

gramme, various activities and initiatives are shared, highlighting the results of a long journey that began in 1984 with the initial reflections on industrial design within the Faculty of Architecture 9↘, and continued in a more structured manner within the disciplinary framework that led to the establishment in 1993 of the first Bachelor's Degree in *Industrial Design* 10↘.

During the event, many initiatives were presented, including the book *Sistema Design Milano* was unveiled, summarising the outcomes of the national research project, co-financed by the Ministry of Universities and Research (MIUR), titled *The Role of Industrial Design in Product Innovation. Development of the Design Resources of System Italy, from Local Resources to Global* 11↘, which was awarded the *Compasso d'Oro*. Additionally, the *Design for Districts* (DxD) initiative was presented, aimed at developing research, design, and experimentation programmes with Italian industrial districts. The creation of two Bachelor's Degree programmes in *Textile Design* and *Furniture Design* at the Como campus was also highlighted, supporting local industries in facing growing international competition.

The establishment of POLI.design 12↘, a consortium of Politecnico di Milano focused on professional continuous education and the promotion of design culture through events, was also presented, along with the creation of the Industrial Product Design Research Unit, offering applied research and consultancy services to businesses. Furthermore, part of the instrumental laboratory system, which was fully completed in 2002, was introduced 13↘ 14↘. This system includes laboratories for merceology and sectoral analysis, environmental sustainability, photography, modelling, digital media, and nautical design. These laboratories, unique within the university at the time, supported and enhanced the inductive teaching model 15↘ at the heart of the *Industrial Design* Degree programme. They also anticipated certain innovation trajectories in education that are now widely recognised in contemporary pedagogical approaches (Bertola, 2018; Iannilli & Sancassani, 2020; Sancassani *et al.*, 2019). The 1999 OpenLab was a structured opportunity to showcase experimental activities related to

3. Guida dello Studente – A.A. 2001-2002.
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4. OpenLab 1999.
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5. OpenLab 1999_001.
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6. Campus Bovisa in costruzione_001.
Document→

7. Nuovo Polo alla Bovisa. Il Politecnico *clona* la Facoltà di *Architettura*.
Document→

8. Campus Bovisa in costruzione_003.
Document→

9. Contributi alla formazione dell'indirizzo di Laurea in *Disegno Industriale e Arredamento*.
Document→

10. Design l'Italia s'è desta. Ottagono.
Document→

11. *Sistema Design Milano*.
Document→

12. POLI.design. Università partner della professione. Document→

13. DVD DI.Labb – Estratto: Intervista ad Alessandro Deserti. Document→

14. Realizzazione del sistema dei Laboratori strumentali (DI.Labb). Event→

15. DVD DI.Labb – Estratto: Intervista ad Alberto Seassaro. Document→

16. *Una laurea per che cosa* (*A degree for what*) 16/09/2003. Document→

Note 1. Cesare Stevan, Professor Emeritus of Politecnico di Milano. Link→

17. Guida dello Studente – A.A. 2001-2002 – Presentazione del Corso di Laurea in *Disegno Industriale*, p. 7. Document→

teaching, research, and the organisational and managerial commitment that, within a few years, would lead to the creation of the Faculty of Design in 2003 16↘. This new faculty provided Politecnico di Milano with a third major technical-scientific and strategic-design direction, complementing the existing faculties of Engineering and Architecture, and sharing their scientific, cultural, and social challenges.

Cesare Stevan, in a recent interview, described the introduction of design at Politecnico as «the only true innovation since the university's founding» 1↘. Politecnico's design area now defines a multidisciplinary research and training environment shaped by contributions from companies, professionals, design scholars, and many of the existing competencies within Politecnico, including departments such as Industrial Design and Architectural Technology, Economics and Production, Mechanics, Industrial Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, Applied Physical Chemistry, Bioengineering, Handling and Transport Systems, Mathematics, Energetics, Architectural Design, Electronics and Information, and Territorial Sciences 17↘.

This is the backdrop against which fashion entered Politecnico di Milano, and more broadly, into university education. The new *Fashion Design* track shares with the broader design system a culture rooted in the project, which began as a practical reflection within professional and entrepreneurial experiences from the 1950s and later became an expression of Politecnico's Design System. From the outset, the *Fashion Design* curriculum took on a specific contextualisation, aligned with Italy's fashion industry, which is deeply tied to territorial vocations, complex design chains, and a systemic vision of value creation. In this vision, the *designer* is one – though not the only – key actor in the process.

3.2 The Transition towards a New Educational Model and a New Fashion Design Approach

The foundation for the emergence of the *Fashion Design* programme is rooted in the transition that characterises post-modernity and cuts across socio-territorial, technical-scientific, and political-decision systems. Until the early 1990s, design for fashion, like design in general, was delegated to secondary or post-secondary education. However, the growing complexity of the economic landscape, the accelerating pace of change, technological innovations, and the globalisation of cultural processes revealed «the increasingly precarious relationship between the ongoing transformations in the professional and production worlds, where increasingly specialised and complex forms of knowledge are being developed and used, both empirically-tacit and logically-conceptual» (Penati, 2000, p. 7).

Fashion has undergone profound changes. While the 1980s were marked by a period of stability and the global success of Made in Italy, with Milan as its capital and prominent figures such as Armani, Versace, Ferré 18↘, and Moschino, the 1990s saw a shift from a focus on designer labels to brand logic, with the consequent transfer of the entire fashion system to the level of communication (Fiorani, 2006). We witnessed a transition from the traditional focus on the product to the product system (Deserti, 2001) which, in addition to the product, encompasses communication and services, an «immaterial system of relationships necessary to introduce the product into subsequent processes of transformation and consumption» (Manzini, 1990, p. 66) 19↘. The centrality of the immaterial component allows services to assume a priority role over the industrial production of goods, and the dichotomy between product-good and product-service is surpassed with the introduction of the concept of an offering system, supported by the emergence of experiential marketing (Schmitt, 1999). Business production expands to include value creation by implementing relational and emotional processes with its audiences, mainly by designing specific consumer experiences. The most immediate consequence is a strong orientation towards

18. Centro di Ricerca Gianfranco Ferré. Event→

19. Copertina del libro *Artefatti. Verso una nuova ecologia dell'ambiente artificiale* di Ezio Manzini. Document→

activities related to strategic brand management and retail control, which, during this period, became the main channel for brand expression. Italian fashion companies, which distinguished themselves and built their strength on a business model where the creative aspect is closely integrated with the managerial one (Bertola, 2000b; Saviolo & Testa, 2000), responded more swiftly to these new demands.

The ongoing transformations directly impact processes, products, and the socio-cultural dimension, supported by policies aimed at enhancing and developing creative potential through research, education, and training (Bertola, 2000a). The competitive value of a company, therefore, lies in its design ability to integrate codifiable and transferable knowledge with tacit, contextual knowledge, also including other fields of knowledge (Bertola, 2001, 2008; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2007; Polanyi, 1966), and to derive value from the implementation of creative processes as an attitude towards continuous change (Nakamura, 2000, in Bertola, 2008, p. 13).

The traditional design culture – often driven by a *spontaneous* research attitude, mostly informed by a «mix of culture, technical knowledge, and sensitivity rooted in a pronounced visionary capacity» (Manzini *et al.*, 1986) – is challenged in favour of new knowledge models informed by project research that transcends the interpretative understanding of reality to encompass a broader and integrated vision of the phenomena underlying the emerging artificial environment (Bertola & Simonelli, 2002). In this direction, the new *Fashion Design* programme introduces the discipline of *meta-design* as a space for reflection and elaboration on project research content, where the focus is less on the project's object, the product, and more on the processual and systemic dimension that links the product to a specific context of use, a cultural community, a territory, and an economic and market context (Bertola, 2000a, 2001).

Under the pressure of the progressive globalisation of knowledge, culture, and politics, as well as changes in the structure of work, the university system is undergoing an unprecedented transformation. The traditional, elitist university, a «sanctuary where the master breaks the bread of knowledge for a few devoted disciples» (Baldacci, 2014, p. 19), oriented towards the training of a predominantly academic profile, is giving way to the demand for a more professional profile, whose

acquired skills are quickly employable in the job market. It is a space for education where «the boundaries between paths, between disciplines, between research areas are no longer seen as what separates, but as what connects» (Ceruti, 1993, p. 211), and where the goal is to experiment with and create new cognitive models to support the *new alliance* between business, culture, and design (Ceruti, 1993, p. 208).

Design activity takes on a new responsibility in creating and experimenting with the new artificial environment that modifies and replaces the previous one by introducing new behaviours and a new system of objects (Celaschi, 2000) and the materials from which they are made (Fiorani, 2001). These are systems of objects that show a new attention to immaterial and sensory variables (Manzini *et al*., 1986), to the emotional-sensitive dimension (Negroponte, 1995), those that new technologies allow to be realised (Facchetti & Pagani, 2000). Additionally, these are objects shaped by new users and practices (Appadurai, 1996; De Certeau, 1994); they are social objects (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Featherstone, 1991), both interface and producers of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). These objects began to populate the landscape of the 1990s, in which the globalisation of markets opened up new scenarios of planetary mobility for people, products, and services. Technological innovation guided and transformed processes, and new forms of communication conveyed new meanings and values along the global networks enabled by digital technologies.

3.3 *La moda progettata* [Fashion Designed]

This paragraph borrows the title from a book by Paola Bertola (2008) 20↘, one of the first researchers to focus on fashion at Politecnico di Milano and the main promoter and advocate of the *Fashion Design* track, which later evolved into the Degree programme in *Fashion Design*.

20. Ritratto di Paola Bertola.
Document→

Pairing the term *fashion* with *design* refers to a vision in which fashion is subject to design, thus becoming the result of an intentional action that not only anticipates the product but also the behaviours it induces in all its potential uses. The designer's intentionality

brings about a reflection on the objectives of design and innovation, which ultimately constitute the meaning behind both tangible and intangible objects. It is within this context that «thinking is anticipation» (Serres, 1980).

In this sense, *Fashion Design* at Politecnico di Milano embraces a multidisciplinary educational model, built in close synergy with the world of industry, research, and professions. It interprets design as a complex synthesis of knowledge related to culture, society, production, economy, scientific research, and technology. Unlike many European and international fashion schools, the teaching model is not based on the *tailoring atelier* but rather on the culture of design; a complex of theoretical, historical-critical, aesthetic, ethical, strategic, projectual, entrepreneurial, technical, and technological manifestations. These are linked to the processes of innovation in design and the convergence of engineering and artistic-architectural traditions that characterise Politecnico di Milano and the tradition of Italian design and manufacturing.

The new *Fashion Design* track, in line with the broader *Industrial Design* Degree course, redefines the relationship between fundamental and specialised knowledge, between knowledge and competence, between high-level technical-scientific knowledge and forms of knowledge that can be directly applied to the professional field.

It responds to «the growing demand for professionals capable of linking the technical-economic dimension with the socio-cultural, and from there proposing new design syntheses» (extract from the document establishing the Degree in *Industrial Design* at the Faculty of Architecture of Politecnico di Milano, 1993 – Student's guide, 2001-2002, p. 14) 21↘.

The fashion system, specifically the textile-clothing and leather-footwear supply chains, is part of the broader context of Made in Italy. This is not only a mark of quality but also a model of industrial organisation made up of small and medium-sized enterprises rooted in districts. It is a constellation of evolving companies, knowledge, and practices (Becattini, 1987, 1998; Sabel, 1984), covering the entire supply chain and based on flexible specialisation, which effectively responds to sectors like fashion that are subject to rapidly changing demands. Moreover, it is an integrated system with the equally com-

21. Guida dello Studente – A.A. 2001-2002 – Documento istitutivo (Stralci estratti dal), p. 14. Document→

plex network of professions and services that support design, both upstream and downstream of the project (Bertola, 2002).

Milan is soon recognised as the fashion capital, where «fashion, together with design, occupies a central place in the symbolic economy, which is the production of meaning or immaterial goods (icons, narratives) and commodities laden with symbolic value, representing identities and lifestyles» (Fiorani, 2006). In Milan, fashion creates multidimensional trajectories and introduces into the social, cultural, and local spheres an extensive network of material and immaterial meanings, new symbols, and cultural codes. It is home to the most important advertising and PR agencies, showrooms, fairs, and events. While the 1980s marked the peak of the Milan fashion show and transformed fashion into a cultural industry, the roots of this centrality date back much further.

From the 1920s, Milan stood out as the centre for fashion publishing, and after World War II, it became the main hub for Italian fashion journalism, contributing to the rise of new professional figures in the industry, such as those related to fashion photography and journalism (Merlotti, 2013). In the 1960s, during the transition from the tailoring model to *prêt-à-porter*, fashion designers embraced the industrial production system and began a profound revision of the fashion creation, development, and production processes. Among them was Nanni Strada, one of the first professors involved in the laboratory teaching of the newly established *Fashion Design* track at Politecnico di Milano 22↘ 23↘ and awarded an honorary degree in 2024 by the current *Design for the Fashion System* programme at Politecnico di Milano 24↘ 25↘.
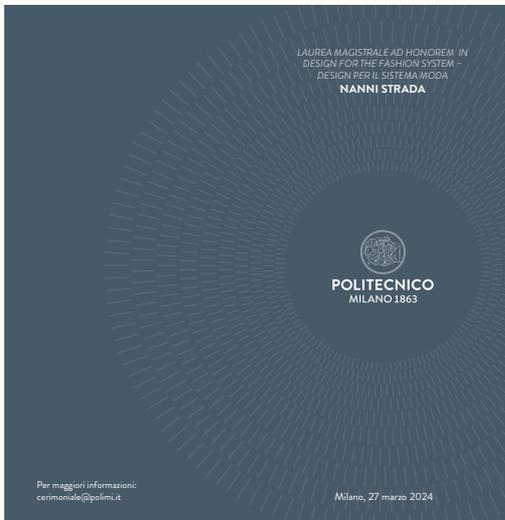
The Italian fashion sector, now firmly established, represents a complex system of activities, processes, intermediate and complementary products that guide the design and creation of high-quality fashion products. At the same time, it generates fabrics, accessories, and a distinct way of communicating and staging events and sales spaces. The foundation of these capabilities is a business model driven by the dual leadership of management and design (Bertola, 2000b).

This characteristic has endured until recent years and informs the new educational programme *Fashion Design and Management*,

22. Laboratorio di Disegno industriale 3. Document→

23. Attività in aula durante il Workshop con Nanni Strada_001. Document→

*LAUREA MAGISTRALE AD HONOREM IN
DESIGN FOR THE FASHION SYSTEM –
DESIGN PER IL SISTEMA MODA*
NANNI STRADA

POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863

Mercoledì, 27 marzo 2024
ore 11.00

Politecnico di Milano
Aula Carlo de Carli
Via Durando, 10
Milano

**Laurea Magistrale ad Honorem in
Design for the Fashion System –
Design per il Sistema Moda,
Nanni Strada**

Per maggiori informazioni:
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Milano, 27 marzo 2024

Programma

Saluti Istituzionali
Professor Francesco Zurlo
Preside della Scuola del Design

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Professoressa Paola Bertola
Dipartimento di Design

Lectio Magistralis
Nanni Strada

**Motivazioni della Laurea Magistrale
ad Honorem**
Professoressa Valeria M. Iannilli
Coordinatore del Consiglio di corso di studio in
Design della Moda –
Design for the Fashion System

**Conferimento della Laurea Magistrale ad Honorem
in Design for the Fashion System –
Design per il Sistema Moda**
Professor Francesco Zurlo
Preside della Scuola del Design

24. Laurea Magistrale ad Honorem in *Design for the Fashion System*, Nanni Strada.
Document→

25. Laurea Magistrale ad Honorem in *Design for the Fashion System*, Nanni Strada_001.
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launched in 2000 within the *Fashion Design* track. The programme is jointly promoted with Bocconi University and offers an integrated and comprehensive response to the need for new designer profiles with strategic and *process-directing* skills (Bertola, 2001). It is a training programme in which creativity is understood as «the process through which new ideas are generated, developed, and transformed into economic value» (Saviolo & Testa, 2000), encompassing the creative and cultural components related to architecture and design, technological and production control aspects linked to engineering, and the economic-managerial and strategic elements represented by Bocconi University.

The new *Fashion Design* track stands out for offering a multidisciplinary educational project where technology and science interface with the humanities. This educational approach is rooted in a vision of design as a discipline aimed at creating socially useful and technologically advanced products, educating the *technical intellectual*, as Tomás Maldonado described it – someone who needs to understand both theory and practice. Paola Bertola imagines this person as capable of «building bridges between different disciplines and understanding any problem from the perspective of their own expertise, while also being able to connect it to a dialogue with other skills and competences» (Bertola, 2018, p. 9).

In this direction, and in relation to the transformation of the fashion sector and its related professions, the new *Fashion Design* track identifies four key areas within the design culture that form the foundation for the training of up-and-coming fashion designers.
Specifically:

- the culture of research as a support for creativity and talent. In this sense, creativity stems from a deep knowledge of the field, from continuous research, and the ability to transfer languages and cultures. Training in research also involves imparting methods and techniques for visualising research itself, which in this field are closely related to visual tools;
- the technical dimension of products, which includes the necessary understanding of the material components of the product, its structure, and the relationship between the product's design, its visualisation, and verification through physical models, followed by engineering and production phases;

- the processual dimension. Processual knowledge refers to the set of activities underlying meta-design. It is the context for design research. It represents the space of design within which systems of interaction are created, capable of presenting different scenarios for the project, while also allowing partial results and stages of work to be summarised, for example in trend books or tools for constructing collection architectures;
- the systemic dimension. This refers to the knowledge, skills, and methodologies underpinning the conveyance of product values and qualities: from the system of events to retail, including communication processes, storytelling, and the staging of the product.

The educational programme is therefore aimed at training designers capable of activating design processes that embrace complexity as a context for enhancing the competitive capabilities of local and district-based businesses.

3.4 Conclusions

Fashion Design at Politecnico di Milano represents the first educational, cultural, and research environment supporting the fashion sector's competitiveness. The new fashion designer is trained to operate within an integrated system of activities related to the intermediate production chain, including processes preceding traditional design phases, post-production activities, and those closely aligned with manufacturing and technological processes.

The new fashion designers can implement development processes supporting sector innovation, particularly in product development stages, with focused expertise in colour design, yarns, fabrics, and trend definition, reflecting the visible aspects of a community's culture, lifestyles, and values.

Moreover, they engage directly in product realisation. Here, the new orientation in fashion design diverges from the traditional arts-and-crafts approach of mannequin-based pattern creation. Instead, it establishes, with support from leading companies and industry labs, a *library* of design foundations – unavailable in any other fashion

school – and includes expertise in the *staging* of products, demonstrating the ability to present items to the final market through the creation of communication and display artefacts.

This framework of activities and perspectives, as we have already seen, is inherently tied to the fact that fashion design at Politecnico di Milano originates and develops within a highly systemic and multidisciplinary context. This essay tells only the starting point of this journey, leaving further milestones for future narratives.

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