
The Milano Design Week: Events, Operators, Business Models

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Structured Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to discuss the case of Milan “Fuorisalone” (literally “outside the fair”) - now renamed Milano Design Week - as the result of a long-term transformation that led to its current configuration, characterised by a complex business model (Smith, Binns and Tushman, 2010), where many actors and stakeholders interact in a network of cooperation and competition. The paper highlights how this transformation was led by the design culture (Deserti and Rizzo, 2014; Concilio, Deserti and Rizzo, 2014) as a pervasive character of the city. The analysis of the case compares the Milano Design Week business model with the fair business model, focusing on the elements of differentiation and on the scaling up mechanisms. In addition, the comparative analysis provides lessons learnt on:

- The ways of combining bottom up initiatives with the overall innovation strategies of the official fair and of the city;
- The ways of building and managing the value chains in the field of CCI;
- The effectiveness of the scaling up model of the Milano Design Week.

Design/methodology/approach – Milano Design Week is presented as a business case study, with the aim of investigating how the multiple actors result in a constellation that coproduce value (Chesbrough and Rosembloom, 2002), representing and diffusing design culture outside its professional community in the larger context of the entire city. The authors conducted a field research, meeting and interviewing some of the actors, as well as a desk research, retrieving documentation on the historical aspects and on the more recent developments of the Milano Design Week.

Originality/value – The construction of the Milano Design Week is discussed as a design-driven innovation (Verganti, 2010) and as a long-term strategic action conducted

through the use of design thinking (Brown, 2009; Lockwood, 2009; Martin, 2009), that has led to an original business model based on the application of design knowledge and tools.

Practical implications – The paper provides a better and detailed understanding of the working dynamics of specific and contextualised solutions for the Milano Design Week, explaining how they have been transferred and/or replicated in different contexts and what impacts they have had on the city.

Keywords – Design Culture, Design Driven Innovation, Business Model, City, Value Co-creation

Paper type – Practical Paper

1 Introduction

Milan Fuorisalone, now officially renamed “Milan Design Week” is one of the most important international design events, involving the entire city of Milan in a frenzy of happenings and installations. Together with the annual furniture exhibition, it attracts people from all over the world and has become the major business event taking place in Milan.



Image 1. Visitors at Fuorisalone

Born in the ‘70s with side initiatives organised during the annual furniture exhibition (Salone Internazionale del Mobile di Milano) in the showrooms of very few furniture brands, the Fuorisalone - which literally means “outside the exhibition” - started growing in the ‘80s, and had a push in the ‘90s with the publication of the guide to the events edited and distributed by the Interni magazine.

While Salone Internazionale del Mobile di Milano, the official furniture exhibition, was launched in 1961, it is not fully clear when to date back the first Fuorisalone. Some furniture brands started organising presentations of their new collections in their in-city showrooms from the ‘70s. According to some Italian design critics (Scodeller, 2014), the first events organised outside the official exhibition and the circuit of the furniture

showrooms took place in September 1981, with a performance for the presentation of Alessandro Mendini's "mobile infinito" at Politecnico di Milano and the exposition of the collective group Memphis at the Arc 74 art gallery.

In 1991 COSMIT (Comitato Organizzatore del Salone del Mobile Italiano), the organiser of the official exhibition, moved the 30th edition from September to April. To fill the space left open in the calendar in September, the *Interni* magazine launched the first design week, in the form of a set of events for the presentation of new products taking place in a network of in-city furniture showrooms, and published a leaflet that would have become the first guide to Fuorisalone (Cuman 2012). This attempt of creating an alternative and fully autonomous business came to an end after the second edition, when the design week was realigned with the new calendar of the official exhibition, becoming de facto its side event (a system of side events) and thus assuming the name "Fuorisalone".

2 Fuorisalone as a bottom-up business

Compared to the official furniture exhibition, Fuorisalone was born as a bottom-up business, characterized by a loose ownership. This indie nature drove most of the institutional actors, first of all Cosmit and Federlegno-Arredo, to look at it as a competitor. Fuorisalone actually appeared from the very beginning as a multifaceted initiative, with a mix of cultural and commercial activities: On the one hand it hosted the more experimental work of young designers and start-up companies that could not find place in the official exhibition; on the other hand it took the form of a parallel commercial exhibition where some of the established companies found more convenient using their showrooms or renting in-city spaces to show-off their products.

Fuorisalone appeared more as a social than as a business event: Showrooms used to be (and still are) open after hours, offering "aperitivo" and organising parties, providing to the whole community gathering around the creative professions - and to a growing number of common citizen and visitors - an opportunity to meet, exchange ideas, network and have fun. At the same time, despite its "social" nature, the growth of Fuorisalone as a business was constant. It is actually difficult to estimate the overall turnover of Fuorisalone, since the borders between the core and the satellite activities are quite blurred, but we can give an account of its expansion by looking at the events: The 50 events with one organiser in 1991 became 1.258 events with a multiplicity of organisers in 2015.

Today Fuorisalone is run by a multitude of subjects, in a quite complex network of cooperation and competition, or else in a regime of "co-opetition" (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 1996). This multiform nature makes it quite different from the many design weeks that have been established, and are being established at a quite fast pace, around the world. While most of these events are "compact" - meaning that they assume the fair, with an official organiser (or at least a structured group of organisers) and a target market, as a model - Fuorisalone is at some extent the opposite of a fair: No official organiser (or many official organisers), no brand (or many sub-brands), even no official name (or many official names for the different sub-brands). Comparing Fuorisalone with other major

international design events, these characteristics may be seen both as strengths and as weaknesses: Some design critics have actually already discussed them in this perspective (Fairs, 2013).



Image 2. The multiple brand identity

3 The relation with the city as a core characteristic

The involvement of the city is another characteristic of Fuorisalone. Milan is not only the setting of the event, but also its motor. Fuorisalone depends on the city, but at the same time it acts on it. In this sense, Fuorisalone is at the same time a representation and a transformation of the city: An agent that provokes temporary and long-term changes. The areas where it takes place are temporarily transformed by the events, that have a visible impact on the tangible characteristics of the interior and exterior spaces, on the number and the kind of people visiting those spaces, and on the intangible atmosphere resulting from the interaction between people and spaces.

The different areas, with their identities and vocations, work as a stage, but the events and the installations turn them into something different. The locations assume a peculiar atmosphere that makes them special and attractive, and many hidden places are ready to be discovered not only by the growing number of foreign visitors, but also by the citizens themselves.



Image 3. Some of the installations

Discovery is actually a fundamental element of the Fuorisalone value proposition: The unveiling of new products and design trends goes along with the unveiling of spaces. The scattered geography of the events, the difficulty in finding places, the crawling of crowds between different districts, the awareness that seeing everything is simply not possible, the emotion of just stumbling into something unexpected, the pleasure of getting somewhere due to word of mouth, are all elements of the Fuorisalone experience.

An interesting aspect is the relation between the transitory nature of the event and the long-term change of the city. The transformation that Fuorisalone brings is not only temporary: its presence contributed to building an overall imaginary on top of some of the areas where it takes place (and actually on top of the whole city), becoming the actor of their long-term change and appropriation by the expanding creative communities.

This phenomenon is not original per se, since it took place in other cities around in the world, in connection with operations of urban renewal and branding (Arnholt, 2007) where creative communities have been sometimes used as largely unaware actors in processes of valorisation of the real estate, often bringing to gentrification and expulsion of the vulnerable social classes (Cameron and Coaffee, 2005). Even if we may recognise some of these negative effects also in the case of Milano, what happened with Fuorisalone and the creation of the Milanese design districts is quite far from other much more “artificial” processes of transformation of contemporary cities. In the case of Milano, the construction of the design districts was based on a real vocation of the city, historically acting as a strategic knowledge hub for a wide system of manufacturing clusters located in the Lombardy region and in the whole country (Maffei and Simonelli, 2002). The city’s districts build on this overall character and on their specificities: Some are more bourgeois, residential and commercial; others have a more ex-industrial and now tertiary identity. Not only the operators managing events in these districts act as competitors, but the same could be said also about the districts themselves as collective entities: Each district fights its way to become the “place to be” in the next edition of Fuorisalone. This perspective is in line with some already described characteristics of the urban development, where single areas within the same city may be seen as competitors (Mäding, 2006), or as actors that operate in the already-cited regime of co-opetition: The districts share the same intellectual resources and work together in the construction of the multifaceted identity and positioning of Fuorisalone.

4 The interplay of actors in a complex business model

4.1 The typology of actors

Fuorisalone is configured as a multicenter event, taking place in different districts and locations, whose geography is in constant evolution. New entrants challenge the established organisers, districts and locations: each of them tries to develop its own value proposition and identity, based on the vocation of the territory and on the specificities and capacities of the organisers.

The background of the organisers normally harks back to the design culture.

Initially, the main players used to be specialised design magazines, such as Interni. Their business model (Perkmann and Spicer, 2010; Teece, 2010) was based on the synergies with their publishing activities: they edited, printed and freely distributed to visitors a pocket guide of the events, through which they could sell advertising spaces to the exhibitors, from the simple citation to a more visible presence in the guide. From the end of the '80s, when a few new entrants started publishing alternative guides, Interni put together the publishing activity with the organisation of events, or else with the expression of a direct cultural presence, in the form of installations in public or semi-public spaces that after a few years found their place at the cloister of the University of Milan. To these actors Fuorisalone represents a form of diversification of the core business, and a way of creating value leveraging on the event and on its international fame. The dynamics of business diversification through brand management can be easily retrieved in the characteristics of the business model of these operators. In the first step of evolution of their business model they tried to create sub-brand architectures or "branducts", exploiting their guides and trying to register umbrella brands for the whole Fuorisalone (such as Interni's "Milan Design Capital"). Today their brand is always clearly visible in all their initiatives. They exploit Fuorisalone as a lever for their core business and - due to the crisis of the traditional publishing industry - as a mean to enter the field of event planning and management, as a promising side business where they can exploit their network of relations and integrate their core knowledge on publishing and advertising. In this direction we can interpret also the entrance of foreign players such as Wallpaper.

Other organisers come from the communication design field: Fuorisalone is at the core of their business and they exploit it primarily by creating area brands on top of which they can build an integrated offering of services. In this case, the brand of the organiser tend to be invisible, or to appear with a minor level of visibility, while all the branding strategies and operations are focused on the area brands. We will take Studiolabo - the business entity behind fuorisalone.it and Brera Design District run by two graduates in design at Politecnico di Milano - as the main operator and the benchmark of this kind of companies that we will describe as characterised by a complex business model. On the one hand, Studiolabo operates as a media company. In this branch of the business revenues come from the sales of advertising spaces in multichannel media platforms, in a variety of formats for all the digital media and the printed guides to the events: These spaces may be part of the offering to the sponsors, but may also be sold as separate packages, like it happens in media broadcasting and in traditional publishing. On the other hand, Studiolabo operates as a business intermediary: Its business involves and exploits local resources creating strategic partnerships, such as those with real estate owners that can rent locations for the events, as well as those with institutional actors, such as museums or other public or private institutions that can provide locations, sponsorship and institutional support.

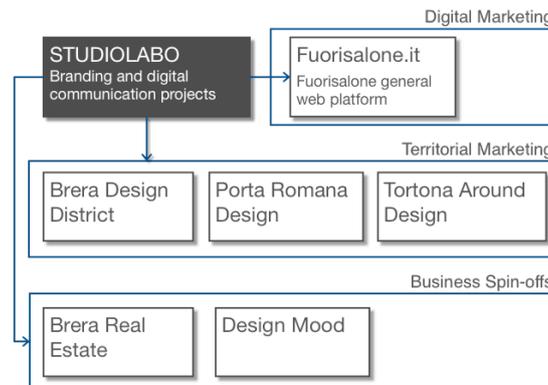


Image 4. Studiolabo's areas of business

One of the relevant issues that these organisers face is that of “unseasoning” their business, making the event live throughout all the year. Perusing this goal, operators like Studiolabo go in the direction of transforming the urban areas where their events are located in permanent locations for the design activities, enforcing and speeding-up the spontaneous long-term transformation of those areas into design districts or into privileged locations for the cultural and creative industries. This strategy is quite well expressed in Brera Design District tagline “The best of design all year round”. Concretely, this means on the one hand finding permanent locations, and on the other hand organising activities beyond Fuorisalone.

The core business model of these operators may be described as an intermediate solution between the commercial fair and the cultural event. A source of revenues comes from the sponsors, articulated at different levels granting different levels of visibility: Main sponsor and simple sponsor. Partnerships grant a share of costs: Media partners provide free access to publicity, while other partners cater services in exchange of visibility. The municipality normally provides patronage, granting institutionalisation, without any economic transaction in both directions. From the commercial fair the business model takes the idea of offering locations or, in a more advanced view, access to visitors. This may be described as two-sided market business model (Caillaud and Jullien, 2003; Rysman, 2009) with a double value proposition for two different categories of clients: The B2B operators, who rent spaces and connected services, and the visitors, whose presence grants publicity and generates business for the exhibitors. The difference with the traditional two-sided market business model is that here the transactions require a much more complex operative structure than the one of a normal fair, where the venue is conceived from the very beginning to host the business. In the majority of the cases, locations do not belong to the organisers, nor organisers control just one big venue that can be subdivided and allotted. In many cases locations are spaces normally hosting other activities that can be temporarily used to show products and installations. The variety of these spaces is impressive: Local shops, factories and warehouse converted into tertiary spaces, small laboratories, private houses, bars and restaurants, hotel lobbies, institutional venues, public squares. While for some of these spaces there might be a direct relation

between the owner and the exhibitors, in other cases the organisers provide an intermediation service, whose relevance has become more and more relevant in correspondence with the progressive internationalisation of the exhibitors. The intermediation service, even if theoretically similar to that of a fair, requires much stronger networking skills, and the capacity of showing the potentialities of the locations to faraway prospect clients. Due to these peculiar characteristics, it has taken the shape of a side business, run through digital platforms (a typical character of the two-sided business models), such as Milano Location and Brera Real Estate for Studiolabo, and Tortona Location for Tortona Design Week. Here the challenge for the operators is again that of “unseasoning” the business, making it live throughout the whole year: Since the business is already profitable, any temporal extension would represent an increase in revenues with little impact on fixed and variable costs.

4.2 The spin-off businesses

Another interesting phenomenon is that of the spin-off activities and businesses. Fuorisalone has a relevant direct impact on the economy of the city, but it is also the driver of specific initiatives that build on the presence of an enormous number of visitors and on the mobilisation of people during the design week. Among others, we’ll describe Elita as paradigmatic case. Born as a non-profit association organising a music festival during Fuorisalone, Elita has subsequently created a for-profit entertainment company, organising the Design Week Festival and launching side initiatives, such as the ExtraSmall designers’ market and - again in the perspective of “unseasoning” the business and of leveraging on the community - the Elita bar, a permanent place for the gathering of the community. It is interesting to note that the Elita Design Week Festival, although different in what it is shown, assumed the same networking and pervasive character of the other Fuorisalone events: Initially (and still) headquartered at Teatro Franco Parenti, it is expanding in the city involving a growing network of music clubs.



Image 5. Elita Design Week Festival

4.3 The relation with the institutional frame

Another interesting aspect is the interconnection of single operators and of their specific business models with the institutional frame.

In an historical analysis, it is clear that Fuorisalone was largely built outside the institutional boundaries. In this, the difference with most of the design weeks popping up all over the world is huge. Apart for some sponsorship and other minor efforts, the institutions did not play an effective role for years, and simply witnessed the surging phenomenon. At a certain point it became so huge that it was simply impossible not taking stock of it, but still the competition between the official exhibition and the independent Fuorisalone was a barrier to an explicit institutional support. Today - since all the players realised that they are not only competing among themselves, but also in the much larger international arena - institutions are actually trying to support Fuorisalone as a fundamental element of the overall value proposition of the annual furniture exhibition, and as one of the elements of qualification of the city of Milan as the major international design hub. The Milan municipality, as well as other public institutions, are thus trying to smooth the bureaucratic processes behind its realisation, to foster the cooperation of the multiplicity of actors involved, and to combine the official fair and the “unofficial” Fuorisalone in a whole value proposition. In all this, the umbrella brand “Milano Design Week” is still much weaker than the single sub-brands that it is supposed to cover, to the point that the umbrella brand itself has a name but not a defined visual identity, nor a subject really taking control of it. This is leading to a quite complex process of negotiation and alignment: Due to the ways in which Fuorisalone took its current shape, institutions seem to be aware that the alignment of the whole system cannot be taken in the perspective of its management, but in that of its governance.

5 The role of design

In all this, design plays a twofold role. On the one hand, design is the content of the exhibition: It is what is shown and what people come for. On the other hand, design is the intangible culture behind the event (Julier, 2013): The knowledge that gives shape to the event as it is. In this sense design is intended in its larger meaning: A culture expressing or underpinning a special way of doing things. Design is a fundamental character of the culture of Milan, which may be retrieved at all those levels in which the culture of organisations has been articulated: Visible artefacts, explicitly espoused values, and invisible underlying assumptions (Schein, 1999). Design permeates the city, being visible with its pervasive presence, but also being invisible in its hidden processes, values and beliefs. The evolution of Fuorisalone, and the transformation of the city that it brought both at the tangible and at the intangible levels, can be thus described as led by design thinking (Brown, 2009; Lockwood, 2009) and culture (Deserti and Rizzo, 2014; Concilio, Deserti and Rizzo, 2014) as pervasive characters of the city.

Design is also the engine of innovation of the event. Its unique competitive positioning in the international markets builds on design-driven innovation (Verganti, 2010), or else on the combination of technological innovation (in particular an advanced

use of digital technologies and platforms) with an innovation of meaning, based on the specificity of the cultural environment in which the event takes place, and on its relation with the material substrate of the city.

6 Conclusions

The modes of operation of Fuorisalone may be described as similar to those of industrial cluster. The phenomena of cooperation, competition, innovation, imitation, knowledge creation and exchange are actually the same that have been described for the industrial clusters (Porter, 1990), with particular reference to those of the so-called “Made in Italy” (Becattini, 1998). The dynamics of transformation of Fuorisalone in its steady process of internationalisation are also similar to those observed in the case of the industrial clusters during the globalisation of competition: Networks remain anchored to their local core but become much larger in their geographical base, while competition becomes international, calling for the capacity of connecting a situated know-how with international markets, and the local culture with the global trends. Fuorisalone, and actually the whole design network underpinning it, works as tertiary district characterised by an intense interaction of actors: Operators cooperate, compete, innovate and imitate each other, advancing the overall knowledge and generating value.

The mix of culture and business constitutes from the very beginning a specific character of Fuorisalone: it is at the base of its value proposition, but at the same time it poses a dilemma to the organisers, challenging the business sustainability. Visitors are in search of a different experience than the one that they can have at the commercial fair: Experimental designs, works of emerging designers, perspectives on new trends, emotional installations, relaxed networking. Organisers must provide all this, but they have to find ways of making it economically viable: They manage the constant tension and the trade-off between being commercial and incrementing revenues and being experimental and cutting-edge. One of our conclusions is that this tension may be interpreted as mostly similar to that occurring in companies striving to combine exploration and exploitation (Martin, 2009), or to manage product portfolios where the sheer economic performances must be combined with other ratios. Some of the organisers of Fuorisalone can be described as ambidextrous organisations (March, 1991), since they must combine the capacity of constantly innovating their offering with that of honing processes to create conditions of efficiency for the economic exploitation.

Fuorisalone can be seen as a system of multiple actors resulting in a constellation that coproduce value (Chesbrough and Rosembloom, 2002), representing and diffusing design culture outside its professional community in the larger context of the entire city. Compared with the business model of the furniture exhibition, that of Fuorisalone appears as much more complex: the event is perceived as a whole, but it is the result of a collective production. Its current configuration may be described as a complex business model (Smith, Binns and Tushman, 2010), or as a system of complex business models interacting one with the other, in a mix of cooperation and competition involving a relevant number of actors and stakeholders.

The scaling up mechanisms were also profoundly different. The fair had the opportunity of scaling up its business thanks to the creation of the new exhibition center in 2005. The scaling up business strategy has been primarily based on internationalisation, by: 1) Trying to attract more foreign visitors; 2) Trying to export the format abroad; 3) Trying to attract more foreign exhibitors. The first strategic line went along with the progressive internationalisation of the Italian furniture companies, and actually worked due to the win-win combination of Commercial fair and Fuorisalone; the others proved much more troublesome, due to the difficulty of recreating the conditions of success abroad and to the intrinsic conflict of interest of the organiser - expression of the federation of the Italian furniture industries - in attracting foreign competitors.

Fuorisalone scaled up its business through an internal process of imitation and competition. Its dynamics of growth may be described as similar to those occurring in industrial or tertiary clusters. Based on pre-conditions primarily related to knowledge and social capital, actors started a virtuous process of imitation and competition, forcing the leaders to look for continuous innovation and improvement, and bringing to an overall growth of Fuorisalone. Also in this case internationalisation was at the core of the business growth, but the public of Fuorisalone is actually much wider than that of the furniture exhibition, since it includes not only the professional operators in search of the most experimental products, of the new trends and of the young talents, but also common citizens and visitors eager to understand the advancement of design, as the background culture permeating the whole city, and to join the “energy flow” of those days.

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