

## MILAN FASHION SYSTEM FUELED BY INTERNATIONALIZATION DIDACTIC EXPERIENCES

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### Resumo

O presente artigo introduz as condições que levaram à criação de um Programa de Design de Moda na Escola de Design - Politecnico di Milano, analisando o contexto histórico, sócio-cultural, econômico e empresarial no qual a Universidade floresceu e atuou como mediador cultural e inovador, com suas atividades didáticas e de pesquisa. Conectando este framework com a estratégia de internacionalização do Politecnico di Milano, posteriormente apresenta-se a colaboração entre o Politecnico di Milano e o Fashion Institute of Technology, em Nova York, como uma plataforma única para diferenciar dramaticamente os dois parceiros dos demais concorrentes líderes globais públicos e privados no campo do ensino superior.

**Palavras-chave:** Competição global, genius loci, contexto sociocultural e econômico, cultura de design, plataforma para troca de conhecimento

### Abstract

The present article introduces the conditions which led to the creation of a Fashion Design Program at the School of Design – Politecnico di Milano, reading the historical, socio-cultural, economic and entrepreneurial context where the university has flourished and acted as a cultural mediator and innovator through its research and teaching activities. Connecting this framework with the internationalization strategy of Politecnico di Milano it then presents the collaboration between Politecnico di Milano and Fashion Institute of Technology, New York as a unique platform to dramatically differentiate the two partners from other leading public and private global competitors, in the field of higher education.

**Keywords:** Global competition, genius loci, socio-cultural and economic context, design culture, platform for knowledge exchange

## 1 The Italian Fashion System

Italy is one of the leading countries in the European textile-clothing and accessories sector, which is an economic and productive field that, considering just the textile-clothing supply chain, employs, approximately 400.000 people (SMI - Federazione Tessile Moda Centro Studi, 2017). In the collective imaginary, for some time now “Fashion” is one of those products generically defined “Made in Italy”, which means they are internationally renowned for excelling at aesthetic, functional, communication and service qualities: clothing, accessories, food, furniture, and, in general, household goods and personal items. The fashion and luxury shopping streets in the most beautiful cities in the world help to spread this popularity and Italian products are often distinguished, not only for their intrinsic quality, but also for the implied communication strategies and the ability to convey a culture and a lifestyle that is very specific.

Nevertheless, today the success of “Made in Italy” is facing dramatically changed socio-cultural, consumption and economic conditions due to the introduction of information and communication technologies, the globalization of markets, the ever-increasing importance assumed by the “intellectual capital” and “knowledge” regarding the possession of instrumental goods and infrastructures.

Therefore, the Italian economic system has to rethink processes, production and distribution chains and, at the same time, it needs to integrate new knowledge and skills to cope with the contemporary scenario and to advance in its development.

Yet, the “Fashion” phenomenon, both from a social and cultural perspectives and from an economic and competences point of view, seems to have far wider repercussions than in the past, even in traditionally distant sectors: from the automotive and transportation sector to home furniture, from

HoReCA to office spaces, from geotextiles for architecture and civil engineering to healthcare, from special protection in extreme environments to sport and active leisure.

Alongside this widening of perspectives and scenarios, the design of fashion products, following the narrowest interpretation of them, is greatly changing: the designing of a fashion item is subject to a deep rereading, both in terms of creative methods and production and distribution processes, and it is progressively moving away from the idea of an isolated artistic act of a gifted creator to finally being considered as a whole design process. From this perspective, creativity, method, technology, production and distributive processes, and the understanding of social and cultural dynamics find their space and define a system of constraints and, together, the opportunities for the design practice.

## **2 Fashion Design at Politecnico di Milano - School of Design**

Within these premises, “designing Fashion” and a didactic path suitable for educating fashion designers find a privileged place at Politecnico di Milano (POLIMI) - School of Design.

The Fashion System—which classified and divided Fashion into historical periods based on tastes and styles, and codified the design and production activities—aimed at representing the economic-financial development model of the sector, but it failed because the very Fashion is going through a substantial revision (ABRUZZESE; BARILE, 2001). The actors who represent the structural core of the sector—professionals, entrepreneurial and research communities—are working to regenerate a system able to face the new trajectories on which the contemporary society is moving along.

Furthermore, today the design practice linked to the culture of the industrial project tends to analyze the design processes that generate its intention and to identify much wider and more complex design scenarios, whose purpose is not to provide a single product solution, but that to suggest broader design directions within which to include the final project.

The numerous disciplinary skills available at POLIMI –which span across the areas of product design, communication and interiors, materials engineering, art and architecture, technologies, production logistics, ergonomic design– as well as the experiences of educational experimentation developed in the field of design in recent years, are the basis on which the didactic offer is founded.

POLIMI School of Design is now offering a cutting-edge Fashion Design Program thanks to the involvement of professionals, companies and cultural operators, which have contributed to the development of this sector.

The Fashion Design Program at POLIMI School of Design moves away from the traditional “stylistic” reading of this sector to become a field of integration of both, technical and creative skills. The design practice refers to the “fashion product system” as a whole, considering a garment or accessory in relation to its components and materials, the packaging, its accessories, retailing and distribution strategies, events and communication methods. The study of trends, changes in behavioral habits, cultural values of reference are then specific reference scenarios for a fashion designer.

The trained designers tend to combine aspects of innovation in materials and technologies, with aspects of cultural interpretation concerning the identity of social groups and communities, designing a fashion item as a functional product and at the same time as a language, as part of a more extensive system of products and components, as the object of a brand communication and as an element of the relationship among users.

Moreover, the knowledge about the technological evolution of the textile sector and the most advanced evolution of garments–objects embedding technology and characterized by hard components and soft aspects is necessary.

Yet, the opening of a Fashion Design Program at POLIMI finds its fundamentals in the close relationship that the Politecnico has established with the local production and professional actors, in particular with the Milanese Fashion System, which represents a unique case on an international level.

Although the birth of “Made in Italy” is traced back to the fashion shows at Palazzo Pitti in Florence, at the beginning of the 1950s, it is still in Milan, and in its surrounding area, that specialized laboratories, meeting places and research centers that see Fashion as a strategic area for the development of the Italian economy, have been flourishing.

Today, Milan is the official headquarters of Ready-to-Wear presentations and through the National Chamber of Italian Fashion it organizes and manages the annual calendar of all the major events within the industry at the international level. Milan is home to the most prestigious research centers, especially in at the academic level, at national and international levels. Furthermore, Milan is home to the largest number of magazines and press offices operating in the fashion sector. Lastly, Milan is the center where the highest number of legal and operational offices linked to the world of entrepreneurship in the sector is concentrated. The city demonstrates to have the natural genius loci of an entrepreneurial, professional and research culture.

Approaching the world of Fashion design, studying its generative dynamics within a Milanese institution with a strong cultural tradition which is linked to the world of science and technology, means therefore to investigate, above all, the history that, still today, has been characterizing, the design soul of this very place.

The heritage of material, entrepreneurial and productive culture constituted by the local systems on which the distinctive character of the territory is articulated is enhanced through the promotion of creative, knowledge transfer, and knowledge sharing processes that the design practice is able to activate within SMEs, fueling processes of continuous innovation (SIMONELLI; BERTOLA; SANGIORGI, 2002).

Through the exploration of the local creative system and the collaboration with the actors involved in the various roles of the industry, the “polytechnic” education guarantees the placement of professional profiles with creative skills articulated throughout the whole creative and product development process, configuring itself as a structured system of skills aimed at increasing the level of competitiveness of the Italian production.

### 3 Politecnico di Milano Internationalization Strategy in Brief

In consideration of an increasing global competition, as discussed in the Erasmus Policy Statement<sup>40</sup>, Politecnico di Milano has always been working on the implementation of the knowledge triangle “Education–Research–Innovation”, thanks also to a specific internationalization strategy. The internationalization strategic plan has been deployed firstly through the participation in the Erasmus Program, allowing POLIMI to develop and strengthen relationships with a wide network of Higher Education Institutions through students, faculty and staff mobility actions, up to one year. Currently, the School of Design by itself has 150 international exchange agreements with partners in Europe and 75 with universities outside Europe. It has approximately 200 exchange students travelling to partner universities per year and hosts 30 visiting professors for research and teaching activities. The Erasmus Program has allowed to be known all over the world and, also thanks to an offer that mixes courses taught in Italian and also in English – with the Master course in Design for the Fashion System fully taught in English –, the Design today has approximately 200 international students enrolled in the Design Programs.<sup>41</sup>

A further development in the internationalization process has been the creation of international double degrees with schools of excellence in specific areas, aiming to offer a higher specialization and a more focused international experience to students who can obtain an Italian academic qualification and one of equal level awarded by a foreign university.

Today the School of Design can offer the following:

- Double Degree with Tongji University in Shanghai for MSc Design students in PSSD, Interior and Spatial Design, Integrated Product Design and Communication Design;

40. Available in: <[https://www.polimi.it/fileadmin/\\_migrated/content\\_uploads/Polimi-Erasmus-policy-statement.pdf](https://www.polimi.it/fileadmin/_migrated/content_uploads/Polimi-Erasmus-policy-statement.pdf)>

41. Available in: <<http://www.design.polimi.it/en/international-area/doppie-lauree/>>

- Double Degree with Tsinghua University of Beijing for MSc Design students in Interior and Spatial Design, Communication Design, Integrated Product Design and Design for the Fashion System;
- Double Degree with Le Ecole Centrale in France for MSc students in Design & Engineering;
- Double Degree with UNAL - Universidad Nacional de Bogotá for MSc students in Communication Design;
- Double Degree with Universidad du Sao Paolo for students in Communication Design and Integrated Product Design.

Lastly, POLIMI internationalization strategy has recently focused on the strategic international partnerships, entering networks of leading European and non-European universities in technical and design fields, with research and teaching objectives.

#### **4 FIT Program @ POLIMI**

In line with the internationalization strategy of POLIMI and in regard to the implementation and enhancement of the fashion sector competitiveness level, the School of Design started a collaboration with the prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology, State University of New York (FIT) with numerous joint activities involving faculty and students from both Universities.

The agreement, signed in 2007 and renewed in 2012 for additional five years, is an expression of the internationalization policies that both universities are pursuing. In fact, it represents an important opportunity to offer students rich and articulated learning experiences and proper skills to the current global markets.

Currently, the project involves faculty and students who are members of the POLIMI School of Design Fashion Design Program and FIT Fashion Design courses but may be extended in the future to other areas at both institutes', such as Interior Design and Product Design. FIT has a history of presence in

Italy with an office in Florence, but is now strengthening its internationalization policies through agreements with University partners. The project started with POLIMI has in fact a bilateral nature. It does not simply imply the opening of a branch office, but it establishes a real didactic collaboration that involves the faculty of POLIMI School of Design faculty and joint educational activities since its beginning.

In particular, the project sees POLIMI School of Design as a Campus Abroad of FIT, a sort of detachment of the institute, and involves about 60 students enrolled in the third or fourth year of the Fashion Design Program in Sportswear and Knitwear specialization tracks at the American institute. The cohorts of FIT students spend an entire academic year in Italy, attending ad-hoc courses taught in English by POLIMI faculty and offered just to FIT students but also and participating in some shared didactic experiences together with POLIMI students. In fact, FIT program at POLIMI School of Design involves a significant number of faculty members from POLIMI who are appointed to teaching specific courses in English for American guests: Knitwear design, Computer pattern design, CAD for textiles and clothing, Sportswear design, Advanced sartorial techniques, Design of leather goods, as well as courses from the historical-critical area such as social research methods and history of design and fashion.

The program has been designed to keep the main ingredients of FIT Fashion Design Program, but giving the chance to FIT students to take part into some courses working with Polimi students and faculty and possibly with Italian fashion companies involved in the didactical process. The shared activities between Polimi and FIT are:

- Technology and production

The goal of the course is to give students the chance to get to know Italian manufacturing culture and tradition, not just giving technical information but also through a calendar of field trips to visit leading Italian fashion companies.

- Metadesign Studio



The goal of the course is to give students the chance to experience the Italian design approach, simulating a complete research and development process of a fashion collection, starting from the trend analysis, throughout the merchandising plan, to the development of the architecture of the collection. The class is organized in teams (FIT + POLIMI) working on a brief given by a real company (during the years: Etro, Benetton, Valentino RED).

- Company Workshop

The goal of the course is to give students the chance to work with a real fashion brand, in a full immersive activity of 5 full time days, presenting a final outcome to the company, taking part into the evaluation process (during the years: Alcantara, Imec, Oakley, RetroSuperFuture, Sartoria Vico, Slam, Diesel)

- History of Architecture and Design

The goal of the course is to give students the chance to get to know the story of design and architecture with a specific focus on European cultural movements and with a deepening of the main topics through fieldtrips in Milano and Lombardy to directly see the expression of design and architecture.

POLIMI students who participate in the activities scheduled at POLIMI School of Design and shared with FIT are approximately 50 and they are enrolled in the second and third years of bachelor in Fashion Design and in the first year of MSc in Design for the Fashion System.

The agreement also includes the chance for 5 MA Polimi students to spend 6 months at FIT during the spring semester, according to the principle of mutual benefits and internationalization of students.

Infrastructure and general facilities are shared by the two communities of students and have been implemented in a spirit of sharing costs in order to offer a proper service to FIT and Polimi students. The constant investment in facility improvement has carried to triple the dimension of laboratories, multiplying spaces and equipment for sewing and knitting lab. Coherently with past collaboration funding for providing technical assistance to the laboratory continues to be shared by FIT and Polimi.

During the past years of this program an active network has been growing, connecting students, some of them already graduated, between the US and Italy. This has been a relevant achievement, coherent with the cultural and scientific mission of the agreement and also useful for supporting future candidates preparing and conducting the experience of studying abroad in the two countries.

This project refers to a strategic goal of internationalization pursued by POLIMI, to support not only the quality of its research activities and the integration of its didactic offer with research, which international exchange processes guarantee, but also to support the processes of industrial, economic and commercial development promoted by the regional and local institutions.

In this way, POLIMI increases its contribution to the development of human capital and of research, to the process of internationalization of companies and to the creation of conditions for the attractiveness of the territory and the Country.

The purposes of the agreement and collaboration with FIT are linked to the possibility for the involved students to compare and enrich themselves with two different didactic models, to get arrive not only to design successful products, but also to develop the capacity to read the needs of society and then translate their intuitions into new scenarios of products and service systems in the field of fashion.

The Fashion Design Program POLIMI School of Design has a fairly recent history and has taken its cue from an articulation of the original course in Industrial Design at the former Faculty of Design. These origins are precisely what characterize the specificities of the very Fashion Design Program: its particular attention to product innovation and its proximity to the Italian design culture. FIT didactic offer is instead closer to the “Arts & Crafts” tradition and expresses more specialized and applicative contents. It is the complementarity of teaching approaches the most interesting aspects of this collaboration, as it encourages an exchange of skills and experiences useful for the development of innovative didactic projects.

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