

CULTURAL INDUSTRIES AND URBAN REGENERATION. PHYSICAL RENOVATION AND TERRITORIAL IDENTITY CREATION IN *ZONA TORTONA*

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Abstract

The main subject of this paper is the relation between urban space and the agglomeration of economic activities tied to creativity and cultural production. The authors aim to contribute to understandings of this relation through a focus on the development of Milan as a creative city.

Urban issues such as identity redefinition, district regeneration, territorial branding and urban competitiveness are in this particular case closely bound to the production of culture and creativity. The co-localization of creative activities in a territory, it is argued, has important effects not only for the cultural industry itself, but is a potential engine for the broader development of an urban district and potentially whole cities. In our empirical example, we show how the gradual settlement of cultural economic activities in the *Zona Tortona* district of Milan has changed local space in terms of both the built environment and territorial identity.

The *Tortona area*, on the post-industrial periphery of Milan, has become a recognized territorial brand, “*Zona Tortona*”, and one of the most dynamic zones and attractive areas in the city, used as a location for big events such as the *Furniture Fair* or the *Fashion Week*. The process through which this has been achieved began in the mid-1980s – with a pivotal intervention on a vacant industrial site by a photography company – and is still going on, in the form of a gradual and incremental series of creative settlements that continue to encourage other creative industry professionals to buy and renovate ex-industrial spaces.

As in *Zona Tortona*, all over Europe we see to an increasing number of examples of urban, economic and social regeneration led by private, bottom-up developments, very often connected to creative economic activities. This is why the *Zona Tortona* experience constitutes an interesting case study: enabling us to deepen our knowledge of contemporary processes of urban change.

In particular, two processes have intertwined in the Tortona area recent history: built environment renovation and territorial identity creation. The paper aims to throw light on these meaningful intersections.

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1. Introduction

Milan is an international node for design and fashion production, in terms of trend setting and related manufacturing. Being known worldwide as a fashion and design capital, the city and the wider Lombardy Region are characterized by a spread distribution of small, medium and large businesses connected to this kind of production; furthermore, Milan is a major R&D and formation center for design and fashion subjects. Promotional events, like the design and furniture trade fair – *Salone del Mobile* - have literally changed large parts of the city (Jansson and Power, 2010). It is obvious, then, that a certain vocation and diffused knowledge about design and creativity is “in the air” in Milan.

All over the world, though, creativity and cultural production have been at the center of the discourse of Planning and urban renovation strategies. During the last 15 years, the importance of creativity seems to be emerged not only as a new, alternative, potential source for urban cultural development, but also as an essential resource to be competitive in the global market. Nowadays, creativity together with innovation and knowledge – the immaterial component of society – are differentiating factors that influence ideas, products, services and places, leading to competitive advantages in all fields of economy. As creativity, innovation and knowledge seem to become some of the main drivers of economic development of cities and regions, a new kind of economy is emerging, a new paradigm which embraces economic, cultural, technological and social aspects of development both at macro and micro levels. Indeed, many cities have recently recognized the value deriving from the presence of creative and cultural industries and have started to investigate how the mixture of culture and commerce, production and consumption, large and small businesses might work as a strategy to improve their image as global and dynamic nodes.

However, one of the major problems with creativity is its definition. Klausen (2010, pp.347) notes that “*the standard definition of creativity is problematic and maybe in an even worse state is generally acknowledged by creativity researchers themselves*”, and Scott (2010, pp.115) remarks that “*in view of its current vogue, the term calls urgently for substantive clarification*”. Kuntzmann (2005) defines creativity as a *fuzzy concept*, Landry (2000) indicates it as an alternative strategic approach to urban planning, and Florida (2002) describes it as the main source for cities to be competitive.

Furthermore in recent times, this new trajectory of the developmental perspective has raised a lot of uncertainties, conflicts and ambiguities. Central to this debate is the exploitation of cultural production for economic profit, in the service of the new emerging middle classes, leading to a destruction of original artistic values, instead or in the name of a genuine interest in stimulating cultural advancement. .

Regarding this, Zukin (2010) argues that creativity is arguably not just an end in itself, but also a means to develop distinction, economic spin-off and authenticity.

Indeed, all over the world we see an increasing number of examples of urban, economic and social regeneration, in which the conscious creation or nourishment of cultural and creative areas, districts, neighbourhoods has already been used as an instrument in the urban planning agenda.

In every major city, cultural and leisure functions are grouped together in a great variety of spatial forms and programs. They can be enclosed in stand-alone building or larger buildings complexes, or they may include entire quarters or networks of locations. Most of the time projects hosting cultural and creative functions are located in former industrial complexes but quite often they also imply the construction of new buildings. Some clustering strategies are simply linked to artistic/cultural activities, but many others also incorporate a great variety of leisure and entertainment elements such as bar, restaurants, cinemas, retail spaces, etc.

Sometimes such projects have started their career as innovative attempts in places left over after planning, by informal, private groups of cultural producers who turn them into new alternative cultural sites through bottom-up developments; in other examples, cultural clusters began their existence already in the minds of cultural managers searching for the ways to strengthen the market position of their amenities within a more competitive cultural and leisure market (Mommaas, 2004). In still other cases, projects come to life on the drawing board of urban planners through a top down approach, looking for ways to revitalize urban quarters or to strengthen the local creative economy improving the “global brands” of cities, through growth-oriented policies.

This seems to acquire more importance in a globalized world where places compete with each other and the image of a city plays a crucial role. In this contemporary global competition, cities become themselves products, trying as best as they can to attract investments, business residents, tourists, events and to improve citizens’ satisfaction. In order to deal with this competition, which puts under pressure not only enterprises and public and private sectors, but also territorial areas, different typologies of tools are exploited, such as strategic plan adoption, place urban territorial marketing strategies, city branding actions, events and mega-events hosting that could produce and spread positive images of cities. So that when all these elements are well managed and promoted, the potentials to obtain good results are definitely higher and of success.

The case study we are presenting here explores some alternative urban patterns, that seem to be quite innovative in terms of features and factors involved in the process and which make this experience rather unique.

Indeed, it is a story of overlapping urban dimensions, equally giving their contributions to the redevelopment process: it is a story of industrial reuse and transformation, territorial promotion and urban marketing strategies linked with world known events taking place in Milan.

Thus built environment renovation and territorial identity creation are inextricable key factors of the regeneration process that need to be analysed together, with the same relevance, since they are continuing influence each other along the path (Giuliani, 2010). What links and supports these two material and immaterial

dimensions is exactly the territory, its spaces and its unused possibilities.

What makes this experience unique and worth to investigate is a combination of elements of interest: first of all, *Zona Tortona* is nowadays renown as one of the most influential fashion and design district in the world, accounting the location of top names in creative industries, beside being one of the most dynamic and attractive neighbourhood in Milan. Secondly, its uniqueness lays in the fact that it is able to grow and renovate itself thanks to its embeddedness in the territory, since it has developed not by top-down interventions, but rather from spontaneous triggering initiative from private creative companies. Thirdly, territorial image creation, still by private sector, has been the supporting infrastructure for the territorial transformation.

The paper is divided into four main parts. The first one reconstructs the historical context of this part of Milan, starting from its origin to narrow down to the urban, socio-economic situation the area was facing before the redevelopment process started. The second parts concerns the process from a physical point of view, considering the interventions on the ex productive sites and the actors were promoted by. The third one regards the immaterial dimension of the transformation, analyzing how different strategies of urban marketing have been applied. The last part tries to produce some final considerations about this urban spontaneous reindustrialization as an occasion to renovate and revitalize this part of the city, proposing possible future research issues. Maps, images and logos are provided for a better explanation of the case.

2. Research methods

The methodology adopted in this study is based on three different steps and on the assumption that it is always appropriate to use multiple methods and triangulation (Barnes, 2009). The first step consisted of a literature review to capture relevant background knowledge on creative and cultural projects within cities, and rehabilitation of traditional districts and old factories, which helped to develop a theoretical framework for the case study.

The second stage was a case study both with on-site interviews and review of some materials. Qualitative analysis of the social dimensions were carried out based on site direct observation and in-depth interviews, as well as review of both formal, published articles and informal documents led to events and activities such as brochures, magazines, websites, blogs about the case study. In depth ethnographic interviews were conducted in *Tortona area* and are intended to represent the common general perception and the evaluation about the zone; for this reason, interviews have been conducted with some people living in the traditional housing neighbourhoods, several creative workers based in the district, young people attending events in the area during some particular manifestations –like the Design Week, and the managing director of the first agency who founded the *Zona Tortona* brand. The third stage of the research methodology were in-depth surveys and drawing of thematic maps, intended to verify the extent of applicability of the list of

attributes collected from the literature review and to identify the underlying factors for urban and socially rehabilitation of this ex industrial periphery of Milan.

3. The story of *Zona Tortona*

The *Tortona area*, near *Porta Genova*, is a traditional neighbourhood of Milan which has become in recent years one of the most dynamic zones of the city in terms of cultural production, in particular in the fields of design, fashion and contemporary art. This area is known as the *Tortona area*, or *Zona Tortona*, following the name of one of its principal streets. This urban transformation has followed some uncommon paths, which have been partially influenced by the specific morphologies, histories, and geographical characteristics of the area, as we will explain in the following paragraphs.

3.1 Location

Located in the south–western part of Milan, the area is bound between the *Naviglio Grande* canal and the railway, and it is characterized by a huge variety of urban elements composing the landscape, belonging both to the productive and residential vocation of this area. Developing from the city-centre and involving several concentric strips, the area extends from the very central presence of *Naviglio* and *Darsena* canals, bordering with some more peripheral adjacent municipalities, producing different patterns of urban composition, both in terms of social and urban features.

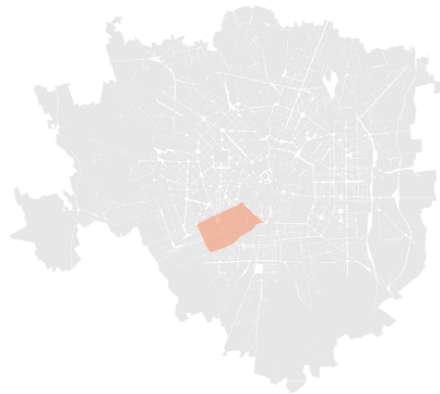


Figure 1: Location of Tortona Area in Milan

Tortona area was part of an old territory, the *Corpi Santi*, added to Milan in 1873, de facto a different municipality, mainly composed by some agricultural sites. This has been one of the main reasons why it has not been involved by the planning strategies and projects adopted by the Municipality of Milan during the last century. This kind of unplanned character has led, through the years, to the coexistence within the same spaces of several heterogeneous functions, to a mixture of old and new

architectural typologies as well as to some different socio-cultural paths.

Thus differentiation from the city as a whole and non-homogeneity are two of the key features of this part of Milan, even in the perspective of becoming an interesting place of research, experimentation and production: the area preserves this kind of traditional and popular image and sense of belonging which is so deeply consolidated in the collective perception and at the same time, as place ever changing, it is spread to the introduction of new urban qualities, able to create a laboratory of contemporary city images.

Indeed the area seems somehow to go along with the contemporary trends in terms of urban regeneration, combining features of the past with patterns of the present and leading to an inclusive urban community where urban settlements are “*indicative of the way in which rooted cultures have evolved appropriate lifestyles in their physical environment*” (Guy, Farmer, 2001, pp.144).

3.2 Origins and urbanization process

After the annexation of the *Corpi Santi* to the Municipality of Milan, the localization of the *Porta Genova* Railway Station in 1865 and the construction of part of the railway, the urbanization process started within this urban portion of Milan. This was the chance for many industries of the metallurgical, mechanic and chemical sector to locate their plants there, in order to exploit the advantages coming from the presence both of the railway and of the *Naviglio* canal.

In shaping one of the most important productive sectors of Milan was, together with the location of vast industrial sites, a quite flourishing network of small and medium enterprises, handcrafts laboratories, workshops, garages, railway tracks, traditional architectural typologies as the *case di ringhiera*, eating houses and social housing neighbourhoods, located in-between mixed up spaces of working and living.

This functional mixitè of land uses laid the foundations for the urban morphology of a quite huge territory, included within the streets *Tortona*, *Solari*, *Savona*, up to *San Cristoforo* and *Giambellino*, designing a solid and heterogeneous urban continuum.

In a few years the agricultural vocation of this area had been converted into an industrial-productive one, changing the area’s social composition and becoming one of the traditional working class neighbourhoods of the city.

At the same time this territory developed precisely as an enclave system due to the presence of two rigid layouts, the *Naviglio* canal and the railway, which, even being the key starting point of the industries settlements, have contained the urban sprawl towards the neighbouring areas, contributing to eventually shape a marginal, abandoned and pending environment.

The high concentration of industrial sites continued to evolve until the ‘60’s, involving several famous companies, such as *CGE*, *Ansaldo*, *Nestlé*, *Riva Calzoni*, *Richard Ginori*, etc. At that point, because of the deep transformations affecting the whole productive system, most factories were dismantled to be moved farther from the expanding city center or have been closed due to the cessation of the production, leaving grand empty spaces behind.

Thus, in a 30 year period, all the industrial sites have been abandoned leading to a situation of urban blight and socio-economic depression, typical of the most post-industrial peripheries of Milan.

Before the starting of settlement of cultural and creative activities, these vacant disused spaces have been pending for quite a long time, without any kind of economic or social actor being interested in giving a new future to them – they seemed not to present any profitable patterns of transformation.

3.3 The process

The transformation of *Tortona area* is a story of a bottom-up preservation case, together with the promotion of a new vocation, started with some specific features that definitively could have not foreseen the result. It's a story of revitalization and re-industrialization in which the main infrastructures is cultural capital.

Tortona area regeneration is not a story regarding only the physical and functional transformation process and regeneration of historic spaces within an old productive neighbourhood; instead, it involves several and variegated aspects, such as local cultural and creative renaissance, new architectural typologies, and innovative strategies of territorial marketing.

Indeed one of the aspects that can be identified in retrospect is the necessity to apply different tools, both material and immaterial, in order to draw a new profile for this area creating a real new urban proposal. We argue that this process of urban regeneration has mainly involved two different patterns of transformation, recognizable because of the different intertwined competences: built environment renovation and territorial identity creation.

These two features mutually influenced each other, both in chronological and concrete terms. This interdisciplinary approach is considered here as a surplus value, as an ingredient that has been basic in the perspective of promoting this urban transformation along the time.

3.3.1 Built environment renovation by self organization³

As mentioned before, the two decades of urban blight with industrial settlements pending in hold for new potential uses let the economical values of the industrial properties went down, leading to a relative low price and to an immediate availability to be restored.

This new spatial and economic configuration transformed the neighbourhood in a fragmented territorial portion, without any precise vocations.

In that period the area was not involved in any kind of redevelopment process, both because of the lack of interest - at public administration's eyes it seemed that bigger and better shaped areas were more appetizing in terms of urban development for the whole city - and lack of adequate, less rigid tools to face such a neglected situation.

Nevertheless these ex-industrial sites were hiding a huge potential for the whole urban context, because of the proximity to the city centre and the particular

³ For a chronological map of physical transformations, please see figure 5a and 5b, pp. 16-17

morphology of such kind of territory, made of a mixité of functions and spaces.

We will have to wait until the '80s to face a new regeneration phase when, without introducing a large-scale redevelopment project - usually imposed from above and accompanying a relocation of the original inhabitants - the rebirth of *Tortona area* started, with what we'll call the pivotal pioneer intervention, that afterwards led to an incremental series of interventions gradually transforming old buildings one after another. Thus the entire regeneration of *Tortona area* was achieved by a self-organizational process, launched by the aggregation of individual buildings renovations.

In 1983 the photographer and entrepreneur Fabio Lucchini, together with some other prestigious cultural professionals such Gisella Borioli and Fabrizio Ferri bought part of ex *CGE* company in *Tortona area* to settle their *Superstudio*. *Superstudio* is a poly-functional and versatile multi-location, a huge space (10,000sqm) created to meet the needs of operators and creative people working in the overlapping fields of fashion, art, design, communication, culture and entertainment.

The studio consists in wide and flexible spaces, which can be divided or combined, suitable for great events, exhibitions, conventions, fairs, fashion shows, performances. The variously-sized spaces are also suitable as studios for furniture, car, advertisement photo-shooting, for cinema/television sets.

Superstudio soon became great attraction pole for international members of the creative class, such as photographers, journalists, artists, both in terms of temporary and stable permanence in the area, enhancing its fame within the district itself and also the whole city. Just two years later, in 1985, a second intervention took place with the settling the laboratory of the photographer *Carlo Orsi* inside an old complex of machine shops. What is important to point out here is that this is the case of already well established creative companies and big names in the cultural production field, who moved here and consequently attracted lots of smaller artists and creative producers.

In that time that ticking situation has been unlocked with the pioneer intervention initiative, it seemed that the risk of investment on such kind of properties has increasingly reduced because of the adequate location of cultural and creative functions in this urban territory. In this sense this first interventions triggered a gradual incremental process of revitalization of the area, encouraging other professionals, within the creative industry, to buy and renovate portions or entire industrial buildings and start their activities there.

This kind of perception was going to strengthen within all the private actors of the transformation along the years, leading to an inverse ratio for which the more high is the quantity of the settlements of creative and cultural activities inside disused productive properties, the less huge is the risk to invest in a regeneration process of such kind, exploiting the advantages deriving both from being inserted in a similar functions network and from the proximity and face to face relations.

Photographic sets, design and architectural studios, offices, universities, research centre, communication and marketing laboratories, are just some of the main cultural

and creative activities settled within *Tortona area*.

In 1999 the Municipality launched a bid for what was defined as the main intervention of cultural requalification in Milan in the last 50 years: the project of the “City of Cultures”, for the realization of Center for Extra European Cultures, the Archeological Museum of Milan and the CASVA - Visual Arts High Studies Center. The competition was won by *David Chipperfield Architects*, but the work started just two years ago because of lack of funding. However, this shows the acknowledgement of the new identity of the area as the new cultural district of the city, even if so far this is the only intervention promoted by a public actor for the Tortona area.

Because of the increasing of activities and the consolidation of such kind of territorial connotation, at the beginning of the 2000's *Superstudio* decided to enlarge its spaces, establishing a new multipurpose laboratory, *Superstudio Più*, in the ex productive properties of the *CGE*, devoted to conventions, exhibitions, festivals and all kind of temporary events related to culture and creativity.

Going forward with the process, at different times and from different private entrepreneurs, several international “archistars” - such as David Chipperfield, Mario Cucinella, Tadao Ando, Antonio Citterio, Matteo Thun - were called for the renovation projects of big abandoned manufacture buildings and even several important fashion firms – Armani, Ermengildo Zegna, Hugo Boss, Kenzo – settled their headquarters occupying parts of these vacant properties.

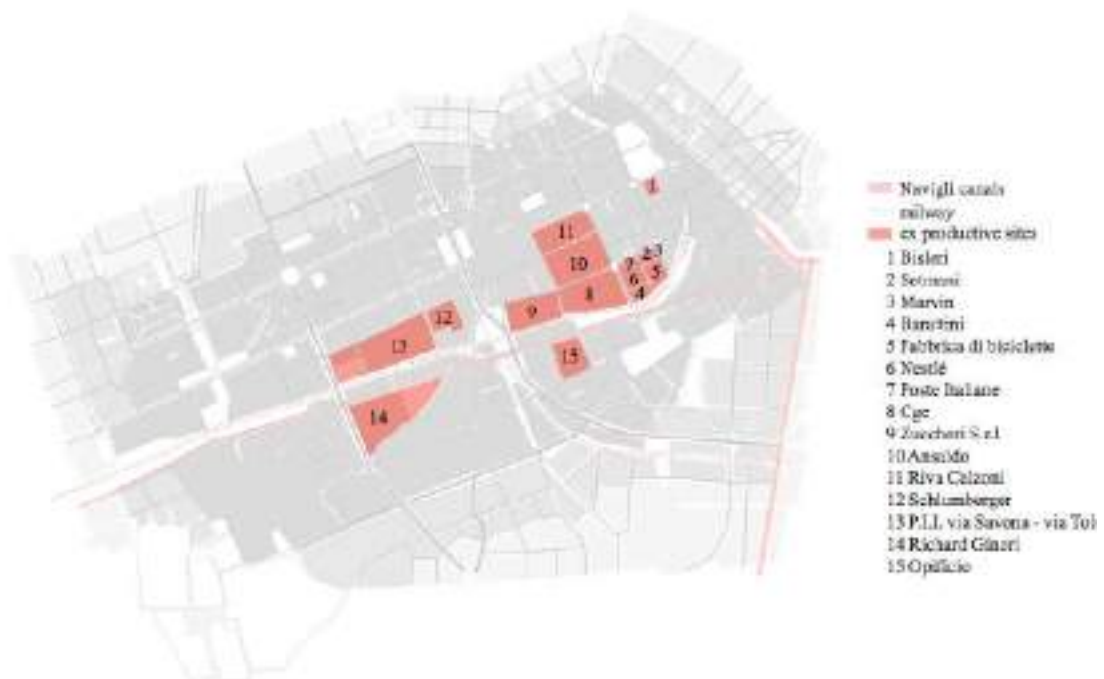


Figure 2: Map of the ex-productive sites

Running parallel with the physical transformation featured by diffused reuse of ex

industrial sites converted in new cultural functions, is a capillary soft movement to obtain new residences and services for the new established creative class.

Indeed as soon as the creative atmosphere infiltrated into the areas, some professionals moved there within new residential complexes and some others renovating old houses by themselves. These expansions added new values to the existing residential buildings and transformed the status of the devastated industrial communities, maintaining the traditional functional mixité and the restricting original neighbourhood community structure.



Figure 3: Map of actual creative and cultural activities

Under no circumstances the results and the reshaped identity were planned from the beginning by Milan Municipality, but were generated spontaneously by enterprises of private stakeholders to meet their own needs.

Indeed, what seems to play a crucial role in this reindustrialization case is also the typology of actors involved in the process. Both the pioneer intervention and many of the projects that came later one after the other, had been promoted by actors of world renown, which are far from minor members of cultural industry. At least at the beginning their purposes was not dealing with the redevelopment of such kind of territory as a whole or with the possibility of taking advantages from being part of a cultural - creative network, but uniquely with the chances offered by this large scale ex productive spaces, perfectly easy-fitting and adaptable to their already wealthy activities. What emerged, thus, is not alike to other apparently seemingly examples of creative districts such as the Brooklyn's, East London's and Berlin's type examples of cultural industry SMEs moving into an area and transforming it.

Tortona story could be defined as a case of re-tasking abandoned large scale

industrial complex through new kind of production, i.e. cultural and creative industries, which had fundamental effects on the territory as a whole, both from architectural and immaterial dimensions.

Zona Tortona could be defined as an *informal* district (Chapple, Jackson and Martin, 2010) that maintains at the same time the well strengthened collective image of working class industrial periphery peculiar of the last century and the reshaped identity obtained through settlement of cultural and creative activities.

3.3.2 Territorial identity creation: *Zona Tortona* brand

The transformation process of the area has been deeply and inextricably sustained by the creation of a new image for this territory. The development and the relaunching of the area needs to be understood in connection to a more immaterial dimension made of identity promotion and communication strategies.

Zona Tortona is nowadays known as *FuoriSalone* area, the biggest satellite event zone of the annual international Furniture Fair (branded Milan Design Week) that now takes place at the fairground in Rho, just outside Milan. During Design Week and other great events like *Milan Art Week* and *Milan Fashion Week*, the entire Tortona street and its adjacent streets are filled with endless initiatives. Every industrial space, small or big, are temporarily occupied by showrooms, galleries, and fashion and design exhibitions.

One could unquestionably say that *FuoriSalone*, settling in *Zona Tortona*, was the spark that has triggered the promotion strategies and the branding process that constituted the inseparable binomial between *Zona Tortona* and *FuoriSalone*.

FuoriSalone event was launched and gradually expanded starting from the 80s as an alternative location for emerging designers to showcase their work contextually with the International Furniture Fair. The set of cultural and creative activities occurring at the same time but located outside the official International Furniture Fair was institutionalized in the early 90s, with the name of *FuoriSalone*, thanks to the initiative of *Interni* Magazine that published a volume entitled *Guide to FuoriSalone (in 1992)*. *Interni* started to handle the management and coordination of all the events and activities referred to *Fuori Salone*, with a great impact for the territorial promotion and international visibility of the area.

The typology of actor plays a crucial role even within the immaterial path of the redevelopment of the area. Both the Fair and the *Interni* Magazine are belonging to the private sector, and both of them are famous at the global scale. So that the initiative *FuoriSalone* developed and leaned on such powerful grassroots, and, thanks to those actors, it has been able to take on with a good probability of success, going beyond the traditional use of spaces for official fairs.

They had the capability to foresee potentialities, somehow hidden behind the merely entrepreneurial purposes of actors re-tasking abandoned large scale industrial complexes, making official that kind of cultural capital that was already in the air, coordinating events, giving new temporary images to locations, proposing new uses of spaces, and overall, involving people fully for one week per year.

That's how the strong liaison between *Tortona area* and the *FuoriSalone* has been created.

Along with the consolidation path of the event and the progressive renovation of spaces in *Tortona area*, more actors contributed to the development of the area. Crucial for the formalization of the image of *Tortona area* has been a society for communication and event organization called *Recapito Milanese*. In 2002, *Recapito Milanese* promoted the creation of the brand '*Zona Tortona*' that institutionalized the emerging role and the creative vocation of this portion of Milan. The function of the brand was basically the one of gluing together all those initiatives that were already and independently well established, including them in an acknowledged symbol as part of the same entity. The red round logotype (figure 4) became unmistakable and was used in producing flags, pocket maps, guidebooks and road markings for the *Fuori Salone* week events. In 2005, the most important Milanese industrial realities in fashion, design, arts and cultural fields founded the association *Zona Tortona*, to further corroborate the district as a place of excellence for Milan at a national and international level.

Among the most relevant stakeholders, which created partnerships with *Zona Tortona*, we find: *Studio Labo* – which coordinates the relations between events and location through the portal *fuorisalone.it*, and *Esterni Magazine* – with sets up performances and stands all around the town. All these subjects collaborate and cooperate in a perspective of city marketing, which aims to launch the events in the area and the image of Milan as capital of Fashion and Design.

2011 marks another important step in the transformation of the image of *Zona Tortona*. At the beginning of the year *Design Partners srl* –the company that founded the brand of *Zona Tortona*, bankrupted following legal issues. A new name and a new logotype under the name of *Tortona Design Week* were created for the event by the *Tortona Area Lab* association, a no-profit organization set up in 2010 by the big names pioneer of the regeneration of the area, such as *Superstudio Group*, *Estate 4*, *Magna Pars* and *Tortona Locations*. *Tortona Area Lab* association works as a collector and selector of offers, a facilitator of creative processes and organiser of services for exhibitors and visitors.

The aim is to network the different talents of the area to enhance it in a wide perspective. Namely, the latest edition of *Fuori Salone* have pointed at attracting international creativity professionals and reaffirming the image of *Tortona* and *Milano* on the global panorama of quality creative economy. This is clear also from the new names of the brand and the association –*Tortona Design Week* and *Tortona Area Lab*, both formulated in English from the beginning.

The new logotype of *Tortona Design Week* was created by the internationally famous designer Stefano Giovannoni, it abandons the traditional red circle and assumes a squared shape with the representation of a black on white old shed-roof factory, typical of the Milanese industrial periphery.



Figure 4: Evolution of the logotype (2002, 2009, 2011)

As years go by, *FuoriSalone* has exponentially grown both for number of visitors and organized events: from 77 registered events and 25,000 visitors in 2003, to 772 events and 196,000 visitors in 2011⁴.

Numbers are not the only thing that has deeply evolved during the last 20 years. We have seen how *FuoriSalone* was born as a complementary event of the official institutional *Design Week* in the Rho fairground. It used to be a not codified, spontaneous practice that aimed to promote young and unedited talents, together with the desire to animate not conventional spaces of the city through creativity. With the passing of the years, we saw how the event has been transformed in one of the most well organized and sponsored happenings of Milan, accompanying a meaningful physical transformation of the area. The lively chronicle of the creation of names, brands, associations and initiatives that have taken place in this area has represented a climax towards excellence and attraction of international creative insiders.

We argue that the strength of this event does not consist only in its innovative and creative contents; what makes *FuoriSalone* work is its authentic bond with the territory, in different ways. Firstly, on the pretext of *FuoriSalone*, parts of the Milan that are usually closed open the door to visitors, becoming public spaces for a week; showrooms and design studios are open until late, parties and social events are organized in spaces and modalities that have different functions during the rest of the year. In this sense, *FuoriSalone* proposes a different urbanity for Milan, even only for one week. Secondly, the territorial promotion strategies are not something that has been planned top-down by local governments or agencies; the self-organizational nature of all the initiative starts from talents and energies that are embedded in the territory, that unite their creativity from below. This aspect is quite different from other examples of territorial marketing strategies and creativity policies traceable in other European cities. The self-promotion through the brand “*Zona Tortona*” could be seen as a ‘*a posteriori* vision’, it is a label to define a process that had started and developed organically.

3.4 Urban effects of an ongoing process

In the past century, Tortona area has rapidly changed its face, passing from suburban area, partly outside the city walls, to working class neighborhood, to postindustrial periphery and finally tertiary district with a strong connotation given by cultural and

⁴ Data from the official website of *Fuori salone*, <http://fuorisalone.it>, accessed 21 april 2012.

creative industrial settlement.

All the phases of the transformation process were carried by micro scale changes deriving from socio-economic dynamics, without any overall coordinating planning actions.

Especially in the last two decades, as we saw, spontaneous economic dynamics were the occasion to renovate and revitalize parts of the city. The growth of the knowledge based economy went along with the progressive renovation of the city's built form and the revitalization of entire neighborhoods.

Despite their relevant outcomes, the processes featured high levels of *informality*. To explain the meaning of formal/informal districts we refer to Chapple, Jackson and Martin (2010, p.226): "The term 'formal' usually invokes a degree of intentionality, often involving a civic plan for redefining the identity of a neighborhood. The term 'informal' invokes a degree of organicism and spontaneity; it usually refers to [arts] districts that have evolved through practices of local actors who have not been organized by a civic plan".

For what concerns *Tortona*, it is clear that we are talking about grassroots practices – at least at the beginning - which are connected by functional and localization economies' patterns, but not by a planned general view.

The driving forces behind the regeneration of this neighborhood could be roughly described as the interests of professionals and companies who find convenient to establish their activities in the area. The factors concurring in making the area attractive for new professionals are of different natures: flexible and relatively low cost locations, but also geographical agglomeration advantages.

The spiral of image creation and physical renovation is an ongoing process that fosters its impacts every year.

Furthermore, we are talking about a culture-led transformation that is not traceable only in the physical buildings and open spaces, but lies greatly in the new 'creative' life styles and atmosphere, which belong to a more immaterial process of transformation.

Nevertheless, the presence of working class population is still strong, so that the social composition is still very mixed.

The result, then, is a vital and dynamic district, in continuous transformation and with a big potential due to the presence of still vacant real estate properties, together with a variegated social composition and a lively cultural atmosphere.

4 Conclusions and research agenda

As we saw along the analysis, there are several factors that make of this story quite a rare and unique case: the socio-economic and urban features of this traditional urban periphery of Milan as first support to the process trigger; the importance of world class and world city level cultural firms/corporations as factors increasing the success of the redevelopment; the two intertwined dimensions of physical renovation and identity creation as key factors of the transformation.

Since the spontaneous nature and the extremely dynamic and fast mutability of the transformation in *Tortona area* - exemplified also by the evolution of its image and brand, we argue it is interesting and important to keep on monitoring and researching

about this area and its vicissitudes.

Accordingly, after this first mainly descriptive framework, next steps in the future research should go more in depth into the following issues:

- the development of the private-led urban regeneration strategies and image creation in relation to the public governance vision
- the patterns of gentrification or soft-gentrification
- the positions and reactions of the historical population of the area
- the future of this part of Milan, in relation to the availability of further and still numerous formerly-productive sites
- Zona Tortona as a pivotal practice in relation to the new emerging cultural district promoted during the FuoriSalone (*Brera Design District, Porta Romana Design, Ventura Lambrate, Mecenate Area Design, Porta Venezia in Design*)

Notwithstanding the prevalent descriptive nature of this paper, we wish it can provide a glance of the complexity and significance of the integration of creativity in urban development, or in this case we could say: the integration of urban regeneration into the dynamic forces of creative industry.

The search for new forms of urban cultural governance seems more than ever necessary and urgent. Creative policies in Milan are not about boosting the creative image of the city. Indeed, the label of Milan as a capital of fashion and design has been present for centuries, nourished by the vivid and productive economy in these sectors. Unlike uncountable examples of city governments around the world setting up brands and improvised cultural vocations to compete in the global panorama, Milan can count on an authentic creative fervour of creative people, products, processes and places.

The challenge for the local government here is to match up these forces, dialogue with them and try to involve them in solving meaningful social, economic and environmental issues of the city and its metropolitan area. The risk, otherwise, is the one of an uncontrolled and deregulated development driven by private interests, which could irreversibly sharpen gentrification processes and social polarization.



Figure 5a: Chronological steps of transformation 1985-1995



Figure 5b: Chronological steps of transformation 2000-2010

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