

## Field-Configuring Events: Design Fairs and Cities

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### Abstract

The paper wants to deepen Field-Configuring Events (FCE) topic, from the urban sociology point of view. Design fairs are the case study identified, because they represent one element of the passage to the so-called creative and knowledge economy. First of all, the author deal with the topic as a theoretical base. The principal theme is that of localization of activities which are collected in the definition of creative and knowledge sectors. Territorial and socio-economic impact of these activities such as design fairs recall big interest not only among academics but also among politicians who would like to redefine the image of the metropolitan area which they are representing. After that, some data collected during the exploratory phase of the study "Design Fairs and Cities" are presented. In detail: a) those about interviewees and agencies characteristics; b) those about cities identified as the place-to-be of design; c) those which explicit the principal reasons why designers participate to design fairs. Finally, three keys have been offered in order to use them in the next phases of the research, which will be focused on the comparative analysis of some case studies chosen.

**Keywords:** Field-Configuring Events. Creative and knowledge economy. Path-dependence. Design. Cities. Urban planning. City branding.

### 1 Introduction

The goal of this chapter is that to apply the concept of Field-Configuring Event (FCE) to the study of design fairs. An FCE is identified as a temporary network (LAMPEL; MEYER, 2008) where are collected individuals, groups, and organization. Initially, an FCE can be sporadic, but then it can become more periodic and structured.

The importance of FCEs is linked to the possibilities that fairs, conferences and contests have in favoring both competition and collaboration in a particular economic sector. The aim of hosting an FCE in one city is that of improving a business sector. Design, in recent years, have become a business sector very important both for the economic and social success of cities, metropolitan areas, regions and countries. Indeed, thanks to design it is also possible to develop the economy of one place and also its imagine or brand. This role seems to have become particularly important after the passage to an economy mainly based on creativity and knowledge and therefore on intangible goods. With the passage to Post-Fordism the economy of cities were no longer based on industrial kind of goods, but mainly on ideas and thoughts.

The preliminary research, which is going to be presented, wanted to deepen the knowledge about design fairs, designers and cities in the light of the concept of Field-Configuring Event.

In the following pages a discussion about the so-called Creative Economy (PRATT, 1997; 2008; SCOTT, 2000) will introduce the study. We will try to answer the question about the importance of being attractive for metropolitan areas, especially for those people who work in creative and knowledge sectors (FLORIDA, 2002). Urban planning strategies are very much focused on making one city attractive, but these strategies are not always thought on the basis of its already existing characteristics. For this reason more and more scholars have been highlighting the importance of history in policies for the development of one city. This importance, as it will be said, has been discussed through the theory of Path-dependence, according to which the history matters, precisely (LIEBOWITZ; MARGOLIS, 1995). After this discussion, the concept of Field-Configuring Event will be introduced as one possible strategy for the attractiveness of one city. However, those kind of events have to take into consideration the tradition of one city in a particular economic sector, such as the design one. Then, the topic of design and its importance for branding and developing the economy of one city will be faced. In the next session the preliminary results of the Design Fairs and Cities research will be presented. The study was conducted on-line in May, June, July 2010 and in March and April 2011. Several designers recruited through design and design fairs websites where asked to answer a questionnaire, composed by four sections of interests:

- a. Enterprise information
- b. Design fairs/festivals/weeks
- c. Focus on the last experience
- d. Interviewed information

The interviewees are mainly from The Netherlands, Italy and UK. The most part of them live in their countries of origin but not in their origin cities. They mainly work in jewelry, furniture, textile and product design sectors. The majority of respondents have participated, at least once, to a design fair. The Salone del Mobile of Milan (translated would be Furniture Fair) is considered as the most important international design fair. It is important to highlight that the interviewees often indicated only the city where the design fair was located and not the precise name of the fair. It was chosen to analyze the answers pointing only the city as indicating the main design fair it was located there. For the Salone del Mobile case this could be controversial also because Salone del Mobile is only a (little) part which gives life to the Design Week of Milan which is very much dense of events, organized under the name of Fuori Salone (translated would be: Outside the Furniture Fair).

The most interesting and important section to the research goals is that about the reasons why it is important to participate to a design fair. Design fairs are generally

considered as good places where to show products, increase popularity and improve business results. At the fourth place, the “possibility to know new people” reason was listed. From these results it can be said that reasons of exposure and earn seems to play a major influence in the decision to participate in a design fair, more than networking reasons do.

In the last section, before the conclusions, an example of the evaluation of a design fair will be presented. The case is that of the Salone del Mobile of Milan. Because of the insufficiency of answers for this section (which was about the last design fair they attended to) it was decided to discuss only one case in order to delineate a tool which would be useful in next studies, investigating several dimensions such as the internationality, the accessibility and the possibility of networking of a design fair.

Conclusions will be mainly focused on the possible development of research which will have design fairs as object of study.

## **2 The importance of being attractive**

The passage from Fordism to Post-Fordism had as a consequence a change in the economy of cities, nowadays mainly identified by creative and knowledge sectors, which are considered as able to give new energy to urban economies. This change has had big impact also on political strategies which wanted to give emphasis to those cultural aspects of cities able to turn them into attractive and competitive at the international level.

However, competition is generally played on the basis of peculiar and particular kinds of offer. Cities which compete at a global level, often follow schemes and trends very similar trying to emphasize the ownership of some kinds of characteristics even when not present. In particular, cities try to attract increasing numbers of people who work in creative and knowledge sectors, because they are considered as the new engine of economy. Creativity, word which indicates in a very general way one of the most important resource owned by those who work in the sectors mentioned above, becomes a competitive resource able to influence good positions global rankings of those cities which have it. Immaterial and cognitive functions become generators of value (CONSORZIO AASTER, 2009, p. 3) especially for big urban economies.

The construction of the image of a city is mainly grounded on two categories of factors: hard factors, which are physical and tangible factors, such as the presence of important resources on the territory (workers, spaces, accessibility, incentives, closeness to services which connect directional centers to global economy network, such as airports, financial centers and telecommunication networks); and soft factors, which are less tangible, and are constituted by tolerance, dynamicity, culture, livability, and so on (SASSEN, 1991; SASSEN, 2002; SCOTT, 2000; MUSTERD *et al*, 2007). Therefore, from one side infrastructural intervention are accomplished, building airports, museums and

any kind of big work of art able to become city-marketing icons, as, for example, the Guggenheim of Bilbao, from the other side the city invests in events able to define the "stance" of the city, and this is the case, for example, of the organization of several kind of festivals and fairs which are located in one city.

The commodification of metropolitan areas is one of the effects produced by neo-liberist approaches to the metropolitan policy. Indeed, instead of mobilize endogenous forces which are present on the territory, the attention is more focused on the attraction of investments and people from outside (VICARI HADDOCK, 2010). The competition of both national and international levels is at the basis of these neo-liberal policies. This competition is driven also by the use of city branding strategies. From one side city marketing is aimed at attracting visitors, citizens, investments, industries and at developing exports to foreign markets. From the other side, the concept of brand, initially used in commerce and advertize, works as generator of identities and collective recognition and allows individuals to identify themselves as members of a community which share a specific lifestyle (VICARI HADDOCK, 2010; MOMMAAS, 2002). This is true for any kind of goods: the aim of a brand is that of creating value and identification of that brand as specific of a good (or a city). The success of this process indicates the success of branding. In the last 10 years, the attention has been moved to the development of Creative City brand. In this kind of brand, precise characteristics and specializations are collected and all of them concur to the brand definition.

As it will be discussed, one of the most used brand, in the definition of one city as creative, is that of design. Next, an explanation of the tangible and intangible importance of creative economy sector will be given, deepening the study of so-called Field-Configuring Events (FCE). These events are able to answer to political strategies aimed at redefining the economy and the image of a city.

Design Fairs and Cities, the pilot survey which is going to be presented, has been conducted in order to collect preliminary data able to show a general tendency of the importance which fairs such as design ones, have for experts and therefore the possible influence which they can have in defining the economy and the image of a city.

### **3 Creative Economy and localization: Field-Configuring Events and Path-Dependence**

Creative and knowledge economy raised discussions in different scientific arenas: geography (PRATT, 1997; 2008; SCOTT, 2000), urban planning (LANDRY, 2000; FLORIDA, 2002), economy (AMIN, 1993; 2002; 2008). Recently the importance of places in facilitating and developing relational aspects and networks among workers has been stressed. These aspects are very important in influencing their localization choices. In this perspective, it seems that creative and knowledge industry expresses a need of community. At the macro-urban level, through the creation of creative quarters and technological parks, at the micro-level, through the settlement of co-working forms and multi-office condos. The community need is not limited to stable forms, as living, but it is also expressed by temporary communities forms.

Field-Configuring Events (FCE) can be identified as temporary networks (LAMPEL; MEYER, 2008). FCE are individuals, groups, organization agglomerations, which initially meet in a sporadic way, but then more frequently and structured. FCE are able to favor competitive and collaborative interactions and they depend by specific local circumstances and individual strategies. They can also work as engine for the development of a specific business sector. Therefore, FCE are identified as fairs, conferences, contests in business and technological sectors.

How governments can push the development of environments able to stimulate the generation of creative and knowledge clusters? Around this topic there is big discussions which take into consideration not only academic perspectives, but also historical-political ones. In this sense Path-dependence theory can be useful in order to structure and understand the problem. Several scholars criticize model of development which do not take into consideration history and local traditions. The development of clusters, such as the creative and knowledge ones, often depends by local inheritances and stratified traditions in one geographic space. To this end, Path-dependence theory, which is based on the assumption "the history matters", is taken into consideration (LIEBOWITZ; MARGOLIS, 1995; ANAND; JONES, 2008; GLYNN, 2008; HARDY, 2010; RULING; PEDERSEN, 2010; SCHÜBLER, 2010). This theory is very useful for the study of the so-called Field-Configuring Events. Indeed, thanks to a wide availability of networks, institutions, communities and bottom-up forces, an event, like a design fairs, can have wide confirmation, of audience and generally social. At the same time these sporadic events can be created in cities which do not have long tradition in the sector. Indeed, even if "history matters" in creativity and knowledge activities, it is also true that in these sectors "[...] there are numerous potential windows of locational opportunity [...]" (SCOTT; STORPER, 2007, p. 195), and that differentiation and change are wide, very fast and allow new comers to enter the market being able to create their own niches. Marco Romano, in his sage *La città come opera d'arte* (City as a masterpiece), says that (2008, p. 65) "[...] quando la città decide di adottare un nuovo tema collettivo lo colloca in un sito dove reputa faccia l'effetto estetico migliore, di solito tenendo conto dei temi già

esistenti...[...]” (when a city decides to adopt a new collective theme, it puts it in one site where it could have the best esthetical aspect, usually taking into account already existing themes). Romano refers to the architecture and the physical image of a city. The same thought can be applied to the investments done to create a new stance and new economic specializations.

#### **4 Design, why?**

Design can be identified as that sector of the creative economy which more than others has gained a central role in the debates about the economic development of metropolitan areas. First of all, it is important to stress as the design sector is particularly interesting, because located in one space which intercepts arts, business and technology. Saskia Sassen defines it a kind of “value-adding creative work” which also has the effect of repositioning the so-called creative work in circuits which are central to the global economy (2005, p. 257). According to Saskia Sassen, design is located in one space which is in between art and profit-making works (even if we could object that artistic work, since commissioners time, has always been profit making). Secondly, this importance has been recognized also by scholars, policymakers and business leaders who see activities connected to design an important input both for the most recent economic activities and for the most traditional ones. As Harvey Molotch (2005) highlighted, at the end of '90s in United States a dramatic increase of ask for designers by enterprises was observed; instead in the UK, design started to be a central topic also in political programs, because it was considered as a driving economic sector. For example, in 1997, Bruce Nussbaum, Business Week director and well-known design journalist, declared that the golden age of design was officially began (MOLOTCH, 2005, p. 270). Therefore, design is thought like having a very important role and as Tara Vinodrai stressed (2009) designers contribute to the economic development at a regional and local level both directly and indirectly. Five essential points have been identified for this contribute:

1. Working opportunities: designer activities, thanks to their planning nature, are able to create working opportunities for other designers.
2. Products quality: design thinking can create value and favor quality and sustainability of goods and services also in other sectors.
3. Places quality: design contribute to built the quality of places and improve the esthetical aspects of built places.
4. Knowledge and innovation: design works as source of new knowledge and innovation going over disciplines and sectors bonds.
5. Local identities development: design has a role in those activities which favor the involvement of local communities and identities.

Going over a vision of design as a panacea for the whole problems of contemporary societies, it is doubtless that design is a factor able to support competitiveness and

success of metropolitan areas (LACROIX, 2005). The main goal, as Saskia Sassen hints, should be that of examine the political economy of design in its whole, in several metropolitan areas and how this faces with globalization, accelerations and disorganization topics (2005. p. 256).

Cities like Milan, always considered the capital of fashion and design suffer the competition of cities which only recently have been focused on the development of the sector, through infrastructural investments and interventions in order to: develop a strong cultural identity around the design brand, institute high-quality education projects, favor knowledge circulation, and create wellbeing and economic development (HYTÖNEN; HEIKKINEN, 2003). Glasgow advertises itself as the "City of Architecture and Design" and is listed among the New Design Cities (LACROIX, 2005). In September, Block, the annual architecture festival, is organized and overlaps with the Doors Open Day, during which many buildings of the city are open to the public. The International Design Conference, happens in spring and it is organized by The Lighthouse, the major institution of design city promotion. Stockholm, another New Design City (LACROIX, 2005), hosts every year the FutureDesignDays, an annual festival dedicated to design, which in 2004 won the title of best event at the EIBTM Awards. 2005 was the Stockholm year of design. The city host several associations design oriented (the Design Museum, the Designforum, the Swedish Industrial Design Association, etc.) and it is the place for the most renowned Scandinavian design schools.

From the examples it is possible to understand that festivals and fairs are essential to define a city as specialized in the design sector. Therefore, fairs constitute a clear example of Field-Configuring Event and they will be the research object.

The application of FCE concept to design is extremely innovative, because creative industries have been only recently object of study in this research field. The choice was oriented by preliminary studies according to which more and more cities, in particular those which had a manufacturing economy specialization, are looking for new economic profiles, often based on creativity and knowledge (MUSTERD et al., 2007). The research for new identities and new market sectors, influences several cities to organize numerous activities in order to host events such as design fairs (HOSPERS, 2003). Success is due to the application of some uniformed, and therefore uniforming models, which let open questions about their efficiency and efficacy. In this sense, the role of the socio-economic history of a city (Path-dependence) can have an important influence in organizing and charactering an FCE, as it has been previously discussed.

## 5 Case study: design fairs

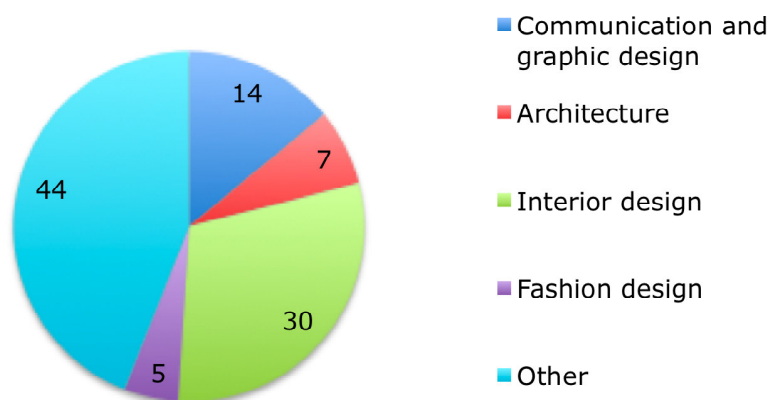
Design fairs are perfect examples of Field-Configuring Event, because they are able to let an important footprint on the territory, if not at an economic level-at least initially- for sure at the level of the socially recognized image (brand).

In the next pages, opinions expressed by 70 designer will be presented. They answered to an on-line questionnaire, organized according to the following sections:

- a. Enterprise and interviewed information
- b. Design fairs/festivals/weeks
- c. Focus on the last experience

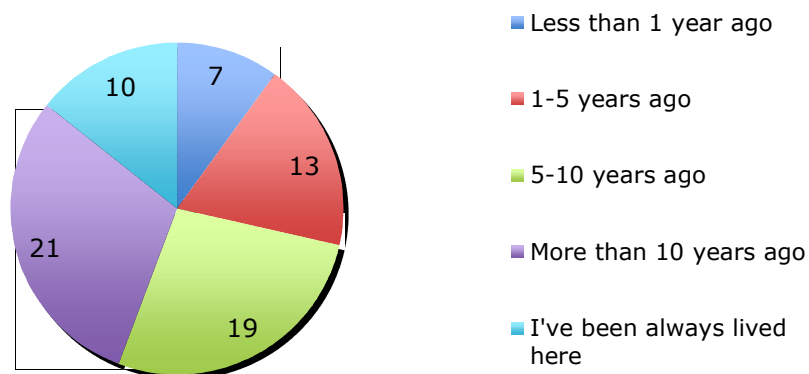
### 5. 1 Enterprise and interviewed information

The majority of the respondents indicated the item "other" as the working sector they work in. In the open answer, linked to "other" item, they specified the following sectors: jewelry, furniture, textile and product design, industrial design and arts.



**Graph 1- Working sector**

The group of interviewees is 35 on average and it is mainly composed by men (66%). They work mostly in their country (80%), but not in their cities of origin. However, as it is possible to see in Graph 2, the majority of the respondents live in cities where they work since long time (primarily "more than 10"), instead those who moved since less than 5 years are the slightest represented.



**Graph 2- When did you move to the city where you work?**

Countries where working activities of the respondents are located, principally are: The Netherlands (35%), Italy (21%), UK (18%), Germany (13%). Cities the most represented are: Amsterdam, Milan and London. The possibility to move somewhere else is uncertain. Indeed, opinions are divided equally between those who do not think to move (25%), those who want to move (25%), and those who do not have a clear opinion on that (50%).

Enterprises, where the respondents work, are on average managed by 6 persons, among which the interviewee is included (93%).

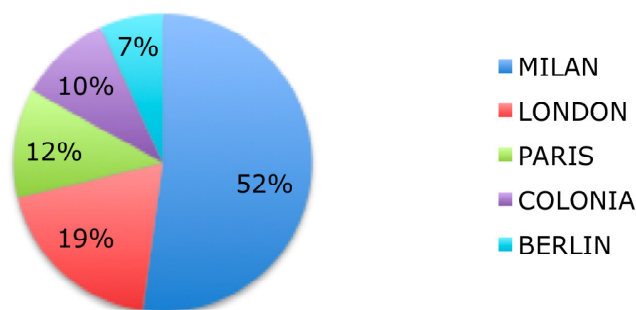
## 5. 2 Design Fairs/festivals/weeks

The majority of respondents have participated, at least once, to a design fair for working reasons (74%). These fairs were generally located in their countries of origin (55%). Usually, the last fair the respondents took part in was already visited in the past and the intention to participate to it in future was expressed (69%). This data might indicate the importance to attend to some specific design fairs and most of all the importance of the periodicity of these events. The access to design fairs was generally for invitation or self-candidacy (42%).

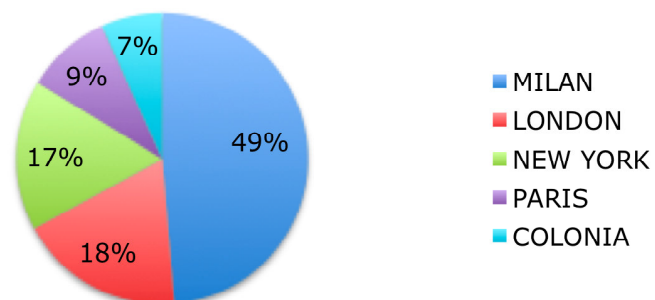
When asked to list the most important European design fairs, the interviewees answered as follow:

1. Il Salone del Mobile - Milan
2. 100% Design - London
3. Maison et Objet - Paris
4. IMM - Colonia
5. DMY - Berlin

As the most important fairs worldwide are concerned, the list did not change very much, a part from the appear of the International Contemporary Furniture Fair of New York at the third position.



**Graph 3- What is the most important design fair in Europe?**



**Graph 4- What is the most important design fair worldwide?**

62% of respondents attended at least to one of the design fairs indicated as the most important in Europe; this percentage slightly decreased when the most important design fairs worldwide were taken into consideration (40%), clearly less accessible for several reasons.

The question about the most important reasons why the interviewees think it is important to attend to a design fairs, was one of the most interesting questions to the study aims. This data is important to determine what are the objectives that cities, which want to host a design fairs, had to pursue.

It was asked to the respondents to list by importance (from the most important to the least important) a series of items, which the interviewer selected, about the benefit of participating in a design fair. These items were selected mainly in light of three relevant purposes that the participation in a design fair can have:

- a. Exposure (show my/our products; let my/our name known worldwide)
- b. Earn (improve my/our business, increase my/our knowhow)
- c. Network (know other people who work in my sector, establish strong networks, directly talk to the customers, share ideas with other designers, have fun)

According to the interviewees the most important goals to attend to a design fair are:

1. show my/our products
2. let my/our name known worldwide
3. improve my/our business
4. know other people who work in my sector
5. increase my/our knowhow
6. directly talk to the customers
7. establish strong networks
8. share ideas with other designers
9. have fun

From the answers, it is possible to understand that design fairs are considered, from those who work in the design sector, as a good showcase where to show off their products and increase their renown and, as a consequence, improve business results as well. Therefore the goals Exposure and Earn seem to be the most important to attend a design fair. The fact that the possibility to know new people who work in their sector was listed at the fourth place is very interesting. Indeed, this fact can be considered as strictly connected to the presence of several experts at the event at the same time. Notwithstanding this, it is possible to notice that other elements collected in the Network category, as for example sharing ideas and making networks, are at the end of the ranking, as for example the possibility to directly talk with the customers and the opportunity to have fun, are apparently not priorities to participate in a design fair.

### 5. 3 Focus on the last experience

Since the number of answers collected do not allow an accurate evaluation or a precise comparison among different design fairs, a qualitative presentation of answers about the most cited design fair as the last they attended, will be provided. The Salone del Mobile is the one which 11 interviewees, the most of them from The Netherlands (6), indicated as the last fair they participate in. 8 among them attended the Salone del Mobile in 2010, 2 in 2011, and 1 in 2008. It is important to highlight that all the respondents list the Salone del Mobile as the most important European fair. Indeed, according to the respondents, the Salone del Mobile<sup>1</sup>:

- is an international event (rank 10);
- is a good possibility to know people who work in the design sector (rank 9,5);

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<sup>1</sup> The interviewees were asked to express their accordance with several statements on a scale from 1 (I do not agree at all) to <sup>10</sup> (I definitely agree)

- is an important showcase for designers not only in Italy (rank 8,8), but also in Europe (9,6) and worldwide (9,5);
- offers good opportunities to make business (rank 8,2);
- is an event during which innovation takes place (rank 8,2)
- offers the opportunity to let one name known (rank 7,6);
- involves also who is not into design (rank 7,6)
- is an event during which it is possible to create a Design Community (rank 7,4)
- offers good possibilities to share ideas (rank 7,3)

Notwithstanding these extremely positive evaluations and the intention to participate to the fair also the next year, respondents identified some limits and negative aspects of the Salone del Mobile. Some of them indicated high costs of participation, organization problems, linked also to the massive participation of non-experts (the huge participation of people is badly evaluate by the respondents). In addition to this, problems due to the local transports and to the lack of parking were raised up. Instead, the most positively judged aspects were the atmosphere, the weather and the internationality of the event. The aggregate rank obtained by the Salone del Mobile was very good, anyway (rank 8).

As it was pointed out, the intention to participate again to the event was declared. Principal reasons for this willingness were linked to the fact that the Salone del Mobile is very important for those who work in the design sector and therefore it is very crucial to be there.

## 6 Conclusion

As it is possible to understand from the data presented above, the objective of this chapter is that of introducing the concept of Field-Configuring Events as events able to structured and favor the economy of one metropolitan area. Design fairs were the focus selected. It was thought useful at this stage to propose the structure for a research to implement with the purpose of studying several cities which host an FCE, such as design fairs. The objective at this moment is that of presenting a tool and categories of analysis (to be improved during an extended stage) more than ultimate and definitive results.

Next phases of the research should be focused, first of all, on a better sampling of interviewees and selection of some specific case studies, in order to allow a comparative study. In this closing section, three main keys of analysis through which the research would be carried on, will be suggested:

1. Values. Design fairs spread values which are negotiated ad hoc in order to promote a particular image both of design and city.
2. Networks. The development of networks which connect industry and education is one of the principal effect which a design fair can have.
3. Buzz. Capacity of a design fair is capable of creating social and cultural buzz. How buzz is orchestrated and shown?

In particular, it is thought that a focus on a maximum of three design fairs might be useful and interesting because it would allow the comparison of results and an analysis focused on the comprehension of which are the most relevant characteristics to participate to a design fair, from one side, and which the elements of criticism from the other side, as, for example, high costs and massive participation indicated in Salone del Mobile of Milan case.

Therefore, as the first point is concerned (Values), the deepening of the analysis would be oriented to the involvement of organizers, stakeholders and professionals of the sector, because they have a very important role in negotiating values and promoting a particular image both of design and the city. Indeed, a specific image of the city is conveyed through the design fair, as it was discussed previously.

The second focus is about networks. From the preliminary results networking purposes are not the most important in influencing the participation in a design fair. Anyway, design fairs have an impact on the local organization of several institutions and subjects to cooperate to the creation of the Design City brand. Indeed, the development of several kinds of collaboration, as for example that between industry and education, could really give shape to the urban environment in a way to favor the creation of workplaces and, in general, of high expertise in design sectors.

The third focus (Buzz) takes into consideration the organization (media organization as well) of a design fair. The Salone del Mobile case can be taken as an example to explain the importance of this focus. Indeed, one of the negative elements indicated by the respondents was the lack of organization from one side and the massive access of "curious" to the fair.

Therefore, to organize a design fair means to (re)think the city particularly in its functional aspects, which we can collect into: welcome, accessibility and environment.

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## Biographical Notes

### Carla Sadini

Sociologist and PhD in Information Society, specialized in Creative and Knowledge Industries, collaborated with the Faculty of Sociology of Milano Bicocca on several projects. She took part in the European research called ACRE aimed at studying the attractiveness of 13 European metropolitan areas for the so-called creative and knowledge workers. Recently, she worked for the Marketing Observatory of the Municipality of Milan in order to evaluate the attractiveness of the city for the so-called talents. She also worked as independent researcher at the DesignWorks lab and the Martin Prosperity Institute of Toronto. At the moment she is developing personal research and she works as a free-lance journalist.