

# Designing Hybrid Spaces

ENVISIONING PLURAL ECOSYSTEMS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL  
PRACTICES FOR REGENERATIVE URBAN FUTURES

Edited by

Laura Galluzzo and Salvatore Di Dio



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# 7. From Making to Meaning: Hybrid Economies and the Role of Design in Urban Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the emergence of hybrid economies in contemporary urban contexts, with a focus on the Milanese experience. It investigates how design contributes to reshaping local economies through inclusive innovation, network creation, and civic engagement. Drawing on a qualitative study based on mapping, interviews, and workshops, the chapter highlights how hybrid enterprises, especially in urban peripheries, merge manufacturing, education, and cultural practices into multifunctional platforms. Design plays a pivotal role not only as a discipline and output but also as a strategy for fostering relational proximity, social cohesion, and territorial regeneration. By examining hybridity across dimensions such as offer, goals, team composition, and user engagement, this contribution frames design as an infrastructure for navigating complexity and enabling new urban imaginaries.

## 7.1 Introduction

In a complex society, where traditional forms of economies are shrinking, the creation of hybrid activities is needed not only for economic survival but also for social support and in general for the broader well-being of citizens. To be functional, sustainable, and prosperous, these economies need to be based on a strong sense of community, sharing of values, and networks.

Within this framework, design, dealing with complexity, plays an essential and multiple role, resulting in both a driver and a possible content to support and create these forms of economy. The research presented here, employing a Grounded Theory approach, maps and analyzes hybrid practices operating at the intersection of design, manufacturing, and social inclusion. Special attention is paid to the role of design as a driver of systemic change, one that fosters proximity, enables cross-sectoral collaboration, and supports the development of new civic infrastructures.

## 7.2 Proximity and the Hybrid Economies

Talking of hybrid economies means talking of proximity. As discussed in the positioning paper *A Systemic Approach to Proximity through Design for Relations* (Sedini *et al.*, 2022), the concept of proximity can be explored through various disciplinary lenses, ranging from sociology to economic geography and urban planning.

Three main layers of the systemic approaches to proximity were identified: economic proximity, accessible and attractive proximity, and living and relational proximity. These layers reflect a shift from viewing proximity solely in spatial or economic terms toward understanding it as a multifaceted and dynamic system composed of tangible and intangible elements, actors, and interrelations. Rather than isolating proximity as a single variable, this systemic perspective emphasized the interconnected nature of spaces, experiences, and relationships, making it crucial to consider how proximity is enacted and shaped through design.

The economic proximity layer can be analyzed from the perspec-

tives of the users (consumers) and entrepreneurs. Neighborhood shops provide the basic necessities of local life, while also offering culture and entertainment. Moreover, the presence of meeting places for both business and leisure purposes, where knowledge and relationships are exchanged (Musterd *et al.*, 2007), can foster the creation of a creative and cultural environment (Fassi & Sedini, 2017). Indeed, Design can be a cultural act, addressing the need for new (cultural) meanings of places and actions (Zurlo, 2019).

In the Systemic Proximity approach (Sedini *et al.*, 2022), the accessible and attractive proximity layer defines a useful neighbor as the one that guarantees numerous and diverse services within a walkable distance from the user's residence (Speck, 2013). While the living and relational proximity layer highlights the importance of diversified, relational, and hybrid contexts, which provide various options in terms of services and activities, the dynamic interweaving of functional and relational networks (online and offline) (Baek & Manzini, 2012).

This premise was necessary to address the concept of the hybrid economy, which serves to avoid the usual overlook of non-monetary activities (Buchanan, 2016; Altman, 1987), considering also social and cultural contexts. The Evolutionary Economic Geography (EEG) perspective explains how new organizational forms and collaborations emerge to pursue both financial and social returns (Gong & Hassink, 2019). Within EEG, institutions play a key role in supporting and adapting to firm and regional development, much like Marshall's Industrial Atmosphere. Researchers focusing on EEG emphasize micro-scale routines and network-based knowledge creation, where weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) and various forms of proximity are crucial. Boschma (2005) expands the concept of proximity beyond geography to encompass cognitive, organizational, social, and institutional forms. These forms of proximity interact dynamically within networks, which Boschma and Frenken (2010) argue must be adaptable to foster innovation. In this complex panorama, hybrid economies shape physical hybrid places that extend beyond their economic identity, also pursuing socio-cultural innovation.

The application of the 15-Minutes city model requires careful consideration of the hybrid use of space to provide necessary functions and services to residents and citizens (Moreno *et al.*, 2021). According

to Cirilli (2025) hybrid spaces are open in terms of schedules and accessibility; flexible in terms of social and cultural offerings; fluid because of the governance models adopted, the heterogeneity of the composition of users, up to multifunctionality in the management of spaces; reclaimed because they often located in regenerated buildings/areas; changeable because their activities are subject to constant revisions. The hybrid spaces are also defined as platform spaces (Tricarico, 2022) because they constitute learning contexts where open social innovation processes take place, involving local communities, collaborative interactions between different stakeholders, and aligning individual and territorial development goals. Therefore, hybrid economies might not have an immediate and direct result in terms of big economic revenues, but over time can activate other kinds of economic and social spillovers.

To conclude, hybrid economies are characterized by embracing hybridity across multiple dimensions (Sedini, 2022). First, hybridity emerges in terms of the offer itself. This involves reflecting on the nature of the goods, services, and activities being provided, and under what conditions they are made available. Second, it concerns the goals and impacts pursued. It's essential to understand the overarching vision and mission that guide the initiative. Third, hybridity can be observed in the composition of the founding group. The founders' backgrounds and areas of expertise are particularly relevant, as they shape the nature and direction of the project.

Similarly, the composition of the team or staff reflects this hybridity. While similar to the founders' analysis, this aspect also requires attention to the specific roles and responsibilities taken on by the individuals involved, shedding light on how the initiative is managed on a day-to-day basis. Finally, hybridity is also evident in the relationship with customers or users. The way users are involved and connected to the initiative is key to understanding its hybrid nature. Altogether, these layers of hybridity contribute to shaping complex, adaptable models that integrate multiple sectors, purposes, and communities. All these levels are co-dependent, connected, and influence one another. We will look at these levels in the specific context of the city of Milano.

## 7.3 The Milanese context

Cities can be seen as hybrid eco-systems, balancing sustainable growth, justice, engagement, and economic diversity (Pradhan & Pradhan, 2002). As Mazzucato (2015) notes, public institutions must clearly define their purpose, promoting both economic innovation and social cohesion by supporting new markets and inclusive practices. To stress the relationship between public authorities, economic success, and social enhancement, it is important to describe the Milanese context starting from the declaration of interest made by the Milanese municipality on five main series of (economic) activities related to innovation and social inclusion<sup>1</sup>:

**Note 1.**  
**Source:**  
<http://boostinno.org>.

- hybrid Enterprises & Urban Regeneration;
- sharing & Collaborative Economy;
- startup & knowledge-intensive economy;
- new Craft & Urban Manufacturing;
- smart city & Smart citizens.

Hybrid enterprises, combining profit and non-profit goals and involving multiple sectors and stakeholders, are closely tied to urban regeneration, often by repurposing spaces like former factories for new productive uses.

The Milano Municipality has been strongly addressing the topic of proximity economies and hybrid places. To do that, as part of the Three-Year Program for the *Proximity Economy*, the City dedicated funding calls, such as *La Scuola dei Quartieri* and the *Civic Crowdfunding*, to micro and small businesses, social enterprises, and informal groups of aspiring entrepreneurs. From 2012, the Milano Municipality launched a series of initiatives aimed at the reuse, regeneration, and enhancement of underutilized municipal properties by entrusting said spaces to private or private social entities for the implementation of social and cultural projects. It established a qualified directory to survey and network hybrid spaces as social and culture-based urban regeneration experiences in the city's neighborhoods, which now collects 26 places that combine entrepreneurship, innovation, social inclusion, and rootedness in local communities, through original forms of organization, management, and production of products and services.

While many economic sectors can take hybrid forms, New (or Traditional) Craft & Urban Manufacturing stands out as particularly inclusive. This sector embodies hybridity by blending technological innovation, economic development, and social goals such as inclusion and participation, aligning with Smart City principles.

This hybrid model builds on the city's historical culture of making, suggesting a path-dependent process rather than a break from tradition. Designers, due to their social and cognitive proximity to artisanal and manufacturing domains (Boschma, 2005), often take on productive roles, valuing craftsmanship knowledge (Tajani & Micelli, 2019).

In Milan, the municipality promoted this sector through the *Manifattura Milano* program (from 2017), which supported new crafts, digital manufacturing, and Industry 4.0, closely linked to urban regeneration and social inclusion. Key strategies include bottom-up neighborhood revitalization, cultural initiatives, and support for shared innovation platforms like fab labs and makerspaces.

This manufacturing revival not only drives new business creation but also supports R&D partnerships that further hybridization (Tajani & Micelli, 2019). Situated often in suburban areas, fab labs and makerspaces contribute to the economic and cultural revitalization of peripheries (Armondi & Bruzzese, 2017), reinforcing the social economy (Zandonai *et al.*, 2019). Rediscovering craft, as Friedmann (1987) notes, enhances the connection between people and their work. It also enables diverse professional growth, benefiting technicians, artisans, designers, and ITS graduates (Tajani, 2019). Moreover, craft practices thrive on mutual learning and collaboration, requiring dialogic competencies (Sennett, 2008).

However, it must be said that the hype for manufacturing faded away in the last few years, probably also because of the economic sustainability that these kinds of economies were struggling with. As Tajani, former councillor for productive activities and labor of the Municipality of Milano, stresses (2025), the maker's utopia of a reinvention of the economic and social model, based on the extreme autonomy of subjects who went from consumers to producers, or co-producers, faces another prevailing model, that of immense concentrations of capital, computing power, and space. However, Tajani states that investing in the physiological dynamics of a neighbor-

hood, including manufacturing, is central. A neighborhood with shops and services is a good investment that pays off in terms of the value and attractiveness of the area, as distinct from the stereotypical nonplaces of chains and shopping malls. Repairing manufacturing in the city and working to bring it back is thus not only good governance, but it is also good business (Tajani, 2025).

## 7.4 The study

**Note 2.**  
Made in Milano / Made in Chicago was a joint research experience developed by the Design System of Politecnico di Milano and the Institute of Design of the Illinois Institute of Technology of Chicago within the Sister Cities Policy Program (2015-2018).

The study<sup>2</sup> presented here adopts a Grounded Theory approach, centered on the concept of civicness, a set of shared values, institutions, and practices that foster civic engagement and collective well-being (Putnam, 1993; Bagnasco, 1999). Fieldwork included mapping, interviews, and a workshop. The mapping phase identified initiatives related to work, creativity, and community, aligned with priorities set by the Municipality of Milano.

From this mapping, composed of 180 realities, 10 case studies were selected for semi-structured interviews, to which we added two public sector key informants and seven artisanal entrepreneurs, bringing the total to nineteen interviews<sup>3</sup>. These participants later joined other stakeholders in a workshop.

**Note 3.**  
The nineteen interviews lasted on average 45 minutes; they were recorded and fully transcribed.

As fully discussed in previous works (Sedini, 2019; 2022), the initial mapping activity involved places and initiatives of (and for) (new) work, creativity, and encounter: coworking spaces; fab labs & makerspaces; service centers and hubs; incubators; cultural centers; spontaneous engagement spaces; cafés; events.

The selection for the interviews was based on three main factors:

- mission: more or less focused on social innovation;
- location: peripheral;
- originality: they had not already been investigated by other recent research.

Our analysis focused primarily on manufacturing-related cases (e.g., jewellery, lute, textile, typography, bakery, bicycle, brewing), categorized under the Municipality's areas of interest. While cafés and events were less relevant, we concentrated on Fab Labs, Makerspaces, and New Craft & Urban Manufacturing. We also included one case

from Spontaneous Engagement Spaces, as it featured manufacturing activities. Notably, all the typologies of spaces taken into consideration are included in the hybrid enterprises and urban regeneration priority.

## 7.5 Results: The Role of Hybrid Making, Networks, and Design

The analysis of the selected case studies confirms that hybrid enterprises are key enablers of socio-cultural and economic innovation. Integrating multiple activities, which creates multifunctional spaces, serves economic and civic purposes. Such hybridization is a survival strategy in uncertain markets, but it also reflects a deeper cultural orientation toward collaboration, inclusion, and place-based development. Indeed, as the offer is concerned, many of the analyzed initiatives exhibit hybrid characteristics by combining various activities (e.g., manufacturing, education, consulting, co-working, etc.) and functioning as inclusive platforms. This hybridity is often necessary for market survival, with revenue commonly derived from space rental, training, and consulting services. The balance between innovation and tradition in their methods highlights unique working models. Hybrid offers are both enabled by and generators of hybrid networks, which rely on both internal team composition and external collaborations. Enterprises with more diversified offers tend to have broader and more cross-sectoral networks. Design emerges as a central element, both as a service and a strategic approach, enabling business reinvention, product quality improvement, and the development of comprehensive, innovation-oriented systems.

Many of the interviewed initiatives pursue sustainability goals, integrating sustainability principles into their products and services; they are often driven by personal values and a commitment to responsible production, favoring small-scale, customized goods over mass-market models. Social impact is also a central goal, with several initiatives empowering marginalized individuals or supporting career transitions through training programs. Most are located in urban peripheries, either by municipal incentives or by choice, to foster

local identity and community engagement. These diverse objectives contribute to a hybrid impact, combining environmental, social, and economic sustainability, often pursued through networking and strategic design approaches.

The hybridity of the offer is thus mirrored in the heterogeneity of teams, founders, and user communities. The founders of the analyzed initiatives often emerged from pre-existing informal relationships,

Hybridity key factors	Questions for the investigation	Exemplifying quote
Offer	What goods, services, and activities are offered? What are the offer conditions?	"The typography carries out printing activities, in particular, offset printing, letterpress printing and digital printing. We do training workshops. Then, there is also a small bookshop [...]. We had an analogue coworking area, but it never really started due to lack of resources." Typography
Goals and impacts	What are the vision and mission? Is there information on the typologies of impacts that their activities have/might have?	"We have projects in collaboration with refugee tailors. One is an Afghan tailor, since he knew how to make shirts well, we did things together. Now he has his private clients." Collective bottom-up association focused on tailoring
Founders composition	Who are the founders (private or public subjects)? What are their biographies (especially as their expertise is concerned)?	"We met at the Ambrosian goldsmith school. I worked and followed the courses with Valentina, coming from Rome, and Debora, who studied at Politecnico. We met, and this sympathy was born." Jewelry artisans
Team/Staff composition	Similar questions to the previous point but with a focus also on the specific roles covered by the team/staff members.	"The passion for the "crossbreeding", for the heterogeneity of people and practices is very important and it is a common element." Old farmhouse recovered into a social hub
(Relationship with) customers	Who are the people attending this place? How do they communicate with them? How they are reached?	"We want to have a relationship with the neighborhood [...]. We aim at residential neighborhoods, inhabited by Milanese people. Word-of-mouth has been fundamental since it has attracted the press, which seems to have fallen in love with us." Bakery artisan

**Table 1.**  
Synthesis of the hybridity key factors.

sharing common values and interests. Formal networks, frequently involving institutional support, funding, or access to space, played a key role in facilitating the creation of these enterprises, particularly in makerspaces and Fab Labs. While informal networks were rooted in shared backgrounds, formal networks tended to be more hybrid, connecting diverse stakeholders. Design was a recurring element in both types of networks, with institutions like Politecnico di Milano and artisanal schools serving as key meeting points and enablers. The teams of workers are expected to possess a range of skills, showing both internal hybridity (multidisciplinary abilities within individuals) and external hybridity (diverse, complementary team members).

This hybridity is even more pronounced than in the founders' composition. While the diversity of activities requires varied expertise, limited resources often lead to teams being primarily composed of designers. Some initiatives also intentionally promote social mixité (Wirth, 1938), aiming for diversity within their teams and among users and clients. The hybrid nature of these initiatives results, therefore, in a diversified customer base, often intentionally fostering encounters among different social groups. Customer networks are both pre-existing and formed within these hybrid spaces, which serve as platforms for connection. Design plays a strategic role in shaping this diversity, influencing the customer composition and the communication strategies used to reach them.

## 7.6. Conclusion

This study reflects on hybrid economies as socio-spatial configurations shaped by multiple forms of proximity, civic engagement, and collaborative making. The research emphasized the importance of networks and design in facilitating hybrid organizational models that operate at the intersection of economic production and social inclusion. Six key factors shape the hybridity of an enterprise: offer, goals and impacts, founders, team composition, and customer/user relationships. While founders are often not hybrid themselves, their vision strongly influences the hybridization of goals and offerings, shaping team diversity and customer mix.

Achieving hybrid impacts, social and economic, depends on these interconnections and user feedback, which may lead to reassessment of goals and offers. Networks play a crucial role in enabling this hybridity cycle by supporting the offer's effectiveness, shaping team and founder composition, reaching target audiences, and even serving as part of the offer itself. However, they typically have limited influence on goal-setting unless at a personal level.

The study identifies four types of networks essential to hybridity:

1. Pre-existing/new: existing networks support the development of new, more innovation-oriented ones.
2. Local/global: both are important; proximity is not just spatial but also cognitive.
3. Formal/informal: institutions and informal ties are equally crucial for support and knowledge exchange.
4. Homogeneous/hybrid: while homogeneous networks focus on specific competencies, hybrid networks bring together diverse fields and are strengthened by being layered across the previous categories.

These enterprises and initiatives, especially in Milan's peripheral areas, act as nodes of local innovation, capable of redefining both urban spaces and social relationships.

However, the revitalization of manufacturing practices, a central pillar of these hybrid economies, faces growing structural challenges. The enthusiasm surrounding makerspaces and micro-factories has been dampened by economic constraints and the systemic power of centralized platforms and global capital. As observed in Milan, the maker movement struggles with long-term sustainability despite public policy support. Yet, the re-embedding of manufacturing within neighborhoods remains vital. It contributes to community identity, diversified economies, and civicness. Design's role in this scenario is systemic and transformative: it mediates between actors, aligns values, and enables future visions. Its systemic and participatory approach is fundamental to both interpreting and shaping hybrid economies as ecosystems. Moving forward, further research should focus on developing metrics for hybridity and sustainability, and explore the scalability of these practices beyond manufacturing sectors, embracing service design, culture, and care-related domains.

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This volume investigates the potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces as engines of urban regeneration, democratic participation, and cultural innovation. Emerging at the intersection of cultural production, social experimentation, and territorial transformation, these spaces challenge conventional boundaries between public and private, temporary and permanent, physical and digital. Through four main sections, the book develops a critical and impactful perspective on the functions, design and interdisciplinary approaches, and transformative potential of Socio-Cultural Hybrid Spaces. From their evolving role as plural ecosystems to their capacity to generate declinations of public value; from cultural and participatory practices that reclaim and reimagine the commons to the opportunities and challenges introduced by digital technologies; it offers a multifaceted lens on *hybrid practices* in contemporary urban and territorial contexts. By weaving together theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and case studies, this book provides critical reflections by and for scholars, practitioners, and institutions. How can cultural initiatives generate new alliances between institutions and communities? What forms of participation can strengthen the democratic role of public space? And what challenges arise in connecting physical and virtual dimensions for collective engagement?