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“Fashioning a global city: global city brand channels in the fashion and design industries.”

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“Fashioning a global city: global city brand channels in the fashion and design industries.”

## **Abstract**

This article approaches the ways in which fashion and design based industrial actors contribute to creating images and myths that support global city status. We suggest that multi-channel systems of brand building and differentiation exist at regional and local levels: supportive of, and constituted by, cultural industries. Milan is used as a case study to show how the city is an arena where different brand channels are negotiated and formed to service fashion and design branding. For cultural industries these systems are vital regional sources of advantage and necessary complements to other localised phenomena such as industrial agglomerations and clusters.

**Keywords:** cultural industries; fashion and design; global city; brand and branding; economic geography; Milan.

“Fashioning a global city: urban brand channels in the global fashion and design industries.”

## **Introduction**

[p. 2] Cultural industries such as fashion clothing and accessories have been deeply affected by recent rounds of globalization and industrial restructuring. On the one hand, the emergence of new markets and tastes for luxury and high-fashion goods has meant that European and American purveyors of such artifacts have begun to find many of their most valuable consumers far from home. On the other hand, globalization has meant that much of clothing’s and designer goods’ manufacture has been outsourced to lower-cost regions far from the specialized production centers that used to be the spatial fix for these industries. Why then do cities like Paris, London, Milan, New York or Tokyo continue to be seen as important centers for fashion and design if production can, and often is, globally outsourced or if relatively small volumes of total product are consumed or sold in these places?

The article starts with a discussion of how fashion and design knowledge is central to how firms involved in marketable outputs such as fashion clothing or designer interior furniture create value and differentiation their offerings. It is suggested that such knowledge is currently reliant to a large extent on branding processes. This suggests to us that the role of cities like Milan or Paris as global centers for fashion and design may lay equally in: these places’ ability to offer actors an attractive set of spaces and channels for the negotiation and communication of immaterial value; and these places’ ability to offer actors industrial systems geared to boost innovation and efficiency in product development and production. We attempt to outline how the city can be an arena within which different channels are negotiated and formed to service fashion and design branding.

The article aims to examine the ways in which interconnected cultural industry actors – who share an interest in gaining competitive advantage through the operationalization of fashion and design knowledge – use certain cities for their own branding and differentiation strategies. It is suggested that it is such actors that ultimately define and perpetuate the status of cities such as Milan, Paris, New York, London, and Tokyo as global fashion and design capitals. The status of global fashion and design capitals is not only based on their being home to Porter-esque industrial production systems. Rather we must also understand how value in the culture industries is in many cases highly related to brands that have a significant attachment to and reliance on particular places. Consequently, we suggest that multi-channel

systems of brand building and differentiation co-exist at regional and local levels; and that these are supportive of, and constituted by, image-producing industries. For cultural and image-producing industries these systems can be interpreted as vital regional sources of advantage and necessary complements to more material localized phenomena such as industrial agglomerations and clusters.

Following this discussion we use a case study of Milan to outline how various actors use, appropriate and direct urban space for branding purposes. Milan is not just a cultural industrial territory with strengths in production, development and innovation. Like other global cities in image-producing industries, it is an especially productive crucible for forging new brands and images. In such cities, place-based associations, images and brands with very real market values are created, negotiated and attached to products, firms and sectors. The case study shows that different 'brand channels' are embedded in the city and populated by networks of actors and actions that support certain types of fashion and design knowledge and branding processes.

### **The role of global cities in global fashion and design circuits?**

#### *Localized knowledge and place-based brands*

In recent years it has become clear that traditional sectoral boundaries within the cultural industries have begun to break down. It is no longer certain that firms engaged in selling clothing are solely defined by their technical and manufacturing capacity to produce quality garments. It is indeed clear that the firms that clothe us are less and less primarily engaged in the provision of garments than they are in provision of fashion and design based images: as McRobbie suggests we have seen a transition from a rag trade to an image industry (McRobbie 1998). With this transition competitive advantage for firms is to be found primarily in the [p. 3] creation and exploitation of fashion and design knowledge that is embedded in various types of marketable output (Power and Hauge 2008). Firms that once specialized in making and selling clothing have diversified into selling fashion and design: immaterial goods that can be leveraged to market not just clothing but accessories, cosmetics, perfumes, bedding, and interiors. Firms that were once founded on a clothing designer have diversified into product areas that have no little connection to dressmaking: Versace crockery and hotels; Gucci candles, bicycles, watches and branded cafes; Prada mobile telephones; Gianfranco Ferré spas; Dolce & Gabbana spas, restaurants, and barbers; Armani fitted kitchens, chocolates, nightclubs and florists.

As Weller mentions, global fashion cities have more in common than being located between 35°N and 52°N with the ensuing number of ‘appropriate’ seasonal changes new collections are based around (Weller 2005). These cities still play an important role as command centers in strategic transnational networks (Sassen 1991) and they play host to corporate headquarters of the largest international luxury goods and fashion conglomerates. Moreover, they undoubtedly still host extensive embedded industrial systems that can be conceived as important agglomerations. Indeed much of the debate on cultural industries’ contribution to regional development, as well as the discussion of the workings of cultural industries, has focused upon the issue of agglomeration. There is a considerable body of work focused on agglomeration tendencies within the fashion and design industries. This work demonstrates how global competitiveness in fashion and design is intertwined with the existence of localized industrial systems for: creative inspiration (McRobbie 1998; Breward 2004), product innovation (Rantisi 2002; Breward 2003; Breward and Gilbert 2006; Weller 2007), knowledge and learning (Zukin 1991; Rantisi 2002), inter-firm/actor linkages (Hirsch 1972; Scott 1996; Barrera 2002; Hauge 2007; Weller 2007), labor availability and mobility (Zukin 1991; Neff, Wissinger et al. 2005; Vinodrai 2006; Hauge 2007), technological updating (Reinach 2006), specialized services and institutions (Rantisi 2002; Rantisi 2002; Rantisi 2004), and links to global commodity chains (Leslie and Reimer 2003; Weller 2007).

However, we believe that for industries concerned with fashion and design knowledge it is not enough to focus on the underlying dynamics of inter-firm and firm-based knowledge production, innovation or learning that so many point to as the basis for regional specialization and excellence (Malmberg and Power 2005). As Rantisi notes of the history by which New York became synonymous with fashion, a city of fashion and design need not be a primary centre of design nor a long-term cluster of highly skilled manufacturing if it is home to design, organizational headquarters, and the fashion publishing media (Rantisi 2004). Rather we suggest here that it is important to understand how these cities are sites for brand negotiation and projection channels that form a vital infrastructure for the switching, transmission and commercialisation of fashion and design knowledge. Understanding how certain places function as supportive bases for actors’ differentiation strategies is, as Caves and Williamson argue, important:

“Our inability to control for differences among industries in their structural bases for differentiation has arguably been the source of important shortcomings of inter-industry research in industrial organization” (Caves and Williamson 1985): 113)

For activities such as fashion and design where products’ competitive and commercial value ultimately rests in immaterial qualities and in differentiation from competitors (Levitt 1975 [1960]; Levitt 1981;

Power and Scott 2004), positionality, acclaim, recognition and reputation are vital strategic resources. Products here are commodities that are framed by aesthetic, cultural and symbolic values that are constituted in knowledge communities that are highly time and space sensitive (Storper 2000; Power and Scott 2004; Weller 2007).

Such knowledge processes are increasingly encapsulated in brands: negotiated and constructed fields that act as markers and carriers for a range of aesthetic, symbolic and cultural values and knowledge (Power and Hauge 2008). Brands are a key way of capturing, and putting a price on, fashion and design knowledge that has its origins, and prospects, in a variety of other places, networks and channels. As Weller (2007: 36) puts it:

“The seductive power of fashionable objects depends on their relationship to variously informed audiences - in other words, on their interactions with other knowledges”.

Competing in such knowledge-based markets involves continual innovation. Such innovation is: a) often ultimately more about products' immaterial and experience aspects and positioning than their technical or utilitarian aspects (Nelson 1970; Kotler and Rath 1984; Lash and Urry 1994; Baudrillard 1998; Pine and Gilmore 1999; Olins 2003); b) a negotiated process of knowledge creation involving multiple actors many of whom are not commercially involved (Bourdieu 1984; Molotch 2003; Power and Hauge 2008); c) often demand-driven, bottom-up, upstream or user-driven (von Hippel 2001; von Hippel 2005).

As firms try to contribute to brands, protect them, use them, and manipulate them to appeal to key audiences certain places and sites can be of great importance. Place-based associations can have a significant effect on situating the knowledges and values brands aspire to utilize. Molotch (Molotch 1996; Molotch 2003) suggests that place-based associations are often indivisible from [p. 4] products and that consumers attach place-informed evaluations to products of all sorts. The value of these place-based brands lies partly in their ability to persuade consumers of products' excellence, quality and innovation. Also the brand infuses products (and firms) with the 'feel' of the city: e.g. cool clothes come from cool places (Hauge 2007). Labels of origin such as 'Made in Italy', Milanese fashion, or Rive Gauche are far from neutral in their affect and are commonly used as strategic tools in the fashion industry (Hauge, Malmberg et al. 2009).

Positive connections between product images and place may create a kind of monopoly rent and therein can create entry barriers for products from competing places; and give firms an incentive for being in the

'right' place. There are, of course, many other reasons why firms will prioritize engagement with certain places; agglomerations of firms and consumers play a central role in the gathering, creation and transfer of industry relevant knowledge. In fashion oriented industries certain privileged global cities "act as 'switching centres' for the transmission of ideas harvested from a wide range of sources" (Weller 2007: 43). Key to these sites is their role as hosts to important elements of a highly globalised yet centralized fashion media system (Beward and Gilbert 2006) which allows knowledge to be imported, created and disseminated globally. Firms with a presence in such centers benefit from dynamic knowledge communities and from the positive associations such communities attach to these places.

### *Urban branding, constructed place myths*

Though seldom motivated by altruism, a highly reciprocal relationship exists between fashion and design firms and certain cities. These cities nurture more than just the industrial systems that cater for firms' needs for innovation, labor, etc. They are also places that help firms situate and brand themselves in image intensive global marketplaces. Equally cities' economies and own promotional efforts may benefit from positive associations with trendy and globalised industries such as fashion and design. As Beward and Gilbert (2006) note, in many places boosterist city authorities have begun to attach considerable importance to their own city's place in the global hierarchy of fashion capitals.

Research on urban branding has tended to focus on how public officials and authorities have attempted to use branding for some sort of selective story telling or reimagining of the city (Eckstein and Throgmorton 2003; Jensen 2005). This type of urban branding is primarily aimed at attracting visitors, investors or inhabitants (Niedomysl 2004) and is therefore quite different to the type of urban branding in focus in this article. Nonetheless despite being based on very different motivations and target audiences both these variants of urban branding are representational or narrative story telling aiming at persuading particular audiences 'to see the city' in particular ways (Selby 2004; Jensen 2007). Urban brands will therefore always involve dialectics of inclusion and exclusion since certain groups or perspectives will be marginalized.

Urban branding is a highly selective, and often deliberately exclusionary, part of the process of constructing (or appropriating) 'place images' which collectively become 'place myths' which have powerful and lasting roles in our perceptions of places (Shields 1991). Such urban brands or 'place myths' are different from the types of brands associated with individual products or even individual bounded urban redevelopment areas. In particular, by virtue of cities' complexity of ownership and

access there is a difference in the scale and scope of stakeholders and interests involved in constructing and consuming urban imageries. The branding of large established cities is seldom likely to be akin to the types of branding possible in the individual districts or smaller de-industrializing cities that so much of the urban branding literature has focused upon. Firstly, by virtue of the scale and diversity of large cities many 'place myths' can coexist without necessarily threatening the validity of others. Thus, Milan can simultaneously be 'a football city', 'a fashion city', and 'a finance centre'. Secondly, the scope of different image offerings that can be attached to a city means that it is far from likely that one will see the imposition of the type of coherently managed (or mismanaged) processes of urban branding apparent in so many smaller towns and gentrifying districts. It is more likely that the various concurrent place myths will be subject to multiple negotiated processes where various actors, to various extents, attempt to manage their own inputs and interests.

Of course, urban branding is not merely a process of image construction. It is fundamentally a process of image communication and consumption. Thus in understanding global cities of fashion and design there is a need "to think of them as constituted through hybrid relationships and connections with other places" (Gilbert 2006: 8) in the same manner as Friedmann (Friedmann 1986) argued that it is necessary to understand cities as part of a world system. This means focusing on the importance of both connections and interdependencies between cities/audiences, but also on their relative positions within global hierarchies. In the fashion and design industries these connections and interdependencies are articulated through increasingly common global production chains (Weller 2007), but also through global circuits of fashion and brand knowledge flows (Power and Jansson 2008).

### *Global fashion and design circuits*

If urban brands and branding processes/capacities are important to global value chains then we must remember that economic geography has long drawn [p. 5] attention to the need to systematically link explanations of localized systems with understandings of the connections between local concentrations (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994; Dicken, Kelly et al. 2001; Bathelt, Malmberg et al. 2004; Malmberg and Power 2005). Underlying such explanations is a 'relational approach' (Dicken, Kelly et al. 2001; Dicken and Malmberg 2001; Bathelt and Gluckler 2003; Boggs and Rantisi 2003; Yeung 2005) that stresses that connections through networks (be these networks of actors, commodities, or production chains) are necessary for how we explain and understand activities' spaces.

“It becomes meaningless to talk of local versus global processes as in much of the global-local literature; instead we should think in terms of networks of agents (such as individuals, institutions or objects) acting across various distances and through diverse intermediaries” (Dicken, Kelly et al. 2001):95)

Thus we must direct our efforts to understanding the complexities inherent in image-producing practices: practices which are seldom clearly local, global or extra-local. In a relational approach the spatial processes and anchoring of brands involves not just local actors but also ones that may never visit a place. Brands that have a global reach are entirely relational in their construction and should not be seen as ‘bounded’ (Doel and Hubbard 2002) indigenous creations but as constantly contested, changing and negotiated collections of fragmented artifacts that are subject to intertwined as well as isolated processes that can be local, global, networked, or multi-scalar. For example, the images, myths and brands anchored to New York City are as much a product of the image-producing agents based in the city as they are the millions of people actively consuming ‘Sex and the City’ or ‘The Devil Wears Prada’ in their living rooms. Short term visitors to trade fairs, passing retail tourists, bloggers following city fashion trends from far away are all actors important to urban brands; actors that need not be embedded or even touch down in the Euclidean spaces of the city.

Branding and marketing theory and practice tells us that effective brand vehicles or channels are needed to both maintain and disseminate brands. The rest of this article concentrates on the communications systems that play a vital role in supporting and broadcasting the message that somewhere is a global city for fashion and design. The following sections use the case of Milan to illustrate the idea of fashion and design branding is operationalized, amongst other methods, through the direct use and appropriation of urban space. However, through their effectiveness and global reach fashion and design branding of this type have a series of knock-on or spill-over effects on Milan’s general urban reputation. The research presented in the rest of this paper identified, in the case of Milan, four ‘brand channels’ with distinctly local moorings that help fashion actors construct and disseminate images they use in their global branding.

The term ‘brand channel’ is inspired partly by our readings of marketing literature and partly by responses from people we met during fieldwork. By it we mean a set of related or similar spaces and activities through which many brands and messages can be communicated and negotiated. Rather like a TV channel, a brand channel acts as a communicative platform in which various messages can be delivered and consumed. As with TV channels they have their own particular identity and form but

unlike TV channels they do not have a general controller and it is hard to effectively exclude actors from using or programming the channel. This means that brand channels are shaped by various actors, stake/stockholders and audiences. Each thus works according to a mess of countervailing organizational, individual and collective motivations. Despite being messy and unmanaged, these processes collectively and cumulatively constitute systems of communication. Thus brand channels may be formed by actors interested in individual acts of commercial branding (e.g. a fashion house) as well as broader coalitions acting towards collective branding (e.g. an aesthetic movement, a city authority's efforts). Through these various actors' use of, and investment in, similar types of spatially rooted branding vehicle (e.g. temporary promotional events, entrepreneurial narratives, flagship stores) they cumulatively give shape to effective communication channels. It is suggested that these channels are the result of local level actions, initiatives and forces that have the city as their primary goal but rather the commercialization of fashion and design knowledge. We argue that these channels are characterized by contested participation, recognition, and ownership; and that this contestation is essential to explaining their dynamism.

## **Methodology**

The case study presented below draws on empirical work on Milan's fashion and design activities, and on a project on cities' role in branding processes, both carried out 2004-7. Data on urban branding was also collected by twelve researchers in the Nordic Innovation Centre 'Image of the City' project. The research team also involved a separate expert group of branding and city marketing consultants and practitioners employed for the project who helped develop the findings as well as discussing the validity of results (cf. (Jansson and Power 2006).

The methodology underpinning the findings presented in this article was determined by two starting [p. 6] questions: How is the reputation and image of certain cities as fashion and design capitals constructed? How do fashion and design industry actors use certain cities for their own branding and differentiation strategies? These questions were based on previous research and a literature review, as well as on discussion with informants from the fashion and design industry and our expert group of branding and city marketing consultants. Milan's position as one of the world's preeminent capitals for fashion and design was considered to make it an ideal case study city. The four 'brand channels' we present below are our attempt to categorize and clarify what we encountered in relation to these two questions. We

did not enter the field with these concepts in mind but rather the idea of brand channels, and the four specific to fashion and design in Milan, we present are the result of our interpretation of what we discovered in the field and were developed during fieldwork and writing. We used a variety of methods to investigate the activities that go to make up these 'channels'

Data collection took three main forms. Firstly, fieldwork was conducted during repeated visits to Milan that were informed by the ethnographic tradition (Miller 1987; Agar 1996; Herbert 2000). This meant that we focused on participant observation, direct observation, self-analysis, and conversations of different levels of formality with event visitors, exhibitors and organizers, storekeepers and retailers, local activists, etc. Central to our study was observational and impressionistic data gathered through extensive periods of walking, observing and participating in Milan's urban landscape and at fashion and design events. Such methods were used not merely in the absence of alternative methods: there are few rigorous methodological avenues for assessing, measuring and describing the existence and effect of brands in urban landscapes. We agree with Wylie that it is highly problematic to assume "that landscape would always speak most cogently via archival, archaeological or ethnographic fieldwork" (Wylie 2005)p245). Descriptive narratives are thus presented in places below as part of our data.

Secondly, data collection involved more formal interviews with people involved with fashion and design, and people involved in urban branding issues in Milan. Interviews were also conducted at trade fairs and industry events. This involved over 40 formal interviews, short informal interviews, collective discussions, and small talk (see also (Power and Jansson 2008). Thirdly, data collection involved qualitative analysis of published materials (e.g. documents, websites, magazines, press releases, catalogues) produced within the fashion and design industry and documentation from events (e.g. fair guides, press releases, catalogues, magazines).

Since our research was qualitative in nature, and focused on one particular city and on how fashion and design knowledge is negotiated in it, attempts to generalize are problematic. Firstly, fashion knowledge is essentially always contested since it is the product of both downstream and upstream communication: both manufacturers and consumers have strong voices in deciding what becomes fashionable. The speed at which such knowledge, and therein its value, can change (or be subverted: (Power and Hauge 2008) makes drawing definite and unbiased conclusions difficult. The differentiated, situated, positional, and negotiated nature of fashion knowledge, and the impossibility of codifying product positionality and characteristics, explains both why fashion is a fascinating subject and why the type of interactive and open landscapes cities can provide are important to it. Secondly, given the global status of Milan in

fashion and design, and the specificity of the fairs and events we examined, some bias will have been introduced into the findings. In particular, not all cities demonstrate the same breadth and intensity of activity. Nonetheless given the scale, variety and number of participants in Milan's fashion and design spaces and industry it was considered an ideal case to study the widest range of actors and phenomena. The fashion interests at work in Milan come from many different places (far from all fashion and design actors active in the Milanese context are Italian, locally rooted or headquartered), and from many different traditions including high-end conceptual fashion, luxury goods segments, neo-artisanal fashion and design products, big-box fashion and design providers, and diverse services. Indeed it is far from the case that only high-end fashion segments are represented: we encountered everything from high-end fashion to age-old handicraft to mass-produced street fashion; and firms varying in size from multinational corporate groups to micro-firms. Thus, whilst Milan is a very specific case it contains a breadth of actors and activities that hopefully allows for some level of generalization.

### **Case study: Milan a global fashion city**

Milan has long been the industrial and financial heart of Italy. It accounts for around 14% of Italy's exports and is one of Europe's wealthiest regions. Since the 1970s it experienced a period of rapid deindustrialization with large areas of the city turning into rust belts. Bucking such trends has been a set of interlinked cultural industries: fashion clothing and accessories, footwear, media, publishing, high-end designer furniture, interior design and other design activities. Of these activities, fashion and design are perhaps most closely associated with the city and region.

Milan's not only a node for fashion and design knowledge but also a major agglomeration for related manufacturing and production. The textile and clothing industries in the wider Lombardy region employ around 200,000 workers making it the largest textile [p. 7] and clothing manufacturing concentration in Europe (Reinach 2006). The city's fashion sector involves 12000 companies, 800 showrooms, and 6000 sales outlets; over 6000 firms are involved in interior design; there are 17 research institutes focusing on fashion and design (figures direct from Comune di Milano). Milan's fashion complex is largely export oriented in contrast to, for instance, Milan's media and publishing behemoths which are principally Italian in focus. The city is a major centre for fashion and design R&D, education, distribution, production, and related services. Crucially Milan is host to headquarters for some of the largest fashion and design multinationals: e.g. in fashion Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Etro, Missoni, Prada, Romeo Gigli, Trussardi, and Versace; in design Boffi, B&B Italia, Cassina, Cappellini, and Kartell. Milan is also

home to a series of other lifestyle based industries that have close ties to and synergies with fashion and design firms.

The reputation of Milan as a fashion capital is not only a function of the industrial agglomeration localized in the region. It is also a name with a range of positive and powerful connotations in fashion; connotations that are essential to the competitiveness and character of the garments etc. that are produced both here and abroad by Milan's fashion and design firms. As we have already suggested one of key assets of global cities of fashion and design is that they, to a high degree, have the power to define the symbols of fashion and design, and function as switching points where ideas and values are negotiated. Such negotiation and switching processes are absolutely central to fashion-based industries' innovation and value creation processes. A variety of channels and actors are involved in the negotiation and construction of such city brands. The following sections describe four different brand channels we have identified in the Milanese case: promotional events; spokespersons and patrons; flagships and showrooms; retail districts.

### *Promotional events*

Promotional events such as catwalk shows, design weeks, showcases and trade fairs are central institutions in how fashion and design firms reach buyers and consumers. In fashion, the large biannual shows are especially important in defining trends and structure the global fashion industry's work and production cycles (Perna 1987; Agins 1999; Entwistle and Rocamora 2006; Skov 2006; Weller 2007). Shows are where new styles and fashions are first broadcast and where large sales orders and contracts are negotiated. Such events are primarily designed to sell and brand product ranges and the types of knowledge presented are inherently strategic - they stress owner-specific novelty, innovation and exclusivity – and are in direct and very proximate competition with other image productions. Despite the overriding logic of monopolistic competition and differentiation apparent, actors have an incentive to invest in mutually supportive and unintentionally collaborative strategies and platforms. Thus despite intense competition actors in both fashion and design adhere to common schedules and invest in organizational capacity, facilities and spaces that their competitors will also benefit from.

The cycle of events that dominate fashion and design happen in certain places and are arranged in an almost continuous cyclical global circuit which repeats itself year after year (Power and Jansson 2008). However, there are clear hierarchies behind which places the circuit travels through: the pit-stops on the annual global fashion circuit change over time. Milan's current status as the home to Italy's most

prestigious fashion and design events is relatively recently gained since traditionally Florence was the media and buying focus for Italian fashion and hosted Italy's designer shows. In 1972 several designers moved their shows from Florence to Milan which soon became 'home' for the major Italian seasonal shows. The 1970s represented a turning point in the history of fashion and Milan formed a central node in the process of adjustment to global fashion markets and prêt-à-porter collections (Reinach 2006). As prêt-à-porter took over as the principal commercial vehicle in rapidly expanding global fashion markets, fashion shows became central arenas within which manufacturers, designers, specialized buyers and media coordinated their efforts.

Central to Milan's rise as centre for Italian shows was *Milanoventemoda* a fashion trade fair/showcase first organized in 1969. Since then the *Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana* has been important in setting standards for and coordinating Italy's fashion shows and has actively used and promoted Milan as its central location. A combination of lead-movers and an institutional setting that favored organizing shows in one centre means that Milan now hosts a variety of fashion shows for local Milanese firms as well as other Italian firms and 'foreign' firms. Principally Milan hosts two (one for men, one for women) bi-annual 7-day Fashion Weeks that alongside Paris and New York are the world's premier fashion events. *Milano Moda Donna* October 2006 attracted over 20000 trade visitors, 2000 accredited journalists, and assorted 'VIPs' to over 100 shows of 230 new collections. For autumn/winter 2008-9 there were 103 catwalk shows and 137 collection presentations packed into eight days. The scale and intensity of these events have attracted criticism within the industry. In February 2008 the Milanese designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana suggested in an interview with *Corriere della Sera* that the current situation is "a senseless circus" and they thought there should be fewer events of higher quality (source Vogue.com). Nonetheless the circus attracts considerable media attention broadens the events' audience of expert [p. 8] buyers to include consumers around the world (Reinach 2006). As such they cement the connection between Milan and fashion; and the inter-urban hierarchies that place Milan above other competing centers.

Milan's showcases should not be thought of as a channel only for Italian designers now residing in Milan. They are channels for designers, collections, products and images from around the world and not just Milan or Italy. Indeed it is hard to say what exactly defines Italian fashion since there is considerable diversity of approach and aesthetics and even the most prominent firms are quite international in their staffing and approach (e.g. Tom Ford's prominence in Florence-based Gucci). Equally designers and firms from other countries increasingly show and showcase in the city in order to reach the world: for instance Burberry was one of the headliners of the first men's fashion weeks of 2009 (*Milano Moda Uomo*

*autunno/inverno 2009/2010*). A similar phenomenon is apparent in Paris where Japanese designers regularly make up significant numbers of the 'Parisian' catwalk shows (Kawamura 2004). It is not the case that this is a channel for a particular Milanese school of fashion or a particularly Milanese style: not much of 'Milan' then rubs off on the design of products that are shown here but need not originate here. Thus there is little agreement about the specific knowledge being constructed and there is no coherent set of actors in charge; rather a variety of actors interested in fashion (producers, buyers, media) for their own strategic reasons co-locate and implicitly cooperate in turning Milan into a prestige fashion hub.

In other areas of design, Milan's annual International Furniture Fair is the world's premium promotional event. Started 1961, the fair has developed into a family of concurrent trade fairs (branded Milan Design Week) covering furniture as well as lighting, kitchens, bathrooms, office furniture and fittings, interior textiles and accessories. In 2008, around 1300 carefully selected exhibitors are allowed by the organizers in the main furniture event. During Design Week Milan's main fairground accommodates all seven 'separate' trade fairs and the rest of the city is given over to ancillary design events and to the almost 350,000 trade visitors in 2008. Nearly 5000 accredited journalists (everything from TV to specialist press) from around the world attended the event. Coverage of the fair in magazines lasts for several months after the event, greatly broadening the fair's 'audience' (Power and Jansson 2008). Events such as trade fairs or showcases should not be seen as purely promotional in character since by virtue of drawing together normally disparate and fragmented groups of related actors they can act as switching where ideas and values are negotiated. This process, of negotiating value on a global level, is facilitated partly by the presence of large and important parts of the industry. Given the number of exhibitors and participants in such events it is hard to summarize the different actors involved and their relative power to decide the direction or form of the event. What these actors share is a mutual strategic use of the fair as a space for their commercial aims. Thus whilst they will all use the spaces available under the fair in different ways (see (Power and Jansson 2008) there is a tacit agreement that promoting the fair benefits all involved.

Such events have profound effects on even large cities. The scale of these fairs attracts considerable numbers of visitors, supporting an extensive business visitor industry. Moreover to accommodate them large areas of the city have been given over to design events. The new exhibition area east of the city centre replaces the old site located in the North West parts of the city. Designed by Massimiliano Fuksas the new exhibition site Rho-Però was one the largest development projects in Italy: at a cost of €750 million it covers 2 million m<sup>2</sup> with 530,000m<sup>2</sup> of floor space. The site likens a self-contained city with

hotels, shopping mall, police station, chapel, mosque, restaurants, cafés, metro and mainline high-speed train stations. The old exhibition complex in the city centre is to be redeveloped into the 'CityLife' district that will accommodate smaller exhibitions and encompass residential high rises designed by a roll call of star architects. To literally accommodate the fair large parts of the city and infrastructure have been redrawn by a coalition of city and regional authorities, the fair organizers and private sector developers.

Fairs and fashion shows are primarily strategic promotional actions organized and arranged by different and competing private sector actors. This variety explains why these channels are tuned towards an equally disparate set of audiences spread out over the entire globe. However, whilst Prada often aims at a very different audience to Armani one constant in the message is the presence of the city as an active participant and backdrop to fashion and design branding. When these narratives work properly they create a kind of 'monopoly rent' attached to products designed in Milan: they may be imitated but only as imperfect substitutes since the 'origins' of the product are integral to its value and appeal. Seen from the perspective of stakeholders in the city of Milan this dense concentration of promotional events is both an important business in its own right as well as constituting a set of inter-linked stories, images and narratives on the city. What these narratives and images share is their role in continuously and episodically re-establishing and broadcasting the tale of Milan as a fashion world city.

### *Spokespersons and patrons*

Whilst there may be limited evidence of a controlling cabal in the event based brand channel, a second channel functions around the pronouncements [p. 9] and communicative actions of a small but vocal group of spokespeople and patrons who have vested interests in Milan's role as a fashion and design capital. In recent decades such cities have become closely associated with, and valued on the basis of, their star designers and industry power-brokers. In fashion and design the use of spokespeople is most obvious in the multiple roles that the 'designer' plays. The designer is typically not only the creative talent behind product ranges but also the figurehead for the organization. There is a widespread public acceptance, and valorization, of the role of 'creative geniuses' (Santagata 2004) in fashion and design and as such these often extravagant, eccentric and media hungry personalities almost constitute brand channels in their own right.

Milan boasts an enviable collection of home grown and 'foreign' super-designers that garner (chase and finance) international media exposure. Moreover they get exposure in the type of high-status media

outlets that few can access: it is not just what they say but also where they say it. Constant references to Milanese designers in international media and designers' equally constant proclamations about Milan's importance to their creativity and business are undoubtedly valuable (though difficult to quantify) contributions to the city's brand. These spokespersons play similar roles to, for example, Donna Karan and Calvin Klein in New York or Christian Dior and Lacroix in Paris: persons/brands who both contribute to and profit from their own stylings and imaging of their cities. The spokespersons and patrons of Milan form a crucial ingredient in creating the narratives that individually have a role in the ever evolving Milanese brand. As a motor for creating Milan's place myth internationally prominent brand name success stories, such as Armani and Dolce & Gabbana, as well as the extravagant lives of individuals behind them, such as Versace, are important communicative tools. Interviews in the design and fashion media with Milan-based design stars such as Giorgio Armani, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, Roberto Cavalli, James Irvine and Patricia Urquiola frequently mention Milan as a focal point in their creative lives. The life stories of these spokespeople and the fact that many have moved from other areas of Italy (e.g. Cavalli from Florence) or from other countries (Urquiola from Spain) reinforces the idea of Milan as a global hub for creative business. Through the pronouncements, actions, press relations and material output of these key figures the name of the city is invested in and used according to each spokespersons' desires. In addition, especially in the field of fashion the work/product produced by these designers frequently incorporate the city's name as a logo or integral element (see Figure 2). Given that each of these spokespersons represents very different and competing aesthetics, brands, lifestyles, etc. it is clear to see that little unites the resulting spins they put to their Milan. What does unite these diverse narratives, however, is a mutual strategic interest in portraying 'their' city in a positive light.

What is interesting about several of Milan's figurehead spokespeople is that they do not simply use the city as a backdrop to their self-marketing. They also invest heavily in leaving their mark on the city and then use these imprints to market both themselves and the city. In a sense there has been a renewed interest in the city from city grandees and this has meant an increased involvement and commitment in the city development. Milan has a long tradition of rulers and patrons who have been made huge investments in their city reputation for cutting-edge art and culture: notably Sforza's patronage of da Vinci. In more recent years the designer as builder, patron and benefactor has become a constant theme in Milan. For example, Nicola Trussardi, the Versace family, Giorgio Armani, Fondazione Prada, Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana have all made large investments in the city in terms of arts funding, events and building projects. Patrizio Bertelli, husband of Miuccia Prada and CEO of Prada Group, recently suggested that the group's, and since 1995 Prada Foundation's, art and culture

interventions are “an expression of one part of Prada’s vision; not the money making side of the brand but its soul” (quoted in *Wallpaper*, May 2009, 85). The potential motivations behind such interventions may then be multifaceted – e.g. simultaneously business strategy and self-expression – but the result is unquestionably large and well delivered symbolic and financial investments in the cityscape.

Unlike many other European cities there are few high profile public actors in this cultural industry branding channel; high-profile mayors throughout Europe have enthusiastically attempted to add their voices to the use of cultural industries in urban branding. Though public actors may dedicate resources to branding the city in terms of fashion and design they have not the media access, profiles or budgets to compete with local fashion and design spokespeople. However, whilst public actors might not be frontline spokespeople they have been important patrons of branding of Milan and its individual fashion and design districts. Public actors have been central in enabling, organizing and promoting major urban redevelopment plans that play on associations with fashion and those that aim to create districts supportive of fashion and design industries: for instance, the ‘Città della Moda’ (Fashion City) development. Equally local authorities become tacit patrons of the art of fashion branding by allowing the proliferation of signage abundant around the city and on Milan’s most iconic buildings, by lauding areas as fashion and design districts, and by linking with and supporting the various local retail networks and associations. Obviously, the various local and regional public actors do understand the importance and potential of both investments in the infrastructure as well as the symbolic expression of the city [p. 10] and have implicitly and explicitly supported fashion and design narratives.

In summary a group of primarily private sector spokespersons and patrons have consciously spoken for and invested in Milan’s status. They are not, however, an organized rooster of city boosters but more a disparate group of globally recognized spokespersons, driven by different motivations (from civic pride to self-promotion) that actively publicize the city for their own purposes and in their own images. Cumulatively this disparate group of actors, agendas, strategies and stories does create a coherent meta-narrative that has been well placed in global media and other channels; the Milan brand is likely deepened and authenticated by the multiplicity of actors willing to invest their own name and money in it.

### *Flagships and showrooms*

Exposing the public and buyers to brands in fashion is not something that can be communicated by media vehicles and spokespeople alone. Feeling fabrics, fitting cloths, and experiencing the context garments

are sold in has a powerful affect on opinion makers and consumers (Hauge 2007). Parallel to the main fashion events and media a constant stream of trade visitors and early adopters are channeled through Milan's abundant smaller or more targeted showings and demonstration spaces. Fashion, design and interiors firms invest heavily in showrooms where buyers, opinion makers and profile/lead-users can experience new collections. In addition, they invest enormous sums in (slightly) less exclusive flagship stores aimed at showcasing their brand on the right street to the right consumers.

Showrooms and ateliers are important promotional spaces for high-end fashion designers. Such spaces are vital to maintaining the image of artistic creativity and exclusivity that *haute couture* customers demand and others aspire to. The nature of the spaces they present in is an important part of their efforts to differentiate themselves from competitors (Levitt 1981). Fashion houses thus compete to find ever more spectacular permanent show spaces. Dolce & Gabbana, for example, converted a cinema in Viale Piave into a venue capable of seating over 1000. Armani's headquarters built in 2001 and designed by star architect Tadao Ando occupies a former Nestlé factory and includes a 3400m<sup>2</sup> showroom (*Teatro Armani*) with seating for 682. Milan's Prada has rebuilt another post-industrial space and the Florentine firm Gucci has a large venue at Piazza Oberdan. It is important to note that as with the promotional events channel this channel is not only made up of local actors. As can be seen in Figure 1 iconic Parisian designers such as Gaultier, Neapolitan tailors Luigi Borrelli, and New York shoe designer Stuart Weitzman have showroom space in Milan. These locational choices are not supply-side strategies, such the location of design facilities or production, but demand-side strategies tailored to particular invited audiences.



Figure 1: Invitation only showrooms

For a less select audience Milan's has rows of flagship stores from most of the world's most prominent (or aspiring) design and fashion houses and brands. Milan attracts many international designers eager to etch their name on the city through the erection of a flagship store. For instance, in 2005 Amsterdam-based Victor & Rolf opened their first flagship store in: a spectacularly inverted flagship where the floor is on the ceiling, the ceiling on the floor, etc. Considerable care is taken with getting the 'right' address, architecture, assistants, etc. Flagship stores are designed as dramatic statements – such as Dutch designers Viktor & Rolf's upside-down boutique - and are subject to frequent and expensive refits. Most flagships – for example Boffi's labyrinth of architect designed kitchens and bathrooms – are primarily spectacular showcases for core product collections. Other Milan flagship stores focus more as concept

stores and are explicit attempts by firms to increase consumers' awareness of their brand's innovativeness (Concetti 2007). Many big brand flagships have begun to look more like department stores since they collect and showcase all the collected sub-brands, alliances and diffusion lines the fashion house sells/licenses. Thus the five storey Armani flagship/city block includes various clothing lines but also Armani cocktails, books, accessories, furniture, cosmetics, perfumes, chocolate, sushi, nightclub, flowers, electronics, etc. Dolce & Gabbana's flagship includes clothing, a bar, spa and barber. Whilst all these are shops, due to high costs and low turnover they are often loss-leaders and their primary function is to showcase products and the 'brand values' surrounding them.

Showrooms and flagships act as shop windows for fashion and design firms but equally they add to the profile of the city as a place where diverse high status products and actors can be seen. Shop windows are not the only way fashion and design firms can flag their presence and leave an imprint on Milan's landscape. Direct advertising channels such as billboards, posters and signage penetrate seemingly every aspect of the cityscape (Cronin 2006). Many of the fashion conglomerates with a presence in Milan consciously use the city's infrastructure and buildings as integral parts of their marketing and branding strategies.

Without even visiting a shop ones' experience of Milan is inscribed with a clutter of billboards, etc. proclaiming the importance of fashion to the city. At Milan's Linate airport visitors are welcomed by a gigantic lettering atop the terminal building spelling 'Armani'. Central parts of Milan are covered by billboards and advertising for local and global fashion and design brands. Free tourist maps distributed throughout the city are often sponsored (we had one sponsored by Burberry) or give detailed listings of design and fashion high points. In Milan, just like [p. 11] many other global cities (Klein 2000), the shopping quarters and the commercial districts make up gigantic canvases for different brands. Walls and street corners are jammed with advertising to such an extent that the cityscape is completely appropriated and recast in the light (or down-lighters) of subtle and not so subtle brand signage. By placing themselves at the centre of the map, by symbolically branding the airport as theirs, and by plastering themselves into almost every public vista, fashion and design firms fight to appropriate the symbolic landscape. Many of the local inhabitants we talked to positively welcomed such appropriations as it helped communicate their certainty that their city is a uniquely important global fashion and design centre. On the other hand the cluttered symbolic landscape of advertising was interpreted by local activists we talked to in the Isola district as an unwelcome hegemony and an encroaching vanguard of gentrification and marginalization.



Figure 2: The city as a canvass for your brand.

Direct marketing does not only cover the face of Milan, for Milan's name is commonly incorporated into local brands' advertisements in other places and media spaces. Adverts for design and fashion firms frequently place 'Milan' or 'Milano' alongside their own name. Thus handbags emblazoned with Milano walk the streets of Beijing whilst Brazilian Vogue features adverts where the name Milan is put centre stage. Equally the flagship stores and showrooms that Milan-based firms have set up in other cities around the world reiterate the message far from home: the flagships of Milan's brand are not just sailing in local waters. The global reach, scope and intensity of direct advertising campaigns run by Milan fashion and design firms is far beyond the scale and type that city authorities could hope to undertake.

### *Retail districts*

One key element of global design and fashion cities is their role as purchasing centers. Most treatments [p. 12] of regional economic development and economic geography have paid little to consumption points (Crewe 2000; Zukin 2005), however, peoples' 'superficial' preoccupation with shopping and the attendant development of retail undoubtedly have an enormous role in shaping cities' form and image. Highly agglomerated retail and consumption districts not only give outward credence to the idea of an underlying fashion or design industry but also help attract sophisticated consumers and consumer attention. That is not to say that there is one clear message emanating from the retail landscape of

fashion and design cities such as Milan. Shops in the city range from exclusive boutiques offering luxurious items produced by Italian and international names to global chain stores (like Habitat and H&M), from locally handcrafted fashion and interior design to second hand and vintage. Thus whilst the city's retail offer is likely to have a profound effect on visitors and residents, the offer itself is subject to change and constant redirection.

Milan's most notable shopping district is the so-called *Quadrilatero d'Oro* (literally 'Golden Rectangle' but also referred to as 'Golden Triangle') or is comprised of Via della Spiga, Via Monte Napoleone, Via Sant'Andrea and Via Alessandro Manzoni: see Fig. 2. The area is perhaps unmatched in the world for density and number of high-end fashion, jewelry, fur and accessories showrooms and shops. This is hardly a shopping district for average income earners and is oriented towards an exclusive group of consumers drawn from around the world. Indeed it is important to stress that in many ways this area is in competition as much, if not more, with Bond Street or Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honor than it is with other areas of Milan. The streets in Quadrilatero d'Oro arguably function less as public spaces than as manicured corridors connecting the real focus of the space: the shop windows and interiors. The district is also host to a large number of appointment only private banks. Almost every fashion boutique in the area is divided into two sections. The ground floor houses the windows towards the street, attracting tourists and window shoppers. Away from prying eyes special showrooms cater to an exclusive cadre of high-spending and high-profile consumers. This sense of a cloistered exclusivity is reinforced by the narrow streets and the intimate scale of the establishments and stands in contrast to the scale, openness and public spectacle seen in other global prestigious retail streets such as 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue or Omotesando.



Figure 3: Quadrilatero d'Oro.

But Milan is not only about luxury or high-end fashion shopping. There are emerging districts that have been taken over by furniture and interiors retail: Via Durini. There are also more 'bohemian' fashion and design consumption districts in Ticinese, Navigli, Brera, Garibaldi/Corso Como and Isola (Bovone 1999; Bovone, Mazzette et al. 2005). These areas are inhabited by smaller scale shops featuring fashion, antique/vintage, design, and art. Many of these stores purposely blurs boundaries between fashion, interiors and the entrepreneurs behind certain key stores - e.g. Carla Sozzani (10 Corso Como), or Rossana Orlandi (Spazio Rossana Orlandi) – have been credited with having significant effects on the retail attractiveness and repositioning of certain districts. While the areas mentioned above generally contain shops that are small scale or bohemian in feel they seldom seem to be catering for low income groups and are frequently home to retailers that sell in the higher premium ends of fashion and design. Rather these retail districts cater to [p. 13] particular consumer groups and sensibilities different to

those chased by the Quadrilatero d'Oro shops. Whilst such districts seem to primarily emerge as a result of localization economies and reputational effects that trigger co-location of similar types of retailer it is also clear that policy has helped brand and promote these districts.

Just as firms differentiate themselves from each other, consumption districts differentiate themselves (often actively) from competitors and substitutes. Equally fashion and design consumption districts get appropriated and co-opted into wider urban regeneration processes. Former working class areas made fashionable by cutting-edge arts and design outlets such as Isola become subject to gentrification: something highly contested by locals and organizations such as Cantieri Isola. Whilst in other areas images and symbols associated with fashion consumption are used in the service of selling large scale new-build shopping and residential districts. The controversial €680 million 'Città della Moda' development by Hines Estate in the Garibaldi/Corso Como area consciously trades on a range of positive associations with fashion and design consumption spaces adjacent to the development.

In Milan there is a variety of high profile, contested and developing districts that function principally as consumption districts tailored to different types of consumers. Shopping districts attracts money, customers and revenue but it also helps create a vast set of shop windows that display Milan's fashion complexity and content. The sheer scale and scope of shops and retailers from Italy and the rest of the world means that the city often feels like one gigantic dressed window on the world of fashion: a window to be looked into but also one designed to project a multiplicity of images outwards.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding sectoral brandings of cities and how cities can function as brand platforms for cultural industries is important. In particular, investigating such processes can tell us more about how the place of origin is itself often part of commercial constructions cultural industries weave to support their competitiveness. In the case of Milan's status as a fashion and design capital we identified four key brand channels: channels through which the city's brand is negotiated and communicated. Each of these channels has their own particular form and involves particular actors and negotiations. Thus each works according to a mess of countervailing organizational, individual and collective motivations. This begs the question of how these four contested channels hang together. Firstly, they hang together because [p. 14] individual actors may be involved in many or all of them simultaneously: e.g. at the same time as being a spokesman for the city Armani's firm organizes events and builds flagship stores. Secondly, the channels

hang together because what happens in one channel may affect another: e.g. the effects of high profile fashion shows may fail to convince consumers faced by a brand that appears in shabby retail environments. Thirdly, they hang together on a collective level because what one actor does in a brand channel can positively or negatively affect another. On the positive side there are definite advantages to channels populated with many investors: e.g. a fashion week with fifty well orchestrated shows is better for everyone involved than a fashion week with only five; or new entrants can benefit from the long term investments established firms have made in the status of a particular retail milieu. On the negative side there is the danger that what some do in the brand channels might not suit everyone.

These channels also share a local anchoring and a degree of embeddedness through their grounding in the use and appropriation of particular elements of urban space - e.g. billboards, shops on particular streets, trade shows. Actors invest in these types of local spatial stratagems even though their audience might be co-present for only a short time (e.g. shoppers, trade visitors, tourists) or never even visit Milan (e.g. magazine readers, bloggers, TV viewers). Whilst many of the brand channels are deeply rooted in the spaces of the city, their reception, interpretation and negotiation may therefore happen far from the local. It is important then to understand the complex and relational spatialities involved in global brands such as 'Milan Fashion and Design'. Global brands rely on certain local milieus, but equally they rely on fluctuating and transient meetings in these milieus, and on relational and positional spaces in which audiences consume and negotiate signs and symbols. Thus, even brief happenings such as showcases, catwalk shows or trade fairs play key roles in bringing trade professionals, media and opinion-makers close to the brand stages anchored in the city. Similarly flagships, showrooms and differentiated retail districts function as magnets bringing both professionals and customers to these switching centers.

These channels are characterized by a diversity of actors and interests, and are likely to be highly contested. The complexity of actors and relations involved in the construction and communication of global city status means that there is no agreed strategy behind this branding and that the channels and brand are continually in flux, negotiation and contestation. A lack of coordination between actors no doubt spurs innovation in the messages that are channeled from places like Milan outwards. However, a lack of coordination can also imply a lack of accountability and the real possibility that alternative images get marginalized. This could be clearly seen in the spokespersons and patrons channel outlined in the Milan case: a disparate group of high-profile, well-funded and media-savvy global celebrities actively publicize and rewrite the city for their own purposes (from civic pride to self-promotion) and in their own image.

In this article we have looked at some of the processes involved in branding a global city of fashion and design. It is suggested that to be a 'global' city in image-intensive sectors is not simply a question of being home to a large concentration of firms. Rather, global city status in fashion and design should be viewed as partly a product of rhetoric and interpretation; the dissemination of more or less managed narratives, images and myths about specific places. Global fashion or design cities function as centers for the production and assignment of brand value. However, such places are not neutral assembly points where professionals construct and attach brands to firms and products. The brand identity and associations of the place itself is important to firm or product level brands: it rubs off on brands 'originating' there, it is appropriated and used by actors, and it gives credence and context to actors' efforts and positionality. In short, brands such as 'made in Milan' are integral components of many commercial stories. Global cities in cultural industries - where competitiveness rests upon differentiation - are important as switching centers and especially productive crucibles for forging immaterial value and knowledge. In such places, place-based associations, images and brands with very real market value are created, negotiated and attached to products, firms and sectors. If we are to understand how fashion and design knowledge can support regional industrial systems then we must also be ready to understand how actors associated with these industries will attempt to dress and fashion the city to their ends.

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