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WRITER Tyler Brülé

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A PLACE TO GROW

Milan's deputy mayor Cristina Tajani sings the praises of Salone del Mobile, the most accessible of design fairs, and the value it brings to the city's infrastructure, as well as the rewards its citizens reap by being exposed to cutting-edge design.

WRITER *Laura Rysman*

"Italian design was born in Milan because it's a city that combines creativity and manufacturing," says Cristina Tajani, Milan's deputy mayor, whose focus is labour policies and economic development, including the city's two most prominent industries: fashion and design. "Our goal is not only to be the centre of Italian design but to strengthen our role as the centre of international design."

Tajani can be grateful then that her remit includes the support and growth of Salone del Mobile. A juggernaut of the design world, Salone is a commercial coup as well as a symposium of new design for an audience that includes both industry insiders and the public. More than 300,000 visitors are estimated to alight in Milan for this year's Design Week. The trade show, held at the Fuksas-designed fairgrounds in the outlying suburb of Rho, hosts more than 2,000 companies from around the world and reserves 650 spots for Satellite, a showcase for the work of designers and students under the age of 35.

Like so many in the city, Tajani moved here looking for opportunity and she sees in Milan the best-functioning and most forward-looking metropolis that the country can offer. "We're creating new opportunities

for Milanese and Italian youth but the key to our success is being a hub at the international level."

For the first time, the Salone del Mobile award ceremony as well as the week's closing party will be held (with no shortage of symbolism) at Palazzo Marino, Milan's city hall. "We need to show that our city institutions support Salone del Mobile," says Tajani.

This year exhibiting companies have also been invited to donate their installations to Milan, which will then be used as public furniture or art for the benefit of ordinary residents. The city is, according to Tajani, "always pushing designers to open up and involve the public so that the Milanese appreciate the value that this sector provides for the city".

Much of the city's support, however, is less visible but equally vital. "What makes Milan's Design Week so different from any other is that the trade show exists side by side with Fuorisalone [a collective term for the fringe events that happen throughout Salone], with all of the events happening throughout the city's districts," says Tajani. The city government works behind the scenes to co-ordinate these events, which in turn helps Milan's dis-



"Our goal is not only to be the centre of Italian design but to strengthen our role as the centre of international design"

tricts to row into distinctive centres with the help of local organisers.

Tortona was the first, transforming from a scrappy neighbourhood of independent makers to a nexus for big-brand presentations seeking a sheen of the area's cool creative energy. Others followed: Lambrate with its artsy warehouse vibe and Brera with its combination of prestigious brands and creative solo shows.

But Fuorisalone's most immediately discernible effect is in the streets of Milan, where throngs of industry insiders and Milanese from all walks of life take in the same design shows spread across storefronts, galleries, apartments, palazzos and old factories throughout the city. The beauty of Salone is that it functions not just as a trade venue but also as an emissary engaging multitudes of people with the world of design and with the city of Milan itself. "Compared to Fashion Week," says Tajani, "Design Week is much, much more democratic and we continue to find ways to make it more so."

Efforts to broaden the city's appeal received its biggest boost three years ago when Milan hosted Expo 2015, the food-centric fair that helped put the Lombard capital on the radar for tourists who would have previously descended on Italy and made a beeline for the art and architecture of Florence, Venice and Rome. Visitor numbers today easily top seven million and new arrivals are welcomed to spruce up surroundings, with new neighbourhoods such as Porta Nuova coming to life.

Then there are the ongoing investments in infrastructure, from more suburban train services and bike lanes to a fifth metro line that, in the future, will connect Milan's Linate airport with downtown. There has been an improvement in the quality of life for residents who have also been witness to a boom in restaurant openings serving up a variety of cuisines from Japanese-style tapas to Greek fare. All this comes as Italy's actual capital, Rome, has suffered through corruption scandals, a mountain of debt and basic problems revolving around rubbish collection and public transport.

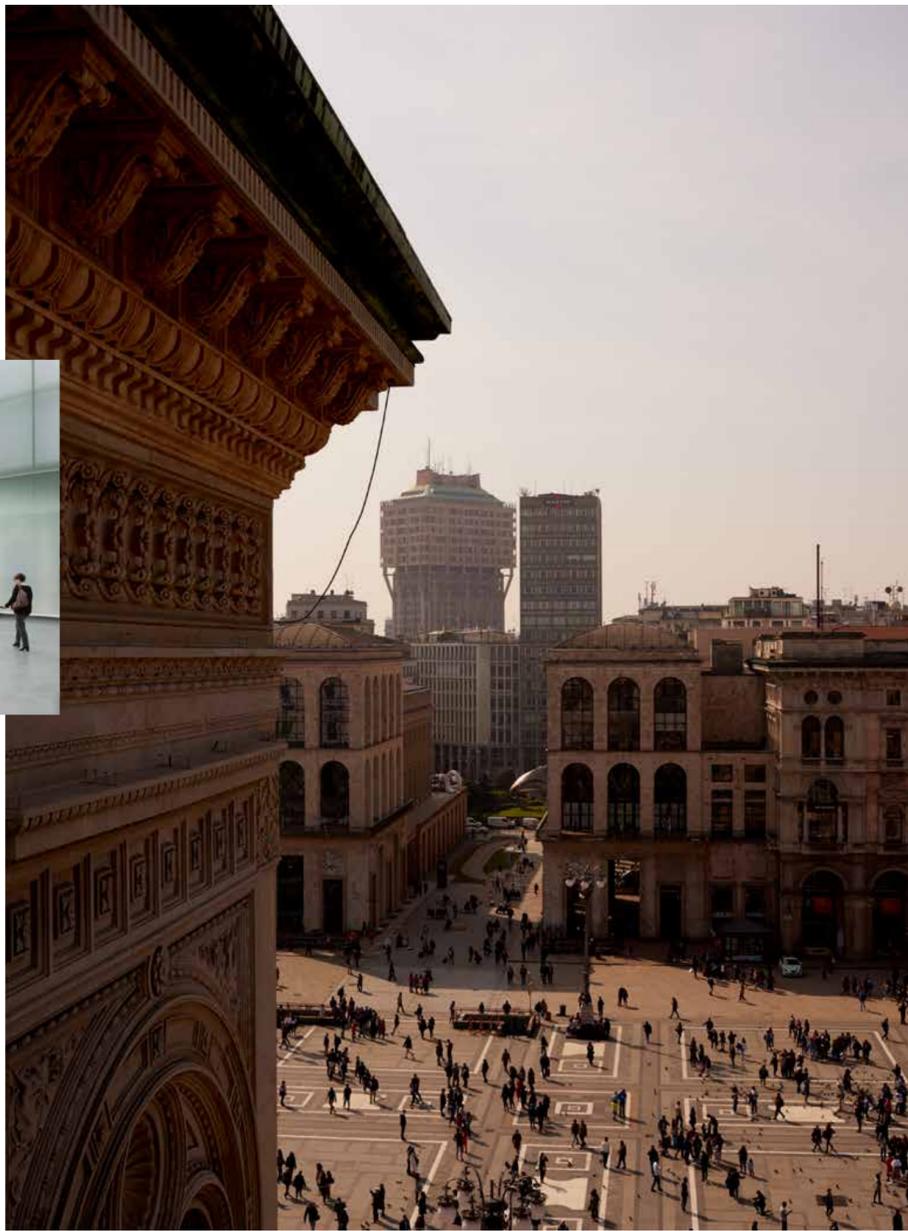
In the aftermath of Brexit, it is Milan's city hall, rather than Rome's, which has courted the EU to win one of the agencies that was to be relocated from London. Although it narrowly lost out to Amsterdam for the European Medicines Agency – the area around Milan is home to the bulk of Italy's pharmaceutical industry – city officials are still eager to lure talent from the UK hoping recently introduced income tax breaks for high earners will make London-based fund managers think about uprooting to southern Europe. Meanwhile, forward-thinking investment banks such as Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley are relocating jobs to Milan in an attempt to prepare for a possible hard exit by the UK from the EU.



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One million square metres will be given over to a new park that will host a university campus, hospital and businesses operating in biotech, agriculture and healthcare



Yet it is not only Brexit that Milan sees as a chance to raise its profile and enter the first tier of global cities. Officials last month joined forces with Turin for a joint bid to host the 2026 Winter Olympics. Interestingly, the move comes after the cities had a war of words when publishers last year inaugurated an international book fair in Milan that looked to take some of the thunder from Turin's own annual event dedicated to the printed word.

As you would expect, it is the private sector that has led the charge to transform the city's fortunes. Today, foreign companies, investors and entrepreneurs are bringing in innovation and much needed capital. Major names such as Microsoft, Siemens and Amazon have recently set up shiny new offices. Around 3,000 foreign businesses are headquartered here and some have even ditched Rome to make Milan their base in Italy. A section of the new investment speaks Chinese, with industrialists and big corporations swooping in to purchase the city's two world-famous football clubs not to mention fashion brands, real estate and industry.

The legacy of Expo 2015 continues to be felt today with an ambitious project that the city is readying to start in 2019. On the former site of the world's fair, which is next to the city's sprawling fairgrounds, one million square metres – more than twice the size of Vatican City – will be given over to a new technological park that will host a university campus, hospital and businesses operating in biotech, agriculture and healthcare. Private investment for the scheme has almost topped €2bn and is yet another sign that Milan is on the up and that it may, as one major Italian news weekly declared last year in a provocative headline, be the moment for the city to be declared the capital of Italy full stop. Only time will tell.



TOURISM / ITALY
On your bike

Italy's new cycle routes are opening up the countryside to pedal-pushing sightseers.

WRITER *Laura Rysman*

As the number of visitors to Italy continues to rise each year, the government is banking on diverting some of them away from oversaturated cities with a modest device – the bicycle. "I'm convinced bicycles are the future," says Graziano Delrio, Italy's minister of infrastructure and transport. This politician has been

central in ushering in an era of bike-path building. "In a handful of years, we could have a genuine system of cycle routes running from north to south," says Delrio.

One of the plans is the Ciclovía di Garda, a 140km path circling Lake Garda to be completed in five years. This May, an impressive stretch of the trail will be ready with a promenade of 10km constructed over the water's edge running north from the shorefront town of Limone. Lake Garda's slopes are already a popular destination for cyclists but the new route allows for more amateur pedal-pushers to navigate the path, widening the scope of visitors.

The project's estimated €100m price will be shouldered by the national government as well as the Lombardy, Trento and Veneto regions and towns along the route. The beauty of a lakeside trail made the project compelling, says Delrio, but with diverse interests and allegiances involved, so did the partnership between regional leaders, mayors and cycling associations. "This is the real meaning of politics," says Delrio. "Working together regardless of party colours for a project that will serve everyone."

AIR TRAVEL / ITALY
Flight arrivals

Air Italy's growth is set to clip the wings of Alitalia but the battle is far from over.

WRITER *David Plattsant*

Qatar Airways' acquisition and rebrand of Olbia-based Meridiana into Air Italy sounds like more bad news for the flag carrier Alitalia. Earlier this year, the Gulf airline announced that eight new aircraft would join the Air Italy fleet in the coming months including five Qatar Airways Airbus A330s, bringing the airline total to 19. This is set to be part of an expansion to 50 aircraft by 2022. "We don't just put cash on the table and let the status quo continue," said Qatar CEO Akbar Al Baker at the ITB travel fair in Berlin in March, a clear reference to rival Etihad's actions – and failures – with Alitalia, the legacy carrier it owns a 49 per cent stake in.

It's clear that Qatar is making itself felt in Italy. Offering all classes of services from Milan Malpensa – Air Italy's choice hub – to destinations as varied as Catania and Cairo is proving smart considering the city is an increasingly thriving centre.

Does that mean it's curtains for Alitalia? Not necessarily. Despite being under special state administration, Alitalia has been making an effort to turn itself around: in January it was named the world's most punctual airline. Meanwhile, Air Italy has yet to launch international flights out of Rome. So while Air Italy's ascendancy will increase the turbulence Alitalia is facing, the airline hasn't been grounded yet: state lender cdp has said it's willing to sit down with potential investors.

With the right investor and a focus on its strengths – particularly in areas where Air Italy is lacking, such as branding and livery design – Alitalia could still soar.

TRANSPORT / ITALY
Rivers run deep

Italy's navigable waterways are making a return in a push against road pollution.

WRITER *Francesco Musolino*

For 18 years, it has been impossible to sail along the entire length of the Po River. A drop in its course caused by a split in the riverbed created an impasse that fractured all traffic between the Adriatic Sea and Piacenza. But now Italy's longest river, which runs through its northern plains for 652 kilometers, is finally navigable again from Cremona to Piacenza thanks to a new €47m lock, partially funded by

The navigation lock near Serafini fluvial island has been baptised the "Padana plain's Panama". It allows navigation in both directions, which will feed the tourist and economic activity of art cities such as Parma and Piacenza. "The opening of the route will also mean a reduction of road traffic with positive consequences for the environment," says Stefano Bonaccini, president of the Emilia Romagna region.

The lock is part of a larger push to reconnect the northern region's waterways. After decades of debate, Milan's mayor Giuseppe Sala has also begun to re-open the Navigli, a network of city canals that was filled in between the 1920s and 1960s. The first stage of recovery will be completed in 2022 and will create 2 kilometres of uninterrupted waterways circling the city centre. Sala has plans to eventually re-open the entire 7.7 kilometre city canal network: it is estimated the project would cost €500m. Ambitious as this is, it would be a step towards re-connecting a system of waterways which once spanned from the Maggiore Lake to the Venetian lagoon and could help with cleaner transportation of goods across the Padana plain.