Fashionable Quarters in the Postindustrial City: The Ticinese of Milan

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Fashion, fashionable goods and services, and the social actors that produce and consume them constitute a complex, organic circuit that is transforming the postindustrial city. This article analyzes Milan’s Ticinese neighborhood to reveal the processes that produce and sustain this type of “fashionable quarter.”

“Fashionable” has two meanings—(1) desirable and (2) pertaining to the fashion and design industries—and both apply to a “fashionable quarter.” Milan’s Ticinese quarter, which we have studied since 1996, is a laboratory for examining changes taking place throughout the whole city, and indeed in cities all over the world. Our purpose was to understand the ways in which the union of city and culture, shaped in Milan by the dominance of the fashion industry, indicates the future of the postindustrial metropolis.

“Culture is more and more the business of cities” (Zukin, 1995, p. 2). The city has always been a concentration of culture and cultures, but today the economic value of this immaterial resource is more evident than in the past. There are many reasons for this: material production is no longer fundamental to many cities; more people are able to appreciate and afford immaterial production; many consumer goods, produced in the city in very small quantities are design-intensive or otherwise culturally meaningful; and all this generates media and communications, which are mostly urban. Cities’ economic and cultural roles have become inseparable, not only because economy and culture have become overlapping areas, but also because the city, as cultural crossroads, gives greater opportunities for that “creolization” which increasingly seems the resource of the future (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Hannerz, 1996; Scott, 2000).

The following discussion of culture and the city uses a broad concept of contemporary culture that is not limited to but rather coloured by fashion. Such a conception defines culture as that which is topical, attractive, concrete, and marketable, though by definition the components are less durable than many anthropological theories of culture have assumed.

On the threshold of the third millennium, the places of Milan structured by this type of culture are neither the large peripheral shopping centers nor the pedestrian areas of the shops surrounding the Cathedral (the Duomo), nor the glamorous and by now stabilized “fashion quadrilateral” bounded by Via Montenapoleone and Via della Spiga, but the

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so-called cultural quarters (Montgomery, 2003) or “fashionable quarters” such as Garibaldi, Isola, or Ticinese. What we have called a “fashionable quarter” is an area undergoing deep transformation and consequently rich in many cultural components, where the circuit of fashionable goods is all simultaneously present: production, communication, consumption of non-durable design-intensive goods, and image related agencies and services.

In these neighborhoods, fashion triggers the regeneration of exindustrial areas, imprinting the local environment and enhancing its economic and expressive potential. The people working in these sectors not only run the local businesses, but also use them, constituting a complex system—from clothing shops to bars and restaurants, to book shops, ethnic and antique shops, to art galleries, photography and design studios—where everybody is producer and consumer at the same time. Gentrification affects both the local economy and the residential population, as the quarter loses its traditional working class features in favor of specialization in the consumption-production of culture (Butler, 1997; Palen and London, 1984). The appearance and uses of the existing buildings change, according to the aesthetic demands of new urban tastes. Such regeneration becomes something completely different from mere museum-like preservation of the cultural relics of the past. It becomes real cultural production, in which a continuously renewed culture—new fashion, new music, new food, new entertainment, new publishers, new artisans—gives life to the quarter.

Studying a quarter of Milan from this point of view means trying to capture its symbolic and economic strengths, its territorial and entrepreneurial resources, and its lifestyles. Despite Milan’s particular status as one of the global fashion capitals, the Ticinese quarter is emblematic of the postindustrial transformation of cities everywhere. In this article, I begin by clarifying some key words and concepts. Next, I will consider some of the characteristics of the postmodern city. With this conceptual and historical background, I next turn to a close examination of the Ticinese quarter of Milan. Finally, I consider the implications of the Ticinese “laboratory” for cities of the 21st century.

Our research was in partnership with an international research project within the European ADAPT 1997 program. The ICISS (Information for Cultural Industries Support Services) project investigated cultural business in European cities. Coordinated by the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture of the Manchester Metropolitan University, it has studied Manchester, Milan, Helsinki, Berlin, Dublin, Tilburg, and Barcelona. The research focused on quarters of these cities with a high density of cultural enterprises. The following pages are an account of the research work made by the Milanese team, first within a so-called background study carried out in 1996–1997 (Bovone, 1999), and later, within the Italian subproject of the previously mentioned European project (Bovone, Magatti, Mora, and Rovati, 2002).¹

First of all, I wish to explain how I will use certain terms: culture, cultural industries and enterprises, cultural production, cultural entrepreneurs and intermediaries, fashion.

Culture most generally refers to the symbolic ability distinguishing human beings from animals. Today, social science tends to attach greater importance to the explicit, actual, and dynamic aspects of culture than to the implicit, abstract ones. As Diana Crane puts it, “culture today is expressed and negotiated almost entirely...through recorded culture, culture that is recorded in either print, film, artifact, or...electronic media” (1994, p. 4). In order for social scientists to address it, culture should crystallize into empirically describable objects; ideas and images should be conveyed into words and into documents, which for a while fix their meaning in terms of a “cultural object” (Griswold, 1994).
Contemporary sociology and cultural studies suggest that what we think is less important than the way in which what we think is socialized, confirmed, or challenged (Hall, Hobson, Lowe, and Willis, 1980; Morley, 1992). The focus is on the cultural objects we manipulate, solid cores around which can intertwine our thoughts and talk. Culture is a building to which everyone has—to some, but not to the same extent—the tools for entering, not simply to dwell in, but also to remodel meanings in a virtually endless negotiation or opposition process (Hall, 1980). Such a “plural” vision of culture (De Certeau, 1974) questions hierarchies of taste. Culture is less something to be managed by the ruling class or by its acknowledged experts, and more a never conclusive elaboration of meanings, meanings which are moving, concealed, and many sided.

Similarly, sociology’s use of the term cultural industry has changed over the years. Coined in the 1940s by members of the Frankfurt School, the culture industry indicated the apparatus that, thanks to mass communications, was able to produce, by assembly line processes, a virtually inexhaustible, stereotypical set of words, images, and sounds (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947). It was a machine aimed at benumbing consciousness and exploiting a passive mass of workers in their free time through entertainment, making them consume standardized and noncritical cultural products sold by an inferior aesthetic appeal.

Today, though the mechanisms of mass culture production have become increasingly powerful, they coexist with smaller communication enterprises. Large networks may be linked to smaller ones and, sometimes, sudden changes in power and size may occur. Standardized entertainment is not the only kind available, and it is inextricably intertwining with less standardized elements. Not only have movies and comics become art products, but even advertising may be considered as art. High and low culture no longer occupy independent circuits (Featherstone, 1991).

Thus the term cultural industry includes, first of all, a great variety of media and art productions that cannot be hierarchically located. Moreover, this term is often used to indicate a production of use goods—that is, to be materially used—which today is much more differentiated than in the past. In fact, culture lends the useful objects of everyday life—food, furnishings, clothes, and tools—a particular and socially recognized shape. The more these objects differentiate, the less the goods can be explained through their material use; for example, we use clothes to cover our bodies, but this does not begin to justify the enormous variety of clothing produced. This variety and our choices can be instead explained by the immaterial elements these objects have incorporated, by their cultural components, by their meanings.

Mass production and consumption society works because goods are continuously redesigned in more interesting and attractive ways, in forms that are associated with other forms, recalling something else (“pure signs”, according to Baudrillard (1972)), or better, someone else, social groups we wish to approach or from which we want to depart (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). This is a typical feature of the fashion industry, whose products have a value (or an added value in comparison with similar goods) on the market, not because of technology or quality, but because they succeed in selling both an experience and the opportunity to signal to others this intangible possession. Just because the hierarchy of signs is not always evident and the uncertain postmodern subject is in search of anchorages, the things we want to sell/buy are not only and always a status, or “distinction” (as Bourdieu maintained (1979)) symbol, but, more in general, an identity element providing one of the possible self-identifications or images of oneself a postmodern individual collects (Bovone, 2003).
Given this expanded understanding of culture and culture industries, *cultural production* becomes an exceedingly broad concept. For example, Crane (1992) identifies three major types of “recorded” cultural production: central (the classic cultural industry of communication and entertainment organized on a large scale by networks of national relevance), peripheral (that formed by independent circuits for different publics), and urban (the artistic or artisan production requiring well-equipped spaces or a specialized public that can only be found in cities). Yet even she neglects material culture in the strict sense of the word, the more or less massive production of the numerous artifacts we use in our everyday life (Dant, 1999).

In short, we call cultural industries the sectors producing goods and services having a market value mostly because of the symbolic and aesthetic elements they include. They include not only the traditional cultural industry of communication and entertainment to which the Frankfurt School referred, but also the typical *made in Italy* products and services: food, fashion, tourism, design.

One of the essential elements for understanding the dynamics of symbolic production and its role in the future of metropolitan areas is the consciousness of the social actors who earn their livings through producing and selling cultural resources. *Cultural entrepreneurs*, through the products they offer, establish links between their own experience/identity and the consumers’ experience/identity. Therefore, they are cultural intermediaries.

Almost at the end of his famous work *La distinction*, Bourdieu writes that “new cultural intermediaries” are members of a new lower middle class acting as a “drive belt” of the typical good taste of the upper classes; they are “intellectuals . . . in charge of soft manipulation activities . . . in the big bureaucracies of cultural production, radios, televisions, poll/inquiry institutes, study offices, big newspapers and weekly magazines . . .” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 422). We have opted for a wider application of this term, extending it both to other cultural production fields, such as art, fashion and tourism, and to some professions (such as architects and journalists) and managerial-entrepreneurial functions (Bovone, 1994). These new cultural intermediaries are not necessarily Bourdieu’s “intermediaries of the ruling class taste,” but are “more in general, transmitters of culture, who work on the transformation of meanings for a larger public” (Bovone, 1994:25). We often talk about cultural enterprises instead of cultural industry, referring to small-scale production and to a small-size entrepreneurial subject consisting of individual or family-run businesses; these enterprises mostly produce services instead of manufactured products.

Within the Milanese context, the case of fashion production is especially significant. As stated previously, *fashion* can refer either to a variety of more or less “fashionable” objects, or to a particular category of objects, namely clothing (Braham, 1997). More and more goods (manufactured goods, but also services and places) are subject to fashion’s mutability, available in a variety of versions whose value is enhanced for a certain period (usually very short) by their recognized meaning within a particular social environment. In this sense, fashion is an aspect of contemporary cultural production, underlining its pressing pace and the instability of its codes.

This clearly applies to clothing fashion, particularly to women’s clothing, in which items are available in a practically endless range of options and colors, whose meaning is extremely changeable. Like in any other kind of symbolic production, it is difficult to say who establishes what is fashionable. Classic theories (Simmel, 1911; Veblen, 1953) would talk about codified behaviors of the upper classes quickly imitated by the lower classes; even Bourdieu (1979, p. 100) uses the concept of *habitus* to indicate a form of
“embodied cultural capital,” a set of widely recognized and therefore relatively stable tastes. Obviously, today the cultural communication circuit is more complex, as fashion designers, entrepreneurs, and professionals involved in the different production stages, communication operators and consumers must concur in temporary, never definitive meanings (Crane, 2000; Ruggerone, 2001; Volonté, 2003).

This fundamental and necessary instability of meaning leads to a reconsideration of the expression **cultural production**. The subjects of cultural production are not only those who make their economic activity coincide with it, those who earn their life producing and reproducing cultural objects, but also consumers themselves, those who are called by Michel de Certeau (1990, p. XLV) “underestimated producers,” those who unpredictably react to market offerings, thus accepting or reshaping meanings put forth by either the dominant or marginal producers. In the conclusion, I will try to assess to what extent it may be useful to rigidly separate these two kinds of cultural production, particularly in the case of the small cultural entrepreneurs we have studied.

**RESOURCES OF POSTMODERN CITIES**

In the postfordist age, cities are no longer centers of manufacturing production, which has mostly moved to southern areas of the world, but instead are centers of finance, communications, and services. Concentric waves spread out from such centers, where “space-time compression” becomes more visible (Harvey, 1989). Globalized communication allows the instant or rapid transfer of information, news, persons, and products. And the new urban businesses favor fashion and speed over quality and durability.

**PLACES**

In the postmodern city, old industrial areas are recycled into shopping centers or fashionable quarters; the (modern) production areas become (postmodern) consumption areas (O’Connor and Wynne, 1998). In a city like Milan, where industrial production took off much later than in Manchester, Glasgow, or New York and remained until recent times, we can still find some premodern production areas (farmsteads, artisan shops, etc.) that can be rehabilitated for consumption purposes.

Despite some predictions, IT conversion in economic transactions has not yet challenged the city’s economic dominance. On the contrary, decentralized interactive networks are not opposed to a growing urban settlement concentration, because the city is the par excellence place of exchanges, information, and power, and those who rule these processes still live there and attract a multilevel subordinate labor force. The physical meeting places are complementary to the electronic flows, and reciprocally increasing their value (Castells, 2001; Sassen, 2000).

**PEOPLE**

The labor market of the city is characterized by the development of fashion-oriented sectors—from clothing items to personal services, diffusion and trade of convenience goods—on the one hand, and to the development of particular service sectors for enterprises—such as any form of communication, financing, consulting—on the other.
These are all unstable sectors, which tend to irregularly employ the workers with part time or precarious jobs; they appeal to flexible yuppies and, in the case of low-level jobs, to immigrants (Sassen, 1994: chap. 6).

After the decline of the traditional city, where inhabitants used to work within the city walls, and the “first-generation metropolis,” which used to attract throngs of commuters, today the situation has become much more complex (Martinotti, 1993). The “second-generation metropolis,” while losing its resident population, is increasingly crowded by “metropolitan consumers,” nonresident “city users,” who take from the city what they need—goods, spaces, entertainment, or culture—without being rooted in it. Not only does living in a particular administrative area (either in an urban municipality or in one of its outskirts) no longer coincide with working in it, but also those who use to work there, in most cases work there for a few hours or for a few days, thus consuming the city as much as those who come to the city from elsewhere for shopping or entertainment purposes.

Through its resources of places and people, the postmodern city provides a large inventory of economic and social roles, easy access to other people which continuously provides new opportunities for changes, and an endless display of goods, an “emporium of styles” (Hannerz, 1980, chap. 3; Raban, 1974). Indefiniteness, fragmentation, cultural “bricolage,” experimentation, pursuit of aesthetic pleasure: these, more than a precise architectural style, define, even in Italy, the postmodern city (Amendola, 1997; Mazzette, 2003; Strassoldo, 1998). This scarcely rational city defies any synthetic portrayal; it is more useful to split it into blocks, quarters, and villages, making a note of its old traditions and new vocations, and most of all of their postmodern blending into new “reenchantment” forms (Maffesoli, 1990).

To some observers, contemporary consumption suggests the institutionalization of a new religion, which promises rituals in “cathedrals of consumption” (shopping centers, entertainment towns, protected residential quarters) and at the same time demands standardized, hyperrational behaviors (Ritzer, 1999). Our analysis of the Ticinese quarter suggests a somewhat different picture. We find that the resources of people and places create enterprises that form a noncentralized, flexible production and consumption organization that is not inclined to the extreme rationalization required for running large structures. Our hypothesis, which is particularly referred to the Ticinese quarter, but might be extended to the whole city of Milan, is that urban life is not necessarily undergoing an increasingly large “deterritorialization” process or alienation from a precise urban context to which one belongs (Garcia Canclini, 1990). Instead, in some social categories and in some quarters, we find new recontextualization mechanisms, which fit people and place to globalization trends.

**WORKING AND LIVING IN A FASHIONABLE QUARTER**

The Ticinese quarter exemplifies the new urban cultural trends, revealing that, in Milan as in any other European, and particularly Italian, city, there is always something ancient in the newest formation. We have tried to offer an “objective” description of this neighborhood. Our methods include: (1) the examination of maps, historical documents, photographs, and available city data; (2) the direct observation of some of the most significant places; and (3) the collection of accounts from those who are the protagonists of this quarter, those who have settled there for generations and those who have started
the cultural enterprises that comprise what we are calling a fashionable quarter. The city is the way in which it is told and these different accounts should be accepted as different readings of the city, from which we can draw our version.

THE TICINESE LANDSCAPE

The Ticinese seems the only quarter of Milan that can be considered picturesque, because of its canals (Navigli), which reflect the sky and which are both beautiful and now functionally useless. The Navigli, navigable canals which began to be dug around the year 1100, surrounded the entire city center until the 1930s, when they were almost totally covered by a ring road. Since the quarter was for a long time regarded as peripheral, city traffic requirements did not remove these by now obsolete waterways, so they remained unchanged until they became another kind of resource, an aesthetical resource. The Ticinese utilized the Navigli for transporting goods until the late 1950s, and up to then the quarter was, like a sea port, crossed by travelers; many bars and restaurants of today are the heirs of the ancient inns for those travelers. Today, when economic value is attributed to aesthetic resources, this quarter beckons persons and jobs through its picturesque image, typical of the new postmodern city (see Fig. 1).

What people say about the Navigli might also refer to the buildings of this neighborhood: the decay of some houses turns into a positive element for those who wish to live, work, stroll in the picturesque, find an authentic aura that is lost in other neighborhoods. Neglect and abandonment, though allowing property speculation, in some cases delayed redevelopment until recent times, when it could be carried out with more historically sensitive criteria or in a more controlled way. On the other hand, the aesthetic regeneration of buildings and the simultaneous subdivision of properties have implied extra costs for the social segments that have not been able to recycle themselves, leading in some cases
to the expulsion of the historical inhabitants and workers, who were, in fact, the keepers of that picturesque.

In addition to the Navigli, the quarter has some other unique features: important monuments linked to the history of Milan, particularly churches and the most impressive Roman ruins left in the Milanese territory. But the distinctiveness of the Ticinese mostly depends, in the opinion of its current inhabitants, on its peculiar social life, on a still recent past in which the simplicity of lifestyle, the organization of artisan work, and even the structure of houses and courtyards helped establish immediate and steady social relations.

If Milan, in general, has always been a crossroad of populations in motion (Foot, 2001), this characterizes the Ticinese quarter particularly well. Its geographical position in the immediate neighborhood of the historical center of the city has involved it in the modern mobility flows between city and countryside (by waterways, but also by road and train, thanks to the adjacent Porta Genova railway station). This flow has contributed to the persistence of handicraft enterprises, as well as to population mixtures and very high crime rates. The quarter’s popular character throughout the centuries is also confirmed by the absence of aristocratic or middle class housing. The large industrial complexes based in the neighboring areas (Ansaldo, Richard Ginori) have in turn encouraged, in the late 19th–early 20th centuries, a flourishing of the typical Milanese tenements, the so-called “banister houses” where postwar immigrants from Southern Italy found accommodation. In the 1960s, the quarter saw the building of new middle/high class houses, which completely altered several blocks; where this did not occur, in the 1970s (the years of political protests and movements) the original population of artisans and workers mixed up with old students or, in general, with extra parliamentary-left militants, who moved to this quarter to occupy, sometimes illegally, abandoned and depreciated areas. The 1980s were the years of wild renovation, of private property speculation often covered by political protections. In the 1990s the area came to be regarded in terms of historical preservation, seen as respectful building regeneration aimed at recovering the spirit of the past; the first projects conceived in the preservationist spirit were planned and started by the municipality.

Today, the Ticinese displays several types of renovation: modifying old craftsman shops into new artisan productions; recycling industrial sheds into lofts; demolishing entire blocks for a renewal process that completely overlooks the ancient features of the neighborhood. Aesthetic considerations much influence this regeneration, even the most functional ones: from the famous and photographed “Vicolo dei lavandai” (Washermen Alley), to the old fountains located in courtyards and landings, the heirs of the common latrines of the past; from barges transformed into restaurants, to the tangle of courtyards, where in the past cheese was made and which today have become desirable working places, photographic studios, ceramics or goldsmith workshops, and boutiques (see Figs. 2–3).

THE DIFFERENT CULTURES OF A CREATIVE QUARTER

This disjointed urban regeneration—mostly due to private interventions and consequently, to the real estate market—has led to the survival of the quarter’s different cultural segments.

Several different populations, which have come sequentially, have succeeded in carving out niches for themselves. The postwar working class emigration, pushed by unemployment in nonindustrialized regions of Italy, was followed by some extreme-left
fringe groups during the 1970s. The subsequent migration waves consist of “lovers of the beautiful things” with increasingly sophisticated requirements. First, intellectuals-artists—“bohemians,” looking for the inexpensive spaces and the proletarian context of a semi-peripheral neighborhood, created an intellectually politically engaged avant-garde atmosphere in the Ticinese. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, this partially regenerated and semicentral quarter began to attract well-to-do population segments, usually professionals of the beautiful (antiquaries, architects, artists-artisans, designers, advertising operators, photographers, musicians, and record company operators, etc.) or managers of associated
services, from entertainment to fitness and fashion shopping. Architects in particular based their studios and homes in those regenerated areas.

The flows of both nonresidents and residents into the Ticinese quarter have at the same time merged into and disturbed its past character, shaped by mainly local artisan production and small business. The quarter provides many nonresidents with employment. It has
also become a leisure time space for many hard-working Milanese. Like the historical city center, the Ticinese attracts consumers of fashionable objects, and, much more than the city center, the consumers of nightlife.

On the other hand, the resident population has a definite “mixed” character: in comparison with the Milanese average, there are many young professionals with a university degree along with old people with a low education level concentrated within particular subareas. In general, single-person families, both young and old, are overrepresented, while areas and structures for children are totally lacking.

Politically, it is notable that the different migration waves of the past 25 years have not significantly changed the Ticinese quarter tendency to support left-wing parties more than the rest of the city, as if the workers’ vote of the past had been gradually replaced by the countercultural vote of youth and, lately, by the liberal-radical vote (well expressed by the green-ecologist choice) of the young professionals and intellectuals-artists, or by the protest vote of those who participate in marginal or illegal activities. One might think that the quarter’s political character trend is related to its anarchic-creative spirit that makes very different lifestyles compatible or even desirable.

“MADE IN ITALY” AND THE QUARTER

A cultural quarter lives, by definition, in the center of a virtuous circle: it produces cultural goods and services and at the same time creates a good environment for their consumption, both because most of this production—such as craftsmanship, entertainment, retail trade—has a market in the wider urban area and because the quarter’s cultural producers and entrepreneurs themselves consume what their neighbors produce.
THE SYNERGIES OF A FASHIONABLE QUARTER

If a quarter is interesting—and in Europe, it is always a historical/environmental interest, connected to landscape, or art, and to previous settlements and businesses—it draws external consumers, becoming the “urban glamour zone” and a multicultural meeting point (Sassen, 2000, p. 153). The consumption of cultural goods attracts various types: vacationers, cosmopolitan global business people, suburban youth who flow to the city on week-end nights. This affluent migratory flow is intertwined with the poorer migration—visible only in some places and in some hours—of cleaners and others who carry out indispensable jobs that support the luxury services. Furthermore, the lawful use of the quarter intertwines with unlawful uses—the drug trade, for example, or hooliganism—encouraged by luxury and wealth and by people seeking thrills (Rojek, 1999). The quarter’s change and hybridization tends to be incomplete and full of contradictions and conflicts. The occasional use of the area clashes with the permanent one, for example: a quarter’s residents and small entrepreneurs wish to live in a safe, clean, and peaceful neighborhood, and their wishes may clash with those of outsiders, who come looking for excitement at night.

The synergies that can be created in a fashionable district are many. Hannigan has suggested a trilogy of compound nouns that link the term “entertainment” with different types of activities, from “to eat” (eatertainment), to “shopping” (shopertainment), to the cultural “businesses” in the more traditional sense of the term (edutainment) (1998, p. 81). He applies these nouns in the context of the artificial city built out of nowhere, a “fantasy community” such as a theme park or a new residential suburban neighborhood. Some theorists have emphasized how such artificial communities tend to be standardized and uncritical (the so-called “McDonaldization” effect, according to Ritzer, 1999). In Italian cities and in their creative neighborhoods, however, a wider range of outcomes seems to take place, frequently spontaneous or even anarchical, but also much more rooted in local tradition (Lazzeretti, 2003).

For example, while food is everywhere an important aspect of entertainment, the Italian imaginary ties it to the local history. Authentically local food is what cultural tourists expect to find, but so do business people and youth. In a cosmopolite situation as that of Ticinese, this does not only mean the Lombard gastronomic tradition, but also Italian regional cookery, a heritage of the different migration waves, as well as global ethnic food. Some surveys carried out in England and North America suggest that going out often for dinner and talking about the food is strictly related to one’s social-economic and educational level (Warde, Martens, and Olsen, 1999). In Italy, although such surveys are lacking, observations suggest that food competence and awareness are more widely spread.

A POSTINDUSTRIAL DISTRICT

Generally speaking, pursuit of authenticity and nonstandardization is a way to justify production and consumption choices, anchoring them to a good taste. Taste is no longer decreed by the upper class, although they may have more options, nor by cultural authorities (Meyer, 2000). We can, however, identify people who specialize in making choices of taste. These “new cultural intermediaries” have access to several codes and can transform meanings by moving them from one context to another and adapting them to a diverse
public (Bovone, 1994). They manipulate meanings in order to resell them, but they also manipulate them as expert consumers of fashionable lifestyles, using themselves as shop windows to sell lifestyle products and services (cf. Bourdieu, 1979, p. 422).

Such cultural intermediaries have transformed the meaning of the Ticinese quarter by legitimizing its use for the middle class; they have chosen it for themselves and have remolded it according to their own lifestyle. They are “reflexive consumers” of what a neighborhood has to offer, its “critical infrastructure,” unusually aware of their role as meaning-makers (Zukin, 1993, p. 215).

The Italian case, however, presents its own peculiarities, which are connected with the country’s history and traditional lifestyle. The various forms of entertainment we have mentioned both correspond to the cultural productions of Milan’s creative quarters and are constituents of the appellation “made in Italy,” which underlies the Italian economy. Made in Italy “consists of products and services in which Italy boasts a high specialization level and through which our country has gained worldwide renown. […] we are talking about the ‘fashion system’, but also about the typical food products, products for the house and furnishing products, such as furniture, lamps, household objects, appliances, […] and obviously, about tourism” (Fortis, 1998, p. 8).

Traditional sectors, traditionally bound to the small/medium-size enterprise structure, are what make Italy a protagonist of the global economy. Typical sectors of the postindustrial city—entertainment, tourism, fashion, design, food, art, and artisanship—have their foundations in Italy’s cultural and social heritage/capital. These sectors are rooted in the lifestyle, in the capacity to produce what Italians (and others) love to consume. Traditionally and at the present, Italy seems to have an affinity for producing symbolic or “design-intensive” goods (Lash and Urry, 1994), either for mass consumption, or—and this is what makes small enterprises so suitable—for small market niches, and a special skill for developing services in which functionality goes along with aesthetical values. If fashion is the protagonist of the postmodern economic miracle, design, in which Milan similarly excels, has been the strongpoint of the postwar industrial boom (Foot, 2001).

The most typical example of territorial rooting of the made in Italy was already evident in the industrial districts: the specialized, flexible production of small and medium firms dating from the 1960s and 1970s, and located in Emilia, Veneto, Tuscany, and Marche that allowed Italy to surmount the crisis of heavy industry in the north-west (Becattini, 2000). The Italian metropolis of the new millennium, namely Milan, represents a fundamental network node that, from the 1980s, links small local productions to big delocalized enterprises, and the local to the global market.

The cultural quarter may be considered to be the postindustrial district of the new millennium: characterized not by production of goods, but by production of meanings; material goods are produced elsewhere and locally “only” projected or fitted with new meanings, eventually produced as prototypes. The cultural quarter production is, therefore, a type of production to a great extent immediately and locally consumed, being above all symbolic and comparable to the production of services. Contrary to what used to occur in the industrial district, synergy comes not from many similar productions, which add up to a local capacity rooted in the tradition of a special geographic zone, but from many different kinds of productions, from a newer, highly diversified category of producers/consumers with some internal affinities—the new cultural entrepreneurs.
THE CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURS OF THE TICINESE QUARTER IN MILAN: ASSESSMENT OF AN IDEAL TYPE

From 1996 our field of research has been the Ticinese quarter. In the second part of this article, I focus on the European subproject specifically devoted to the cultural entrepreneurs of this fashionable quarter.

WHO MAKES FASHION?

We can say that a quarter is fashionable if the social categories that make the city fashion live in it, patronize it, or define it. The culture and fashion professions include: those who deal with image and manage the fashion and entertainment imaginary and the city image; those who are transforming an industrial city like Milan into a city living on cultural enterprises; the operators, managers, and politicians who run these cultural enterprises. Surveys carried out in the last decade in Milan allow us to look at the role these categories of citizens have played in the manipulation process of urban imaginary. One thing we have seen is the cultural entrepreneurs’ and professionals’ extraordinary awareness of their context and of their ability to shape meanings, a reflexivity which is much more intense for this group than for the free-floating juvenile tribes that often occupy the same urban space (Bovone, 1994; Bovone and Mora, 1997).

The ideal type of cultural entrepreneur is a complex role. Going far beyond the “tolerance” Florida (2002) recently attributed to the new urban creative classes, cultural entrepreneurs establish social and cultural links. They are “cultural intermediaries.” To understand their key function for the economic and cultural life of the postmodern city, we must understand how they work, which are the pieces of culture they bring together, how they communicate with those who work with them or who are ahead of or behind them in the production chain, why and how they invest on their ideas, and the relation between their lifestyle-consumption and their enterprise-production.

In addition, the typical cultural entrepreneur is a “social mediator,” that is, “the innovative agent who, by creating connection channels (or bridges) to link different social networks, encourages the change . . . controlling exchanges between a local reality and an external (city, market, country) one” (Mutti, 1998, p. 69, after Boissevain, 1974). The ability to play such a role depends on trust. Trust can be seen as a basic resource, a nonrational motivation that allows creating and maintaining social flows, and through them cultural flows (Fukuyama, 1995; Gambetta, 1988). The question then is: How does the cultural entrepreneur produce such trust? Does it rest exclusively on traditional/local/family bases or can it be generated in more innovative ways?

As I have already said, one of the characteristics that emerged in our earlier work on cultural intermediaries was their reflexivity, their habit of rationalizing their experiences, of considering and indeed confronting themselves. In the present survey of cultural entrepreneurs of the Ticinese, we have tried to understand whether their reflexivity/ awareness is based on a sense of the place, that is, whether the perception of the existing connection between the economic value and cultural authenticity of their work is based on sensing the quarter as a place provided with a peculiar and distinctive atmosphere. As it is often pointed out, a diffused feeling of community belonging is determinant for a good
performance of the economical organizations of regional industrial districts (Bagnasco, 1999; Becattini, 2000). But the same is proved by other recent studies considering, as we did, city neighborhoods as postindustrial districts (Lazzeretti, 2003; Zukin and Kosta, 2004). We further asked, then, to what extent a relation network actually develops, a network based on trust, that ensures a social and cultural enterprise rooted in a place even as it leaps into the global market.

In sum, the cultural intermediary is something more than a mere successful entrepreneur who by chance has invested at the right moment in a winning idea. Those cultural entrepreneurs who correspond to our ideal type are also aware of the cultural and relational elements of their businesses; they are aware of their resources and consciously invest them.

A MULTI-METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To answer these questions, we have first tried to specify the size of this expanded concept of the culture industry, using the official register of the companies based in Milan made available by the Chamber of Commerce. We have chosen to examine five major lines of activity: the classical cultural industry (communication and entertainment) and the four typical “made in Italy” sectors of fashion, food, tourism, and furniture. Except for tourism, we have considered all three stages: manufacturing, trade, and services. Through these available data (referred to 1992 and 1998) we succeeded in getting an idea of the development of cultural enterprises throughout the 1990s both in the city, and, though in a less precise way, in the quarter.

In the second stage we considered a sample of 508 entrepreneurs, proportionally stratified according to the size of the different lines of activity and located in the central part of the quarter. In that subarea we have interviewed one quarter of the entrepreneurs in possession of the requested professional and cultural characteristics.

Finally, the third stage of the study consisted of 70 in-depth interviews, which allowed us better to understand what makes our enterprises, or better the entrepreneurs we have interviewed, “cultural.” These interviews produced “life stories,” accounts made by entrepreneurs on the relations they have been able to establish over the years with their products or services, with the customers to whom they want to sell them, and with the quarter in which they operate (Bertaux, 1998). These accounts were collected through nondirective motivational interviews in order to let these entrepreneurs describe themselves as freely as possible.

A FASHIONABLE QUARTER IS MORE THAN FASHION

Out of about 130,000 enterprises registered by the Municipality of Milan in 1998, about one-third (a little less than 50,000) may be included within the area of what we have called “cultural enterprises”; among them the prevailing line of activity is communication/entertainment, that is, the classic cultural industry, which is represented by 30 percent of the operating enterprises, followed by fashion and food.

About one fourth of the Milanese cultural enterprises are operating in the Ticinese quarter (if we consider the long segment that from the city center reaches the municipality limits). It is worth remarking that fashion plays an even more important role in the Ticinese
quarter than it does in the rest of Milan, but it is not the only “cultural” strongpoint in either the neighborhood or the city. Compared to other European cities, Milan has more successfully faced deindustrialization because the variety of its economic activities as well as the significant presence of cultural enterprises is not only in the prosperous and innovative service sector, but also in the manufacturing/industrial sector, and the more traditional retail trade sector. In the Ticinese, these linked cultural enterprises have thrived, confirming the typical *entertainment-eatertainment-shopertainment* offerings of a cultural quarter and its production/consumption virtuous circle.

The data collected by the survey reveal a few patterns emerging from a heterogeneity of situations. First, these enterprises are the typical *made in Italy* size: most of them are small and very small businesses, individual or family run, employing an average of 5 persons and in 40 percent of cases no more than 2 persons, including the owner. In 50 percent of cases, contacted entrepreneurs have been helped by a previous entrepreneurial culture, being children or grandchildren of entrepreneurs, mainly in different sectors. On the other hand, more than one half of these entrepreneurs have in staff one or more (20 percent) family members. Such an interesting mix of innovation and family traditions is typical of the Italian pattern.

Second, they are relatively new enterprises. A fashionable quarter is able to improve traditional elements, a core preserving its successful environment and image, around which “younger” proposals frenetically rotate. Only 10 percent of the enterprises based in the quarter are more than 50 years old, whereas twice as many are less than 4 years old. Many of the entrepreneurs are young as well. The interviewees are in average 45 years old, but this figure conceals their very balanced distribution in different age segments, including a significant 12 percent to 13 percent share in both the younger (<30) and the older (>60) age segments.

As evidence of the extreme flexibility of the workers and the fluidity of the system, we found that 38 percent of the contacted entrepreneurs have run another business before the current one. The female interviewees (one third of the total) changed more often and totalled a higher number of work experiences in other sectors. Women had other distinctive characteristics: they were more educated, knew more foreign languages, were more numerous than men in the youngest age segments, and were more likely to be the founders of their business (61 percent of women versus 55 percent of men). It appears clear that cultural enterprises are and will be especially suitable for the feminine workforce. As Castells (2000) forecasts, since women are accustomed to cope with different roles, are accustomed to manage nonhierarchical or informal relations, and are responsible for sectors such as education, art, and image management, they seem to fit well into the new social-economical structure characterized by networks and by the central position of culture.

The survey sheds light on the relationship between the interviewees and the quarter. Forty percent of the businesses contacted have been operating in this neighborhood six years or less, and many involved relocation, suggesting both an attempt to find new roots and the recent emergence of Ticinese as a cultural quarter. How deeply rooted these entrepreneurs have become is indicated by the fact that more than half live near the workplace, 7 percent in the same building following the old artisan tradition. On the other hand, the field of action of the enterprise is not always restricted (as in the typical case of restaurants and bars), because one quarter of respondents have clients especially in Central-Southern Italy or abroad.
As shown by the interviews, the Ticinese cultural entrepreneurs seem to have the capacity to link different worlds of meaning, to create bridges, using cultural objects to link a multitude of subjects: relatives, partners, suppliers, assistants on the side of production; clients, friends, neighbors, and other relatives on the side of consumption. Obviously, not all the contacted entrepreneurs have the same capacity of manipulating significant objects and the same awareness. Trying to identify different entrepreneur and intermediary types, a first distinction can be made between those who, having totally invested in their own business, behave as if they sold or gave customers a part of themselves, and those who work with meanings for particular market requirements (Mora, 2002).

The first type of entrepreneur is the pure creator, the one who invents products (ecological plastic handbags) or services (a passionate traveler who opens a travel agency), or who collects (an antiquary, an ethnic product dealer). This type of entrepreneur is both highly reflexive and an expert in individualizing chains of taste (“the customer who likes what I choose comes to my store”), but usually neglects the economic side of his/her work. The second type capitalizes on the interplay between economic and aesthetical-cultural motivations. While the economic motivation drives the enterprise, the market encourages the entrepreneur to exploit the opportunities offered by heterogeneous choices rather than trends dictated by mass cultural enterprises, that is, to emphasize the original features that only the smaller enterprises are able to shape. If the former are “identity entrepreneurs” because, by completely identifying themselves in their products, they try to transfer/sell to customers elements of their own identities, the latter, who are particularly conscious of being links between elite and mass culture, are what we call “entrepreneur-articulators” (in the sense Du Gay et al., 1997, give to the verb to articulate).

Relevant cultural and identity elements can vary depending on the age of the enterprise or the gender of the entrepreneur. Family tradition, for example, is a peculiar heritage that can be understood through Bourdieu’s theory of the new cultural intermediaries and his several forms of “capital” (Bourdieu, 1987). The cultural intermediaries we have examined usually possess all types of capital: not only the more obvious “economic capital” and “institutionalized cultural capital” (more than one half of our sample holds a high school diploma, and the percentage is higher for those under forty), but also “symbolic capital” (a capacity to understand and manipulate meanings), as well as the “social capital” (relations based on trust). If they come from an entrepreneurial family, these subjects have also inherited an “embodied cultural capital,” specifically a capacity for taking risks (Bourdieu, 1979, chap. 2). The heirs of old, established enterprises seem more aware of this heritage, so they want to innovate without giving up tradition. Older entrepreneurs heading these established enterprises are inclined to make the history of the enterprise coincide with their personal history, emphasizing not only their personal taste, but also their ability to satisfy their markets. Identity entrepreneurs are more likely to be those who run newer enterprises. Women in particular give importance to the expressive, relational, and content elements of their business, whereas they report a tendency to neglect the economic or technical elements.

Another identity element that both male and female entrepreneurs often stressed is their relation to the Ticinese quarter itself. Those who have recently chosen it, have done so because they considered the quarter to be the most suitable place to start or continue their business. Those who have been there a long time have seen it evolve throughout the years just as their own line of business evolved. In comparison with the big fashion, communication, or furnishing circuits, the small cultural enterprise devoted to
peripheral production acts as a local resonance box of global trends, which it interprets for discriminating publics. They perceive the Ticinese quarter as offering relational support for those who want to live in the city without remaining anonymous, specifically for those who want to produce nonstandardized goods and services for clients with whom they can personally be in touch. Such an urban quarter runs counter to Simmel’s division (1957) between the economic relations of the metropolis, characterized by production for an anonymous market, and the previous forms of production aimed at satisfying well-known customers. In a fashionable quarter, the local public is not only a test for the global public to which exports are addressed, but it already includes a part of it: those city users mentioned previously—tourists, travelling businessmen, young people from Milan’s hinterlands.

The quarter ensures a friendly environment. The business staff is usually made up of relatives or friends who share a common interest to develop a project, of colleagues with whom free time is spent. Clients become friends; friends and neighbors become clients. For those who provide a service, the most effective way to find new clients is by word of mouth; for retailers, the shop window establishes a direct relation with the street. Trust in the others and awareness of one’s many resources seems to generate, in our interviewees, the confidence to take risks. They are also aware that the reduced size of their enterprise is also an asset, for small scale allows an entrepreneur to dedicate more time to products and also personally to monitor the communication circuit within which an identity product is received by either local or global consumers.

METROPOLITAN FASHIONS: PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION CIRCULARITY

The consuming city, the postmodern successor to the modern productive city, still appears very productive. Our research shows that in some cases there exists a conscious and declared alliance between those who produce and those who consume, a cultural alliance that outweighs any conflict of interests. As a rule, the consumption of standardized goods imported in postmodern cities from distant productive regions, communicated by the mass-media giants, and sold in large shopping malls, seems to position the consumer-citizen on the opposite side of the product, against the producer and the seller; indeed, the consumer has to defend him/herself from them (e.g., from the blandishments of advertising or from defective and dangerous products). In the Ticinese quarter, however, we saw signs of a different possibility. A cultural quarter like this is something of a laboratory where the businesses and behavior of the future city are experimented with. Cross-fertilization of different modes of cultural production makes the quarter “a site of the facto research and development” (Lloyd, 2004, p. 348) and where classical, sociological oppositions—such as production and consumption, work and leisure, center and periphery—are overcome in a postmodern way; it is a laboratory in which traces of a past community are preserved, recycled in contemporary life-styles, that is, in contemporary production and consumption.

What occurs in cultural quarters such as the Ticinese is a mix, a circular movement related to the “creolization” described by Hannerz (1996). There are “natives,” autochthonous subjects, and immigrants of different origins who have settled there in different decades. Cultural entrepreneurs do not exclusively belong to any of those categories. They may be old recycled artisans who have lived for decades in the territory, or brilliant aesthetes of the last generation, but they are neither protagonists of mass production
nor “peripheral cultural entrepreneurs,” Hannerz’s term for those who earn their life interpreting the tastes of the poor suburbs of third world cities. However, they have something in common with those peripheral entrepreneurs: they are rooted in the territory, know their clients well, and—a typical contemporary feature—“creolize” different cultural components to meet their taste. The most outstanding postmodern peculiarity of a fashionable quarter consists, in fact, in its deliberate lack of homogeneity, in the declared adhesion of its protagonists to a family-like, village-like atmosphere a short way away from the city center, to a structure that seems casually built up through different and sometimes clashing contributions.

If being fashionable also means foreseeing, before others, new trends, a fashionable quarter is a quarter where urban lifestyles and urban production—which will be predictably imitated—are initiated before elsewhere, where the role that culture could have in a future city is subject to experimentation. But the neighborhood we were involved in is not *avant-garde* because it has forgotten its past. It rather tries to combine the past tradition which is present in its buildings, in its residents, and in its working patterns, with new demands and new businesses of those who have recently arrived seeing their future in that place.

“Traces of community” survive (Bagnasco, 1999). We encountered them in the small cultural entrepreneurs of the Ticinese, in the importance of family and friendly relationships in their businesses, and in their rooting in the territory.

Perhaps, the most interesting element of the quarter is the climate of trust, in which the family business plays a central role. In fact, what is typical of the Italian model of development is a particular kind of trust, a familial type. And it is actually the small enterprises—especially the family-run businesses—which are the protagonist of the various Italian economic miracles. However, the organizational model of family business has been the object of many controversial judgments and today it may seem particularly in contrast with the logics of the network society.

The network is, according to Castells (1996), actually a framework of self-organized independent individuals, by definition nonhierarchical, very flexible, and dynamic, because it is untied to tradition and territory. But, as Italian particularism and familism are long since considered resources, starting points for a rationally planned economic development, trust might be considered as a basic resource as well, locally rooted, a starting point from which a more extended network can be organized. The local can be considered as a starting point for a leap in the global market, a goal achieved by a considerable number of small entrepreneurs. The common belonging can be seen as a significant glue for the network links. In fact, deterritorialization phenomena are not one-way, irreversible, but intertwine with the search of new territories, producing a reterritorialization of symbolic production.

This dual local-global orientation characterizes the virtuous circle of production-consumption we have identified. A part of the goods and services produced in the quarter are locally consumed by those who live and work there; another part is locally consumed by the transient population; another part is exported. Cultural entrepreneurs work on the transformation of meanings to resell them, transporting them from one context to another, adapting them to a diverse public. As true cultural intermediaries, they manipulate meanings as expert consumers of fashionable lifestyles, which they personally try and exhibit. In doing so they are producing themselves, thus becoming one of the most attractive products of the fashionable Ticinese quarter.
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Notes

1 The Milan team includes researchers from the Centre for the Study of Fashion and Cultural Production of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano, of which I am the director. The first work/book involved: Rita Bichi, Manuela Caniato, Emanuela Mora, Lucia Ruggerone, Paolo Volontè; the second one: Mauro Magatti, Emanuela Mora, Giancarlo Rovati. Two colleagues from the University of Sassari have cooperated on the first and the second project, respectively, Antonietta Mazzette and Andrea Vargiu.

The methodology has been complex in both stages. The survey discussed in this article was based on interviews of privileged witnesses, ethnographic observation, study of several entrepreneurial case histories, examination of city maps and town-planning schemes, collection of data concerning mobility flows, electoral behaviours, and housing types. The Italian sub-project of the ICISS project involved an analysis of the Public Register of Companies, a survey, and interviews with entrepreneurs. We have included some elements of network analysis in both the qualitative and the quantitative inquiries, which have helped us outline the complex network of which the entrepreneur/cultural intermediary is the protagonist.

2 Multi-level tenement houses consisting of small flats located around a courtyard. The different levels were linked by a narrow bannister balcony, at the ends of which the common lavatories were located.

3 These operations have been carried out in a very unsatisfactory way, because the available data are based on the categories established by Istat (the Italian Institute of Statistics), which are scarcely sensitive to the changes of the postindustrial economy. On the other hand, they are broken down according to administrative territorial criteria that can be only roughly used for isolating the enterprises of the quarter object of our research.

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