ALL HAIL, THE MILAN MANIFESTO

It's not the 'same-old, same-old' for education leaders in Milan. The Italian city has broken away from the traditional school building model and now it's involving schools, designers, suppliers and researchers. Research Fellow and Pedagogist Dr Mariagrazia Francesca Marcarini and architect Cristiano Scevola have been following the changes.

It all started in Milan with 'The Memorandum'.

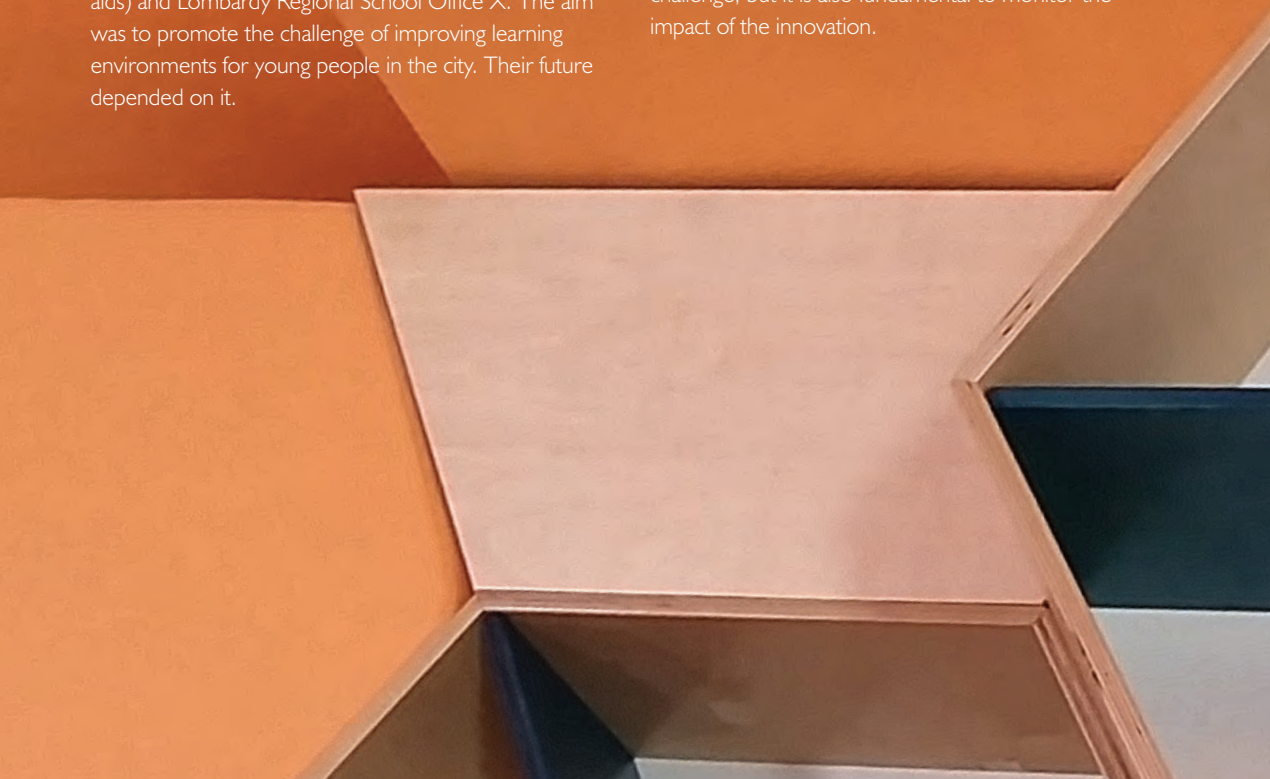
We are all familiar with the debate around innovative school learning spaces and that the great majority of schools are still created around traditional design and use. However, research has shown that there is a link between teaching effectiveness and the physical and organisational structures within which educational activity takes place. But what to do about it?

Determined to break the mould, the Municipality of Milan signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2020 with INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research) of Ministry of Education, Assodidattica (Italian Association manufacturers and suppliers of furniture and teaching aids) and Lombardy Regional School Office X. The aim was to promote the challenge of improving learning environments for young people in the city. Their future depended on it.

Guiding Principles

Based on a series of guiding principles, the municipality wanted to experiment with design and pedagogical innovation, providing evidence to feed into the ongoing national debate on learning space design. The Milan Manifesto, as it has become known, states that learning space innovation is vital to overcome the traditional school model that is no longer able to respond effectively to the social and educational needs of modern society.

Flexible and configurable spaces are believed to be essential to support active teaching methods in which students play a leading role. The need to design new schools and renovate existing ones is a strategic challenge, but it is also fundamental to monitor the impact of the innovation.



A Vital Network

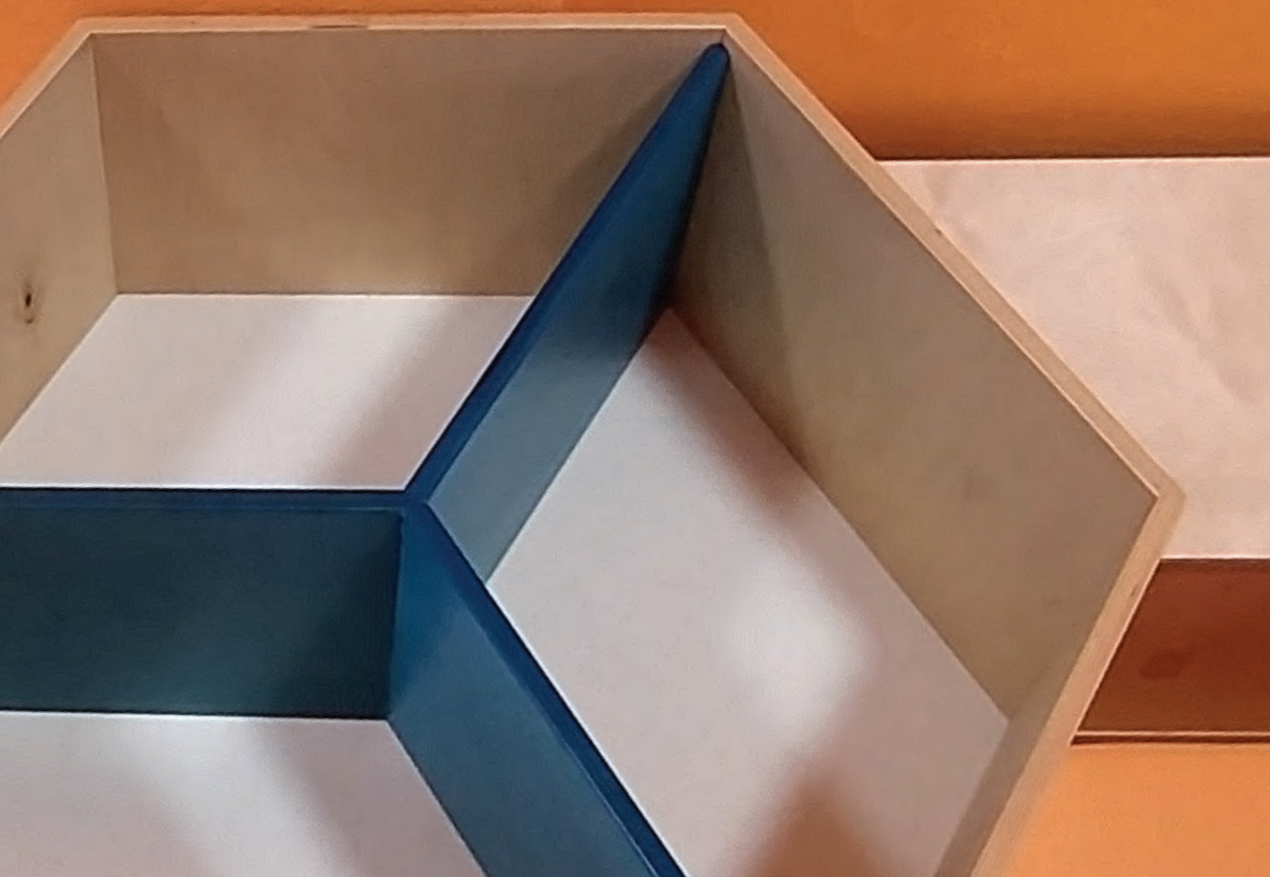
The Municipality of Milan wanted to invest in schools in order to promote social, cultural and economic growth in the future, so it provided financial support to projects proposed by primary and lower secondary schools. Milan also promoted networking between schools to allow them to experiment and share their experiences and findings. Companies, designers and academic researchers are also part of this ongoing dialogue with schools.

Investment in teacher training was also key and a two-volume expert guidebook to the "Milan Model" of learning space innovation was produced (Vol. I: "Innovation of Learning Environments" and Vol 2: "Indoor and outdoor: Project itineraries for the innovation of learning environments") to outline its principles and showcase what has already been achieved in the region.

Innovative Project Examples

A second book outlines three different project types: classrooms and laboratories; libraries and other spaces; outdoor spaces. From the topics presented, the need to design schools that enable inclusion, personalisation and flexibility emerged overwhelmingly. In the Libraries and other spaces section of the book there are three particularly fascinating examples of what schools have done already.

Within these spaces, innovative educational paths allow students to learn more about themselves and others, to explore the external world and to test themselves by experimenting. They have a multi-dimensional learning experience interacting with the spaces that have been designed with flexibility in mind.



“TEATRO AGORÀ POLICENTRICO” (MULTIPURPOSE AGORÀ THEATRE)

Salvatore Quasimodo Lower Secondary School

Via della Giustizia of Locatelli-Quasimodo Comprehensive Institute

Salvatore Quasimodo Lower Secondary School proposed and implemented what was described as the “Teatro Agora Policentrico” (Multipurpose Open Theatre Space) project, led by the architect Alessandro Ramini from the Archra studio.

The school entrance now opens onto a large atrium with steps and a stage that is also intended for theatrical performances. The steps, not too far from the stage, now constitute an architectural Agora (an open, public space) that can be used for presentations and speeches. Some soft cushions have been placed above the steps to make the seating more comfortable and to decorate the space.

The educational offer of the school is characterised by its theatrical activity and pupils have two hours’ a week dedicated to the subject on the timetable. This space is well-suited for presentations on topics of interest, and also exhibitions of various types, meetings and conferences.

“ATELIER DELLE SCOPERTE” (ATELIER OF DISCOVERIES)

Rufini Primary School

Via Fratelli Ruffini of Giovanni Pascoli Comprehensive Institute

The “Atelier delle Scoperte” (Workshop of Discoveries) at Rufini primary school, was a very challenging project. The school is located in a historic building, constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century, which is considered as a place of historic and cultural importance for the city of Milan.

Inside the school there are a mass of historical objects once used for teaching, such as scientific instrumentation materials and plenty of taxidermy. Although this material has gradually lost its scientific usefulness, for a long time there was the need and the will to recover it, recognising its historical, cultural and technical-scientific heritage.

The project tries to recreate the feeling of being in a museum exhibition space. For this reason, the objects that have been selected from the school archive have been distributed in different areas of the building, in particular at the entrance and on the first floor.

After the project was conceived, the school worked with both Laura Pezzetti, Professor of Architectural and Urban Composition at the Polytechnic University of Milan, and the Museum of Science and Technology of Milan, which contributed to the presentation and classification of the historical objects of the school.

The project has become an opportunity for pupils to become involved in active citizenship in which everyone felt part of achieving a common goal.

LIBRIAMOCI
(WE ARE READING AND LET'S FLY)

E. Pimentel Primary School

Via Vincenzo Russo of Giacosa Comprehensive Institute

Another thought-provoking project was proposed by the E. Pimnetal Primary School for their primary students, but also for lower secondary students of the Giacosa Comprehensive Institute.

The Libriamoci project was conceived to underline and encourage three different types of reading: individual, collective and interpreted. From an architectural point of view, three spaces have been rearranged and renamed: The Fire Classroom; The Water and Air Classroom; The Lawn Classroom. Through the natural elements, different communicating classrooms are united by a thematic thread. The walls are reminiscent of fire, water and lawn, giving the impression of really being inside an alternative, almost magical space. ■

About the authors

Cristiano Scevola, architect, was a teacher in secondary schools, collaborated for some years with the Polytechnic University of Milan and is in charge of the School Network Office (Department of Education of the Municipality of Milan). He has a Masters in Institutional and Educational Management and carried out foreign missions in the educational field.

Mariagrazia Francesca Marcarini Ph.D., teaches at the secondary schools of the Municipality of Milan, is research fellow at the University of Bologna and has published the book "Pedarchitettura. Linee storiche ed esempi attuali in Italia in Europa" (Pedarchitecture: historical styles and current examples in Italy and Europe). She has contributed to magazines, journals and conferences in Italy and abroad.