

# Milan Design Week

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# 1. Accessibility and Flows

## 1A. Event signage & Communication system

A seemingly simple thing, such as signage, can make all the difference when it comes to Milan Design Week. The week-long event is vast, spread all around Milan and, in some cases, a bit outside. Many of the people who visit and experience this week are not Milan natives like ourselves. Before this trip, no one in our group of three had been to Milan making this city entirely new to us. We relied solely on event signage and maps, physical and digital, to locate the plethora of shows. In some cases, this proves effective, but in other cases, we felt lost and frustrated asking passersby for any information they might have to guide us in the right direction.

Drop City provides a strong example for how effective signage is crucial. While we were led by Paolo to Drop City, the extensive "Drop City In Progress" flags posted down the street leading to the location made it very clear that we were headed in the correct direction. Once we were across the street from Drop City, there were large fences with canvas signage reading "Drop City" and created a walking path to the official entrypoint for the district. Additionally, the container for which Drop City is located, consolidated inside these tunnels, makes it much easier to spend time in one location and appreciate it rather than hopping from one small show to another which was the case in larger districts such as Isola and Brera.



Drop City Banners

Alcova, while outside of the city and a bit more challenging to get to, the location provided a remarkable two stop district. Paolo led us to Alcova as well but the signage to the district was next to none. Only when you reach a long line of people and step through the gates do you come across large displays regarding the exhibit. Without Paolo, I think the lack of signage leading to the final locations (one and two) would have been confusing. General signage and directional signage once at the two locations, however, was plentiful and helpful in teaching visitors about the show theme, artists, sponsors, and space navigation.



Alcova's Large scale, clear signage

Isola and Brera were the two most challenging districts to navigate in part due to their size and how spread out they were but also due to the lack of signage. When in Isola and Brera, there were plenty of hung flags making it clear what district you were in but the problem was the lack of individual exhibit signage. We began by choosing our top exhibits from the brochure and mapping out the route. In Isola, this proved very frustrating. Our first stop was the Adidas show which we were told was a must see. According to the Isola map and the digital map providing us with direction, we were led to an Adidas store. When we entered, it was simply a store, nothing special about it. We walked quite far to get there so that was certainly a let down. Next we ventured to the Bosco Verticale skyscraper where the brochure suggested there was a design week event. At the base of the two stunning buildings, we found nothing related to design week and no signs. Eventually we ended up in the downtown area of Isola where we were in search of the show "Disclosure: Design Studios Unveiled" We knew we were in Isola but the map didn't correspond with its supposed location. Walking about after not seeing anything design related all day, we happened to stumble across the correct hidden building.



Isola with general lack of event signage

Our experience in Brera was similar, however, we did have more success finding the desired shows. The best part about Brera, though, was stumbling across shows on the way to tohers. One of my favorite shows in the Brera district was UPS (Under Pressure Solutions) Exhibit by Ecal graduate students. It consisted of a fascinating walk-through experience where you can see this sponge-like material used in many different ways like as practical furniture.



Brera- UPS wall-mounted book holder with sponge material

Useful signage was the key to a smooth and efficient design week experience. As visitors, the more detailed the signage and maps, the better. When we struggled to find various shows, it was discouraging and felt like a waste of time. The districts and specific shows that utilized in depth wayfinding left us feeling accomplished and happy, certainly a feeling that should ring true for the entire design week.

## 1B. Transportation to Events

The majority of the Milan Design Week districts are within a reasonable commuting radius of one another and from the hostel. The three main modes of transportation our group utilized were walking, biking, and the train/subway. During such a busy week, rideshare services and taxis are challenging to come by and the prices are, in turn, inflated. This, luckily, didn't prove to be an issue as public transportation is very reliable for longer distances.

The two most challenging areas to get over this week were Alcovia and Salone del Mobile. Alcovia was located outside of Milan, requiring us to take a commuter train about 30 minutes to the town where it was being held. While the train ride was a bit longer than most of our other train rides to districts within Milan, it was helpful that we didn't have to transfer anywhere along the journey. Once we arrived in the town, we needed to wait for the train track gates to open for pedestrians and cars. This took an absurdly long time which proved a bit frustrating but once the gates raised, it was a straight walk to the first of two Alcovia buildings. The walk was on a very narrow path which would be challenging for people who use assistive walking devices but was ok for our group. I'm unsure if either of the buildings had ramps or elevators but if not, that would be a huge oversight on the Alcovia organizers and planners part as both were multi floor buildings.

Salone del Mobile, the original trade show that began Milan's design week, is located at the end of the train line, 20 or so stops from the hostel. Since design week attracts many visitors, the train was bursting with people making it a tight trip for one person. Anyone who requires a seat or has any kind of assistive device that takes up space, would likely have an especially stressful and difficult trip during this week. The train ride, however, is the easier part of the journey to Salone. Once you arrive at the station, the walk to the farthest warehouse, housing hundreds of companies' products, is about a mile long and congested with patrons. At the entrance of this event, however, there were wheelchairs available for rent which is a must to accommodate a variety of patrons of varying abilities.

For the other districts, travel proved fairly straightforward. Occasionally, biking was the fastest mode of transportation. An example of this is the ride from the hostel to the Isola x Adidas event collaboration. Similar to the Boston Blue Bikes system, Milan has several community bike rental options with stations all around the city making it simple to dock and head to your destination. We also walked a lot. Whether within one district or from one district to another, walking was often easy and the weather was nice too which was a plus!



*Isola- Very long walk to exhibition in narrowly fenced area on uneven pavement*

## 1C. Other Design Week and Event Accessibility

Monetarily, design week was reasonable. Once in Italy, food costs much less on average than in Boston. Very importantly, the gelato was especially budget friendly coming to about 2.50 euros for a generous serving! Other than food, to my knowledge, all of the design week events were free to attend: eliminating the barrier of cost. This aspect of accessibility is crucial to consider. Anyone should be able to see and experience art and design. Transportation didn't break the bank either. Biking and the train were all reasonably priced modes of transit.

Walking surfaces throughout Milan were often inaccessible as they were narrow and uneven. The Drop City tunnels, for example, had severely cracked floors with large chunks of missing concrete. I tripped several times in the tunnels due to the lack of smooth paving. While I can acknowledge that paving/smoothing out the floor could take away from the "industrial aesthetic", accessibility should trump aesthetics. If done correctly, the flooring could be leveled and patched up while keeping the current vibe.



*Drop City- uneven floors and various obstacles*

Language barriers were fairly easy to navigate as a non-Italian native speaker. Most signs were written in English or had English underneath the main Italian text. Almost everyone I spoke with understood English and was able to converse with me. Online, the various event websites had an English translation feature which was super helpful for me and my group. Additionally, almost all of the promotional materials like brochures had both Italian and English text. All of the language considerations for non-native speakers greatly helped with my comprehension and improved my experience during this week.

Generally, Milan Design Week lacked seating areas which made it difficult for those who needed a place to rest, catch their breath, and/or in search of seating with back support. In Alcova, for example, when we were eating lunch and enjoying the nice weather on the grass, chairs were very challenging to come by. All of the empty chairs I found were being saved. I managed to snag a chair when I noticed someone sitting near us getting up. Sitting on the ground without back support isn't an ideal option for many including myself so this was a challenge. Additionally, in the various shows, there often isn't anywhere to sit. The flow tends to consist of a narrow path where people walk in the same direction. Outside along the sidewalks, there are few benches and when you do come across one, it's normally occupied. I hope that the lack of seating becomes a more urgent consideration for future design weeks.

# 2. Coherence/ Relevance with Brand Identity

## 2A. Reflection of Brand

Participating in Milan Design Week is not just a prestigious opportunity for organizations; it's also a strategic platform for brand promotion through large-scale installations. Throughout the event, it was evident how different companies approached their presence at MDW and the degree of dedication they invested. Some chose to spotlight their products and brand ethos prominently. Porsche and IKEA serve as compelling examples of this branding strategy, each tailored to their distinct objectives and customer base.

Porsche, synonymous with luxury, crafted an installation exuding sophistication and exclusivity. Entering their venue, guests encountered a captivating web-like structure meticulously woven from ropes—a playful yet refined embodiment of the brand's essence. In an adjacent space, a vintage Porsche adorned with lush greenery and serene music evoked an ambiance of opulence and refinement, perfectly aligning with Porsche's image.



*The Art of Dreams Milan 2024 by Porsche in Brera District*

In contrast, IKEA's approach centered on creating a familiar and welcoming environment mirroring their brand identity. Navigating through a maze of rooms filled with an eclectic array of products, visitors were immersed in a narrative celebrating life's milestones—your first bedroom, your first apartment, your first party—all with IKEA at the heart. This cohesive theme resonated deeply with their diverse audience, mirroring the warmth and accessibility synonymous with the IKEA experience.



*IKEA Event in Tortona District*

Overall, these contrasting approaches illustrate the diverse ways in which brand leverage Milan Design Week to authentically connect with their audience and reinforce their brand identity.

## 2B. Memorability

Ensuring memorability is paramount when crafting installations or events for Milan Design Week. If visitors fail to recollect their experience, the intended impact falls short. Numerous events and installations, lacking in memorability, understandably did not garner attention. However, two standout examples, orchestrated by Ron Zacapa and Amazon, notably achieved lasting impressions.

Ron Zacapa's "Soul Nest" event epitomized tranquility and hospitality. The venue, comprising a courtyard, indoor bar, and outdoor square, exuded warmth. Nestled within the square, a picturesque tent beckoned visitors with inviting lounging chairs. Inside, a carefully curated presentation featuring Ron Zacapa's spirits, citrus fruits, and chocolates awaited. Amidst this serene setting, guests savored the sensory delights, immersing themselves in a refreshing ambiance. The thoughtful fusion of venue design and user experience left an indelible mark, resonating deeply.



*Ron Zacapa SOUL NEST  
by Locatelli Partners  
in Brera District*

On the other hand, Amazon's "Amazing Walk" installation captivated with its initial allure. The striking crystal dome immediately captivated attention, surrounded by an ethereal mist. Exploring the perimeter and venturing into the dome revealed an unexpected sight: Amazon products elegantly showcased within. This divergence from the platform's conventional identity sparked intrigue, challenging preconceived notions. The juxtaposition between

Amazon's typical branding and the artistic interpretation fostered a memorable experience, leaving a lasting impression.



*The Amazing Walk by  
Amazon and MAD Architects  
in Cortile della Farmacia*

These instances underscore the significance of creating memorable experiences at Milan Design Week, where innovative design intersects with brand representation to forge enduring connections with audiences.

## 2C. Community-Building

Occasionally, the journey itself holds more significance than the destination. During our encounter with KIA representatives, their motive for participating in MDW diverged from conventional expectations. Rather than seeking tangible returns, KIA viewed their involvement as a means of enriching their community. This altruistic approach was evident in their installations which bore no direct correlation to automotive products.

KIA's event unfolded across multiple rooms, each offering distinct lighting and sensory experiences. One pathway featured dynamic, moving images that seamlessly shifted alongside visitors—a truly immersive encounter. Temperature and fragrance control further heightened the ambiance, enhancing the overall sensory engagement. Another highlight was mesmerizing musical and lighting spectacle. Within a dimly lit space adorned with mirrors, the interplay between music and illumination transformed the environment into a surreal dreamscape.



For KIA, the objective wasn't solely about brand representation or maximizing recall among attendees. Rather, their participation served as a gesture of appreciation towards their community, foesting a connection beyond mere product promotion. In embracing this ethos, KIA demonstrated a commitment to enriching experiences and giving back to those who share a fondness for their brand.



*KIA Event in Museo della Permanente*

# 3. Content/ Container Relationship

## 3A. Geographical Location

Most of the design districts fall within Milan's city border. This certainly aids in the geographical accessibility of these districts as they are near one another. I don't particularly feel that one district over the other benefits by being located in one area of Milan vs. another area in Milan. Each district did well with using the location/area they were provided to maximize the amount of work that could be shown in addition to allotting various buildings/ spaces appropriately for the different brands. A strong example of effectively used space based on geographical location would be 5vie. This entire district was condensed into one building and courtyard, yet displayed a plethora of work from around the world. While the building and space for 5vie was grand and spectacular, the planners still needed to strategically plan and layout the most effective way to present all of the projects.

If a district is located outside of the main design week boundaries, it must be executed and advertised well to bring visitors to that location. Alcova, the one district outside of Milan, was a fairly quick commuter train ride away and the venue made the commute worthwhile. Although it would have been easier if Alcova were in Milan, the extravagant building where it was held, at such a large scale, could only be located outside of a city. Despite its further location from the city than the other districts, Alcova attracted thousands of people; there were long lines for both of the Alcova houses starting early in the morning.

## 3B. Venue Selection

Milan Design Week showcased a diverse array of design choices regarding venue selection. Some opted for a minimalist approach, featuring venues with white or black ceilings, floors, and walls to keep the focus solely on the work presented. While effective in certain instances, it was fascinating to observe the interplay between content and container when both possessed distinct characteristics. As attendees moved from one venue to another, the importance of a harmonious relationship between the content and its setting became evident.

A notable example of this synergy was the event by Design Palazzo Austria. The garden-esque exterior seamlessly complemented the interior furniture, creating a cohesive and immersive experience. In this case, the venue did not overshadow the exhibits; instead, it enhanced the overall ambiance, providing a unified and enriching experience for the visitors. This illustrates the potential for thoughtfully designed spaces to amplify the impact of the installations they house.



*Exterior of the event done by  
Design Palazzo Austria*

# 4. Sustainability

## 4A. Venue Selection

Milan Design Week is a globally renowned event that attracts nearly half a million visitors each year. The venue selection process for such a high scale event must prioritize sustainability to minimize environmental impact and uphold the city's reputation as a design capital. Opting for venues with eco-friendly certifications, energy-efficient facilities, and robust waste management systems is essential. Additionally, implementing a "leave no trace" policy ensures that the venues are not only utilized for the event but also left in a better state afterward, possibly through initiatives such as a focus landscaping for the event.

Clear waste management solutions, such as properly labeled garbage cans for waste separation and recycling, further contribute to minimizing the event's environmental footprint. While there were garbage cans provided at the events, the separation labels were written in only Italian, which is not accessible to foreign visitors. Instead, there could be clear symbols to divide between paper, plastic, or glass, for example. By carefully selecting venues that align with sustainability principles, Milan Design Week organizers demonstrate a commitment to responsible resource management and environmental stewardship.



*Alcovia District utilizing existing rooms in Villa Bagatti Valsecchi*

## 4B. Transportation

Transportation plays a crucial role in ensuring the accessibility and sustainability of Milan Design Week. Encouraging attendees to opt for sustainable transportation options, such as biking and public transit, reduces carbon emissions and alleviates traffic congestion in the city. One way to encourage this could be by partnering with local transportation companies, such as BikeMi, and offering incentives for using eco-friendly modes of transportation. Additionally, arranging shuttle services to transportation hubs, particularly for remote districts like Alcovia, enhances the overall attendee experience while minimizing individual carbon footprints. By prioritizing sustainable transportation options, Milan Design Week can contribute to the city's broader goals of reducing air pollution and promoting green mobility solutions.



Milan's train system allow for affordable and environmental friendly travel

## 4C. Marketing

With the thousands of different artists exhibiting at Milan Design Week, they each need to find a way to stand out. Usually, this means giving visitors something to remember them by, whether it's a business card, postcard, booklet, or even poster. An attendee can easily collect over 50 pieces of collectables a day, adding up to hundreds over the course of the week. While it's nice to have a tangible product, the majority of these papers are likely going straight to the bin, wasting not only paper but also printing efforts and money.

One way to minimize excessive paper waste while still sharing artists' products is through digital marketing. Developing a comprehensive event app that features guides, maps, schedules, and e-business cards can reduce reliance on paper materials, improve accessibility, and enhance user experience.

For essential print materials, using recycled paper shows a commitment to sustainability. Encouraging exhibitors to use fewer physical items makes the event more eco-friendly. By using technology and sustainable marketing methods, Milan Design Week organizers can engage attendees while focusing on environmental responsibility.



Nearly all artists provided some form of paper materials

## 4D. Set Design

Set design serves as a creative expression of Milan Design Week's ethos and values. Opting for recyclable or reusable materials for sets, product stands, booths, and decorations reduces waste and promotes circular design principles. Evaluating the lifecycle impacts of set design elements allows organizers to prioritize durable, low-impact solutions that align with sustainability goals. Exploring innovative reuse options, such as repurposing waste materials or utilizing preexisting structures for displays, showcases creativity while minimizing environmental impact. By integrating sustainability considerations into set design, Milan Design Week can demonstrate leadership in sustainable event management and inspire positive change within the design industry.



Minimal designed sets are more sustainable

In conclusion, by integrating sustainability considerations into every aspect of Milan Design Week, organizers can minimize environmental impact, promote social responsibility, and uphold the city's reputation as a global design capital. Through careful venue selection, promotion of sustainable transportation options, adoption of digital marketing solutions, and innovative set design practices, Milan Design Week can serve as a model for sustainable event management and inspire positive change within the design community.



*KIA Event in Museo della Permanente*