Fashion and the city - Social interaction and creativity in London and Milan

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Abstract

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Creative industries (design, fashion, art, entertainment) are key to the economic growth and renaissance of contemporary cities. Characterized by a constantly changing environment, high levels of uncertainty, and tacit knowledge, these industries show patterns of concentration in urban quarters; the relevant literature suggests that such concentrations reflect the critical role played by frequent face-to-face interaction and exchange among individuals, organizations and institutions in fostering innovation and creativity.

On the basis of previous work (d'Ovidio 2005) and current research, in this paper we focus on the interactions among fashion designers based in Milan and London, two international fashion capitals. To begin with, we show that the industry is highly concentrated in specific quarters by mapping the location of main fashion houses in the two cities. Secondly, we present evidence that designers engage frequently in face-to-face interaction and we discuss the different functions of interaction in relation to the construction of trust, the building of in-group reputation and the nourishment of creativity. Thirdly, we identify the diverging patterns of interaction in the two cities; despite the strong economic performance of this industry in both cities, the "creative field" is perceived to be much more vibrant in London than in Milan. We discuss these different patterns with respect to complaints regarding a perceived decrease in the creativity of the Milanese designer community. Finally, we advance a tentative explanation for the relative weakness of the Milanese creative community based on the absence of links with other fields of creative production in the city.

1. The role of proximity and face-to-face interaction

Since the seminal work of Goffman (1959) and Garfinkel (1967) face-to-face relations have been considered the richest communication medium, because in a face-to-face context communication occurs on many levels at the same time -- verbal, physical, contextual, intentional, and non-intentional. Such multidimensional communication is held by many to be essential to the transmission of complex, uncodifiable, tacit knowledge. The rise of the cultural industries, which rely to an enormous extent on this kind of knowledge, has renewed the focus on face-to-face interaction and its functions in the coordination of the economy. For many of these industries there is empirical evidence that face-to-face interaction remains a crucial means of communication for their highly skilled workers, despite the development of new communication technologies and the low cost of their use. The reliance on direct interaction, and the requirement of physical proximity that this entails, are part of the explanation of the clustering of these industries in cities and in specific quarters of cities.

Fashion is a typical segment of the cultural industry, as it is "*engaged in the creation of marketable outputs whose competitive qualities depend on the fact that they function at least in part as personal ornaments, modes of social display, forms of entertainment and distraction, or sources of information and self-awarness, i.e. as artifacts whose symbolic value to the consumer is high relative to their practical purposes.*" (Scott, 2000:3). The fashion industry shares with all culture-based products continuously changing and uncertain environments and a constant high demand for innovation. Due to these characteristics it is said to rely heavily on face-to face relations and to be concentrated in specific quarters.

Studies on different cultural industries have shown that face-to-face communication performs several functions. First, cultural workers spend time, money and energy in face-to-face interaction because they need to build relationships conducive to trust and to mutually renew and confirm that trust over time. Trustworthy relations are necessary because of the nature of knowledge involved in their work, which entails individual ability, sensibility, taste and lifestyle that can be communicated and transferred only through a personal relationship based on mutual trust. Trust thus makes easier the sharing of different cultural assets and skills necessary for collective projects. Because more and more cultural products are the result of the coming together of different special skills and distinct forms of human capital, trust is a prerequisite for successful collaboration. Banks et alii (2000) in the analysis of Mancunian cultural industries have shown how networks and informal spaces of social interaction were conducive to non-planned cooperation and the development of new products. In his work on new media workers, Pratt (2000) stresses the need for frequent face-to-face interaction and relationships of familiarity among them.

Secondly, trust is also important in the creation of dense networks which tie together cultural workers in community-like formations based on common sensibilities, aesthetic orientation and cultural values. Within the community, knowledge is shared "horizontally" among the actual participants but also "vertically", that is, transmitted over time from one generation to the next (Scott 2000). The network/community thus

performs a socialization function, since through the interaction with its members, individuals learn the "codes", acquire specific criteria of judgment which, in turn, signal to others that they belong to the same social world. Through this process of "getting into the loop" (Storper & Venables 2004) the network selects its prospective members and defines and reproduces its identity: as a result, individuals' qualities and skills are recognized as adequate to belonging to the group and the group defines its cultural capital. Once in the network, due to the fact that group members have an interest in maintaining a high standard of quality, there is constant monitoring and assessing of one another: thanks to frequent and extended interactions the network guarantees the competence of its members and produces reputation capital for them, which results in a reduction of risk and information costs, enables more efficient partnering in joint projects and increases motivation in collaborative efforts. As in the cultural industries there are no formal credentials that can guarantee the creative qualities of a person; an individual's reputation, which derives from being recognized as belonging to the creative community, is of paramount importance. Moreover, due to the flexible, unstable nature of cultural work, which is performed mostly on the basis of short-term contract projects and forces cultural workers to be committed to different temporary jobs at any given time (Menger 1999, Christopherson and Stroper 1989), they are constantly on the lookout for new jobs or better contracts. The network provides them with the reputation and the contacts needed to further their careers (Pratt 2000; Wittel 2001).

Last, but by no means least, creativity. Its importance for the cultural industries cannot be overstated, as they combine artistic expression and creativity with material production, tradeable goods and, to a greater or lesser extent, market-based consumption. The conception, production and manipulation of symbols, signs and ideas employed in making a movie, a video game, a music CD or a fashion collection are much less the result of the creativity of single individuals and much more the outcome of intense interaction among a critical mass of highly skilled, creative individuals in an environment which promotes and rewards creativity. Becker's pioneer study on the artistic world (1974) has shown the socially constructed nature of the production of works of art. Far from being the result of a sparkle of inspiration of an individual artist, a work of art is the outcome of a process where different actors are involved, among which the artist herself is the last link in a long chain. The process is mostly carried out through face-to-face interaction of the actors involved, who agree on value judgements, share conventions and mutually adjust to each other's orientation and style; by doing so, they are able to effectively collaborate in the final definition of the work of art. More recently, the work of Molotch on the design industry (2002, 2003) has shown that, in the creative process leading to the production of "new things", geographical proximity is considered vital, as it increases the opportunities for interaction among designers and for unplanned, inter-network contacts with other creative communities; in turn, these frequent face-to-face contacts and encounters are crucial to the enhancement of creativity.

The analysis carried out in this paper is based on different field work and empirical materials. Data on the fashion industry was collected in two three-month periods of field work in Spring 2004 in Milan and in Summer 2004 in London. The data was first used to construct a profile of the two fashion systems, as part of a Ph.D. dissertation (d'Ovidio 2005). Second, locational data of the fashion houses was collected in order to produce maps on the geography of the fashion designers' activities in both cities, which will be

presented in the next section. Thirdly, during the same two periods a total of 31 designers (17 in Milan, 14 in London) were interviewed at length. The designers are a sample of those working at the time in fashion houses that had participated in the Fashion week in Fall 2003 in Milan or in London. These interviews were complemented with those carried out and published in Bucci's book on Fashion in Milan (2002). In-depth interviews with key experts of the industry and specialized journalists were carried out in both cities; in London men and women are equally represented in the interviews, while in Milan almost all interviewees are men. We reached designers working in internationally-known fashion houses (such as, for example, Extè and Moschino in Milan and Arkadius and Eley Kishimoto in London) as well as designers working in small or medium size fashion houses. Most often the interviewee is the head designer; in some cases a member of the design staff. An analysis of the fashion trade press also served to provide background information. Sections 3 and 4 contain the analysis and discussion of the interviews.

## 2. Fashion quarters in Milan and London: where is fashion made?

This part of the paper explores the location of fashion houses in London and Milan in order to provide an assessment of the pattern and level of geographic concentration of fashion activities. As our starting point we use the lists of fashion houses which participated in fashion shows in Milan or in London in Fall 2003; their addresses were georeferenced: if a fashion house had more than one address, we considered the address of the designers' workrooms, not that of the fashion house headquarters or showrooms. These georeferenced points were then projected onto maps of the two cities: each point represents the location of designers' activities. Some words of caution are in order for a correct interpretation of the maps. The first problem relates to the different size of our sample of fashion houses in London and in Milan, which, in turn, derives from the fact that the fashion show of one city involved two and a half times as many brands as in the other city : London fashion show hosted more than 400 brands (among which 260 located in London), while in Milan more than 170 fashion houses presented their collections, 46 of which were from Milan or the surrounding area.

The second problem concerns the different scale of what is considered the central area in the two cities and their different morphology. For comparative purposes we take as unit of analysis the area of Greater London and of Province of Milan (a good proxy for the Metropolitan area of Milan). Within this definition London has a population of about 7.5 million inhabitants (Office for National Statistics 2007) in an area of about 1,600 km^2. The Province of Milan has a population of about 3.8 million (ISTAT 2006) in an area close to 2,000 km^2. Maps 1 and 2 present the results at this scale: in Milan all fashion houses are within the boundaries of the municipality of Milan, the very core of the metropolitan area, with only two exceptions : one located at the south-west border of the municipality, the other in a city outside the metropolitan area. Within the municipality all 44 fashion houses are concentrated in the center of the city. In London, the large majority of fashion houses (240 out of 260) are in Inner London but distributed over a comparatively much larger territory.

Map 1. Province of Milan. Fashion Designers
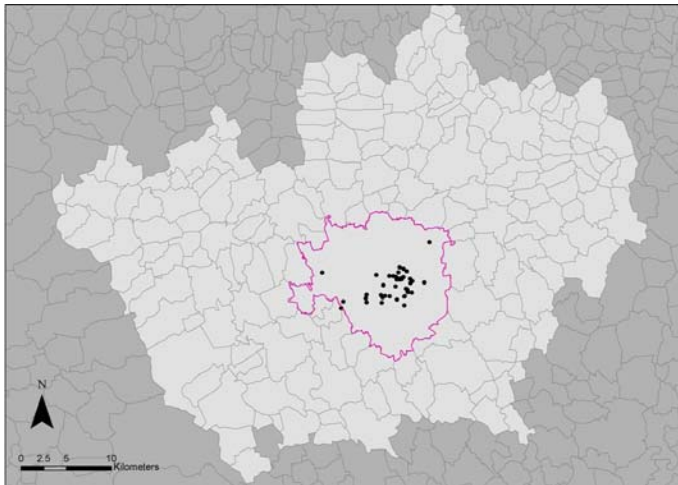

Map 2. Greater London. Fashion Designers
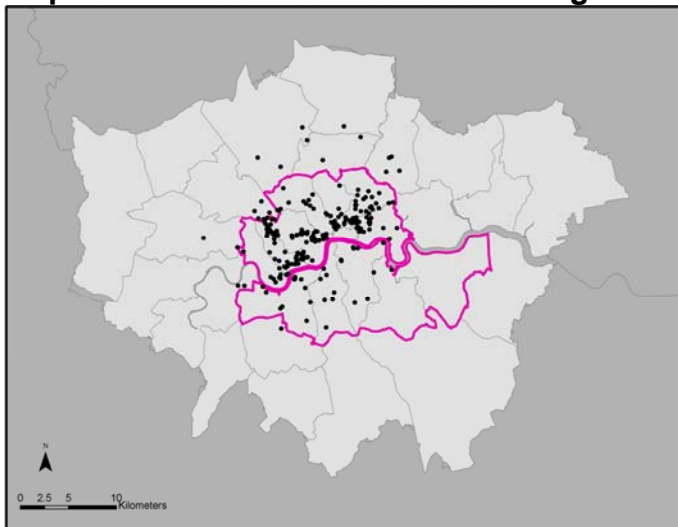
From these maps it is evident that the nature of designers activities requires a central location and that the fashion industry has maintained its traditional location despite the industry's transformation over the last three decades and the development of new information technologies; besides the benefits in terms of accessibility and services provision, this central location confers prestige and signs of distinction; it can be argued that through their location fashion houses establish a link between the aesthetic quality of the built environment and the sophistication and originality of their production. But these maps do not tell us enough as far as the issues of agglomeration and of proximity are concerned. In order to explore these issues we need to work at a smaller scale.

Map 3 gives us a more detailed picture of the distribution of Milan fashion houses. The strongest concentration is in the so-called '*Quadrilatero della moda*' (Fashion quadrilateral): a very central, square-shaped quarter within the historical centre, where

all brand-names shops and showrooms of world fashion are also concentrated. This highly prestigious and most expensive quarter in the very heart of the city used to be and remains the traditional location of the haute couture houses. Of the 46 fashion houses, 16 are located in the area and a number of others at the boundaries of this area. The remaining fashion houses are located in two other parts of the city which have come to be characterized by the presence of the fashion industry in more recent times. One coincides more or less with a traditional neighbourhood called "*Navigli*", where the canals are located (*naviglio* means canal); this area, which used to be characterized by artisans and small industrial activities, has been subject to an intense process of gentrification in the '80s and '90s, which transformed it into a fashionable, bohemian quarter with an intense night life. Today it also houses a vast number of support activities for the fashion industry: model agencies, photo studios, PR and advertising agencies. By contrast, the other area is not identifiable with a traditional neighbourhood, is very unassuming, was never linked to any activities related to fashion or to other creative productions. The current concentration can be related to the relatively low cost of real estate there and the investment made by two important fashion houses (Etro and Prada) which moved to the area in early Nineties, followed by others, smaller and/or less well known ones. It is interesting to observe that these three agglomerations are the same as those identified in a previous work on the Milanese fashion system.

Map 3. City of Milan. Fashion House Clusters
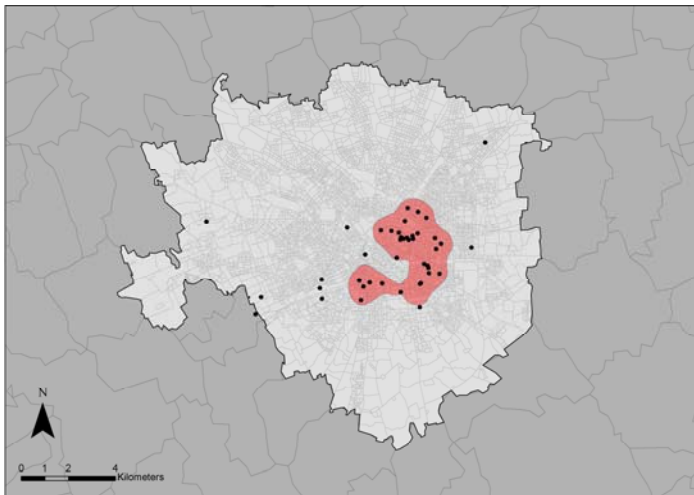
At first sight the map of London (map 4) shows a different picture: fashion houses are distributed over a larger area, although it can be argued that the large majority of them are centrally located here too, as the central-city effect refers in London to a much larger area than in Milan. The northern part of central London maintains its preeminence as the preferred location also of the fashion industry, reflecting the traditional wealth and concentration of commercial and industrial activities over time. Here the tendency of the fashion houses to concentrate in certain areas is more evident as five agglomerations are clearly identifiable: Notting Hill, the area between Brick Lane and Hoxton Square,

Clerkenwell, the area around Oxford Circus, and the area from Knightsbridge to Sloane Square.

These last two areas have a long tradition of being associated with the fashion industry. The area around Oxford Circus used to be the centre of high fashion in London: from the mid eighteenth century, Savile Row carved out for itself the role of centre of excellence of bespoke tailoring, initially for the exclusive delight of the aristocracy. On that basis a high-end fashion district has developed. Traditionally, the other high fashion district is Knightsbridge, centred on the presence of Harrod's and other high-end department stores and luxury shops; today it is also the location of the London Fashion Week, which takes place here twice a year and brings countless people to the area.

The remaining three areas are "new" developments, the result of the transformation of old neighbourhoods into new quarters for the cultural industries. The Notting Hill area features a dense agglomeration of fashion designers, among which there are famous fashion houses such as Ghost or Stella McCartney close to lesser-known ones; the area is said to be bursting with creativity, the main spring of which derives from the presence of the celebrated Portobello street market and the enormous variety of people which it attracts, including tourists. The area around Brick Lane is a mixture of Bangladesh tradition and fashionable places, from bars and restaurants to shops. Whitechapel, the surrounding area, has been heavily affected by gentrification; 'occupied' by many young artists some time ago, it experienced a period of artistic renaissance within an ethnic connotation: many fashion designers, fascinated by the artistic atmosphere of the area and attracted by relatively cheap housing, located their laboratories there. Today the success of the area and its central location still make it still a much sought-after choice for residence and work spaces. Finally, a similar process of urban renewal is at the basis of the location of fashion houses in Clerkenwell; a former industrial area with many large spaces which became available as a result of de-industrialization, Clerkenwell underwent a rapid transformation due to its central position between the City of London and the West End.

Map 4. Inner London. Fashion House Clusters

We estimated the density of these agglomerations in Milan and London (Table 1). For Milan our data are insufficient to identify systems of close proximity among fashion designers, because the size of our sample is too small and the density remains low both at the level of the central city as a whole and at the level of the subunits identified within the central city. In London it is a different story, as the five identified agglomerations show a very high density and consequently a level of proximity potentially conducive to high frequency of face-to-face interaction. With this background information we turn to the analysis of our interviews.

Table 1. Clusters of Designers

	Area (Km^2)	Fashion Designers	Density: Designers per Km^2
Milano	181,70	43	0,27
M - Cluster	11,40	33	2,90
M1	1.47	5	3.4
M2	0.74	3	4.07
M3	1	4	4.14
M4	2.20	12	5.4
Inner London	301,00	240	0,80
L - Clerkenwell	1,57	16	10,22
L - Oxford Circus	1,96	18	9,19
L - Knightsbrigde	2,20	25	11,37
L - Brick Lane	2,34	24	10,28
L - Notting Hill	2,48	26	10,47

3. Patterns of interaction among designers

From our interviews the work of fashion designers seems to be all about being engaged in making and maintaining relationships, which requires direct and frequent interaction and therefore co-location of actors. The main demand of their job is to be in the city, constantly reachable and permanently available to meeting people who are part of the fashion system or are engaged in the creative field.

> "*It is all networking.*"(Respondent f - London)

> "*It is all a matter of contacts, you cannot do this job on the phone or by fax, you have to meet people, to talk to them, to keep in touch.*" (Respondent i - Milan)

> "*No, you cannot* [work elsewhere]*, I would like to live in the countryside, for example, but I cannot; you have to be here to meet people, your friends […] you cannot stay away from Milan very long.*" (Respondent q - Milan)

Fashion, in other words, is a contact sport. Three levels of interaction are identifiable. The first relates to the internal workings of the laboratory: here the designer is at the center of a network of intense interactions aimed at channeling his/her creativity into a product with a precise positioning in the market; a lot of different abilities, skills and sensibilities are employed, value judgments and taste and style interpretations are monitored and reciprocally adjusted. Such rich work of interpretation requires direct and

intense interaction where the persons involved are perceived to be tied together by relationships based on a certain level of trust.

> *"Everyone is essential* […] *you need people to convey your message, to turn your ideas into material."* (Respondent a - Milan)

> *"We classify ourselves as a group. We work as a team."* (Respondent d - Milan)

The second level refers to the interaction with other fashion designers. According to our interviewees these relationships tend to form a network which is the basis of an exchange system where information and support circulate. A problem with a textile producer, the search for a junior designer or for a better job are all issues which can be dealt with through face-to-face interaction with other designers.

> *"It is only business, and it is done by talking to people. It is all networking: if you have a problem with the production, you can talk about it and maybe make new contacts, understand what is happening and so on."* (Respondent f – London)

In the network relationships are constantly renewed so that they can be resumed when opportunities for collaboration arise.

> *"I had already worked for him a while ago, then we met again and he needed someone to design a new collection, it was a very important opportunity for me."* (Respondent b - Milan)

Designers report helping each other in different matters. Some designers have relationships with artists and emphasize the high level of reciprocal support which circulates in the creative quarters of the city where they work and live.

> *"We hang out a lot with the guys from the lab next door because we understand each other: we give each other support both for practical things, for example taking deliveries when they are not in or helping each other with transport, but also for more more important things, even financial issues."* (Respondent m - London)

All designers have a clear perception of the benefits deriving from their being part of networks.

This brings us to the third level of interaction in which fashion designers are involved, which refers to the fashion system as a whole. At this level parties and fashion shows are the main catalysing events of interaction and sociality. Participation in these events is a must because by being present designers affirm their belonging to the system. It is also during these events that they gain visibility and recognition by the media; in this respect journalists play a crucial role as they legitimize the work of a designer, acknowledge the life style that his clothes are supposed to convey to the final consumer, and, more in general, interpret fashion for the general public. The direct interaction with journalists is here perceived as necessary in order to ensure the desired interpretation. Last, these events are increasingly the occasion for meeting people in show business who may provide further visibility.

> "*You have to be there […] you may meet some celebrity and ask them to wear your clothes for publicity."* (Respondent g - Milan)

Milanese designers tend to emphasize their relationships among themselves and within the fashion system, and stress the frequency with which the creative workers from different fashion houses interact with each other. They also have a very clear idea of the geography of this interaction: parties, events, specific restaurants and places where they

gather for both social and professional reasons. Parties organized by sponsors, by the fashion press, by designers to celebrate a special occasion and, of course, fashion shows are all mentioned as important occasions to meet people, to consolidate already existing relationships and to forge new ones. Because contacts are so essential, a lot of attention is paid to the planning and attendance of these meetings—nothing is left to chance.

> "We all know each other, we see each other very often […] everyone knows what is going on in other companies. We also go to the same places, to the same restaurants, so you end up meeting there too." (Respondent q - Milan)

> "You have to be there when things happen, you have to be seen there." (Respondent g - Milan)

A number of London-based designers, on the other hand, report being more engaged in relationships with the world of art, specifically in the form of specific localized artistic communities; generally they have chosen a "creative" area for their laboratories and they often live in the same area, thereby making contact with other artists particularly easy. These fashion designers tend to set themselves apart from the fashion world and to identify more with the art community; that is the locus where they seek belonging and recognition. These designers portray the fashion world as dominated by appearance and superficiality, as opposed to creativity, and refuse to be perceived as belonging to this world or to be identified with its values.

> "We keep in touch with many persons in this area, they are creative people too, but not fashion designers […] we don't go to parties or to places where other fashion designers go." (Respondent m - London)

> "The fashion world is superficial, I don't like it." (Respondent j - London)

> "Many of the people I meet are artists […] and it may happens that they want to wear our creations, and give us publicity this way. We like the fact that artists wear our hats." (Respondent n- London)

Finally, in the interviews the relationship with creativity was explored. Contrary to the prevailing view in the relevant literature, the focus of interaction among designers is more on business than on creativity. On the one hand, most of them, especially in Milan, are keen to underplay the creative content of their work and to emphasize the business-related aspects and even the routine character of their job. In particular a lot of time seems to be occupied by decisions related to the quality of details such as the choice of seams, linings or buttons, the combination of accessories, and so on.

> "My job is pure business." (Respondent a – Milan)

> "You must not think that we spend the whole day with coloured pencils in our hands: [our job] is less creative than that. We spend hours working on the wearability of a sleeve, or meeting suppliers, and so on." (Respondent q – Milan)

On the other hand, the sphere of creativity is described as an individual and private area which should be kept separate from business; the birth of new ideas is a solitary activity, as the fashion designer works alone when drawing and putting new ideas to paper. But this is not to say that the creative process is not a collective and creative undertaking; quite the contrary—there is a high level of interaction with the staff in the fashion labs who must transform the idea contained in a drawing into a material object. As they perceive the collective nature of the creative process, designers show appreciation for the contribution of their staff to the creative and original character of their final product.

> "*No, we never talk about our drawings* [with other designers]*. Even if you know that one is working on the fifties, he would never show his sketches, we all work alone when drawing.*" (Respondent e - London)

> "*I am on my own when drawing, but then I work with the staff: they are essential once the model is drawn, they put my ideas into practice.*" (Respondent f - Milan)

Outside the laboratories, however, the interaction with other fashion designers does not concern the production of ideas or the creative content of their work. For some designers what is important for the nourishment of creativity is interaction with other creative workers, mainly artists but also architects or designers; particularly in London, these fashion designers claim to have close relationships with artists and/or to consider themselves artists. These relationships are sustained by frequent face-to-face interactions and are perceived as conducive to enhanced creativity. The resulting need for proximity is seen as the main reason for living and/or working in a specific neighbourhood where different creative workers are present.

> "*I often show him* [a neighbour, painter] *my drawings of clothes, and he does the same with his sketches for his paintings. We often talk about colour or shape, it helps us find new ideas or further develop the ones we have already.*[…] *I have many friends here. It is a sort of community. This area is very nice, it's very creative. A famous painter lives just around the corner, and another artist lives above me. There is a mix of many different things, I think the relevant thing is having all sorts of people around you, many of whom are artists. It's a very exciting area*" Respondent i - London)

> "*Many of the people I meet are artists.*"(Respondent n - London)

> "*My work is more like that of an artist than a fashion designer. I create unique works of art that, of course, can also be worn* […]*I know many people who live in this neighbourhood, many painters live here* [an industrial building remodeled into lofts and laboratories]*, there is a sort of artistic movement here.*"(Respondent j - London

4. Designers and the city

Patterns of interaction, emphasis on creativity and the relationship with the city are different in the two cities. In particular the relationship with the city and its role vis à vis creative work seems to point in two divergent directions. In both cities fashion designers are well aware of the importance of the city as a stimulus for their creative work; without prompting all interviewees repeatedly refer to art galleries, to museums and exhibitions, to the mix and diversity of people in the streets, to open-air markets, to the buildings and their aesthetic qualities as potential sources which provide inspiration for their work, new ideas and novel innovative directions to explore. In London designers show appreciation for all forms of inputs which they reportedly receive from the city; in particular, open-air markets, such as Portobello or Spitalfields, are mentioned as important parts/events of the city in this respect.

> "*I often go window shopping during my lunch break, especially for vintage clothing; and every Friday we go to the market* [in Portobello Road]*. Many fashion designers go there, you can find lots of strange and old things there, and you meet people.*" (Respondent c - London)

In sharp contrast with their London colleagues, Milanese designers never mentioned the city in this respect and complain emphatically about the lack of stimuli in their home town. One of our interviewee went so far as to say:

> *"Milan is uninviting, there is nothing to do, it's not a city, it doesn't offer anything"*
> (Respondent b - Milan)

Precisely because they value those urban stimuli on the one hand, and on the other perceive the city as lacking in cultural events, interesting exhibitions and contemporary art in particular, Milanese designers mention their frequent travels abroad, mainly to other fashion capitals, as the means through which they fulfill the need to nourish their creativity. This need to go elsewhere for inputs is recognized by the Milanese fashion houses which are keen to assign travel allowances and to facilitate the acquisition of inputs, for example, by recruiting fashion students to do research on urban-wear in other cities.

Secondly, designers' connections with the art world in the city are different. In both cities, more and more fashion houses are main sponsors of art exhibitions and establish dedicated venues for the presentation of their collections but also as spaces for culture where cross-fertilization between fashion and art is said to occur. All designers report an increase in the number of events and venues where art and fashion blend, as it is increasingly common to present collections in art galleries or to make short movies or to use experimental art for the promotion of collections. Also, music and multimedia and visual arts are used to communicate the emotions that a particular brand is supposed to produce. Here again, however, our interviewees paint two different pictures. While London designers refer to stable and ongoing exchanges and collaboration with artists, Milanese designers see their connections with the arts as mere experiments and isolated episodes which fail to consolidate into stable relationships between the two worlds. The venues established by the big names of the fashion industry, such as *Fondazione Trussardi* or *Fondazione Prada*, are portrayed as effective in bolstering the image of the respective brand but much less so in providing space for artistic production, innovation and creativity.

Several culprits are identified with regard to this problematic relationship between the city of Milan and its creative communities. Local institutions are said to pay little attention to the promotion of creativity and innovation. Despite the relevance of the fashion industry to the city's economy, the local government is seen as completely indifferent, if not hostile, and its cultural policy is perceived as being peculiarly blind to the needs of this industry. The city's inability to support the fashion industry is considered damaging in particular to young, innovative designers who face almost insurmountable obstacles in their effort to gain visibility. In the words of a Milanese designer:

> *"The costs* [of organizing a fashion show] *are enormous for young designers, so much so that they often cannot afford them. The local government should support them financially or at least guarantee that there will be media coverage. Unfortunately none of this ever happens."* (Respondent l – Milan)

Moreover, local institutions are seen as resistant to change; examples are offered when opportunities were not seized and possible improvements were not made. The difference with London cannot be more striking: in different parts of our interviews London

designers mentioned the support of public and private institutions, in terms of competitions or prizes and dedicated funds available for innovative projects; the support of retail brands is specifically sought for these actions. Within the framework of cultural policies connecting the world of fashion to the world of art, young professionals are given opportunities to take part in collective shows with high visibility vis-à-vis the international press.

Secondly, dedicated institutions such as the Italian Chamber of Fashion, which has its headquarters in Milan, have proven to be ineffective in promoting a creative environment. None of our Milanese interviewees feel fully represented by this institution: the Chamber is described as dominated by the big names in the city fashion systems, and as such poorly attentive or unresponsive to the demand for innovation and to the interests of innovative young designers. An interviewee recalls that during one of the last editions of the fashion week, the Chamber could not find a date to schedule an event organized by the magazine Vogue Italy to promote young fashion designers. The event was eventually scheduled the same day of the biggest shows and consequently failed to provide international visibility to the participants. But this is reported only as one of many examples demonstrating the reasons for the negative opinion shared by all designers[1].

> *"The next fashion show will not be in Milan, but in Paris: there is more visibility there"*
> (Respondent e - Milan)

Third, the "big names" are also called to account because their behaviour has, as an unintended consequence, an adverse effect on creativity in the city. The main fashion houses increasingly tend to hire young professionals who are foreign nationals, mainly from London and Paris. To this end they have come to entertain on-going relationships with the best fashion schools in these cities; they are often invited to attend the end-of-year shows presenting the work of graduating students, the best of whom are offered work. No relationships of this kind are maintained with Milanese fashion schools, which are never mentioned in the interviews as institutions to be in touch with as potential source of new talent.

Not only do they prefer to look for young professionals in French or English schools, but they are also particularly keen to collaborate with foreign fashion universities (for example, in writing or organizing conferences and workshops) because these connections give them more visibility than that provided by Italian or Milanese institutions.

Finally, one asset is recognized to Milan: the high level of craft skills present in the city, as a result of the specific trajectory that the development of the fashion industry has taken. It is because of these skills that Milanese fashion is of excellent quality and fashion cannot be elsewhere in Italy but in Milan. The designers are perfectly aware that the reason to be in Milan is not the participation in a environment of creativity but the acquisition of those skills.

> *"I came to Milan with the intention of working here for a short while but then I understood I had to stay longer to learn to do my job well. It is not enough to be creative,*

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[1] This negative evaluation is shared also by Anne Wintour, editor of Vogue America, who accused the Italian Fashion Chamber of being in a state of paralysis (Corriere della Sera, 2007).

you must also have the skills to do things well. Schools do not always teach you this but in Milan everyone is very highly skilled and professional." (Respondent q - Milan)

"...what is presented during the fashion shows in Milan does not represent creativity, but the industry. The clothes are perfectly made and this is why fashion is in Milan." (Respondent e - Milan)

5. Discussion

Our interviews prove the importance of developing and maintaining social relations for fashion designers. It is by being connected with other people in the field that they do business, solve problems and acquire information, visibility and recognition as they build their careers. Through social relations, trust is built and collaboration is fostered. As they need to be connected in order to function successfully in their profession, time and energy are constantly invested in networking, in seeing each other and being seen in the "right" places and events.

Is face-to-face interaction important for creativity and innovation as well? Here the picture is less clear-cut. In London, sociality and creativity are more intertwined: some of the designers there are part of artistic communities which not only transcend the fashion industry but also provide a different venue for creative exchange, mutual recognition and support. Because being part of an artistic community is important, proximity assumes a greater role for designers working in this city. In point of fact, designers who emphasize the creative side of their work tend to portray creativity as the result of interaction with other creative workers, whether designers at large or artists. Conversely, designers who underplay the creative content of their work tend to portray creativity as the outcome of individual activity produced in isolation. For this last group sociality is more a medium for business than for creativity: all Milanese designers stressed the instrumental role of social relations for doing business and being successful in their profession; they do not see creativity and innovation as their paramount concern.

The maps we presented provide the basis for the following conclusions. First, they confirm—if proof were still needed—that the fashion industry, like all cultural industries, needs a central location in cities, for all the reasons already discussed in the relevant literature. Second, the fashion industry needs special places in the central city; when complemented with qualitative materials, the maps allow us to state that fashion houses are located in specific quarters within the city core. Particularly for the quarters established in the last two or three decades, high accessibility, high quality of the built environment, a certain social mix and alternative, bohemian atmosphere are the main characteristics of these places. Third, when complemented with our interviews the maps indicate, at least in London, that creativity has a clear spatial dimension. In this city we found a very high concentration of fashion houses in specific clusters; this high density implies close proximity and consequently a high potential for face-to-face interaction and building relationships of exchange, support and trust. From the interviews we know that these conditions are necessary but not sufficient for creativity to be developed, as evidenced in Milan where these conditions are met but creativity is lacking. It is also necessary that other creative workers be there, in addition to the fashion designers. It is the diversity of creative workers, when these are highly packed into limited space, that

facilitates creativity. Milan, by contrast, seems to be with proximity but without creativity; our data, however, is very limited and we need to see, for example, if a larger sample might define the clusters better or point to a more widely dispersed pattern. We are left with the evidence of the interviews and the complaints about the lack of creativity in Milan.

The problem about creativity that our interviews pointed out is not new, nor it is unknown. Complaints regarding a perceived decrease in the creativity of the Milanese designer community, along with criticism about the lack of novelty and renewal, "*always the same names and faces*", have been a constant refrain in the specialized press in recent years. It has been also suggested that creativity was never the main asset of Milanese fashion and that it ought not to be the ground on which the city competes. As argued by Morace: " *[…] in the international fashion system, Milan will never be able to produce the freshness of bottom-up trends, nor the multiple inputs that emerge from cities which are laboratories of youth cultures. Milan will continue to follow its calling in producing, through on-going experimentation, a very measured and balanced style and elegance which is the defining character of Milan fashion* (2002: 185).

According to our interviews with fashion experts, the fashion system in London has developed an increasing focus on innovation and creativity, while the fashion system in Milan has taken another route and focussed on product quality, choice and refinement of materials, and close examination of all stages of the assembly process to ensure excellence. It can be argued that the two systems have carved out two different market niches in which they thrive. Data showing growth in turnover and profits of the main fashion houses in Milan may be taken as evidence that the system continues to perform successfully regardless of the alleged lack of creativity.

Questions about its capacity to reproduce itself over time remain relevant with regard to the reliance on foreign designers and the lack of integration between the fashion houses and the training schools, which are perceived as damaging to local assets. Italian designers transfer their know-how to young foreign designers who rarely stay in the city longer than the time necessary to complete their training; as temporary guests they tend to invest little in the local scene, which is also further impoverished by their leaving. Students of Milanese, or Italian, fashion schools, have to struggle to find access to the local fashion system; as a result their potential for the development of the city's "creative field" remains largely unexploited. Moreover, the inclination of the main fashion houses to rely on foreign designers makes them less interested in the city as a creative field; it can be argued that as they become increasingly global actors, they tend to disengage from the local scene, have no interest in partnerships with local institutions and see little reason to invest locally to promote culture and creativity. If this is true, the alleged disengagement of such important actors will not be without impact on the vitality of the city.

From the point of view of the city, it is also true that Milan fashion shows, which twice a year used to be great events where the city spaces experienced the creative outcome of the social, cultural, and economic mix, are no longer so exciting and appealing. As a matter of fact, the shows are increasingly considered uninteresting by the international press: commenting on the 2007 Spring edition, the New York Times complained that 228 fashion shows had been squeezed into seven days, adding that only about five were well

worth seeing. Monopolized by the "big names" and lacking new names and faces, the shows are of little interest from the point of view of creativity and originality. The result is that, in the words of Mariuccia Mandelli (alias Krizia), "*For the first time in forty years the Milan fashion shows were deserted*" (Repubblica, 28/1/2007). Facing increasing competition from the new entries -- San Paolo, Los Angeles, Shanghai, Moscow, in Europe Barcelona and Berlin -- and from the aggressive strategies of traditional fashion cities such as Paris and New York, Milan seems unable to renew its image (Corbellini 2006).

Creativity is, obviously, only one of the many variables that contribute to the success and competitiveness of the fashion industry, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the relevance of the city's creativity for the future performance of the Milan fashion system. What is of interest is that the problems identified by the designers as having a negative effect on Milan's creativity have an impact and significance that go beyond the fashion system and are damaging the vitality of the city as a whole; it can be argued that what is missing or working poorly for the designers are the components of a creative field which, if they were to function effectively, would be beneficial to the cultural economy of the city and the region as a whole. Milan is particularly lacking a cultural policy attentive to the nourishment of cultural clusters, as well as public and private institutions able to offer forthright encouragement and support for innovative artistic production.

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