

Teaching Business Design

by Giovanni Lanzone

Since the 1950s, design has been a hallmark of Italian businesses. Founded in 1982, Milan's Domus Academy has responded to the country's leadership in this area with specialized postgraduate programs as well as research and consulting activities. Here, Giovanni Lanzone outlines the Master's of Business Design, an initiative that blends a focus on innovation and creativity with hands-on corporate experience.

In most companies, the conventional role of design is as a supporting player in the industrial production process. Unless design is recognized as more than a matter of aesthetics and process—unless it becomes part of the very bloodstream of a company—it's likely to remain that way. This is true pretty much wherever you go—unless you go to Italy. Since way back in the 1950s, the development of the culture of Italian style in that country proceeded in step with the development of Italian entrepreneurship, and this led companies and brands, especially in the fields of design and fashion, to take up a new path, one that would form the foundation of that profound innovation in the organization of the creative process and business that we refer to today as a design model, or the Made in Italy



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model. It was an enormous, widespread operation based on close collaboration between designers and entrepreneurs, and it transformed the destiny of several of Italy's most important companies.

The key to this transformation, which continued up until the 1990s, was the close connection between sociocultural scenarios and the inheritance of Italian history, between the creativity of Italy's designers, artisans, and craftsmen and the personal, open-eyed, and courageous vision of its entrepreneurs.

At the base of this process lay organization within a given region, where an entrepreneur's intuition, a designer's creativity, and the artisan's tacit knowledge all worked together in a virtuous circle. The final result of this transformation was the expansion of design-driven companies in both design and

fashion industries (Cassina and Valentino, Kartel and Gucci, Alessi and Ferragamo, to name just a few). These encounters between designers and entrepreneurs were initially casual and based on intuition, but ultimately gave birth to the use of methodologies derived from design and lifestyles (scenarios, storytelling, ethnographic observations, and cultural studies).

These activities have been matched in a novel way, with vision and project becoming a strong axis for productive organizations. The maximum stretch for a design approach implies that this axis—running from sensitivity to trends to brand vision—will become the operative source for the company, reinforcing the links among that vision and all the company’s activities. Thus the company becomes a “medium”: an organism that is sensitive to the outside world. The result of this entrepreneurial philosophy is a multiple, but coordinated, system of assets: products, stories, events, magazines, art and culture, languages, advertising, architectural spaces, new communities—a whole network of relations.

A few years ago at Domus Academy, in the wake of discussions with several students about their professional future, we started to think more about the Made in Italy model and the new professions it might spawn. Were there other routes that design and fashion students might travel, beyond the traditional design path? What if they decided to become product managers or entrepreneurs? That’s when my colleagues and I began to think that these questions

could inform our project to create a new master’s program based on the close relationship between business and design.

Domus Academy

Domus Academy was established in Milan in 1982 as both an international center for postgraduate training and as a base for research and consulting in topics including innovation and design. The institution’s research and consulting activities have developed into an important, internationally recognized reality and are conducted through Domus Academy Research and Consulting (DARC).

Training is conducted through eight master courses (grouped in four departments: design, architecture, fashion, and business) and is realized through the collaboration and support of premiere companies. This offers Domus Academy students access to an experience with real-world production and gives them the contexts in which they will have to work and establish themselves professionally.

Domus Academy is truly an international school; we receive entries from all over the world. Each year we welcome students from many countries; this year, for example, 44 nationalities were represented. ■



Fashion and business design students work together during a workshop for the Deborah cosmetic brand.

Business Design at Domus

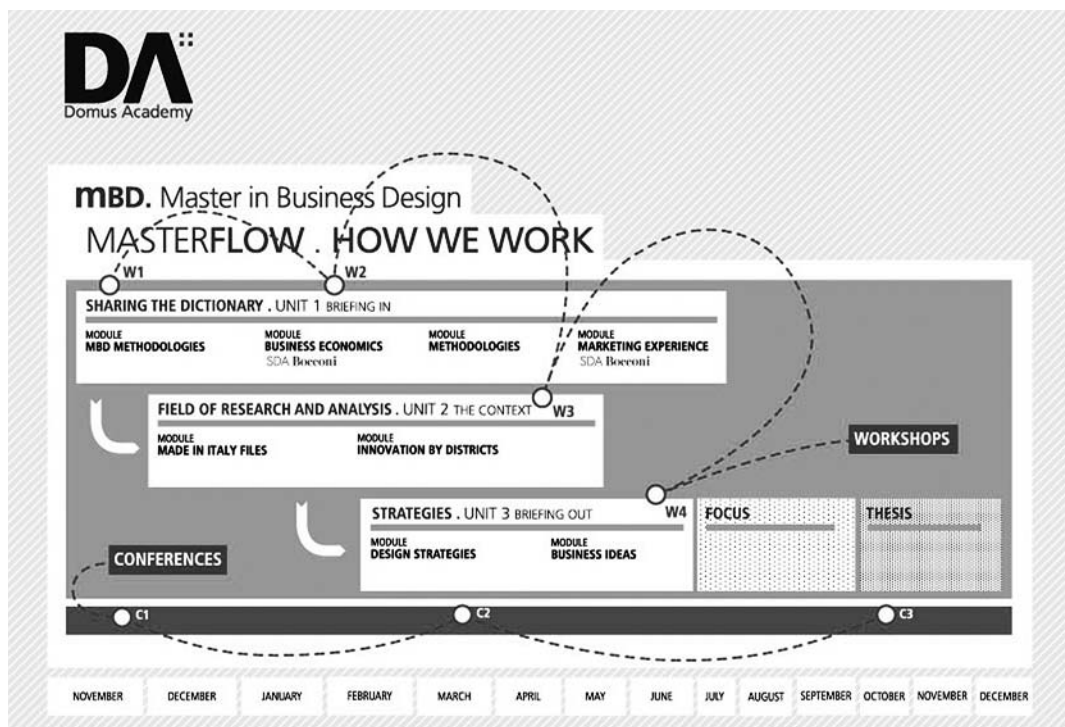
To build up companies or to invent businesses with the head in the clouds and the feet well rooted to the ground. This idea is the driving force behind our Business Design program. It's a concept not just for design companies but for firms like Motorola, RyanAir, Camper, Absolut Vodka, Illy, and Nokia. They may demonstrate this idea in different practical solutions (some more product-oriented, some more process-oriented, and others more oriented toward enabling communities or using art and culture as a means of communication), but all of them strive to combine creativity and business, lifestyle and production, aesthetics and communication.

And so it is with our Business Design curriculum, which aims to redesign the training of business management through the inclusion of specific design skills. The aim of the course is to inculcate in the students the lessons of the Italian design model, in which the passion for design meets the product in a business practice; it is also meant to give them the capability to understand the behavior of new social groups (lifestyles), as well as the new languages of creativity: arts, design, unconventional marketing, storytelling, and movies. All this is taught by using as sample and support the history of Made

in Italy. We open this hidden laboratory to help our students understand not just product quality but also the inner nature of the process—from talent scouting to knowledge management, from strategic vision to the building of a creative community of practices, from marketing innovation to networking capabilities. Understanding the whole process in detail is the key condition of sharing values and the only condition that allows us to repeat the process in new territories: food, for example, or perhaps urban furniture, energy plants, transportation (and not only automotive) and the crucial issue of services.

This is, in extreme synthesis, what we mean by “head in the clouds.” But, of course, to aim all this soft and creative material toward the goal of profitability and consistency in the market, we need a solid grounding in business. That's why we began a partnership this year with SDA Bocconi University. The collaboration combines traditional design skills and creativity with the pragmatic richness of business management and shows how both contribute to the education of a business designer.

Our MBD students are chosen on a curricular and portfolio basis from two main backgrounds: design and fashion graduates, and students of economics and administration. Every year, the



An overview of the phases and activities involved in the Master's in Business Design program at Domus Academy

school provides a scholarship contest; this year's was Business Innovation and required participants to develop a project analyzing an innovative company from their country of origin.

The program is divided generally into four units. The first is all about methodology, and is where we develop subjects in business economics and marketing. The second unit covers research and analysis and is where we implement the Made in Italy model and the innovation subjects. During the third unit, we develop design strategies and business ideas. At the end of the MBD process, students are involved in a focus project, which helps them to experience the work done inside several design-oriented companies or inside the strategic and advanced departments of big companies.

The focus project

An important part of the Master's in Business Design program is the focus period, during which our students have the chance to spend three months working inside a partner company to expand the knowledge gained during the educational phase of the program. In this way, they can fully experience design and strategic issues inside a corporation. In past years, our students have had experiences in companies such as 3M, Autogrill, Elica, Giugiaro Architecture, Norman Group, Moreschi, Pininfarina Extra, and Studio

Giovannoni. After this phase is completed, the students go on to develop their master's thesis, which can draw from the same area of interest experienced during the focus period, or can involve a new field of research.

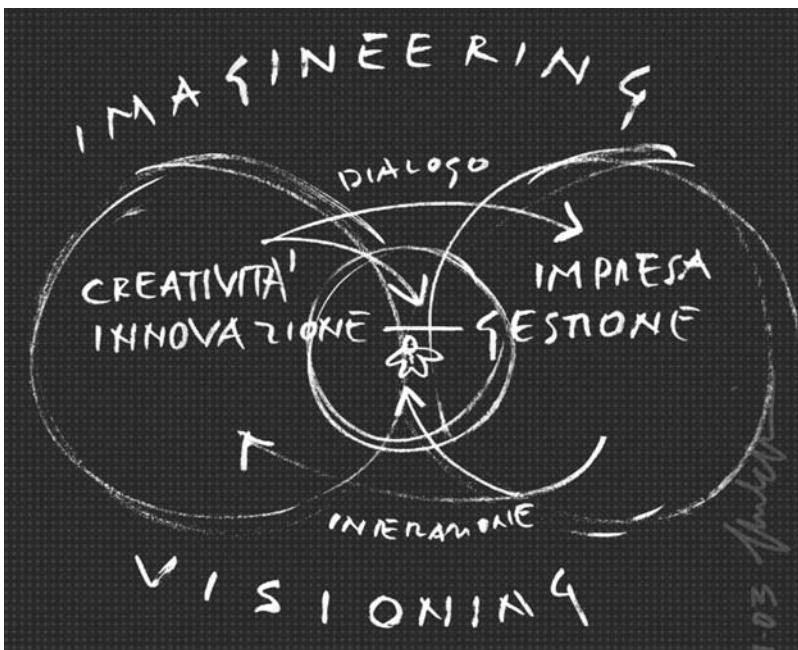
Workshops

Our educational platform is based on a five-workshop structure, carrying out research and analysis in close relationship with clients and companies. These workshops last about a month; they begin with a brief from a real client and end with design concepts or scenario drafts. The aim is to learn by doing.

During the first two years of the MBD program, for instance, we held workshops with Pininfarina Extra, a leading product design company, with the aim of sharing brand values and competences in several new directions, from hotel management to charge barriers for parking congestion. We call this research brand wedding; its aim is to connect well-established brands with new objects and territories. We held another major workshop with Moreschi, the venerable Italian leather brand, with the aim of doing a rejuvenation of its product range and brand identity.

This year, the program is putting on workshops with Deborah, an Italian cosmetic brand interested in inventing new items or accessories for its seasonal collections, and with Piquadro, a company known for its leather briefcases, which hopes to extend its line of products farther into the world of travel. Thus our students would get some insights into the issues of brand extension.

Another workshop, the first for the 2006 to 2007 program, was The Made in Italy Files. It was developed for the Fondazione Valore Italia, a governmental organization, by the MBD design program in collaboration with our colleagues teaching in the Master's in Interior and Living Design program. With a total of 57 students coming from 23 countries, its final aim was to design the concept of the Made in Italy



Giulio Ceppi likes to represent the idea of businesses with their "heads in the clouds and feet on the ground" with this map.

Museum, which will be housed in the Palazzo della Civiltà building in Rome.

During the first weeks of Made in Italy, students attended lectures on art, architecture, design, fashion, cinema, and food culture. Andrea Branzi, Francesco Morace, and Italo Rota came to lecture. The students had the chance to visit the location of the future museum and to meet entrepreneurs representing “the Italian model”—from Elisa Astori, the vice president of Driade, to Andrea Ferraresi, head of the design department for Ducati Motors, to Franco Romani, the director of new projects for Perini Navi. The MBD students created an instrument (a consistency map) to analyze the Made in Italy experience and to target the most likely users of the Made in Italy Museum. Their aim was to help the designers to select a concept for the museum in relation to its contents and likely usage, after which the interior designers were able to develop 10 new architectural shapes for the future museum.

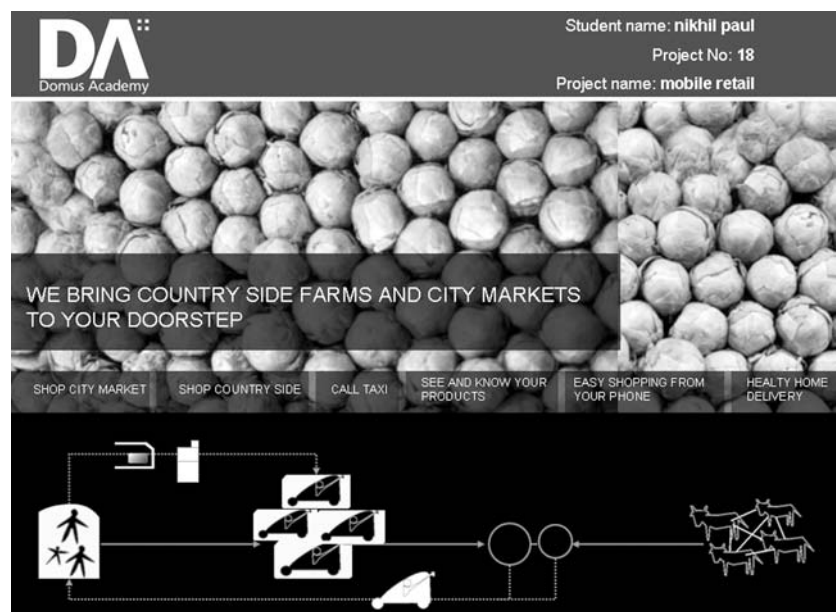
Another workshop, My Ideal Business, was a project in which students, after many lessons on forecasting and visioning techniques from the field of anthropology, as well as design, had to devise a personal and (they hoped) innovative business. This task paralleled work being done by students in the Master’s in Urban Management program. Those students had been asked to imagine the city of the future. Their output differed, but the two sets of students shared in the same classroom lectures and exercises.

The idea of sharing knowledge and practices with students in other master’s programs is especially relevant for our business design students, because it offers them more experience in what feels like a “real” work field—a real business arena in which they have to integrate, discuss, and compete with other personalities with different skills and attitudes. The workshop with Deborah, for instance, was challenging because business students had to work in mixed teams with fashion designers, who are the most instinctive and intu-

itive personalities they will likely ever face in the business arena. So we had discussions, rage, passion between two completely different methodologies, but also great energy and a great learning experience.

The key concepts of our workshops are:

- To use, inside the inner territory of design (furniture and fashion, for example), or abroad in the hostile territories of traditional industries (developing countries, old services) the seductive qualities (comfort, aesthetics, emotion) that design has historically developed
- To add the soft qualities of new territories and cultures to the established culture of design (urban remix), thus using a multicultural heritage to enhance the Western tradition of industrial and service design
- To use design to support social and community projects in developing, as well as developed, countries
- To use design as a medium for the transfer of knowledge in fields that are well established in Western countries to other countries
- To use design as a fertile environment for developing technological services and digital interfaces



2007 MBD student Nikhil Paul’s “My Ideal Business” workshop “Mobil Retail” project was a concept to bring country products to city doorsteps.

Coming Attractions

In September 2006, we hosted in Milan the Management, Innovation, and Design conference, featuring Italian entrepreneurs from the Assolombarda, the largest territorial association belonging to Italy's entrepreneurial system. Our great collaborator was Roger Martin, the dean of the Rotman School of Management in Toronto. The Rotman School has also chosen, as we have, to re-design the business approach of MBA schools—a new view of creative and integrative thinking, the so-called D-school approach.

Another great school involved in this process of re-thinking business and design is the Institute of Design of Stanford University. The people at that school believe, as we do, that design thinking is a catalyst for innovation and for bringing new things into the world. We both use design thinking to drive multidisciplinary innovation.

During the next year, we will start a brand-new course in Rome—a master's degree in Cultural Experience Design and Management. This course will train students to become managers of cultural experiences—professionals able to give back proper value to the artistic and cultural heritage of their native lands, again combining design skills with management abilities.

Summary

Business design celebrates the idea of the project as a focus and a key driver of the business—the belief that business is not made for design but through design, the idea that design can work everywhere, in hostile, as well as friendly, territories. Where design is a new idea, our graduates aim to bring in a culture of design; where design is already established, they try to find and organize new and profound values, new relationships, and new paths among the sensibilities and activities unveiled by the world of design. Their task is to understand the connections among them. ■

Reprint #07183LAN69