

Italy's Milanese Renaissance

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The architecturally daring Milan Fair Complex catalyzes a new economic era as one of Europe's largest construction projects.

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ANCIENT HISTORY MEETS MODERNITY IN EUROPE'S Nuovo Polo Fiera Milano—the New Milan Fair Complex designed by architect Massimiliano Fuksas. Positioned between Rho and Pero, two Italian communities on the northwest edge of Italy's second-largest metropolis, this ultramodern exhibition space is the country's single largest real estate development undertaken in 50 years.

Spanning 494 acres (200 ha), this transformation of a former AgipPetroli refinery site was completed in 900 days, overcoming challenges created by the project's physical, economic, organizational, and political size.

"This is an incredible story, not only for the enormous expanse of land that was reclaimed, but for all the buildings that were then constructed upon it, the five or six roads needed to serve the Nuovo Polo, the subway that was extended, the freight railway that was built, and the high-speed train connection between Milan and Turin that was realized," says Gabriele Albertini, former mayor of Milan. "[This] complex national jigsaw puzzle [was accomplished] in such a short time, showing that Italy is able to construct innovative works on time and within budget."

The original 108-acre (44-ha) Fiera di Milano, also known as "the city of trade," was established in Milan's hinterlands in 1923—now the site of Piazza d'Armi at the locus of Milan's bustling modern downtown. Less than a

mile away sit two city landmarks—the Piazza del Duomo and Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. After about 70 percent of the Fiera's pavilions were destroyed during World War II, the site began to expand in response to Milan's rapid postwar boom. By the mid-1990s, increased traffic congestion, aging buildings, and a location too constricted for modern adaptation meant that the site demanded serious reevaluation. These and other concerns were beginning to damage the Fiera's reputation for excellence and its ability to meet Europe's trade demands.

For years, political leaders vacillated between transforming the site and relocating the entire trade show complex outside Milan. A lack of access to larger, more functional quarters required to attract higher-quality business had become a worsening problem. Further, the city's inability to reduce the strain on Milan's delicate infrastructure and the increasingly dense traffic made the choice of a site beyond the city center inevitable.

To guide redevelopment of the old site and oversee development of a new trade fair quarter outside the boundaries of Milan, Ente Autonomo Fiera Internazionale di Milano, the original corporation and manager of the property, was transformed into a private foundation by the regional government of Lombardy.

Fondazione Fiera Milano, a private economic body and controlling shareholder of the Fiera Milano Group—



Nuovo Polo Fiera Milano is the largest exhibition space in Europe. A brownfield site in the Milan suburbs, formerly home to an oil refinery, required a two-phase land and groundwater remediation that lasted two and a half years.

the country's most important events organization—was established in early 2000 to supervise and manage corporate operations. The following year, Sviluppo Sistema Fiera SpA was formed to serve as the engineering and contracting controller-manager for the group's large construction projects.

The foundation, whose operations are entirely self-financed, was assigned the task of constructing Italy's new trade exhibition area, including establishment of property and infrastructure systems at the Nuovo Polo, the new complex, plus the construction and subsequent reorganization of the old Milanese fairgrounds, or Polo Urbano, still situated in central Milan. This singular organizational approach, the first of its kind in Italy in mission, size, and organizational structure, has a portfolio of more than \$1.03 billion (€750 million) of investment.

Guided by a new governing entity, the search began for a strategically located, unoccupied site. A location large enough to accommodate a huge new trade show complex and related facilities in a highly industrial area—and connected to Milan and major international highways—was the goal, explains Claudio Artusi, managing director of Sviluppo Sistema Fiera.



Ultimately, a suitable location—a massive brownfield site in the suburban communities of Rho and Pero, located on the thoroughfare connecting downtown Milan to Malpensa airport—was purchased from Agip in October 2001 by Fondazione Fiera Milano. Despite the site's need for extensive remediation, the foundation's plan to develop the new trade fair quarter ensued. In addition, two-thirds of the old Milanese location was sold, and one-third retained for more specialized trade shows and conventions.

Of the 21.5 million-square-foot (2 million-sq-m) site, 10.8 million square feet (1 million sq m) was contaminated during its use by a large oil refinery. A two-and-a-half-year, two-phase, owner-driven land and groundwater remediation operation was undertaken—the first lot

completed in 2001, and the second in June 2003 after construction had begun. In October 2002, ground was broken on the New Milan Fair Complex as part of an expanded 108 million-square-foot (10 million-sq-m) portfolio of citywide urban transformations under construction in Milan.

After winning an international competition for the work in July 2002, Fuksas began work on the master plan. That October, Fondazione Fiera Milano laid the foundation stone. “In March 2003, [the site] was just a vast derelict wasteland,” says Fuksas. “Then everything moved very fast. By March 2004, the state of progress was evident, [with the] work almost finished.”

Today, the state-of-the-art Nuovo Polo Fair Complex—the largest exhibition space in Europe and one of the most ambitious construction projects in the world—supports 10.8 million square feet (1 million sq m) of

structures with 3.7 million square feet (345,000 sq m) of new exhibition space, producing \$5.5 billion (€4 billion) of revenue annually.

Fiera Milano is also the first trade fair center to be listed on the country’s stock exchange. A pool of privately held banks led by Banca Intesa contributed \$1.3 billion (945 million lira) to finance the exhibition and congress facilities, two hotels, commercial and leisure activities, and a parking lot for 10,000 cars, says Angelo Nespoli, land planning and real estate project manager at Sviluppo Sistema Fiera. To repay the loan, Fondazione Fiera Milano sold 2.7 million square feet (255,000 sq m) of the old Fiera property, keeping 2 million square feet (185,000 sq m) for the property’s recurring exhibitor rental fees.

The foundation’s decision to hire an independent general contractor—Astaldi-Pizzarotti & Co.—Vianini Lavori—to build and manage Nuovo Polo under a five-

The Fiera’s eight pavilions are developed around an elongated central corridor covered by an undulating glazed-glass roof.



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year commitment was a first for Italy. As the originator of the project, “[we] saw the transformation not so much from a design and engineering point of view, but as the management of a complex system involving the community, the territory, the environment, politics, and the authorities,” explains Luigi Roth, chairman and chief executive of Fondazione Fiera Milano.

“[This was] an absolutely innovative process for Italy, which, it must be said, was set in a favorable social and political environment ready for change, thanks to the

counterpoint to Milan’s skyline and a glittering symbol of Europe’s newest economic engine.

The Fiera Milano’s eight pavilions—six of which are single level, while two span two levels—are developed around an elongated 4,300-foot (1,300-m) central corridor covered by a 500,000-square-foot (47,000-sq-m) undulating glazed glass roof, custom engineered and manufactured in Germany. Its complex mosaic, made up of 40,000 one-of-a-kind triangular glass panels, mirrors the distant line of the Alps.



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The light-filled central connector is framed by walls of glass and steel. Ample parking is fully integrated with the region’s transportation system via road and underground access to Milan’s city center and the Urbano Polo, or City Complex.

contribution of people who had the capacity to understand it and to look ahead. This is an intangible value, difficult to quantify, but it made this operation the right one at the right time.”

The design of Nuovo Polo di Milano’s singular structure—conceived as a symbol of beauty rooted in Italy’s past—is centered on the idea of linking the complex’s two main entrances in a visual nod to the surrounding terrain. With a surface area of 5.7 million square feet (530,000 sq m), Fuksas’s monumental design acts as a

This architectural landmark—a veiled covering, or “sail,” that is subject to constant atmospheric adjustments for wind and temperature variations—rises to nearly 118 feet (36 m). Near its center, the structure’s crystalline roof thrusts skyward into a peaklike form—a dramatic wayfinding gesture towering over the complex’s central atrium and fondly known as “Fuksas’s volcano.”

Trade fair halls, interspersed with green spaces and open areas for social interaction, spiral off the light-filled central connector framed by walls of glass and steel that

reflect abundant natural light and nearby water features. Ample parking is fully integrated with the region's transportation system via road and underground access to Milan's city center and the Urbano Polo, or City Complex, ensuring that the exhibition system has an impact throughout Europe.

"Our company was very aware of the importance of the architecture to the project," says Artusi, who was responsible for having the project completed on time and on budget. "Someone told us that if the architecture

trees both inside and throughout the outdoor parking lots offer a variety of amenities for tenants and visitors alike. "The space is beautiful because when you leave the exhibition to go to other areas, you stop being a business person and you want to feel pleasure." Green spaces inside and around the new complex include two large parks linked by a 2 million-square-foot (180,000-sq-m) landscaped corridor.

"The winning formula was to pursue beauty, emblematic qualities, and aesthetic impact, besides



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is beautiful, it would distract from the business. But we believed the architecture would increase the business, and it has. Fuksas succeeded in achieving both function and beauty. Everyone was surprised by the architecture and the dramatic business increase from 70 to 90 exhibitions within two years. Further, we've received visitors from all over the world."

The space is open, with few structural pillars, which is better for exhibitors, points out Nespoli. A multitude of shops, showrooms, offices, and more than 5,000

functionality," notes Artusi. "We said to ourselves, 'It doesn't cost that much more to make something attractive than to make something ugly.' I am still convinced of this, even more than I was back then."

Construction of the complex involved more than 9,300 workers from across the globe, with as many as 2,200 working at one time. Accommodations for the 900 people living at the site included multilingual movies, entertainment, sports, dining, and more. Safety was a critical focus during construction, Nespoli reports,

The New Milan Fair Complex has interspersed green spaces and open areas for social interaction. The roof, made up of 40,000 one-of-a-kind triangular glass panels, spans the corridor's full length.

The design of the fairground structure acts as a counterpoint to Milan's skyline.



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as was sustainability. The remediation process was accomplished through a new bacteria-based technology using massive ovens to “bake” the contaminated dirt.

According to Italian leaders, the new exhibition space has relaunched the Lombard region’s socioeconomic system, which accounts for more than 27 percent of Italy’s gross domestic product (GDP) and 9 percent of the European Union’s GDP. As one of the main motors driving urban and economic development for the metropolitan area and country, this project is expected to carry the region into the future.

The new fairground structure and site “bring together modernity, efficiency, complete environmental sustainability, and unrivaled beauty—difficult to take in with a single glance,” comments Roth. “No less important, it is also an economic platform that will bring to Italy, the area, and the whole region increased wealth, development, and quality of life.”

Meeting the urgent need to give Milan and the nation an exposition space able to compete with the biggest trade fair centers around the world in terms of functionality, space, services, and technology was the foundation’s mandate, Roth says.

“The fair no longer looks like a fort, but is something alive,” comments Fuksas. “What is a building? It is the

matrix of a city. This is truly a city within a city—a model city. We must inject more energy into the city, and we can do so only if we have a clear idea of what we want to create for the future. This is what we have tried to express.”

Noted European landscape architect Andreas Kipar praises the new complex. “Fuksas’s Fiera has fashioned a new interactive landscape, the impact of which is immediate and explosive,” he says. “It is up to the citizens to make it their own and become the protagonists of a true metropolitan renaissance.” **U**

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(The New Milan Fair Complex was one of the winning developments in the 2006 ULI Awards for Excellence: Europe competition.)