

5Human-Centered Urban Design through the rehabilitation of public spaces in Milans historic districts

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Abstract This article analyzes adapted public spaces within the historical districts of Milan—„Vesta“and „Apple Piazza Liberty“—in the context of architectural strategies that transform the city into a human-oriented and healthy urban environment. „Urban Health“ has become one of the key priorities of contemporary architectural practice. [2] [1] Growing evidence confirms that the physical structure of buildings and public spaces directly influences human psychological, emotional, and social well-being. In this regard, Milan represents a particularly significant case study. Two distinct yet conceptually interconnected examples—“Apple Piazza Liberty”, where a historic square is reinterpreted as a contemporary urban amphitheater (Foster + Partners, 2018) [3], and “Vesta”, a semi-public social platform located along the historic Brera street (Belingardi, 2022) —share a common architectural logic, a new architectural paradigm, respect for the cultural-historical context, spatial strategies, and a tangible impact on urban well-being.

A comparative analysis of “Vesta” (designed by Stefano Belingardi) and “Apple Piazza Liberty” (designed by Foster + Partners) reveals their strong conceptual relationship with urban health, specifically within the framework of healthy peacemaking and urban well-being [4] [5]. Both projects exemplify contemporary urban approaches in which architectural concepts actively support social well-being. In both cases, spatial-volumetric structure, transparency, openness, visual and acoustic connections with nature, and location within a dense urban context create intermediate, restful indoor–outdoor spaces—a pause between the “city” and the “human.” [1]

Such spaces play a crucial role in mental health by enabling psychological relief from the

accelerated rhythm of urban life, fostering a sense of refuge, facilitating informal and spontaneous social interactions, and encouraging exploration and discovery. [5] The analysis demonstrates that despite differing functions (restaurant and store), both spaces are united by shared principles: human-scale design, openness, microclimatic comfort, and the promotion of social interaction. Both projects achieve a balance between history and contemporaneity, prioritizing physical, social, and mental well-being.

Thus, Milan’s contemporary urban transformations are not solely the result of large-scale projects but also of the introduction of a new architectural paradigm within historical districts through small-scale public spaces that reinforce the relationship between public space, public life, and urban health (peacemaking / urban well-being). [5]

Key words: Healthy Urbanism, Public space, mental health, Scale, Rehabilitation.

Introduction

Urban Health and Contemporary Challenges. The main challenge for 21st century cities is urban health, or the city's ability to create: a healthy psychological environment, platforms for social interactions, an ecologically sustainable environment, and spaces adapted to the human scale [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) Healthy Cities Framework emphasizes that the physical characteristics of the urban environment – connection to nature, noise, lighting, accessibility, opportunities for social interaction – determine people's well-being. [5] With the growth of the population of Tbilisi, "urban health" has become one of the most important problems. Despite the fact that

Tbilisi is actively renewing the existing infrastructure (parks, squares, roads), and carrying out rehabilitation and reconstruction works in historical districts, each intervention is fragmentary and lacks systematicity. Accordingly, the issue requires research, sharing of international experience, and a new architectural paradigm in order to achieve a "human-friendly city." [1]

In the context of urban health, "Apple Piazza Liberty" and "Vesta" in the historic center of Milan represent important research objects. Both are conceptually conceived as open-social spaces that create an environment appropriate for urban health in the historic districts of the city. [6].

Main Part

Urban health encompasses three main dimensions — physical, mental, and social well-being, which are directly related to the quality of city planning, the availability of open public spaces, ecology, and architectural solutions [5]. Architecture, as a formative agent of space, shapes the environment in which people conduct their everyday lives. Research in neuroarchitecture confirms that spatial configuration directly affects neural responses, attention restoration, and patterns of social interaction. As architect Steven Holl argues, "contemporary architecture must account for human movement through layered spaces in which light, material, geometry; color; smell, wind, and the sound of water intersect." [7] Consequently, urban infrastructure exerts a profound influence on physical and mental health as well as social well-being. Contributing factors to urban stress include the lack of parks and pedestrian spaces, noisy and chaotic environments, high building density, and traffic congestion. The existence of inclusive, accessible and multifunctional public spaces

plays an important role in improving social well-being.

Milan is particularly noteworthy in this regard. This study examines two distinct yet conceptually related examples: Apple Piazza Liberty, where a historic square is reimagined as a contemporary urban amphitheater, and Vesta, a semi-public social platform situated on the historic Brera Street. Both projects share architectural logic, a new paradigm of intervention, respect for cultural-historical context, spatial strategies, and measurable influence on urban well-being. (Foster+Partners, 2018; Belingardi, 2022)

Research Methodology and Objectives: The research methodology includes architectural-typological analysis, spatial and social observation, and comparative analysis. The primary objective is to identify architectural solutions that foster human-oriented environments and respond effectively to urban health strategies.

Apple Piazza Liberty (Figure 1.) represents an architectural paradigm that transforms a historic square into a contemporary socio-cultural amphitheater (Foster + Partners, 2018). Completed in 2018 by Foster + Partners, with design direction by Apple's Chief Design Officer Jonathan Ive, the project is located along the extension of Corso Vittorio Emanuele within Milan's dense cultural and tourist network. The site previously lacked a strong identity, with surrounding development primarily dating to the early 20th century. A rectilinear glass volume bearing the brand's emblem, functioning simultaneously as an entrance portal and a fountain, defines the architectural expression of the Apple Store. Its surface dynamically reflects the historical characteristics of the site while emphasizing the contrast between contemporary structure and historic urban landscape. The visual perception of the structure changes throughout the day. (Figure 2,)

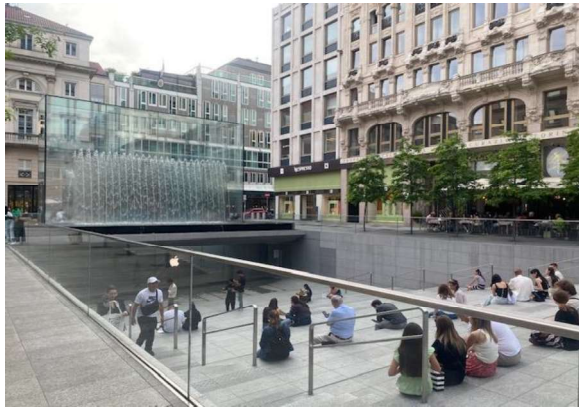


Fig.1

A sensitive and soft microclimate creates around it, contributing to a calm and tranquil atmosphere. Another important element: the effect of the material used - the stone cladding made of traditional Lombard stone Beola Grigia creates a new intervention with the material historical language of Milan. The new square responds to the principles of mental health: water, as an element of nature, reduces stress caused by urban density, regulates the microclimate, and partially suppresses urban noise. (Figure 3, 4) The constant sound of water balances the acoustic environment. The accessible amphitheater supports psychosocial well-being by welcoming users of all social groups.



Fig.2



Fig.3

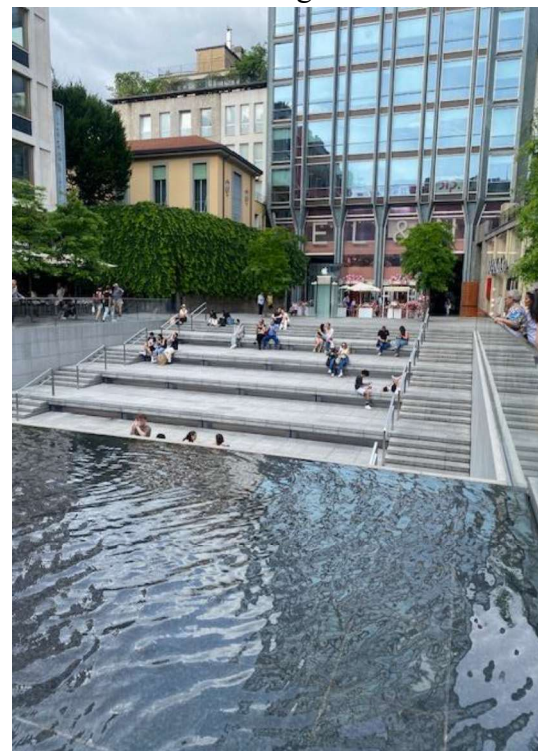


Fig.4

The building does not dominate the development but is of a human-friendly scale, transparent and in delicate dialogue with the environment. However, its architectural forms - strict geometry - contrast with the facade solutions of the buildings surrounding the square. The main space of the building is developed on the lower level of the square. (Figure 5, 6)



Fig. 5

An open, recessed amphitheater connects the upper and lower levels.

Apple Piazza Liberty is a visually stable environment. Minimalist shapes and the sound of water create a psycho-emotionally less stressful environment, which promotes psychological well-being.



Fig. 6

Vesta is a contemporary, multi-level, visually permeable structure located within one of Milan's most historic and rich cultural districts. Its name references the Roman goddess Vesta, while its primary material—travertine—is characteristic of Milanese architecture, firmly anchoring the project within the city's historical memory. (Figure 6, 7) (Belingardi, 2022)



Fig.6

Vesta functions not merely as an architectural object with a defined program but as a social, emotional, and multifunctional space that activates residual urban voids between buildings. (Figure 8) Through architectural means, it establishes a harmonious relationship with the heavily touristic pedestrian Brera Street. The elegant stair-ramp operates simultaneously as an entrance and a social platform—an inclusive, open meeting space. The project represents a delicate dialogue between history and contemporaneity.

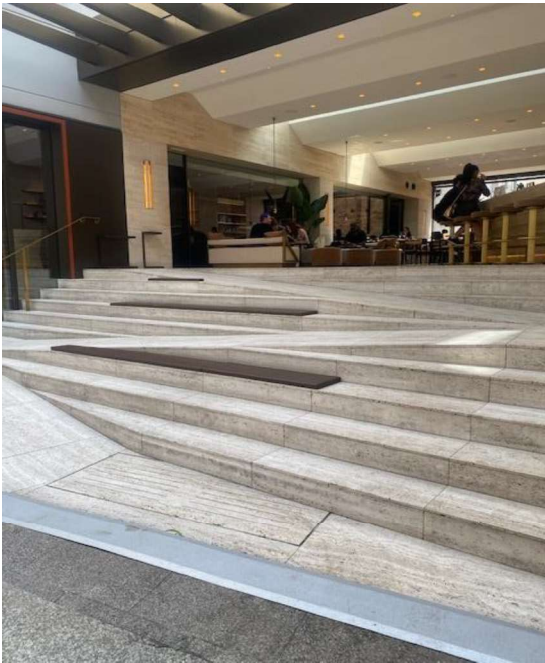


Fig. 7



Fig. 8

The stair-podium is the only visible architectural gesture, acting not as a conventional entrance but as an “urban stage”—a small public space that restores urban atmosphere and merges the rhythm of street life with the intimacy of the restaurant below. By locating primary functions on lower levels, the intervention avoids disrupting the historic street rhythm and instead enhances it. Despite its contemporary structure, the building increases psychological comfort

and generates an urban health effect through the activation of social interaction.

Comparative Analysis and Critical Aspects

The comparative analysis of Vesta and Apple Piazza Liberty clearly demonstrates their conceptual alignment with urban health principles, healthy peacemaking and urban well-being (Project for Public Spaces, 2016[4]). Both projects exemplify contemporary urban approaches in which architectural ideas actively contribute to social well-being. In both cases, spatial-volumetric composition, transparency, openness, sensory connection with nature, and integration within dense urban contexts create intermediate, restorative spaces between the city and the individual. However, despite their positive impact, critical aspects must be acknowledged: commercial pressure, gradual loss of spatial neutrality, and issues of equality and accessibility require careful consideration in future development.

Conclusions

Milan’s contemporary urban transformations are not solely the result of large-scale projects such as Piazza Gae Aulenti or CityLife Piazza Tre Torri, nor initiatives like Piazza Aperte, which convert car-oriented spaces into pedestrian public areas. Rather, they reflect the introduction of a new architectural paradigm within historic districts through small-scale public spaces that strengthen the relationship between public space, public life, and urban health (placemaking / urban well-being). Projects such as the rehabilitation of the Sant’Ambrogio area—creating a network of cultural, historical, and religious pedestrian streets and the human-scaled green corridor of Porta Magenta — demonstrate how contemporary interventions can preserve historic structures while enhancing urban well-being.

Although Apple Piazza Liberty and Vesta differ in terms of location, conceptual, functional program, architectural approach, and scale, they

share a common urban significance. Each project creates a Human – centered environment in which architecture, landscape, movement, and social activities are integrally and hybrid intertwined. Both interventions play a significant role within the city is established urban structure by contributing to the formation of multifunctional public spaces aligned with the principles of urban health and contemporary peacemaking.

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