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PLAYING MIND GAMES

**An investigation into how university design can enhance
academic performance without compromising mental health**

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Reflection

1. Thesis Topic, Master Track & Master Programme

This project aligns closely with the theme of the Complex Projects Studio due to its multidisciplinary approach and the intricate balance it seeks to create between mental health and performance influenced by architecture. It is part of an overarching initiative involving one of eight buildings in Milan, which connects with seven other public building projects. Each of these projects aims to enhance the visibility of the city's events while avoiding the "Disneyfication" of Milan, as identified through extensive cultural research.

Furthermore, the project's scale, scope, and ambition, combined with a commitment to ethical and inclusive design, reflect the professional standards expected of a Master of Science in Architecture.

2. Research & Design

The research and design process in this project were deeply interdependent, continuously informing and reshaping each other. The design emerged as a natural extension of the research, with core principles drawn from environmental psychology and methods of including neurodiversity in architecture, and the relationship between mental health and performance, guiding every design decision. Abstract theoretical concepts resulted from the literature review resulted in concepts that defined sustainable academic performance, which later were translated into tangible spatial arrangements, where circulation, zoning, and atmosphere responded to different cognitive and emotional needs. This ensured a dynamic balance between social and individual, high-stimulation and low-stimulation environments, creating architecture that is both monumental and accessible, formal and informal, reflecting the dual needs of both client and users.

Conversely, the act of designing revealed limitations within existing workplace and learning space paradigms, encouraging further reflection and refinement of the research. One of the most notable example is the challenge of reconciling desk-centric environments with the goal of inclusivity and sustainable performance, which proved to be not matching. It became evident that, despite technological advancements enabling more flexible modes of working, spatial design still clings to outdated models based on fixed desks and rigid layouts. Once the assumption of desk-bound productivity was abandoned, the project truly began to embody the concept of sustainable academic performance, enabling users to reclaim control over their environment.

The research also underscored a systemic issue in university design: a one-size-fits-all approach that caters primarily to neurotypical users, often stressing performance at the expense of community, rest, and individual variation. By distancing the project and design guidelines from this traditional model toward a more experience-driven and needs-responsive spatial strategy, the design started finally embodying the principles of a space that emphasises sustainable academic performance. Thus, the reciprocal relationship between research and design not only strengthened the project's conceptual clarity but also grounded it in a transformative architectural outcome.

3. Way of Working

Grounding the investigation in a thorough literature review on environmental psychology and the intersection of mental health and performance provided a solid theoretical foundation, revealing the need to reconsider traditional assumptions about educational and working spaces, as well as desk-based academic work. The abstract nature of the research, however, posed challenges in the early design stages, as the resulting initial brief lacked the specificity required for the



Figure 1: Identity of Milan Collage

detailed development of initial massing iterations. This led to numerous iterations that remained surface-level in terms of spatial articulation. Nonetheless, the inclusion of qualitative data through interviews and surveys significantly enhanced the depth and relevance of the project by directly informing the design with insights into user needs. This brought a concrete side to the previously only theoretical approach to users' needs at Bocconi University. This methodological integration of theory, qualitative and quantitative survey results, and iterative design allowed for a more nuanced and ethically informed exploration of architectural solutions that support sustainable academic performance. Overall, while the abstract and exploratory nature of the project introduced complexity, the chosen methods proved valuable in navigating these challenges and reinforcing the project's relevance and societal impact.

4. Societal Value

This project holds significant societal value, as it addresses the growing tension between performance-driven academic environments and the rising importance of mental health and well-being. It addresses the current pendulum motion our society is going through from the obsession with performance at the cost of mental health, also regarded as "hustle culture", to the increased emphasis on mental health at the cost of performance, embodied by the "wellness culture" movement. Through sustainable academic performance, a new vision aiming to balance achievement and well-being, this project challenges conventional definitions of academic success and advocates for learning environments that support diverse cognitive and emotional needs. The scope of the research is interdisciplinary, integrating insights from environmental psychology, architecture, and education while using Milan as a culturally rich yet globally relevant case study. Its implications are broad, proposing a shift in university design practices from standardized space following a "one-size-fits-all" approach to spaces, performance-oriented spaces, to adaptable environments

that empower individuals to choose the environment that best suits their needs. Ethically, the project promotes inclusivity, challenging the notion of design made for the neurotypical individual, and prioritizes human dignity and mental health over institutional metrics, aligning architectural design with contemporary values of equity, diversity, and well-being.

5. Transferability of the Project's Results

While the project is designed specifically in Milan, considering its climate, site, and client conditions, its overarching idea extends well beyond this context. In essence, this project is not as much about Milan, as it is about challenging the conventions of traditional approaches to working and studying places. It seeks to reintegrate the human element into large-scale architectural compositions, where it often becomes overlooked in the design process.

Recognizing that users' needs significantly differ not only among various groups but also among individuals at different times of the day is crucial. By centring architecture around the individuality of the human experience and needs, aspects such as the environmental effects on one's mental health or performance cannot be ignored. However, placing too much emphasis on one of these aspects inevitably leads to the deterioration of the other. These elements are tightly interconnected, yet research tends to be divided, often focusing exclusively on one topic at the expense of the other.

The goal of this project is to achieve a balance between architecture that promotes mental well-being and architecture that enhances performance while adapting the design to the individuality of the users. Due to this, the project is highly transferable, as it is a mere example of how these principles can be applied in a working and learning environment.



Figure 2: Ambition Collage



Figure 3: "Addressing the needs of the individual", Thesis Topic Collage

Where to from here? How does the future of working and learning spaces look like?

This project allowed me to explore an intricate subject that I had previously been interested in within a generous time frame for articulating the research idea. It broadened my understanding of architecture's impact on user's well-being and performance and highlighted how outdated and standardized architectural practices have become. I often found myself needing to consciously detach from traditional approaches to designing workspaces, frequently asking myself, "What do people really need?" rather than simply considering design practices for certain types of spaces.

It highlighted the essence of what public architecture could be: a space designed for people, tailored to meet the diverse needs of its users, rather than a building providing a mere empty space with a specified capacity for employees. It became clear through my research that productivity is not enhanced by confining individuals to a closed space for eight hours of concentrated work, as often working spaces are designed. Instead, it thrives in an environment filled with diverse subspaces that cater to various needs, ranging from social interaction and collaborative efforts to resting, taking breaks, or working independently. Therefore, in response to my question, "Where to from here?": the focus must return to human-centred architecture that accommodates all individuals, not just the fictional, perfectly neurotypical individual.