

THE CONNECTING LIBRARY

from collection to connection



Research Plan

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COMPLEX PROJECTS
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INTRODUCTION

01

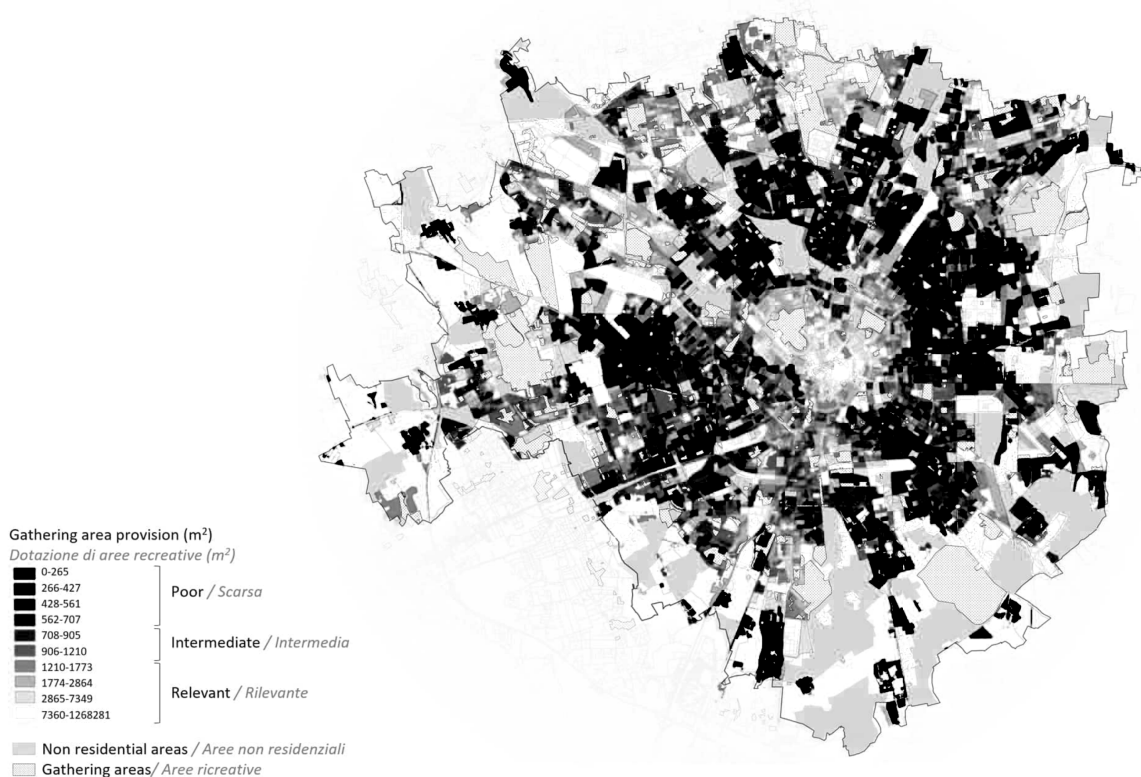


Figure 1: About 52% of Milan's residents have inadequate access to public spaces within a 15-minute walk (Systematica, 2020)

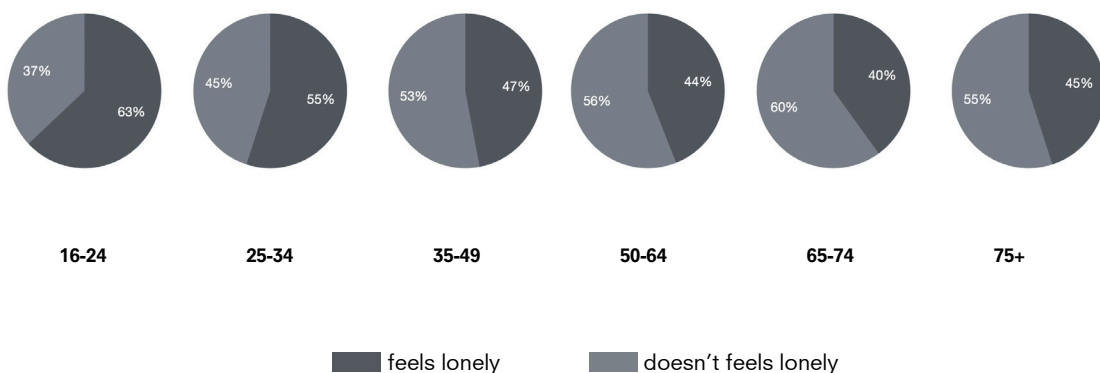


Figure 2: Younger people in Milan often report feelings of loneliness (Brennecke, 2023)

1.1 Introduction

Human well-being is built upon three essential pillars: mental health, physical health, and social health. Each pillar affects the quality of life, and when any one of these pillars is diminished, it reduces a person's well-being (Api, 2023). In Italy, strong social bonds form an important part of daily life. There is a culture of togetherness, with Italians frequently gathering in public spaces that foster social connections. Squares, cafés, and markets serve as key interaction points, which Italians utilize extensively. Additionally, Italians are known for their strong family ties, often coming together to share meals, for example (Zimmermann & Gordon, 2022). Due to this culture of togetherness, Italians often score high on social health measures. This is also evident in the OECD's How's Life? report from 2020, where Italy scores high in terms of social connectedness: 89% of Italians report having access to a strong support network (OECD Better Life Index, 2020).

1.2 Problem Statement

However, in Milan, a shift can be observed in this culture of togetherness.

Individualism

As a major economic and cultural hub, Milan attracts a significant number of young adults, drawn by its universities and abundant career opportunities. This trend has resulted in a growing population of young adults aged 18 to 44, many of whom struggle financially to purchase larger homes (Age Classes by Gender ITALY, n.d.). This often results in individuals living alone in small studios, contributing to a high rate of single-person households, 52%, well above the national average of 30% (Loneliness Among Adults Worldwide by Country 2021 | Statista, 2024).

Furthermore, many young newcomers to Milan are distanced from their families, which intensifies their focus on individual career advancement at the expense of community or family interactions. This career-driven lifestyle fosters a form of individualism that sharply contrasts with Italy's traditional culture of togetherness. Consequently, social interactions with family and friends, are

significantly diminished in Milan (Loneliness Among Adults Worldwide by Country 2021 | Statista, 2024).

Fragmentation

In addition to individualism, Milan experiences significant societal fragmentation. Approximately 20% of the city's population is comprised of migrants, who often face challenges in integrating into the local community (Council, 2024). Barriers such as limited access to essential services, lack of social cohesion, language barriers, and insufficient support networks contribute to this issue. These struggles can lead migrants to isolate themselves or form insular groups, resulting in a fragmented society that hinders social connections between local residents and newcomers (Bini et al., 2019). This fragmentation not only isolates individuals but also undermines the community's overall social fabric, making it more challenging for diverse groups to engage and collaborate.

Public Spaces

Finally, the city itself presents challenges for social connection among its residents. Milan lacks sufficient public spaces that encourage social interaction. About 52% of Milan's residents have inadequate access to public spaces within a 15-minute walk, significantly limiting opportunities for social engagement (Systematica, 2020).

The public spaces that do exist often fail to promote social interaction among diverse population groups, posing a serious issue for urban cohesion. Various sources indicate that these spaces are either overcrowded or poorly designed for social interactions. For example, Gae Aulenti Square has been described as "one of the most contradictory and exclusive urban spaces that Milan has ever seen" (Galimberti & Osirini, 2017). This lack of inclusive design not only discourages engagement among different demographics, such as families, young professionals, and migrants, but also worsens the fragmentation observed within the city.

Consequences

These factors collectively contribute to decreased social interaction in Milan, weakening the social health pillar and diminishing overall well-being. As a result of these challenges, many residents reporting feelings of loneliness. Approximately 700,000 individuals report feelings of loneliness, accounting for 51% of the city's population.

Notably, younger people are particularly affected, experiencing heightened levels of isolation and disconnection in this urban environment, figure 2 (Brennecke, 2023). Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering a more connected and healthy community in Milan.

1.3 Research Question

To enhance social interaction in Milan, this research will explore how the design of a public library can address these issues. The central research question is as follows:

How can the architectural design of a public library boost social interaction?

This central question will be addressed through the actual design of a library in Milan. The design process will explore this question by investigating the following sub-questions:

- How can architecture make a library more accessible to everyone?
- What architectural elements promote social interaction in libraries?
- How can a library design contribute to the well-being and comfort of its users?

Ultimately, this research aims to transform the public library into Milan's 'living room'; a welcoming space that not only provides access to knowledge but also serves as a vibrant community hub, reinvigorating the traditional Italian culture of togetherness in the city, figure 3.



*Figure 3: Library as urban 'Living Room' for the city
(own illustration)*

FRAMEWORK

02

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical foundations of public libraries as essential community spaces for social interaction. It examines their evolving role in the digital age, highlighting their function as informal gathering places that enhance accessibility and social connection. This framework will guide design strategies to position the public library as the city's "living room."

Public Library

"The public library is an organisation established, supported, and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or through some other form of community organisation. It provides access to knowledge, information, lifelong learning, and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community..." (Koontz, 2010)

However, the advent of the digital age has transformed the role of libraries in profound ways. While traditional print materials remain a vital part of their offerings, libraries have evolved into versatile centers for learning, innovation, and community engagement. They now provide access to digital resources, workshops, and technology, catering to the needs of a modern audience (Isiaka, z.d.).

Consequently, the public library plays a crucial role as a communal space and meeting point within urban environments. By facilitating research, education, and leisure activities, libraries not only provide resources but also foster informal interactions among individuals, creating positive social experiences and enhancing community bonds (Koontz, 2010).

This shift in focus aligns seamlessly with the research question of this study, which explores strategies for enhancing social interaction within public libraries.

Urban 'Living Room'

An urban 'living room' refers to public spaces within a city that serve as informal gathering areas for community interaction, much like a living room in a home.

Ray Oldenburg's Third Place theory emphasizes the importance of such communal spaces in fostering social interactions and a sense of belonging outside of the home (first place) and workplace (second place). According to Oldenburg, third places are crucial for building community ties, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together in a welcoming environment (Oldenburg, 1999). This perspective informs our understanding of how public libraries can serve as vital third places within urban settings.

According to Ray Oldenburg, the terms shown in the mindmap in Figure 4 are the key aspects that a third place, or in this case an urban living room, should fulfill. Three main themes can be derived from these terms: accessibility and belonging, social connection, and comfort.

To thoroughly address the role of public libraries as urban living rooms, the following sub-questions are explored in alignment with the three themes:

Accessibility & Belonging

How can architecture make a library more accessible to everyone?

This question aims to identify design strategies that eliminate barriers and ensure inclusivity for all members of the community.

Social Connection

What architectural elements promote social interaction in libraries?

This question seeks to uncover specific features, layouts, and spaces within libraries that encourage users to engage with one another and foster a sense of community.

Comfort

How can library design contribute to the well-being and comfort of its users?

This question focuses on understanding how design choices, such as lighting, acoustics, and furniture, can enhance the overall user experience, making the library a welcoming environment.

Answering these sub-questions creates a toolbox for promoting social interaction in public buildings. This toolbox forms the foundation for the final design of the public library as the city's living room.

2.2 Relevance

The relevance of this research can be understood in three dimensions: its importance for Milan, for the studio (Bodies & Building), and for the field of architecture.

Milan

The problem statement indicates that the culture of togetherness, which is so characteristic of Italy, is gradually diminishing in Milan. This research aims to revive this culture within the city. A library as the living room of the city can provide a potential solution.

Studio

This research is relevant to the theme of the Bodies & Building studio, as it explores human behavior in response to architecture. The aim is to encourage social interaction through architectural design, which is essential for the overall well-being of individuals.

Architecture

The research will result in a toolbox for stimulating social interaction through architecture. This toolbox will be used in the design of a library as the living room of the city. Additionally, it can also be applied to encourage social interaction and connection in other buildings. This makes it highly relevant to the field of architecture.

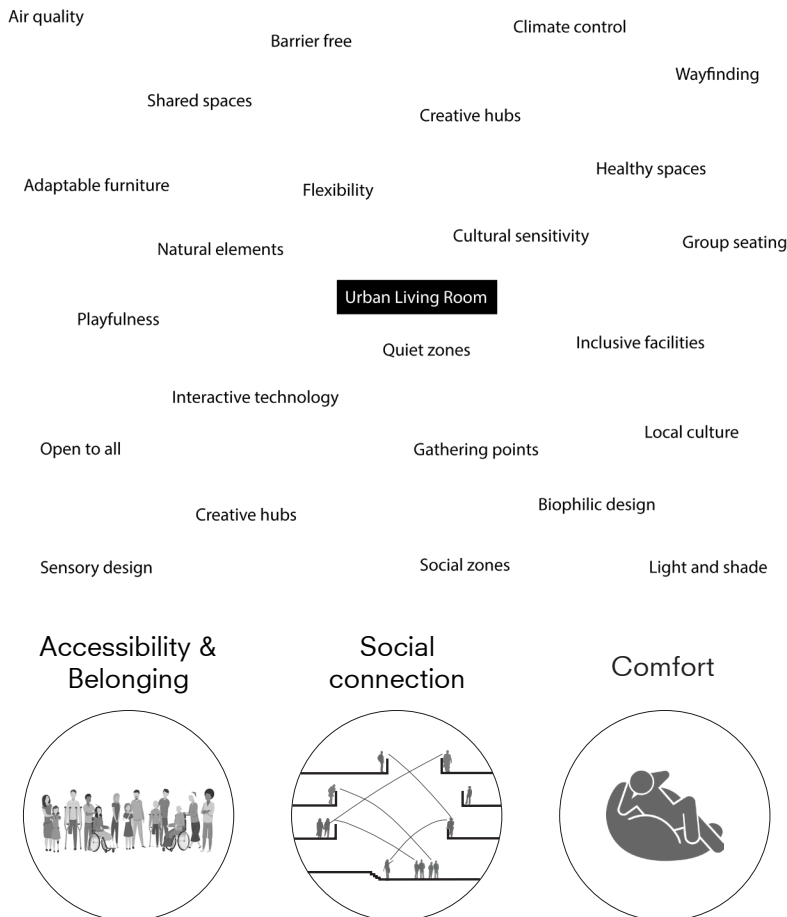


Figure 4: From mindmap to themes (according to the theory of the third place of Oldenburg, 1998)
(own illustration)

RESEARCH METHODS

03

This research takes a comprehensive approach to exploring how the architectural design of a public library can enhance social interaction in Milan. Recognizing the importance of context, program, and user engagement, this study focuses on three core aspects: the site, the program, and the client. Specifically, it examines the Feltrinelli Library in Milan, designed by Herzog & de Meuron, as the new library will be located on the same site, serve the same clients, and retain much of the original program, figure 5. The current Feltrinelli complex is actually composed of three buildings: the library itself, Microsoft's headquarters, and a planned museum, figure 6. Although construction of the museum was delayed due to the discovery of remnants of the historic Spanish Wall on-site, a new design that preserves these findings is set for realization in 2025. Through this layered analysis, the research seeks to generate insights that will inform a cohesive design prioritizing accessibility, social connection, and user comfort.

3.1 Site

The Feltrinelli building's location in Milan offers a unique context that will shape the architectural and social objectives of the new design. Situated in a densely populated urban setting, surrounded by a mix of residential, commercial, and cultural buildings, the site is ideal for a public space that serves as a social hub. Observational studies and spatial analysis will be used to evaluate pedestrian flow, access points, and the characteristics of surrounding public spaces. Additionally, an on-site visit will provide further insights into the library's current situation in Milan, complemented by historical research on the development of the area. This approach aims to identify opportunities to enhance connectivity and accessibility, ensuring that the library becomes a well-integrated part of the community's daily life.

3.2 Program

The program analysis begins by examining the Feltrinelli building, focusing on the functions currently housed within the building, their spatial relationships, and how they are used. These functions are then

mapped into a relational diagram to provide a clearer overview of the existing program, spatial adjacencies, and approximate size requirements. Additionally, case studies of the Forum Library in Groningen and the Boekenberg in Spijkenisse will be conducted. Both libraries serve as social "living rooms" of their respective cities, making them ideal references for program and spatial organization. By studying these examples, valuable insights will be gained to inform the design of a well-functioning library.

The aim is to identify activities and facilities that encourage diverse user engagement, such as collaborative workspaces, cultural event areas, and informal gathering zones.

This process will also involve a literature review, notably including Ray Oldenburg's work on third places, which offers valuable insights into the characteristics of effective communal spaces. Additionally, the review will consider various architects who prioritize social interaction in their designs. By examining these strategies, the goal is to design a library that serves as a vibrant, integrative space for the community.

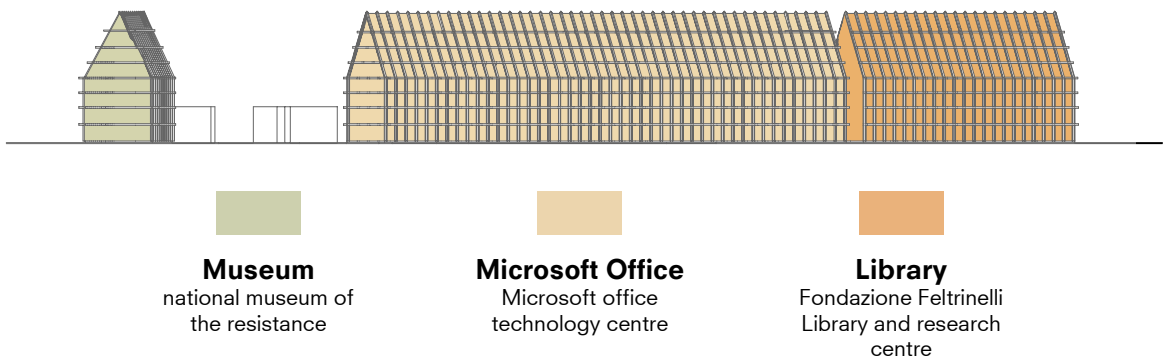
3.3 Client

The presence of three distinct buildings within the Feltrinelli complex, the library, Microsoft's headquarters, and a planned museum, introduces unique clients, each with different expectations. This research will thoroughly investigate the needs and goals of each client, analyzing how their distinct visions contribute to the concept of the "living room of the city."

To achieve this, internet research will be conducted on the clients, alongside on-site interviews to understand their current needs and priorities regarding modern library features. Additionally, a comparison of their requirements will identify commonalities and explore potential synergies among them.



*Figure 5: Fondazione Feltrinelli designed by Herzog & de meuron
(Herzog & de Meuron, z.d.)*



*Figure 6: The three buildings of the feltrinelli complex
(own illustration)*

CONCLUSION

04

Conclusion

The diagram in Figure 7 visualizes the research process and distinguishes between two main areas of research. On one side, the current Feltrinelli building will be analyzed in terms of its location, clients, and program. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the existing architecture, how the building is used, the wishes and requirements of the clients, and how the layout is tailored to the functions and user needs. This helps to understand the design choices made and how they contribute to the current operation of the building, as well as potential areas for improvement in the new design.

On the other hand, the main research question is explored through three sub-questions and their corresponding themes: Accessibility and Belonging, Social Connection, and Comfort. These themes are crucial for realizing a 'living room for the city', where public spaces function as social and inclusive meeting points. Each of these themes plays a vital role in fostering social interaction and creating a welcoming environment for diverse user groups.

By thoroughly investigating these themes, a toolbox will be developed that provides architects and designers with strategies to promote social interaction through thoughtful architectural choices. This toolbox offers concrete design solutions that can help strengthen community bonds, promote inclusivity, and enhance the well-being of users.

This toolbox, together with the analysis of the existing building, sets the stage to design Milan's "living room":

**a vibrant space where Italy's culture of
togetherness comes alive**

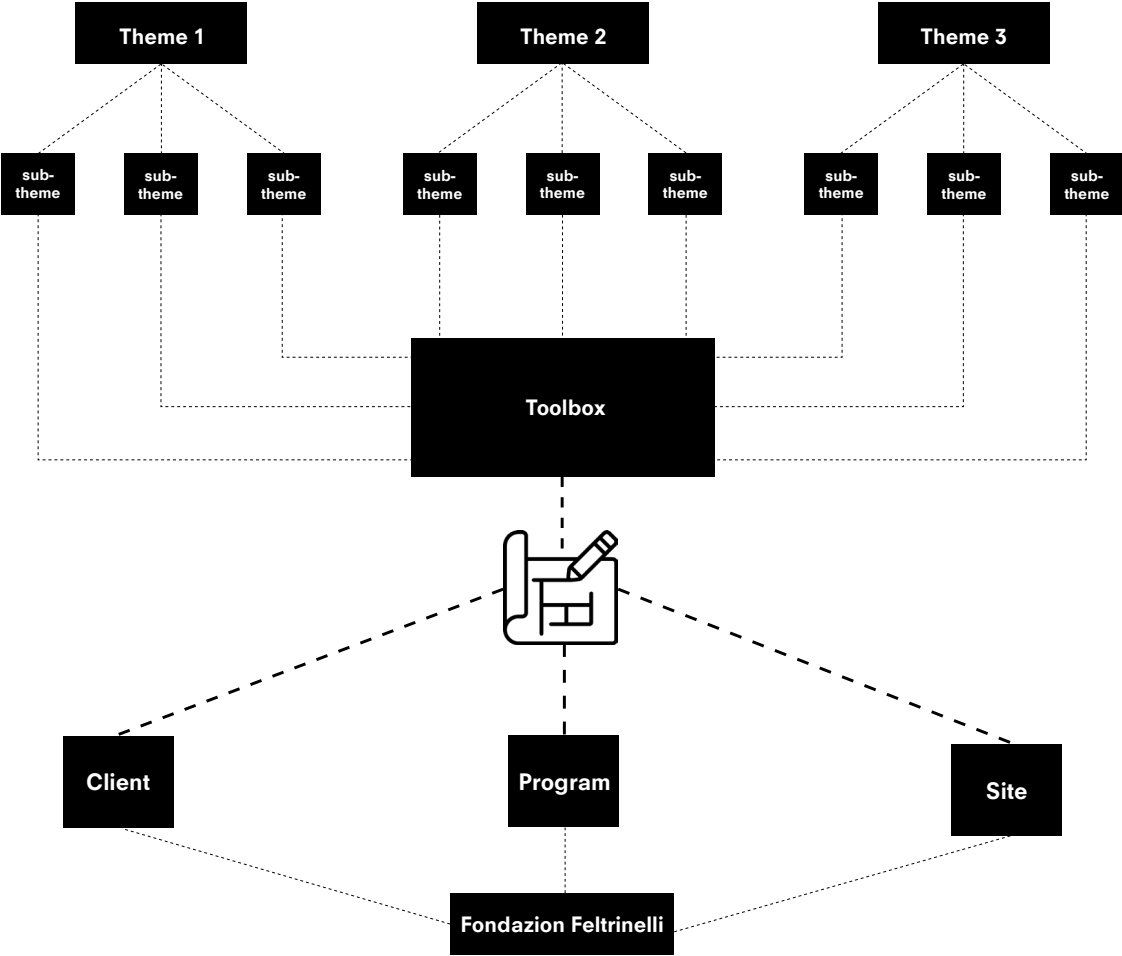


Figure 7: Diagram, from research to design
(own illustration)

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