

## **Introduction**

### **Map of a city in pieces**

*Research Collective Re/search Milano*

There's a tunnel in the city, connecting the Duomo to the Cordusio metro stop, where young representatives of Milan's counter-culture seek refuge. It is a narrow and long underground passage where, to this day, one is witness to an almost complete absence of commercial activities. A forgotten tunnel. Forgotten by the passers-by, even if located within the heart of the urban center, with a structure evoking underground galleries dug by African slaves looking for a temporary daily escape, a few hours a day, from the hard work in the cotton fields. In those subterranean passages, the oppressed sang, danced, told stories and were, at least momentarily, free. Today, if you happen to be around the Duomo area, you'll easily find, in a place which is literally underground, groups of gypsies playing violins and accordions, young Filipino breakers or Arabs quietly smoking a joint in peaceful tranquility.

The term underground comes from slavery, when mass culture, whose only purpose was to economically exploit new urban lifestyles, appeared. The basements of large American cities turned into venues where black musicians played and writers and dissidents met, just as colored but red with rage. Even in Europe, in the small underground clubs of Gamla stan in Stockholm or Saint-Germain in Paris, Afro-American jazz players used to lit the entire night for hundreds of young people before the advent of rock'n'roll. The American underground scene from the early Sixties took inspiration from those same slaves, grouping all radical movements belonging to countercultures, or the most audacious artistic avant-gardes (for example, in the music field, the Velvet Underground). A hidden culture activated by rebellious

dreamers united by the negation of the rhythms and values of the bourgeois, convinced that the real path to collective liberation couldn't occur without questioning one's daily rapport with the self and others, starting from the emotional, sexual sphere and the use of conscience altering substances. The idea was of facing society and its institutions without a frontal clash attitude but rather underlining one's non-involvement, hitting it bottom-up, from the underground. It isn't thus by chance that in the Duomo-Cordusio tunnel in December 1966 the editorial board of "Mondo beat", the city's first published underground magazine, was founded. Subsequently, it was used as an escape route from police attacks against massive student protests from 1968 onwards. Here, in 1977, the militants hid the loot from proletarian expropriations to gain speed in later attacks, punks organized concerts and the urban poet Dino Meo Cataldo recited his monologue entitled *Voglio uccidere*. In the Eighties, the Ghetto blasters blasted rap so loud as to be heard at the turnstiles two stops away and there was the secret meeting point for a historical rave at the outskirts of the city.

Agenzia X's editorial staff sinks its roots in the suggestions evoked by that tunnel and to this day takes cue when selecting the catalog. A privileged observatory to investigate that fundamental bond between entertainment and identity, a pathway populated by urban explorers that through the unworldly lightness of the digital age appear more tangible, conveying the overwhelming weight of ruins left behind by modernization in its forward thrust.

Milano has completely changed in this last decade, from heavy industry's capital it has now become the central hub for the advanced tertiary sector. Arab oil-mongers buy new skyscrapers in the Garibaldi area, Pirelli is being devoured by the Chinese, big publishing houses merge to be increasingly appealing for American investments. These are structural changes that, like a waterfall, flooded the urban social fiber determining humanistic, anthropological transformations: in downmarket meeting hubs and, likewise, in the city center's cultural spaces, the propulsive force of Milan's middle class failed to pull through, being at the

end of its slow descending trajectory. Milano had always been a culturally advanced and progressive city. It no longer is. Milano's middle class crisis became the entire city's crisis, of its social and productive model. The mega event Expo was wedged into an already disfigured metropolis, pouring acid into open wounds, corrosive acid against which we needed to trigger counter-narrative antidotes and underground tactics for a completely different reality to emerge amongst the one proposed on the official signage.

...the deep-rooted Milano, unexpected, treacherous, little known but still alive and capable of awe when dug even slightly deeper. Milano as a narrative apparatus. There has never been any literature connected to the fashionable "Milano da bere", it's neither suggestive nor evocative. The outstanding novels are the ones that dig into the metropolis, into Milano's underground.

Alessandro Bertante, one of the first writers to respond  
to our open call *Re/search Milano*

"Map the districts to come", sustained Deleuze and Guattari. Map, not to make static, but to create escape routes, create motion, evolve. This was *Re/search Milano's* initial plan. Cartography, research, hypertextual guides, mapping the different, multiple and distant ways and lifestyles that, however different, endure in responsive harmony, waiting for unexpected connections to produce new visions and projects, socialization formulas, participation and disclosed knowledge.

The project began in June 2014 when an in-training group of Agenzia X's editorial staff decided to map eight-hundred meeting places, cultural production and spontaneous aggregation venues in Milan and hinterland: an overview of public spaces that tried to overshadow commercial constraints. The idea came about as an attempt to avoid subjugation to the great event in the making; after so many attempts of objection, we wanted to shift the view on the Expo showcase. Initially the keywords were: underground and research. We asked ourselves if it still made sense to question the meaning of these two words at a time when all countercul-

ture researchers agree that underground has stopped supplying characteristics of belonging capable of catalyzing contestants or visionaries of alternative worlds. Yet, the eight-hundred mapped locations told us another story: the list included a multitude of creative workshops, small bookshops, multimedia labs, production machines for non-conforming imagery, basements turned into exhibition spaces, micro stages treaded on by numerous bands a week, social experimentation centers supplying daily cultural tools, shops that became social hubs, street art and poetry attempting street invasions, hybrid working places where people finally spoke to each other, neighborhood associations that defended the territory, cultural venues for ethnic groups, informal groups organizing temporary initiatives in squares around town. A hidden city crossed more than before by outsiders, bohémienis, dissidents, migrants, female revolutionaries, ethnic minorities, lgtb, homeless, extrajudicials, penniless, adventurers and libertines. All these subjects were promoters to the many uncharted locations we mapped and, even if united by the negation of mainstream rhythms and values, knew only a few of the others. They were separate pieces of the city, a thousand miles from each other. Surprised by the number, the vivacity and fragmentation met, we realized that what we had on our worktable were valid reasons to begin a research within the metropolis.

At that point the editorial staff had become the researchers, taking step after step in the city's streets collecting more detailed data and information, involving friends, creating connections, developing new topographies of understanding. The framework needed to be undone, a sort of deconstruction to blow interaction's access codes, using the psychogeographic exploration technique. When it was time to start, we decided to ask several other friends that through the years have supported the work of Agenzia X, to take part in the research following these indications:

Walk toward your selected spot allowing all that you encounter to become a distraction. For example, if you're struck by the beauty of the façade of a particular building, do everything you can to get

in and see how the residents inhabit it. Or stimulate oral accounts from the people there and then keep on your journey following the traces of what you just heard. Conduct field research with the continuous support of radical critique and enactment of unordinary situations. Invent moments where behavior codes no longer count and become, with all those involved, protagonist of the transformation of the current relational fabric. Precisely like the situationists that theorized hitch-hiking during public transport strikes, or filling the walls with lettrism sketches or, if possible, taking downmarket kids to upmarket ateliers to peddle stones for meteorites to engineers and architects.

The information gathered, hypertextually and narratively elaborated, with the frequent use of references to political and underground movements, oral narratives, lay overs, authorial works, geopolitical maps, chronologies and illustrations, pictures and small diagrams, blended to create the volume *Re/search Milano*.

Milano is a city in pieces, divided in countless sectorial niches, at times hermetic for anyone other than the insiders. Those coming for a brief period are unlikely to find the way they seek, often trapped by pre-established institutional pathways or touristic shrieks sponsored by corporations. We tried to shake it, to press open those self-referential locks, an act aimed at being “separated from separation, to widen the sphere of awareness and strike the sky”, as the old hippy saying goes. *Re/search Milano* is a tool that collects and maps small fragments of a city, photosensitive to the dominating media lights, a puzzle completed and disconnected by associations, geographies and affinities, in an editorial project that offers an erratic journey, dense of surprises and emotions. A topography of pathways between psyche and territory, itineraries written by Milano’s citizens in a fun game of clues, tie-ups and chance but also of new connections in which the reader can be a protagonist. Consequently, the volume you’re holding has a particular structure in which for association, geographies and affinities, four founding elements interlink:

*Record sheets:* Curated by an editorial collective created *ad hoc* for this project, who identified the most important realities excluding large cultural institutions and commercial chains, proposing creative writing artifacts resulting from direct explorations or interviews and insights by the overseers of the chosen spots.

*The writer's Angle.* Brief narratives specifically written by the best pens in Milano, texts created for the most demanding of readers, in which the art of writing takes center stage and a portion of urban fabric catches the limelight. Autobiographical texts in which anecdotes, historical facts, milestones or updates regarding the past or present of a neighborhood or corner of Milano.

*Itineraries:* Prearranged stops in narrative routes coordinated by experts in different fields of study and belonging. Visionary guides equipped with acknowledged experiential tools and animated by the passion for social and humanistic sciences. Erratic walking itineraries in which the authors report on the city's current events proposing their theories availed by the places visited.

*Metix.* More than a fourth of Milano's present population is composed of foreigners, we thus wanted to dedicate a section of the book to brief oral accounts by first or second generation migrant youths from the city's underground. Each one created a rough map of the Milano they know and cross daily, the drawing was then included as a marginalia next to the commentary.

*Re/search Milano* is the result of a considerable editorial effort and converges more than a hundred and twenty Milanese that contributed with texts, research, inspections, photographs, illustrations and much more. A group of independent researchers that for almost a year managed to activate a composite laboratory of miscellaneous sensitivities, established important links and relations through different expressive forms in a unity of co-functioning and connection, symbiosis and empathy. A temporary alliance to try to infect the urban fabric with the virus of thought, action, creativity. A book that exploded even before publishing through an itinerant exhibition in bookstores and squats entitled

Milano Upsidedown, an exhibition with twenty-five illustrations of the Milano skyline upside down, created for the occasion by twenty-five illustrators living in the city. These works of graphic art that are included in the text have supplied part of the rewards for those who participated in the realized crowdfunding to finance the translation and publishing of this text in English. Consequently, since this book clearly does not pretend to be exhaustive and we are convinced that the best medium for potential development is the web, we are getting organized to arrange a broader editorial staff with the intent of creating a bilingual website with interactive maps in which unpublished texts and numerous data and stories yet to be found and told will be included.

We thank all the participants, the supporters and readers that, after having browsed even only a single page of this volume will want to contribute useful information to enhance and evolve the topics covered in *Re/search Milano* on the web.