Why take this course

The purpose of this course is to show that culture and aesthetics are indispensable for real innovation, social change, and sustainable economic development. The course will take place in Milan, a world capital of fashion and design, and in Siena, a perfectly preserved medieval city that still holds to what their 14th-century constitution stipulates: that the city’s rulers and citizens work to enhance “the beauty of their city to bring prosperity and growth.”

Participants will discuss with prof. Francesco Erspamer the main authors and thinkers that defined the concept of beauty, from Homer, Plato and Immanuel Kant to John Dewey, Cristin Sartwell, and Elaine Scarry. Students will be introduced to topics such as cultural agency, storytelling, design, transgression, innovation, good manners, material culture, rhetoric, visual sociology. Readings include Machiavelli’s Prince, Pico della Mirandola’s On the Dignity of Man, Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities. One of the leading experts in cultural economics, prof. Pier Luigi Sacco, will teach several classes on smart cities, new modes of cultural production, and creative industries.

Outside the classroom, numerous activities and trips constitute an integral part of the course and connect the curriculum with museums, historical sites, and leading financial institutions and tech firms such as Monte dei Paschi, the oldest surviving bank in the world, and Inarea, a cutting edge network specializing in the creation and management of identity systems. We will visit Vicenza—the city of Palladio, with its renowned Teatro Olimpico—and the extraordinary Isola Bella in Lago Maggiore. We will taste olive oil, aged vinegar, prosecco, and saffron, and we will study the production and culture of coffee. We will tour the eco-friendly district designed in Trento by architect Renzo Piano, and the Vittoriale, the eccentric house-museum of the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, overlooking Lake Garda. We will attend seminars on the tradition of the carnival, territorial management, and comics and video games (with the director of the second-largest comics and gaming convention in the world). We will visit fashion studios, concept stores, and spaces dedicated to the production, exhibition, and enhancement of contemporary culture such as the Armani Museum, HangarBicocca, and the Vespa scooter collection of the Piaggio Museum. In Siena, students will be deeply involved in the local community: each of them will be exceptionally invited to join one of the city’s contrade (wards) and participate in the preparation for the Palio, the horse race which for centuries has been run each year on August 16 in Piazza del Campo. Optional Italian language instruction is offered at the beginner, intermediate, and advanced level. We will not just be tourists; we will view the important cultural touchstones of the places we go in the context of the communities they originate from and the people who work to perpetuate them.

For more detailed information, see the syllabus.