

## FASHION MILAN

## Will there be an Expo effect?

BY ELIZABETH PATON

With a title like "Feeding the Planet: Energy for Life," the focus of the Milan Expo would appear to be on just one part of the triumvirate of food, fashion and very fast cars that underpins much of the 100 billion euro Italian luxury industry.

But when Prime Minister Matteo Renzi took the stage in May during the glittering opening ceremony for the 2015 world's fair and its mile-long stretch of 54 pavilions, he proved otherwise.

"The bet we have made on Expo is that it will restart the country," Mr. Renzi declared, confirming a desire to put aside the event's numerous corruption scandals, delays and fights over its €3 billion, or \$3.36 billion, price tag.

By Wednesday, when the style set touched down for Milan Fashion Week, 13 million tickets had been sold — one million alone to Chinese tourists. And many luxury industry insiders were affirming the positive impact the event, which ends Oct. 31, has had on the city.

"Big brands like Salvatore Ferragamo and Ermenegildo Zegna have been doing very well over the summer, a time when Milan is usually completely dead," said Franca Sozzani, the editor of Vogue Italia. "It was a bit of a challenge to convince local stores to stay open," she added, referring to the usual summer vacation closings. "But all signs point to better visitor foot traffic."

Remo Ruffini, chief executive of the Italian ski jacket label Moncler, called the scale and scope of the Expo "dazzling." He was particularly excited about its potential long-term effect.

"Even if visitors don't spend today, they still gain brand awareness and

greater appreciation of our culture," he said. "It's been such a tough few years for Southern Europe, with Italy one of the worst-hit countries. But there has been a different, more positive energy to Milan since the Expo came to town."

Andrea Illy, chairman of the country's national luxury goods consortium Fondazione Altagamma, was full of praise for Panorama, a 360-degree video installation that the foundation helped create. Already watched by 160,000 viewers, it ambitiously attempts to "represent the best of Italy in 15 minutes," including images of craftsmen at work in factories and catwalk shows from the likes of Versace, Brioni and Brunello Cucinelli.

Mr. Illy echoed Mr. Ruffini's comments that the Expo's success could bol-

ster sustainable commercial growth for all sectors of the Italian luxury industry. "It is too soon to estimate a benefit for the sector in terms of exact numbers," he said. "But there is no question there will be huge benefit from the added visibility."

Alongside the Expo, several local luxury leaders have opened separate, yet complimentary, cultural exhibitions, taking advantage of Milan's moment in the international spotlight.

May saw the unveiling of the Fondazione Prada, a 205,000-square-foot multidisciplinary arts space and showcase for the upscale fashion house,

in the industrial Largo Isarco zone.

And days later, Giorgio Armani, mindful of the Expo's debut, opened Armani/Silos, a four-floor exhibition space displaying work from his 40-year career.

"I thought that bringing some of my work together in a single space, as an archiving project with a particular, personal perspective, it could be a concrete way to promote Italian fashion," he said this week. "Perhaps my personal creative journey may be an example and inspiration for future generations."

With competition among the world's four style capitals never more intense, Italian fashion, looking beyond the

Expo, has begun investing heavily in young businesses to support its future.

This year, Carlo Capasa, president of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana, an industry association, announced an ambitious five-part plan to put Milan back at the forefront of world fashion.

A number of incubator projects — such as Vogue Talents, a collaboration between the luxury giant Kering and Vogue Italia — continue to gain momentum. And in June, the Italian government said it would allot €45 million to promote Italian-made products, with €18 million going specifically to the fashion sector.

Whether the Expo and other efforts actually have a lasting impact remains to be seen, according to Mr. Armani, who emphasized: "It is too early to say."

"I think that my country is gaining positive momentum and has a lot to give still in terms of both cultural production and talent in the field of fashion," he said. "But we can do more to support young designers to succeed."

"The right balance between legacy and modernity will be the key. We are a country that still defends quality when the rest of the world is forgetting about it."



A display inside the Expo's Italian Pavilion. In addition to its focus on Italy's food and future, the pavilion also recreates some of the country's beauty.

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