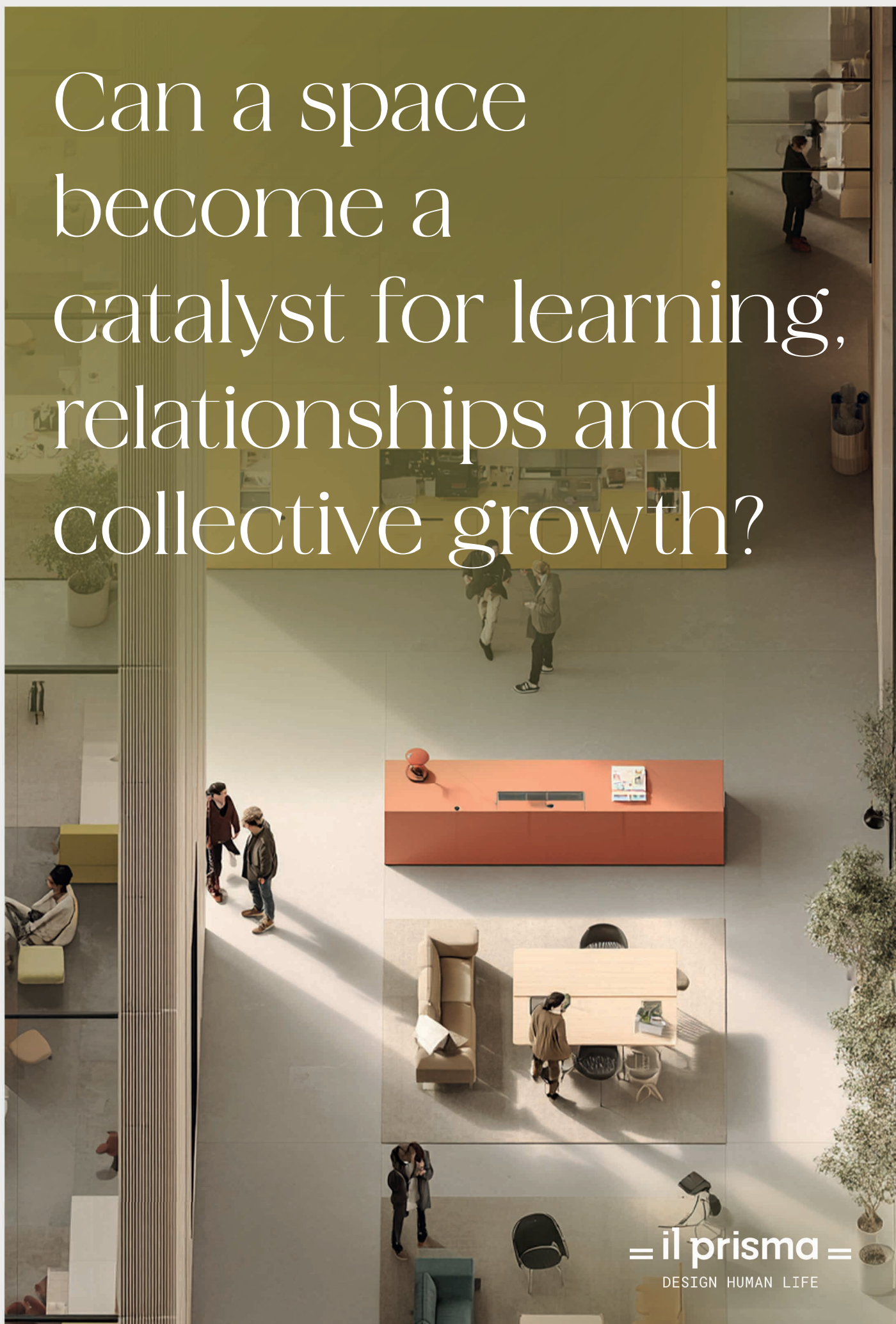


Can a space
become a
catalyst for learning,
relationships and
collective growth?



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DESIGN HUMAN LIFE

➤ Knowledge as the engine of relationships, community as a design responsibility, and space as an activator of motivation

It is within informal, almost imperceptible moments that today's **new learning ecosystem** takes shape – an ecosystem that extends **far beyond traditional classrooms** and flows through work, the city, and everyday interactions. In fact, **we also learn “at the edges” of our days:** in a quick exchange of ideas, in an improvised piece of feedback, in the suspended time between one meeting and the next.

Much like serendipity, many of these moments are not planned, yet they generate value. They are **micro-spaces of curiosity, fragments of dialogue and observation** that – almost without us realizing it – **help shape the very culture of organizations.**

Written by:

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➤ How can space facilitate people's learning?

Designing for learning today no longer means imagining classrooms alone. **Any space, if shaped with intention, can become a place that facilitates knowledge and exchange.** Learning anywhere and at any time is no longer an exception; it is an **increasingly widespread expectation.** It is precisely on this terrain that **the worlds of Education and Workplace begin to overlap**, giving rise to a hybrid landscape that we are already witnessing.

Globally, for example, only about **8%** of adults participate in **formal work-related learning**, while 37% choose **non-formal pathways** – a clear indication that a significant share of learning happens **outside the traditional classroom** (OECD). At the same time, **interest in flexible and digital** learning formats continues to grow, driven mainly by **cost reduction (57.4%)** and **time efficiency (51%)**, made possible by accessing content across multiple devices (ResearchGate).

This shift is also reflected in physical spaces. In many universities, informal environments are taking on an increasingly central role. Research from the University of Sheffield, for instance, shows that about **38%** of students use **cafés, lounges, or hybrid areas as their primary study spaces.** They choose them for their more relaxed atmosphere, the availability of Wi-Fi and power outlets, and a less rigid, more collaborative mode of working (Academia).

This transformation affects not only teaching methods or work culture, but the very way people meet, exchange ideas, and grow together.

New generations – **particularly Generation Z and Millennials** – are **re-defining how we understand both learning and work.**

For them, growth and development are not optional add-ons: they consistently rank among the top three criteria guiding the choice of an organization and the decision to stay. For Gen Z, this is even more pronounced: continuous learning is not just an opportunity for self-improvement, but a concrete indicator of a company's culture. A sign that the organization is not solely focused on results, but genuinely invests in **people's future** (Deloitte Global Gen Z & Millennial Survey 2025).

According to a 2024 Harvard Business Review study, **the sense of belonging is among the top three drivers of professional engagement**, with a **56%** impact on individual motivation and **50%** on retention. In universities and organizations, learning communities operate in exactly this way: as **spaces of shared identity**, where knowledge becomes relationship, and where **trust and proximity fuel intrinsic motivation.**

After years marked by physical and digital distance, the **need for places that foster authentic connections** has become increasingly evident. The Gensler Workplace Survey 2024 confirms this: **73%** of employees are willing to return **to the office only when the space encourages relationships, collaboration, and mutual learning.** It's a clear signal: today, the value of learning lies not only in content, but in the quality of interactions that space is able to generate.

This is where the **link between learning and community** becomes most evident: **real learning happens when people feel part of something, when they share a common language, when knowledge becomes an opportunity to meet.**



There was a time when spending eight hours in the same place with the same people naturally generated a shared rhythm – a cadence of gestures and relationships that held the community together. Today, this no longer happens automatically.

Community is no longer born from simple proximity, nor from technology: it needs places rich in meaning, where people can recognize themselves and exchange ideas.

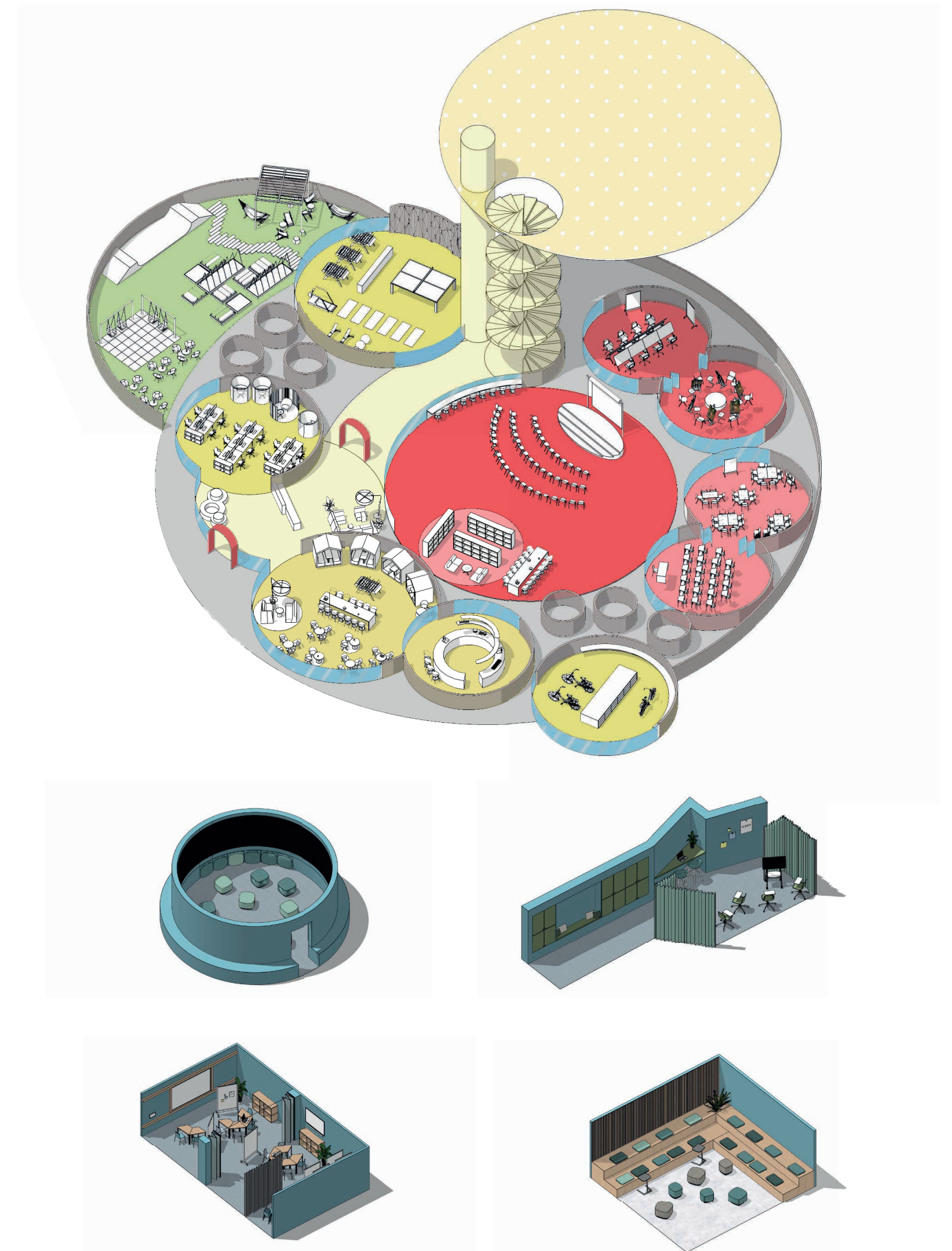
Community is a need, not a given.

This is why it can no longer be taken for granted or assumed to “happen on its own.” **Community becomes a design responsibility:** it must be imagined, nurtured, made possible. Spontaneous conversations, shared breaks, unplanned moments are not marginal details: they are elements that must be intentionally designed, because they are the very channels through which real bonds and real learning emerge.

To understand how communities are built today, it is useful to take a step back and widen our perspective. Contemporary communities take shape where there is a shared drive, a common language, a need to recognize oneself in something or someone. From digital squares to urban margins, from platforms to clubs, new collective spaces form around gestures and symbols that replace the old idea of belonging based solely on physical presence or proximity.

In this perspective, **many experiences born outside institutional circuits become valuable to observe with design attention.** They are not youth subcultures to be dismissed quickly, but **genuine spontaneous laboratories of sociality:** contexts where people gather to share a rhythm, a purpose, a way of inhabiting the world.

Whether rooted in culture, sports or art, these environments reveal community dynamics that **anticipate new models of learning, collaboration and well-being.**



➤ Belonging born from shared experience

Consider the **music formats of recent years**, such as **Boiler Room**: experiences that interweave presence and digital, body and network. Born as local initiatives, they have become **global platforms of proximity**, capable of transforming listening into active participation. The audience is not a spectator: it contributes to the atmosphere, becomes part of the scene, and builds community simply through its presence – physical or remote. In a time marked by distance and fragmentation, these contexts have reactivated the **sense of belonging through shared experience**, reminding us that community is also made of rhythm, energy and mutual visibility.

The same principle guides **Il Prisma Live**, our **Milan headquarters**, conceived as a **living, constantly evolving space**. Here, the **professional community takes shape through what happens**: events, workshops, conversations and informal moments that transform the environment each day into a **cultural device**.

People don't merely inhabit the space: they co-produce it. **As in Boiler Room, value arises from participating, sharing** the same rhythm, and feeling part of a collective experience.



Circolo UltraFiorucci Project, Milan - Il Prisma.



➤ Meaning emerging from micro-rituals, from the body, from movement

This is also what happens in urban spaces, where certain spontaneous communities have rewritten the meaning of place. **In Barcelona, in front of the MACBA, or in Milan's squares and underpasses near the stations, skateboarders have transformed anonymous surfaces into true gyms of sociality.** They don't merely occupy space: they reinterpret it, giving it meaning, rules, identity. Through constant practice, **the place becomes a language, and the community takes shape in the repetition of gestures and in mutual observation.** It is a **diffuse**, embodied form of **learning** – one that thrives on proximity and shared challenge.

In the project for the POLIMI Graduate School of Management in Milan, we worked with this same idea of movement and traversal. The spaces are fluid and permeable, designed so that learning happens not only while sitting, but also in corridors, on thresholds, and in the in-between spaces. Community is built through movement, unexpected encounters, and the daily repetition of the same paths – just as skateboarders read and interpret a place through a shared language.

➤ Community growing from shared aesthetics and rituals

Contemporary clubs such as Soho House demonstrate another form of community: more structured, intergenerational, built through a balance of exclusivity and openness. These are hybrid spaces between home and work, where cultural programming creates belonging and where co-presence becomes a form of value. They are not simply networking places, but true **identity ecosystems** in which people recognize themselves and allow themselves to be recognized.

In this same direction, we envisioned **Villa Morgagni for SDA Bocconi in Rome: a contemporary “house of knowledge”** where study and social interaction coexist like in a **cultural club**. It is a space that invites people to pause, converse, and cultivate small communal rituals, where shared experience becomes part of identity-building.

Phyd, instead, represents the most open and hybrid expression of this logic: an environment that brings together training, guidance, and professional encounter, functioning as a **real social platform**. Here, knowledge is not merely transmitted, but activated through connections, dialogues, and unexpected discoveries. **The community forms at the intersection of digital and physical, between curated programming and spontaneous participation.**



SDA Bocconi Project, Rome - Il Prisma.



Globant Project, Milan - Il Prisma.

The **paradigm shift** we are experiencing has made a simple reality increasingly clear: **we learn – first and foremost – in the places of everyday life, not only in traditional educational settings.** The quality of learning depends more and more on the **quality of relationships that a space is able to activate.**

This is why **libraries are transforming into cognitive plazas**, true ***civic hubs*** of lifelong learning, where **knowledge does not accumulate but circulates.** In the same way, the outdoor spaces of **campuses and workplaces are becoming an integral part of the educational language:** pavilions, courtyards, gardens, and open-air squares turn daily movements into moments of regeneration, focus, and creativity. The relationship with nature is not an aesthetic element: it is a cognitive lever, capable of enhancing attention and balance.

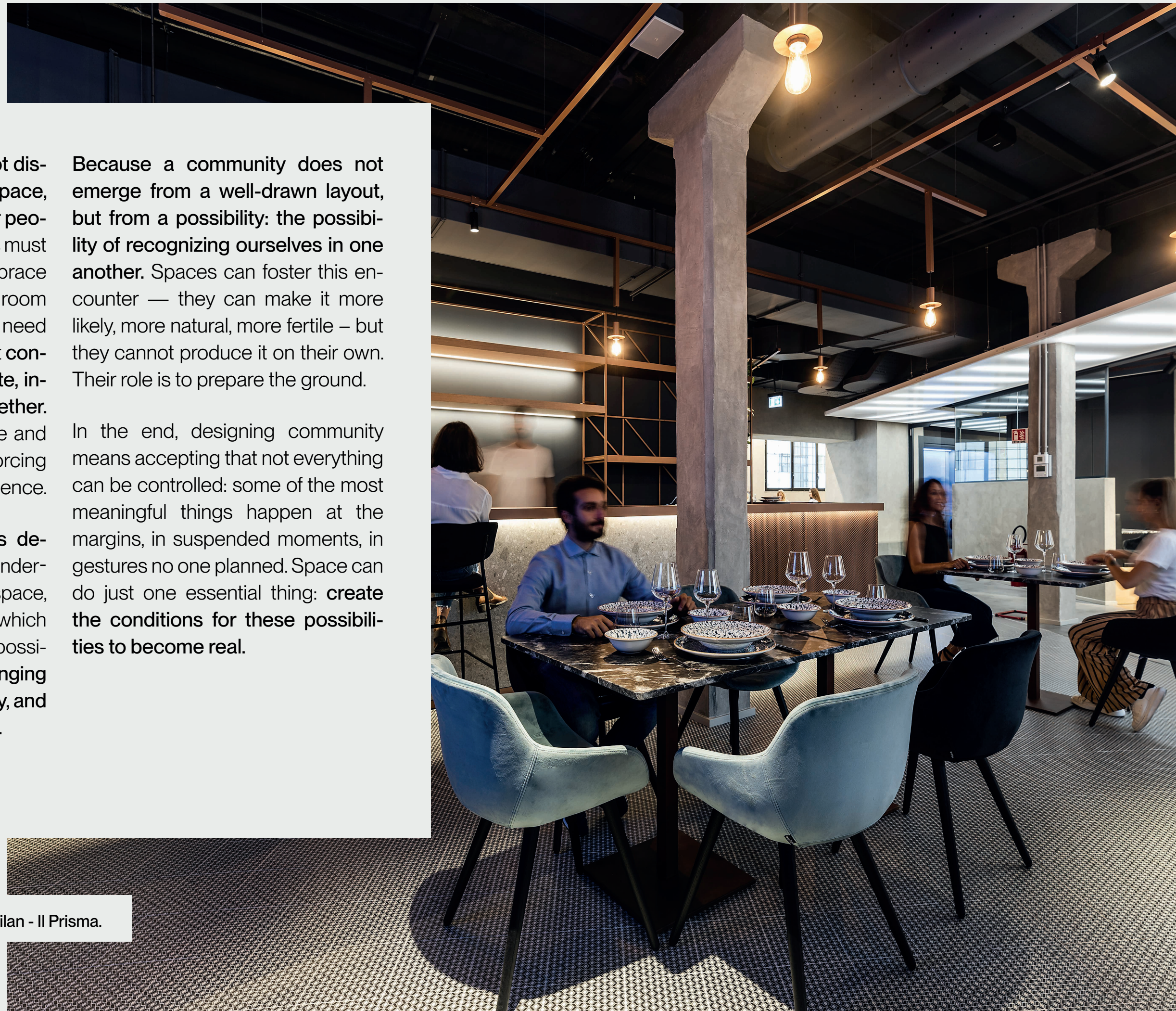
Evidence points in the same direction: teams that experience frequent informal interactions see **productivity increases of around 30%**, while those embedded in strong collaborative networks report **lower stress levels and greater mutual trust.** What makes the difference is not the amount of time spent together, but the **relational density:** the quality of exchanges, encounters, and connections that space makes possible (Pentland, A. (2014). *Social Physics: How Good Ideas Spread — The Lessons from a New Science.* Penguin Press).

Today, the real challenge is not distributing functions within a space, but creating the conditions for people to truly meet. Environments must support diverse behaviors, embrace personal rhythms, and leave room for the unexpected. What we need are not rigid compartments, but **contexts where ideas can circulate, intersect, and take shape together.** Places that accompany people and their relationships, rather than forcing them into a single mode of presence.

Designing for learning means designing for relationships: understanding who will inhabit the space, which rituals it might generate, which tensions it can ease, and which possibilities it can unlock. It means **bringing culture, experience, technology, and human presence into dialogue.**

Because a community does not emerge from a well-drawn layout, but from a possibility: the possibility of recognizing ourselves in one another. Spaces can foster this encounter — they can make it more likely, more natural, more fertile – but they cannot produce it on their own. Their role is to prepare the ground.

In the end, designing community means accepting that not everything can be controlled: some of the most meaningful things happen at the margins, in suspended moments, in gestures no one planned. Space can do just one essential thing: **create the conditions for these possibilities to become real.**



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