



Via Montenapoleone, Milan's fashion hub; Giorgio Armani, below
 VITTORIO ZUNINO CELOTTO/GETTY

Armani blamed for death of Milan

City's cultural centre is out of vogue - and Italian fashion houses are being held responsible, reports **Peter Popham**

DAYS BEFORE the opening of Milan's fashion week, a local government official has declared that the city's once-thriving cultural centre is dead - and blamed Giorgio Armani for its demise.

Massimiliano Finazzer Flory, Milan's culture boss, made his comments at a press conference this week. Mr Flory was responding to Armani's charge that Milan had become moribund, and he broadened his assault to the city's fashion establishment in general. "The great Milanese brands, with Giorgio Armani in the lead, criticise the city a lot but do nothing for it," Mr Flory fumed. "Those who say that il quadrilatero - the 'square' of streets, with Via Montenapoleone as one of its sides, which is Milan's fashion hub - 'is dead are the same people who have played a role in killing it'."

Mr Flory was launching a programme of concerts, performances and special museum openings to coincide with fashion week, in an effort to breathe life back into the city's streets. But the designers, he insisted, must play their part as well.

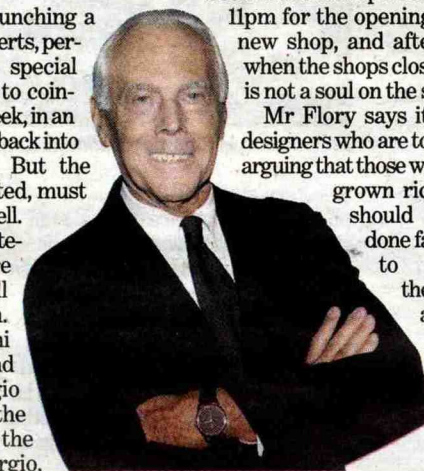
By daylight, Montepoleone (as the square is also known) still looks in rude health. With the Armani Hotel at one end and the flagship Giorgio Armani store at the other, the street is the realm of King Giorgio,

with every star in the Italian fashion constellation from Gucci to Cavalli to Prada clustered in between. It's practically an *haute couture* monoculture, with only the odd watch and jewellery shop punctuating the suits and frocks, and a single café.

There is a splash or two of graffiti and one prominent empty store, but otherwise indications of trouble are few: no "sale" signs, plenty of ladies in ankle-length fur coats, tourists consulting their maps, a shopper struggling into a taxi with giant Versace carrier bags.

But by night Montepoleone suffers from the same blight that has killed off the rest of the city. "The centre of Milan is dead, that's the reality," Armani remarked, in the comments that sparked Mr Flory's response. "For the past week I have been in Montepoleone until 11pm for the opening of my new shop, and after 8pm when the shops close there is not a soul on the street."

Mr Flory says it is the designers who are to blame, arguing that those who have grown rich here should have done far more to benefit the city as a whole.



He said: "For years we have been waiting for the great names of Italian fashion to invest in the area. The big-name brands use the city's cultural heritage to give allure to their brands, and they use art to sell their clothes, I would expect them to support the art museums at least. But nothing, just criticism. Zero proposals. Milan has not received a cent from the designers."

Franca Sozzani, editor of *Vogue Italia*, retorted that Mr Flory was talking nonsense. She said: "The mere fact that the couturiers invest in their Milan shows is a very important sign. Perhaps Milan does not appreciate that there is not a city in the world that would not like to have our designers."

Behind the row is the fear that Milan's deadness at night is the thin end of the wedge, the beginning of the end of its daytime appeal as well.

"It has changed a lot," says Barbara Vitti, who has worked as a stylist with Armani. "People would say 'I'm going up to Montepoleone' and it meant something special. Perhaps it still holds that sort of cachet for foreigners but not for us. It's no longer the symbol it used to be."

The fate of both the area and the city as a whole are bound up with whether the designers can overcome the current economic crisis.

Giuliano Noci, professor of marketing at MIP Polytechnic in Milan, said: "The great Italian brands have been hit hard by the fall in demand."

"Everyone should get around the table and hammer out a way to relaunch Milan, to raise its profile."