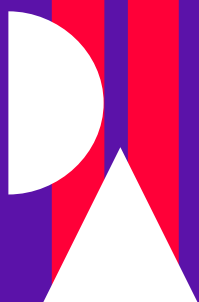


MILANO  
DESIGN  
WEEK

# UNFOLD

2026



DOMUS ACADEMY  
MILANO

# ENGAGE FRICTION://designing through conflict

## Call for Participation - Milan Design Week 2026

In a world increasingly shaped by friction—between values, viewpoints, embodied perspectives, and the competing interests of organizations, industries, and communities—design is uniquely positioned not to smooth over conflict, but to meaningfully engage with it. Design can engage with friction not necessarily by resolving it, but as an agent for change giving form to new narratives and interventions that emerge from oppositions.

Domus Academy invites all Cumulus Member Institutions and their design students to develop projects for the UNFOLD project competition centred around the theme **ENGAGE FRICTION://designing through conflict**.

While the competition is primarily open to Cumulus members, other design institutions are warmly encouraged to engage with this theme and seize the opportunity to contribute.

Now in its third edition, the UNFOLD competition will feature a one-day conference and exhibition during Milan Design Week 2026 – a globally renowned event that offers a unique opportunity for selected institutions and their students to engage with the vibrant design scene. Participants will showcase prototypes and present their projects in dedicated presentation sessions. More information about past editions can be found [here](#).

### ABOUT THE TOPIC

The UNFOLD initiative challenges students from international design schools to embrace friction—not as an obstacle, but as a powerful catalyst for change. This theme encourages a critical exploration of how conflict, disagreement, and difference can be harnessed within the design process as opportunities for both reflection and positive transformation.

Participants are encouraged to develop creative and thought-provoking projects that confront and work with the tensions found in society, technology, or the environment. Rather than smoothing over differences, this initiative invites designers to leverage friction, transforming it into productive dialogue and meaningful outcomes.

Participants may consider the following directions to develop projects addressing friction in design:

#### Design for Negotiation

Focus on solutions that facilitate dialogue and understanding among stakeholders with diverging interests or priorities. This direction encourages participants to design tools, products, and services that promote mutual alignment, nurture collaborative decision-making, and ensure balanced outcomes.

#### Design for Compromise

Prioritise solutions that acknowledge and integrate opposing values or needs, arriving at thoughtful compromises rather than binary choices. This direction encourages to develop tools, products, and services that use friction as an opening for encounters—between people, positions, or perspectives—to allow competing truths and priorities to coexist.

#### Design for Resolution

Concentrate on products and services that address conflict directly transforming points of tension into opportunities for constructive change. This direction invites participants to create tangible interventions that mitigate disputes, reduce polarization, and dissolve tension to promote alignment. Rather than avoiding friction, it embraces resolution as an active, ongoing process that can be embedded in everyday relations and exchanges.

We encourage institutions to involve their students in exploring the generative dimensions of friction, and to consider how design can harness conflict, tension, and disagreement to create space for coexistence. Institutions interested in participating are invited to express their intent and contribute to an international dialogue on the role of design in navigating societal contradictions in difficult times.

## REQUIRED MATERIALS AND DEADLINES

### Step 1 – EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

Schools should fill in [this form](#) to express their interest by **26th September 2025**. A Zoom webinar will be held in early October to share practical information and ask further questions.

By **10th October 2025**, Domus Academy will inform the schools whether they have been selected to proceed to the second phase of the process (Project Submission). The accuracy of information submitted will be considered by the committee to make the selection.

**Please note:** being invited to the second phase (Project Submission) does not guarantee participation in the final exhibition and one-day conference. Domus Academy will select the finalist schools based on the projects submitted.

### Step 2 – PROJECT SUBMISSION

Selected schools are required to organize an ad-hoc workshop with their design students, divided in groups, to develop projects to respond to the main topic of the competition.

By **10th January**, each selected school will submit the two or three best projects they have developed during their workshop. A submission link will be provided to the selected schools.

**Schools are kindly requested to submit the following materials for each project:**

#### 1. A Word document including:

- Project Title
- Project Authors (names of the students)
- Project Mentors (names of professors or any collaborators involved in the development of the project)
- Project Abstract – maximum 900 characters, including spaces
- Project Overview – between 2,500 and 3,500 characters, including spaces

The overview should explain the background and context of the project, how it aligns with the Unfold 2026 theme, its aims and objectives, the concept and design, key features or innovations, as well as any relevant methods, materials, or processes used.

2. **A separate Word document** outlining the format of the academic activity in which the project was developed (e.g. workshop, design sprint, curricular activity, etc.), and describing how the project responds to the proposed workshop brief – approximately 1,300 characters, including spaces.

3. **5 to 10 high-resolution images** showcasing the object/project intended for exhibition.

Each object/project will be allocated an ideal display space of 60 x 60 x 60 cm. The images should clearly highlight the project's features and materials, as well as demonstrate its suitability for the assigned space.

4. **Optional:** A project presentation deck (PDF or PowerPoint format, maximum 15 slides)

### Step 3 – FINAL SELECTION AND AGREEMENT SIGNING

Domus Academy will select the final schools and projects by **20th January**, with up to two projects chosen from each selected school. An agreement will then be sent to the selected schools, which must be signed and returned by **31st January**.

### Step 4 – START PROTOTYPING AND PREPARING FOR EXHIBITION AND CONFERENCE

Each selected school and students will prototype the best projects selected by Domus Academy.

Students, supported by faculty, will also prepare a 10–15 minutes speech about their projects, to be given during the one-day conference. The speech could be done either by individual student or group of students.

By **20th March**, selected schools must submit the following materials, a submission link will be provided to selected schools:

1. **High-resolution images/renders** of the prototype (photos showing the prototype's development process are recommended but not mandatory)
2. **Detailed information on how the prototype will be displayed** during the exhibition. Please specify any special requirements (e.g. electricity, Wi-Fi)
3. **Both PowerPoint and PDF project presentation deck** to support the 10–15 minute speech during the one-day conference
4. **Video scenario** that clearly illustrates and explains the concept behind the project, highlighting its key features and characteristics. The video should include explanatory text, keyword overlays, and/or subtitles to ensure the content is easily understood and effectively communicated, even when viewed without sound. – Format and duration: approximately 1 minute in length, with a resolution of 3840 × 2160 pixels (4K resolution).

Prototypes must arrive in Milan **by and no later than 6th April**.

If a school prefers to have a representative personally transport the prototype (by plane, train, or other means), it must arrive in Milan **no later than 18th April**.

## NOTES

Expression of Interest and project submissions are **free of charge**.

**Please note:** Participation in the UNFOLD 2026 competition is open exclusively to design schools and institutions. It is the institutions themselves that formally participate by engaging their students in the development of project proposals. Submissions submitted directly by individual students or student groups, without institutional endorsement and coordination, will not be considered. Given the nature and scope of the competition's theme, participation is particularly suited to postgraduate students. However, institutions may also choose to involve bachelor's students, especially when there is a strong motivation and a clear alignment between their academic profile and the thematic focus of the competition.

Domus Academy will cover all costs related to the **UNFOLD 2026 exhibition**, including the conference venue, setup, and event planning.

Institutions selected to participate in **UNFOLD 2026** will be responsible for the following expenses:

- Production of prototypes for the selected projects and their delivery to Milan and return.
- Travel and accommodation costs for school staff and selected students attending the exhibition opening and the one-day conference.

**Please note:** attendance at the one-day conference is mandatory for at least one professor and one student per each selected project.

Copyright for all materials submitted at the time of entry remains with the authors. Domus Academy reserves the right to use the submitted work for event promotion.

Projects submitted must not have been previously published or entered into other competitions. For projects developed in collaboration with companies, the organiser will not provide recognition or visibility to those brands or companies.

## KEY DEADLINES AND MILESTONES

- **26th September 2025** – Deadline to submit the **Expression of Interest form**
- **By 10th October 2025** – Domus Academy will inform schools whether they have been selected to proceed to the second phase (Project Submission)
- **Until 10th January** – Selected schools organise ad-hoc workshops
- **By 10th January 2026** – Selected schools must submit two or three of their best projects developed during internal workshops.
- **By 20th January 2026** – Domus Academy will select the final projects and notify the participating schools by sending an agreement.
- **By 31st January 2026** – Deadline to return the signed agreement
- **20th March 2026** – Selected schools must submit all materials for the exhibition and the one-day conference
- **6th April 2026** – Domus Academy must receive the physical prototypes by this date at the latest
- **18th April 2026** – Final deadline to deliver prototypes in person, if transported by a school representative to Milan
- **21-26 April** – Exhibition and one-day conference in Milan

**Contacts:** Please feel free to contact [unfold@domusacademy.it](mailto:unfold@domusacademy.it) with any enquiries.



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