

The delightful little Piazza dei Mercanti, just a few yards from the Duomo, surprises and enchants the visitor, taking him back several centuries in time. Hidden away, in peace and quiet, it is an ideal place to stop for a pleasant rest.

The construction began in 1228 and originally also included the current via dei Mercanti, opened in 1867 to connect piazza del Duomo with Cordusio. On the right hand side is the imposing Palazzo dei Giureconsulti, whose construction began in 1561: forty years later the building incorporated the 13th century Napo tower, and many other changes were made before its completion at the beginning of the 20th century.

With a little imagination, it is still possible to see the original form of the piazza: it was built as a square and was surrounded by buildings fronted with arcades that housed the podestà, the prison, magistrates' court, and merchants guilds. Six large gateways led to the roads towards the most important areas in the city and further on, to the countryside, from where the goods were transported. This was the original heart of Milan business and city life in medieval times.

Broletto Nuovo, or the Palazzo della Ragione, originally stood in the centre. During the work for its construction in 1233, workers discovered a Roman stone inscribed with a crescent moon and a sow. This referred to the legend concerning the origins of Milan, according to which the city was founded by Gaul Bellovèso in the area where a sow had appeared to him with only half its back covered with bristles, as had been predicted by the oracles. The stone was walled in an arch of the façade that now faces the via dei Mercanti, and the sow was the emblem of the city until it was replaced by the adder of the Visconti family. Another bas-relief, but this time on the façade facing the current piazza, shows the podestà who built the palazzo, Oldrado da Tessèno on horseback.

The 16th century well in the middle of the little piazza marks the place where one time stood the Pietra dei falliti, or the bankruptcy stone. Those condemned for bankruptcy were forced to sit on the stone and listen to the sentence pronounced by the magistrates in public, from their "parlèra". This was the name given to the small balcony on the Osii loggia, the building close by, composed of two loggias, one on top of the other and completed by a row of triple lancet windows. The building was designed by Scoto da San Gimignano in 1316 for Matteo Visconti, and was erected on a piece of land belonging to the Osii family, from whom it takes its name.

To the right is a small Neo-gothic palazzo built in 1872, to replace the 14th century Ferrata arcade, while to the left is the Palazzo of the Scuole Palatine, built in the mid 17th century in place of the more ancient Scuole del Broletto. The archway that leads into via Orefici, with its statue of the Latin poet Ausonius, is one of the six original gateways into the piazza. Lastly, proceeding along the short side, there is Casa Panigaròla, built at the end of the 19th century in place of the original apse of the church of San Michele al gallo and the Badia dei Mercanti. The door and windows dating back to the 16th century reused under the small archways were originally from this former building.