

Firenze, Italy

Opening up the prison

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The project has had a long gestation; since the 1990s, it has been the object of design competitions and of a study by Renzo Piano, who provided the first guidelines for the redevelopment. Work started in 1995 when a consistent national funding source was made available for social housing, and since then the Office for Social Housing (ERP) of the Municipality of Florence has managed the job. It has been carried out by a partnership under the strong leadership of the municipality, relying on the coordinated effort of different city departments and other institutional actors to produce a multi-sectoral intervention. The project has also benefitted from participation in the URBACT network REPAIR, which was dedicated to the regeneration of disused military bases. This led to the design of a local action plan envisaging the integration of different actions and identifying funding sources for the completion of the project. Although EU investment came at a later stage, the project is partially funded by the ERDF in the framework of a Plan for Integrated Sustainable Urban Development (PIUSS) which responds to the Regional Operative Programme's Priority Axis 5: *Making full use of local resources, sustainable development of the territory*.

Fostering the vision of the 'City of Knowledge' produced by the PIUSS, the EU-funded action focused on creating in the Le Murate complex a pole for innovative enterprises, with a start-up programme hosting up to 10 new enterprises and spin-offs as well as a service centre. The Urban Park for Innovation aims to create synergies and collaborations with a number of bodies including the neighbouring University of Florence, the Business School, and various foundations. Today about three-quarters of the total surface has been completed, but the Le Murate complex is already fully inhabited. Its public space is full of life, and cultural, social and commercial activities are increasing day by day, confirming the accuracy of the initial intuitions about what was best for the area's regeneration.

Opening up the prison

Florence is not an easy city to understand in terms of urban development. The city benefits from an extraordinary built heritage – listed in its entirety by Unesco as a World Heritage site – and the biggest concentration of artworks and cultural institutions in a single city. In economic terms it outbids many other cities to attract visitors and investors, thanks to the enormous cultural capital accumulated since the Renaissance. Despite its success in terms of global image and productivity, Florence is also a city of inequalities and social exclusion, of which the most visible sign is the transformation of its historical citadel from the vibrant civic centre to the glamorous Disneyland of the Renaissance devoted to symbolic consumption. The development of the city is a matter of fierce debate, between on one side a carefully elaborated planning framework, backed by an uninterrupted succession of centre-left local governments during the post-war period, and on the other the dominance of concentrated economic power that determines the city's strategic orientation. This has led to a certain number of failed or debatable flagship projects, to the displacement of many public functions from the centre and to the principle of concentrating these activities in new peripheral functional poles. A particularly significant change has been the dismembering of the University of Florence, which was historically concentrated in the ancient centre, and gave it character. Now only a few faculties are left and the university has been reorganised to fit the model of thematic campuses.

The effect of these policies is the progressive draining of residential life from the centre, and in general from the city, which is losing population to the satellite municipalities. Meanwhile the historic town centre is becoming more and more a monofunctional productive district disconnected from global trends. Many buildings have been converted into hotels and other tourist facilities, while a great number remain unused. While the adoption of a metropolitan model for an urban area of more than 1 100 000 inhabitants is relatively undisputed, the logic behind infrastructural interventions, new urban developments, and the fate of its historical centre, the 'identity core' of the city, is highly debated. Rents have risen so high that there is no affordable space in a market economy driven by international tourism, luxury goods and fashion. Temporary city users dominate the scene, including a wave of a new kind of students on international short 'edutainment' programmes, displacing the traditional inhabitants of the city. The city's social programmes seem to be unable to respond to the demand for safety valves and social housing. This results in the progressive marginalisation of weaker people in civic life. There is a growing feeling in civil society against the selling-off of city's heritage and image, and the loss of its true identity.

Bringing life back to historic neighbourhood

In this disputed planning scenario, the case of the regeneration of Le Murate, an ancient prison complex in the central neighbourhood of Santa Croce, stands out as an interesting countertrend. It was implemented without significant delays and with consensual support among politicians and the general public. The project converted the prison complex into social housing, and has been managed by the Social Housing Office (ERP) of the Municipality of Florence. Although coordinated by a sectoral programme, since the beginning the project has followed an approach that can be considered broadly integrated, even if not in the full European policy sense. A relatively narrow and centralised governance partnership managed by the municipality has come up with a fully integrated vision of different functions and policy sectors, combining social housing, new public spaces and pedestrian access, an arts centre with residences for artists, a business incubator, a recovery and media

centre for political refugees, a restaurant and literary café, a shopping arcade and a new urban centre.

The context is one of the most beautiful neighbourhoods of the historical centre, around the monumental complex of the Santa Croce Monastery, with a concentration of monuments and cultural facilities. It is one of the more lively parts of the historical centre, a traditional craft quarter, but also a stronghold of radical



Figure 1. The new Madonna della Neve square and social housing units under regeneration

politics, which during the 70s used to host a great number of *case del popolo* (houses of the people), and student organisations. Since the 80s it has been affected by a typical gentrification process in which old inhabitants have been pushed out by transitory renters and tourists. The area, bordering the ancient city walls, was characterised by a number of monasteries and other enclosed precincts, later turned into prisons. The emigration of ancient functions brought the possibility to open up the opaque urban fabric to new uses and to improve the complicated access routes. The Le Murate complex lies between the enclosed Santa Croce monastery and the lively Sant'Ambrogio market, and constituted an impenetrable block between two long blank walls that prevented anyone from crossing the neighbourhood. The buildings were used as a prison until the early 80s, when their functions were taken over by the new prison at Sollicciano. They have consequently been transferred to the ownership of the municipality, and have become the strategic core of a wider project for the functional redevelopment of the Santa Croce neighbourhood. Close by are two other ancient prison complexes, Santa Verdiana and Santa Teresa, which since the 1990s have been redeveloped to house the university's faculty of architecture. In 1986 an international competition for ideas for the area was held, followed in 1990 by one specifically for Le Murate. However those competitions were not solidly backed by political will or resources for implementation.

A challenging functional regeneration

The project took off when a conspicuous funding resource for social housing became available under the administration of Mayor Mario Primicerio (1995-1999), an academic and outsider in the Florentine political scene, who during his mandate held dear the cause of reversing the residential abandonment of the centre. An investment of about 100 billion lire (€50 million) was earmarked to turn a number of publicly-owned buildings in the centre into social housing. About half of the total, €26 million, was destined for Le Murate. In 1997 architect Renzo Piano was asked to provide the guidelines for the regeneration plan taking into account the concept of a 'city in the city', that is, to open up the area as a multifunctional complex fully integrated into the neighbourhood. These guidelines were developed by the architects of the Municipality of Florence in a Unitary Project approved by the city council on 14 September 1998, which was the basis for the successive executive projects. The designers and implementers have focused on 'a recovery based on a balance between permanence and change, where modernity is entrusted to a set of functional components'. Since then, the core action of the project, the reconversion of the prison buildings into social housing units, has been the driving force of an integrated urban development. Although it has followed the slow timetable typical of Italian public work, it has been implemented coherently and steadily throughout three different administrations, without significant hindrances, stoppages or arguments.

In 2001, with the approval of the executive project on 10 April, the first block of works started, covering the central part of about one quarter of the whole area. Three years later the project delivered 33 flats for young couples – covering 2 156 square metres in all – 705 square metres of public facilities, and a large new square, Piazza Madonna della Neve. The first residents, chosen from the municipality's public housing list, settled in. This phase also created a useful new connection between two main streets. On 4 May 2004 the second executive project was approved, which complemented the first intervention by converting four adjacent buildings, delivering 34 new residential units with a total surface of 1 748 square metres, offices, social spaces, a second internal square, open arcades along the main street (Via dell'Agnolo) and a new internal pedestrian street. The greater part of the monumental complex was now given back to the city. Pedestrians could once again cross it in both directions, and the area's life resurged.

The third block of works, approved on 23 October 2007, focused on a building facing Piazza Madonna della Neve, and delivered six more residential units, social facilities, and a shopping arcade which improved the pedestrian route across the area. This part of the intervention substantially advanced the integration of a new access and public space system into the urban fabric and provides new spaces for a wide range of activities which are moving in.



Figure 2. Le Murate before and after: from prison corridor to open urban passage

Until this phase, the project had been directed mainly by the ERP office team coordinated by architect Roberto Melosi. Architect Mario Pittalis was responsible for the executive project and managed the site. The team was made up of about 20 people, including architects, technicians and administrators from the technical office of the Municipality of Florence, with engineers hired externally. The combination of fresh young designers and skilled technicians, trusted and supported

by the executives, resulted in an inspired and successful architectural and urban design, which succeeded in merging traditional building elements with innovative stylistic and technical solutions. The project demonstrated that it could respond to the difficult challenge of preserving the heritage of a historical prison while redeveloping it as a residential complex meeting modern needs, and opening up a new system of public spaces integrated into the neighbourhood.

Integrating the project into the urban fabric

The second phase, which runs from 2010 to 2014, has the objective of taking the project to full capacity and integrating various different actions into a living part of the city. At this point in the story the management of the project underwent some big readjustments, to address a new priority: the sustainable functionalisation of the area and its incorporation into the spatial governance of the city. In 2009-10 various events in the planning and political framework at local and regional level altered the strategic context of the project. First, the Le Murate project was selected as part of a set of 25 projects forming the *Città dei Saperi* (City of Knowledge) Integrated Plan for Urban Sustainable Development (PIUSS). This is one of the 11 integrated plans selected for the ERDF Regional Operational Programme for Tuscany, and falls under priority 5: 'Making full use of local resources, sustainable development of the territory'. The *City of Knowledge* integrated plan envisages the recomposition of the historical centre of Florence, with its cultural and research facilities, together with the south-east periphery of the city, including the neighbouring municipalities of Scandicci and Campi Bisenzio. The plan seeks to accompany the building of the new

tramline (funded under priority 2 of the ROP) with a series of integrated actions including the regeneration of disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as Le Piagge, parks and cycling paths, research centres and cultural centres. These will merge to form a functional urban axis characterised by cultural production, and heading to the centre of Florence at Le Murate. In particular, the plan envisages that part of the regenerated space in the complex should become an incubator for young entrepreneurs, and also finances a new pedestrian route which will connect the site with Largo Annigoni, the recently redeveloped nerve centre of the neighbourhood.

Secondly, the project benefits from participation in EU-supported knowledge exchanges between cities. In 1998 Florence and Le Murate had already participated in the EU's Raphael programme with the REPRISE networking project for the regeneration of prisons. In 2010-11 the city took part in the REPAIR URBACT II network on the same theme, using it to develop a local action plan for Le Murate. This established continuity with the previous phase, as the local action group included Messrs Melosi, Pittalis and a number of the technicians who have been part of the managing team since the beginning, together with institutional representatives of the bodies steering the regeneration process. Taking part in this European knowledge exchange programme was an opportunity to fine-tune the management of the project towards the objective of obtaining an integrated mix of activities for its social and economic sustainability.

Thirdly, the new administration of Mayor Matteo Renzi, which took office in 2009, gave a definite boost to the project as regards innovative and cultural production. Two new councillors took direct responsibility for the project: Giuliano Da Empoli for culture and Claudio Fantoni for housing, with the latter co-ordinating the REPAIR local action group. The new administration has set up an office to coordinate all the municipality's technical offices,

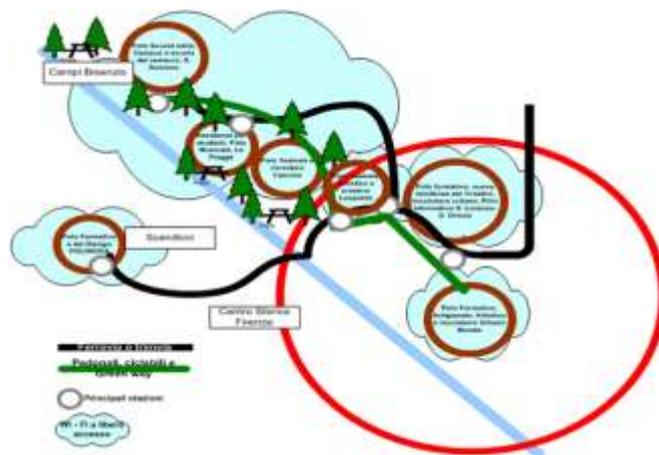


Figure 3: Basic scheme of the PIUSS City of Knowledge. Planned tramline in black, cycle and footpaths in green.

and ERP architects are now under its direction. The programming of activities, including the procedures to allocate spaces to commercial or cultural activities, is under the Department of Culture, which becomes the formal operational manager of the area. The part of the project regarding the Incubator for Entrepreneurship and the ERDF-funded actions is governed in partnership with the Department of Economic Development, which is in charge of the PIUSS City of Knowledge, and with the Tuscan Regional government as the Managing Authority of the ERDF OP. In addition to that, since 2004 the management of the housing and commercial stock has been delegated to Casa SpA, a public company owned by the municipality that manages the social housing stock of Florence. A separate fund has been constituted for Le Murate, to hold the rent revenue from commercial spaces and housing, which is destined to cover the maintenance costs.

Mixing art, media and human rights

A new set of projects is proposed for the current phase 2010-14, which derive from different funding sources and have a diversified implementation process. Some of them are finished or at an advanced stage of completion, while a few are in progress

or still in search of the funding they need. Among them, **Spazi Urbani Contemporanei** (SUC) is an art centre providing exhibition spaces and a set of eight studios for artists, which are going to be available for future residence programmes. The space is directly managed by the Office for Culture, and is producing a constant stream of events, although the cultural programming still needs to find a definitive management form. Under the slogan 'from prison to place of freedom', **Smart Dissidents** is the symbolic core of the project for the recovery of Le Murate. Political activists and bloggers of the Web 2.0 generation who have quit their countries will be enabled to continue their journalistic activity in Florence. They will find physical and virtual hospitality in a structure providing accommodation and a shared service centre for 24 people. The work is well advanced thanks to an investment of €1.8 million coming from regional funds. Recently a new institution has found space in the area: the city invited the **Robert Kennedy Foundation** to base its Italian activities in Le Murate, and it moved here from Rome, reinforcing the focus on human rights already present with the Dissident Space project.

The **House of the City** is a centre dedicated to the housing culture and planning of Florence. It is to be located in the last part of the complex, which faces the ring boulevard; it is thus at the edge of the traffic-limited zone, and includes an underground car park. A feasibility studio was completed by a private consultancy in 2011, but no firm funding has yet been found for this project. This phase of work also envisages the creation of a further 24 residential units and studios for young couples



Figure 4. Interior spaces

and artists, and a new pedestrian passage connecting the area of Le Murate with the neighbouring architecture faculty and the newly redeveloped Largo Annigoni, the central square and focus of the wider regeneration vision for the neighbourhood.

As these major projects have gone on over the last few years, Le Murate has also been weaving itself into the social fabric of the neighbourhood through commercial

activities and small projects promoting the use of public spaces: 'Le Carceri' is a restaurant whose image plays with the memory of the prison, while the Literary Café put on a daily programme of readings and concerts. Both are meeting with public approval. A new shopping arcade crosses the area, and the retail units it contains were allocated through a public competition. Some criticism was voiced of the principles leading to the selection of certain activities (i.e. the Box Office), but ultimately the procedure was completed and the area's new businesses are settling in.

An incubator for smart entrepreneurship

Last but not least, the scheme's kingpin is the **Urban Park for Innovation**, co-funded by the ERDF, which is one of the pillars of the PIUSS, and is supposed to constitute the R&D engine of the area. This project has a curvilinear genesis. Initially, Le Murate was identified as the container for a historical Museum of the Resistance, but this idea was dropped as the developers focused on more dynamic and innovative uses for the area. Later, the strategic vision of the *Città dei Saperi* Integrated Plan proposed the site as the location of an incubator for art and craft enterprises, which was to be dedicated to jewellery. This use was appropriate, given the tradition of that art in the city, but was still not particularly innovative given the

tendency of Florence to focus on traditional cultural production. The spin towards more innovative sectors came in 2009 from the new administration, in particular the Councillor for Culture, Da Empoli, who supported the renewed concept of the Urban Park for Innovation, an incubator of entrepreneurship in the field of informational technologies and heritage preservation. This change required a co-ordinated effort from all the partners, and the city's technical office had to adapt the design to new features. This business incubator and service centre for handicrafts and research is devoted to supporting enterprise start-ups and university spin-offs in sectors that are strategic for Florence's economy, like the cultural heritage and knowledge-based sectors. New enterprises selected through a public call receive space, services and support for the start-up of their activity. A connected service centre, also open to enterprises not in the incubator, will train the entrepreneurs, helping them to write their business plan and grow towards a sustainable business. The service centre offers scientific and marketing consultancy from the Scuola di Scienze Aziendali (Business School) and the MICC (Media Integration and Communication Centre) of the University of Florence and the Fondazione Sistema Toscana, a foundation created by the regional government and the Monte dei Paschi di Siena Bank which aims to promote the territorial system of Tuscany through integrated multimedia tools. In the renovated spaces provided by the municipality, the ERDF finances the furniture and equipment. The municipality has set up a €260 000 fund for start-up activities. The spaces have been allocated to seven new enterprises selected through a public call, and on 15 March 2012, the Urban Park was officially inaugurated by the Mayor.

A mix of functions that brings vitality

The outcomes of Le Murate's regeneration so far have met with general acclaim. The first tangible result has been a high-standard social housing complex in a challenging historical building. The first 73 tenants, chosen from those eligible for social housing, have received their keys, and a new population of more than 200 has moved in. The cost of refurbishment has been kept well below the limit set by the ERP regulation of €2 000 per square metre, demonstrating that redeveloping a historical building can work for social housing. Thus, the objective of countering the loss of residential life from the city centre appears to have been achieved, if not in statistically significant terms, at least in identifying successful practices and reversing negative trends. Opening up a closed block of buildings with new squares, public space and pedestrian access is definitely a successful achievement. The project has delivered a new pedestrian access system including a shopping arcade and two squares which, apart from significantly improving mobility in the area, have been successfully adopted by citizens as an attractive place for socialising, and are quickly acquiring a lively public life. Especially during the summer, the two internal squares have been particularly successful in attracting people, and the cultural initiatives of SUC often extend into the open space, animating the area. Films have been shown in the open air, and so far no significant friction has arisen with residents. The project has improved the city's social life by creating a new cultural focus, which integrates the provision of facilities in the neighbourhood with flexible connecting spaces. Finally it is creating opportunities for employment, research, and new technologies in a strategic urban spot, as well as strengthening the possibility of cooperation with the neighbouring universities and other R&D organisations in the city. Taking a general view, the area is increasingly lively, and the effects on the city life are palpable.

In strategic terms, the main factor influencing the success of the project has been the presence since the beginning of a coherent vision of a multi-functional urban district planned in an integrated and holistic way. Given the clear objective of the Primitivo administration's policies to recover the centre as the residential core of the city, and the project ideas provided by the architect Renzo Piano, the project has clearly

pursued the integration of social housing with a multifunctional cultural container, effectively responding to the growing demand for social spaces in the city.

In management terms, the initial team had the opportunity to create a long-term relationship with the project, and their competence and commitment enabled them to solve the design issues coherently, and to build to high standard. This confirms that the consistent



Figure 5. The newly regenerated public spaces

involvement of committed actors in long-term projects is a key factor of success at every level. An essential factor of efficiency has been the personal attitude of the architects of ERP, in particular Mario Pittalis. He has played a key role, being a constant presence in the area and a reference person for everyone including the inhabitants and the managers of commercial activities, solving everyday problems, or at least their technical aspects. In partnership terms, this project does not have a particularly articulated governance apparatus, as the City of Florence remains at the centre.

Nevertheless, the multi-sectoral nature of the project required the cooperation of several administrative units and public institutions, which have worked cooperatively to steer the process. The public housing office (ERP) led the first phase. The management of the project subsequently became more complex, as a growing number of activities found their way into the area. ERP was put under the responsibility of the new Technical Coordination Office but kept a central role as executive managing agency. The city's Office of Culture coordinates the cultural management of the area, and its intuitions about the mix of activities to be installed in the area seem successful at first sight. However its director says he is aware of the need for a broader coordination of the actors in the area and a dedicated structure to manage its cultural and public activity with continuity and clear scope.

It is too early to fully evaluate the outcomes of the EU co-funded Urban Innovation Park, which was inaugurated early in 2012, but the outlook is good. The conversion of the monumental building into an incubator appears to be optimal, in terms both of ambient conditions and of connectivity. The technical implementation has been free of hitches. The conditions for fruitful cooperation among actors in the area and organisations with thematic interests are there, and the neighbourhood and the district have the potential to enhance the role of le Murate as a cultural and economic catalyst for Florence.

Continuity is the key

An overall success factor has undoubtedly been the uninterrupted flow of public funding which provided a solid base for the physical renovation, but this factor is hard to replicate in the current atmosphere of austerity. It is difficult to evaluate the transferability of the experience overall. In the current climate there are few possibilities to replicate the le Murate experience, at least as regards the financing. Nevertheless, the project's general philosophy and strategic vision have definitely proven successful, and it has been adopted as a pilot example for Florence's future policy-making. The Le Murate project has brought a strong wind of innovation into the city's approach to urban development. The project takes a highly inventive approach in such a unique context as the historical centre of Florence, with all the issues bound up in the coexistence of a great heritage with mass tourism and the

pressure of a globalised market economy. It has achieved much as an experiment in reversing the loss of housing and social life in the city's historical core, and demonstrates the sustainability of an integrated model that couples social housing and services for the general public with pioneering businesses. It has been less innovative, in some ways even traditional, in its design and implementation. This shows that effective urban development processes often result from combining ground-breaking practices with local knowledge rooted in the historical reality of places – in other words a good mix of innovation and traditional know-how. Le Murate did not take a typical participative approach, but the formation of a team of civil servants which was continuously involved in the project's implementation has responded well to the need to interpret local needs and knowledge for the sustainable revitalisation of the neighbourhood.

AEIDL has been contracted by the European Commission in 2012 in order to provide examples of learning practice in urban development supported by the European Regional Development Fund during the 2007-2013 programming period (contract reference 2011.CE.16.0.AT.035). The views expressed by AEIDL remain informal and should not under any circumstance be regarded as the official position of the European Commission.