

6 **Museumization and transformation in Florence**

Laura Colini, Anna Lisa Pecoriello, Lorenzo Tripodi and Iacopo Zetti

Usually, the term renaissance is not used to describe Florence's regeneration programs, probably because there is no other possible Renaissance but the original in the Florentine vision. All over the world, Florence recalls an image of romanticism, a special place where, in the fifteenth century, human nature developed some of the highest expressions of creativity which would influence the arts and knowledge of generations to come. Hence, any possible future scenario for the city has to deal with its strong global identity of an iconic historic location due to its unique and precious cultural heritage. It is a controversial aspect, as it can be both an incentive and a limit in the face of modernization and urban transformations.

This condition strongly influenced the urban life, due also to the typical Florentine attitude, characterized by a polemic esprit, if not a real quarrelsomeness, pervading the political as well as the everyday life sphere, and transforming every planning process into a complex and conflicting argument. On the other hand, the myth of a public's contentious attitude has been regularly used as an alibi to foster decisions overriding consensual processes.

This chapter will outline general tendencies transforming Florence and in particular the historical centre, the effects of which are questioning the right to live, access and inhabit the whole city. It will look at the rhetoric deployed within the plans to sustain the regeneration programmes and the contradictions between assumed goals and proposed solutions. It will focus on the role of infrastructural programmes and related Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) and eventually on the case of Piazza Ghiberti as an example of redevelopment processes reshaping the city centre.

Regeneration programmes and the city centre

In the last years, Florence witnessed an intense rebirth of urban regeneration activities, with new building sites mushrooming all over the city, accompanied by loud promotional campaigns advertising a vision of high-quality city living. The regeneration plans are characterized by large-scale construction programmes that often correspond to the re-actualization of long-debated infrastructural and residential projects. They are developed in the frame of public policies that reinforce the uncontested dominance of tourism and other forms of exploitation of rent while expelling most elements of diversity and cultural innovation from the city.

Such policies endorse and accelerate a process of alienation of the historical centre from the whole city. The inner city is becoming an exclusive leisure district in a network of globally valuable tourist locations, exploiting consistent economic flows derived from a consolidated historical image (Tripodi 2004). Florence municipality experienced a significant loss of 11.7 per cent of residents between 1991 and 2001 (Italian National Institute of Statistics 2001) and in particular the active section of the population is moving to satellite municipalities.

Such dynamics intensify commuting back to the city, alongside the already significant influx of tourists, and affect the development of the entire metropolitan system growing around the pivotal historical core. The redesign of the city centre expels residential life as well as traditional functions, displaced by market-driven pressures such as the increase of real estate values in central locations, accessible only for profitable activities or temporary users; the actual need for more suitable spaces that cannot be provided by historical buildings, maintenance costs of which are very high; the dominance of the tourism economy which undermines existing facilities for residents in favour of services dedicated to temporary users; and the increasing difficulty of accessing the centre for private car owners and daily workers who cannot rely on the public transport system.

Change of demographic profile, lack of access to affordable housing, impoverishment of cultural life and standardization of commerce are some manifest consequences. Long-time residents are moving to the outskirts where they can benefit from new housing and facilities, avoiding some of the distressing tensions in the historical centre such as dysfunctional mobility, swarms of tourists colonizing public space, cultural clashes with newcomers, and the diffuse perception of urban degradation encouraged by anxiety-inducing media campaigns. In the meantime, low- or precarious-income inhabitants live in the lowest quality buildings still existing in the historical area. They are mainly single-family households (often seniors) or new migrants living crammed into overpriced apartments. Italian students, once a consistent part of the city centre's population, are moving towards the periphery in search of more affordable locations closer to new university campuses. They are replaced by an increasing population of foreign students from numerous international universities, art, fashion design and language schools, recently developed in the centre. Alongside the mass of tourists, estimated at approximately six million per year (Comune di Firenze 2006), the movement of international, educated people feeds the image of the centre as a golden spot for investment, tourism and temporary residence (see Figure 6.1).

The whole central district is turning into a gentrified urban island. This is a peculiar form of gentrification because the lower income population is not replaced by the upper-class but by the steady pressure of temporary users who are ready to pay any rent for short-term stays in Florence. Supported by the mighty pressure of real estate investments and by wealthy citizens' craving for easy profits, residential estates are often refurbished into smaller units to let or used as bed and breakfasts. Many buildings, once hosting collective functions, are being turned into hotels. Traditional meeting places such as the leftist Casa del Popolo (House of People) and other workers' movement facilities are changing and losing their social role.



Figure 6.1 Florence city centre: consuming the image of the city.

Photograph by G. Pizziolo.

Much of the traditional commercial fabric such as grocery stores, open air markets, and art and crafts activities are suffering the high cost of renting spaces and are slowly disappearing. A similar fate is also affecting old-time pharmacies, bookshops, cinemas and literary cafes, replaced by luxury shops clustering in monocultural districts dedicated to expensive fashion or retail chains and franchise shops.

In the meantime, cheap shops often run by migrant labour are flourishing all over the city. Many of them sell low-price, Florentine-style wares, imitating while trivializing the traditional image and quality of the local production. They effectively respond to tourist demand for consumption of souvenirs, clothes and accessories. However, these ethnic shops also represent a resource supplying cheaper basic goods such as groceries.

On the other hand, residents inhabiting Florence's inner city have organized themselves in grass-roots groups. Around 40 citizen committees now form an umbrella organization, firmly reclaiming a voice in the debate about specific urban issues and the general philosophy that informs the city administration's choices and management. Citizens contest the regeneration programmes claiming that they cause environmental problems, social injustice, discrimination and a commodification of urban life. The public administration is often blamed for

designing and implementing public policies in splendid isolation, inconsiderate of the welfare of their citizens.

Planning instruments and their rhetoric

The vision for the urban regeneration of Florence is presented in two planning documents: the Strategic Plan and the Structural Plan. The Strategic Plan is not a legally binding land-use plan, but following a tendency in contemporary planning practice, it represents a concerted vision for future urban development (Sartorio 2005). It involves a large partnership of private and public stakeholders and representatives of neighbouring municipalities, chaired by the Mayor of Florence.

Florence is envisioned as a cultural centre for branded Italian production and for high-quality handcraft that encourages and manages tourism, promoting a new image related to creativity and technological innovation. The main objectives resulting from a negotiation among the most powerful players are identified as follows:

- ‘Promoting innovation’;
- ‘Rebalancing the distribution of functions in the metropolitan area’;
- ‘Re-organizing mobility and accessibility’; and
- ‘Improving urban quality as a resource for development’. (Firenze 2010 2001:23, translation by the authors)

The very wide-ranging objectives are supported by massive urban marketing and promotional multimedia campaigns that are covering up a patchwork of projects already planned or in the course of realization before the drafting of the Strategic Plan itself.

The Structural Plan is based on the regional law n.1/2005 that pledges sustainable urban development and public participation, defining strategies for land use and development over a long period of time. The Florence Structural Plan (see Comune di Firenze 2007a, 2007b), though yet to receive final official approval, assumes three definitions of Florence on which projects are based. First is the ‘brand name’. Here, the city is a ‘modern myth’, the name of which, ‘best known in the world, recalls memory of beauty, elegance and good taste’; a place where ‘historical and cultural heritage match well without any conflicts with contemporary daily life, [...] without turning the city into a museum’ (Comune di Firenze 2007b:9, translation by the authors). Second is the ‘global city’. Florence does not need to fight for a new role in the global market as ‘its *missions* [sic] already granted the city a vantage point which will never be endangered’ (ibid.:8–9, translation by the authors). The word ‘mission’ is used to emphasize vocational activities that in the course of time demonstrated a high degree of excellence in trade, arts and culture. Third is the ‘city of good governance’. Florence is an open place for people and nations to meet and a key place for education, research and creativity as the ‘invisible fabric of experimental initiatives’ and innovation (Comune di Firenze 2007b:30, translation by the authors).

Beside the rhetoric of both plans, Florence’s everyday reality is very different. Its public space, for instance, suffers dramatically for the branding of the city:

overwhelmingly affected by mass tourism, it undergoes a process of museumization and disneyfication. The position of Florence in the global market is not per se of good quality as it does not protect citizens from the deterioration of its living conditions. The creativity of Florence and its especially innovative subcultural productions struggle to survive and are not at all recognized by official cultural institutions: they are rather almost neglected, if not manifestly ostracized, and nearly disappearing (Paba 2001). The concept of Florence as the city of good governance (Comune di Firenze 2007b), a city that supports public participatory processes and eulogizes itself as pluralistic, clashes dramatically with the reality of an administration unable to put into practice consensual and 'non-violent conflict management' (Friedmann 2000:470).

Despite the potential elements of innovation contained in the new regional law, and the claim for a participative involvement of citizens, the actual outcomes of the planning process seem to go in a different direction, being strongly informed by consolidated power relationships and market pressures. What is often missing is the logical consequence between the objectives enunciated by the plans and the actual projects put in place.

For instance, how would such policies and projects 'protect and reinforce the identity of the historical centre and the city as place for residence and high quality handcraft', 'to revitalize the city as a centre of cultural production, formation and of technological innovation', 'to improve environmental quality and the mobility' (Firenze 2010 2001:34, translation by the authors), to quote just some of the Strategic Plans' purposes. All these goals, as a matter of fact, the city is dramatically failing to achieve.

Tendencies transforming the city

Supported by the above-mentioned rhetorical discourses, urban strategies for Florence are redesigning the city through three main and connected tendencies: first, the decentralization of functions traditionally located in the centre, as university, law courts, military headquarters, administration and residence, freeing a huge amount of high-valued buildings and making them potentially available to the ruling economy of leisure and tourism. Second, the development of new polarities in the periphery. They absorb the last available spaces on the fringe where zoning had attracted land speculators and large real estate interests in the past. Third, the reorganization of mobility and transportation according to the decentralization logic, which prioritizes managing the flows of people and goods to and from the historical centre. This ongoing transformation demands an infrastructural network adjustment that has swallowed the largest amount of public investments in recent years. Its capacity to be leverage for urban regeneration and improvement of the quality of life raises public debate.

For years, Florence has been suffering mobility problems, and its province counts the highest number of private cars per inhabitant in Italy (Agenzia Regionale per la Protezione Ambientale della Toscana 2007). The implicit limits of the historical fabric, together with inadequate public transportation produce overwhelming

car traffic, distressing the mobility into, out of, and around the city. The district inside the former city walls is the object of desire of consistent fluxes at the core of a radial metropolitan system, and the boulevards' ring around it is a substantial bottleneck, slowing down all traversal movements across the city. The whole city is also a critical bypass for the national fluxes of goods and people but is permanently at the edge of congestion and paralysis. Considerable regeneration plans for mobility issues propose a third lane for the motorway, the crossing of the city with a high-speed train and related new station, tramways, and parking lots around and inside the city centre. Most of these infrastructural solutions, defined as 'non-negotiable' (Comune di Firenze 2007b:43), will have a strong impact on the prestigious urban and natural landscape. These strategic projects have been handled by institutions with a top-down approach, cutting off any possible debate about alternative solutions. The public administration is privileging oversized technical solutions, in order to attract high investments in financial terms by favouring the interests of construction companies possessing a powerful voice in the decision-making process.

Public–private partnerships

Mobility and parking surveillance have become a significant employment sector in the economy of the city and a conspicuous source of income for the municipality and the enterprises connected to mobility issues by PPPs. The mobility plan for the city delivers a system of new underground parking lots all around the city centre, a strategy that deserves some criticism. The first critical point of this operation is to reinforce the excessive amount of private traffic, instead of desaturating the central location by granting priority to alternative forms of mobility. It is self-evident that increased hosting capacity of vehicles around the historical district is a contradictory strategy for limiting the already excessive traffic pressure and pollution.

A second critical point regards the procedure chosen to realize those plans and their results in terms both of efficiency and profits for the public finance. Infrastructural operations in this field are directed by the Municipality of Florence through two different yet interconnected organizations: Firenze Parcheggi and Firenze Mobilità. The first is a joint stock company whose main shareholder is the Municipality of Florence itself. It manages an increasing number of underground parking lots and the extensive system of surface pay-toll car parks in the city. In addition to the direct revenues of parking fees, it also benefits from 14 per cent of the revenues from parking fines. The second, Firenze Mobilità, is a holding company expressly created to respond to a call for developing new underground car parks. The main shareholder is Baldassini Tognozzi & Pontello (BTP), the biggest building enterprise active in Florence, together with Firenze Parcheggi itself, the Chamber of Commerce and other institutions. The project financing architecture foresees Firenze Parcheggi paying to Firenze Mobilità – for a certain amount of years – the rent of all the parking facilities, even of those actually underutilized.

If we espouse a liberal agenda to manage public functions through private enterprises, we at least expect effectiveness in producing revenues. Instead, Firenze Parcheggi is in constant budget loss. The main reason for the debt is due to money

owed to Firenze Mobilità for the newly built parking facilities, the income capacity of which is lower than their costs. The situation is simply perverse as the debt is actually contracted with the banks that are at the same time shareholders of the company. As a matter of fact, the Municipality of Florence, sponsoring the creation of two private companies to *better* carry out the construction and management of a hypertrophic system for private mobility, spends a huge amount of public money in balancing the shortfalls of the PPP, guaranteeing the profit of the private stakeholders instead of benefits for its citizens. An emblematic example is the case of Fortezza da Basso, a masterpiece of renaissance architecture transformed into a fair ground, close to the main railway station. Already in an advanced construction phase, public opinion acknowledged that part of the planned structure was going to emerge in front of the historical fortress of Giuliano da Sangallo. A campaign against the project was raised, forcing the administration to stop construction and to resize the project.

As a consequence, part of the newly built facility had to be pulled down due to its poor design. At the same time, the building company has not been able to excavate all the three underground floors, for the unexpected appearance of groundwater. The Municipality of Florence is now paying the compensation for the vanished profits of Firenze Mobilità (10 million and 200 euro) (Ferrara 2008). Citizens, who already harshly criticized the project from the early stage for the impact in the historical area, now feel as if it is contributing to the burden by paying for the mistakes of the PPP through public taxes. Overall, the malcontent and criticism towards Firenze Parcheggi's initiatives is increasing in the city.

Recently, the Procura della Repubblica (National Prosecutor's Office) opened up a file to investigate the case of this Florentine PPP for the case of Fortezza da Basso and also for other public works, including among them the one of Piazza Ghiberti, in which civil servants of the municipality and representatives of Firenze Mobilità are accused of bribery, corruption and public fraud (Gomez 2008; Selvatici 2008a, 2008b).

The case of Piazza Ghiberti

In the Santa Croce neighbourhood, BTP won the tender to realize one of the biggest underground parking facilities owned by Firenze Parcheggi. The parking space is located beneath Piazza Ghiberti, in a strategic position between the Viali (the city centre boulevards' ring) and the historical inner city. The four-floor underground parking lot was successively reduced due to excavation difficulties. Despite this big change in the plan, Firenze Parcheggi paid Firenze Mobilità 10 million euro, exactly the sum initially agreed to pay four floors instead of the two actually realized (Selvatici 2008a). Most residents strongly criticized this project, which confirmed the public scepticism towards the PPP and the mistrust towards any Firenze Parcheggi plan.

In 2005, following the disgruntlement, the municipal administration launched a participatory planning workshop for a new Piazza Ghiberti (see Figure 6.2) in the framework of a larger participatory programme called 'Florence Together'. The



Figure 6.2 Piazza Ghiberti.

Photograph by Laura Colini.

workshop was dedicated to an international competition funded by the Firenze Parcheggi, which had just finished the underground parking facility underneath Piazza Ghiberti, and were about to complete the pedestrian surface with pavement and a lighting system. The workshop participants were asked to respond to a consultation for the design of a public square where the municipality proposed the relocation of the antiquity market already existing in the neighbourhood. Both the competition and the workshop were supported by the municipality.

The participation process seemed to be biased from the beginning. The project for the surface of the Piazza is financed by the Firenze Parcheggi, which is eager to regain public support in the city. The local authority is seeking to recreate a dialogue beyond the rancorous attitude of its citizens, but yet proposing a predefined solution, which may jeopardize the honest spirit of a participatory decision-making process. Moreover, the workshop was not designed to contribute to the future development of the neighbourhood as, officially, it was intended to focus exclusively on the design competition of Piazza Ghiberti.

This piazza is probably the largest public space in the historical area and an important core of Santa Croce neighbourhood. Santa Croce is known to be one of the traditional social hearts of Florence (Pratolini 1943) which today counts on an active and ethnically diverse resident population, a local neighbourhood administration,

socio-cultural associations, a number of activists organizations, and independent groups. Beside the historic residential houses and small shops, the area hosts a mix of vital functions such as *cinema d'essai*, religious centres (synagogue, mosque and more than one catholic church), the University of Florence (Faculty of Architecture), a recent social housing programme in Piazza Madonna della Neve, the grocery market of Sant' Ambrogio, the well-known antiquity market dei Ciompi and education and social facilities. Some changes in the life of the area such as the large presence of students, the slowly disappearing arts and crafts laboratories and shops, the vacating of the local newspaper building La Nazione, bought by a supermarket chain and the relocation of the court house to the newly built Palazzo di Giustizia in the outskirts, opened up a debate about the future scenario of the neighbourhood. Discontent affects both the inhabitants as well as the working population of this area, who demand a voice in the future development of the neighbourhood. Long-time tenants tend to move out of the area due to the high costs of dwelling there. Crystallization of the city centre for mainstream purchasing activities makes it hard for arts and crafts activities to survive. Moreover, vendors of dei Ciompi market declare that the number of customers has been dramatically reduced after the creation of a pedestrian area, which is not supported by sufficient and efficient public transportation.

Surrounded by the Faculty of Architecture, the street that separates it from the grocery market, La Nazione building, and some residential buildings, the Piazza became a large empty space after the demolition of some shanty houses for the construction of car parking. Now, the Piazza Ghiberti is only an empty space in the tight-knit texture of the historical centre with a great potential for neighbourhood life.

The vacated La Nazione building will be reused some time in the future and its new functions will surely be connected to the square. The Faculty of Architecture – constantly under enlargement – can benefit from this large outer space. The grocery market could profit from an extension or connection with trading activities and the residents could benefit from a rare open-air recreational facility in the centre. In addition to seasonal markets and fairs, the Piazza also welcomes different activities and proposals such as those carried out by a group of squatters who occupied some of the empty residential buildings facing the Piazza, and the local radio willing to set up a radio station in the Piazza as part of a collaboration with the university. These and other possible functions are by no means detached from the life of the whole neighbourhood.

The launching of a participatory process offered the opportunity for discussing and debating some of these issues, in order to create a shared vision for the future of the Piazza, bringing together all the stakeholders and making visible long-time conflicts, moving toward a common resolution. A precondition for the workshop was an agreement between the municipality, the residents joining the first meeting, and the non-profit foundation Fondazione Michelucci, in charge of facilitating the workshop. The condition was that the workshop was solely to discuss strategic guidelines for the whole neighbourhood development, including the new Piazza Ghiberti, the design of which will be realized through the public competition.

Despite the true commitment of the citizens and the Fondazione Michelucci in proposing both guidelines for neighbourhood regeneration and the Piazza Ghiberti, the obligation of the local administration towards the citizens remained closely limited in the frame of the design competition, and in the agreements previously accorded to Firenze Parcheggi. Since the conclusion of the workshop and the successful accomplishment of the design competition at the end of 2005, there has been no sign of launching the regeneration plans or projects, either in the neighbourhood, or in the Piazza Ghiberti.

Moreover, at some point in the workshop, the municipality revealed key information that was not transparent from the beginning, a hitch supposedly due to a miscommunication among municipal departments, which risked the trustful relationship that had been patiently built among the workshop's participants. As a result, the municipality seemed to be caught between a willingness to regain the trust and dialogue with its citizens, the clogs of the institutional machine and the pressure from mostly private investors; they were unable to balance them for the sake of the citizens' welfare.

Public partial interventions such as these may risk reaffirming the division of interests against a common vision for the city, hiding decisions driven by exclusive monetary interests, or delaying ad infinitum and finally moving to other decisions pending key questions.

Conclusion

A comprehensive portrait of the urban renaissance of Florence is a controversial matter. On one hand, the city is clearly successful in confirming the rank that it has reached in a global landscape of cultural heritage capitals and in perpetuating its traditional attractiveness. Paradoxically, this success has a catastrophic effect on the social and cultural life of its inhabitants, on the everyday life conditions, and on the capacity to renovate the conditions of creativity that made Florence able to become that extraordinary cradle of beauty and art in the first place. Instead, the renaissance of real estate developers, fashion traders, tourist operators and other privileged managers of commodified spaces and facilities has led to the dispersal of residents, students, artists, craftspeople and intellectuals and to the debacle of contemporary culture. Today the city still demonstrates its ability to maintain its heritage in an authentic way and distribute with dignity its welfare among old and new citizens, providing a good standard of education, health care and social services. Yet the lively, proactive relationship envisaged between citizens and the city, as the precondition for a real urban renaissance in Florence, is far from being realized.

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