

A “green” Isola for the rich

Arts and communities against Eco-Gentrification in Milan, Italy

Isola is the name of a neighbourhood in Milan, situated behind the Garibaldi railway station, which for a long time had remained isolated between railroad tracks and canals, and is still today connected to (or separated from) the city by two bridges – hence the name “island”.

In the past, the Isola has been almost everything except a bedroom community: a nest of Lombard shop-owners and workers; a haven in the Twenties for small-time criminals and bandits, boasting at times a warning for policemen not to enter; an irreducible anti-fascist and partisan community; a springboard for committees fighting demolition plans; an incubator of squats and occupations in the Nineties.

The Isola’s social and urban singularities (a heterogeneous population characterized by solidarity, in a little trafficked area of low and irregular developments, flooding light and two public parks to relax in) have in the past two decades been risking erasure, a slow and yet perceivable hindering aimed at flattening the neighbourhood down to the residential and fashion districts’ standards, and cramming it with privileged inhabitants and night-life tourism.

Comitato I Mille, Forum Isola, Office for Urban Transformation-out and Isola Art Center are the latest chapter of a radical discontent, proposing a series of effective and active alternatives to the institutional abandonment that has left the neighbourhood pray to increasingly seductive communicational and co-optive logics. In the case of the Isola, these logics characterised a supposedly participatory planning aiming at gaining support from the inhabitants for projects inconsistent with the urban context, if not the outright result of urban speculations.

Driving these conflictive development plans in the neighbourhood was a ‘urban void’ constituted by a semi-abandoned factory and the two surrounding vacant lots, which had been recuperated by the neighbourhood associations and turned into public parks.

The contemporary art projects at Isola started in 2001 with actions and events centred on this space. In 2003 the 1.500 square meters of the upper floor of the former factory called “Stecca degli artigiani” were squatted in order to create an Art and Community Center open to the neighbourhood. The challenge set for the centre and its participants was to avoid what nearly always happens when museums, art centres, galleries or public art projects are introduced in a working class neighbourhood: they become instruments of gentrification. Out of this awareness the centre begun to actively work against gentrification by linking the art projects to the movement of opposition to the urban plans as well as to the neighbourhood’s elaboration of counter-proposals. Being not only “site specific”, but also “fight specific”.

These challenges were met by creating and maintaining a close connection between the needs and desires of the local inhabitants and the practice of the centre. Rather than aiming at attracting ‘the art crowd’ and its usual urban hype effects (galleries moving in, new restaurants and bars, old warehouses turned into lofts etc), the activities of the centre are directed at the people who live in the area and at their interests. Among them, that of maintaining the green areas and of turning the abandoned factory into a centre for everyone, and not just an exhibition space following some abstract logics removed from everyday life.

In April 2007 the city council and the Texan multinational real estate development agency Hines have cleared the “Stecca”, evicting Isola Art Center, the craftspeople and the associations, subsequently proceeding to the demolition of the building. The operation was

aimed at delivering the “Stecca” and the parks to the corporation, so as to develop new buildings whose total volumes would amount to over 90.000 m³.

The latest plan for the area, signed by Boeri Studio, involves underground parking lots, luxury dwellings and two tree-covered towers called “vertical forest” in place of the present park, added to the construction of a 30.000 m³ building with parking lots, offices and a shopping mall to be built by the Italian Ligresti group.¹

The whole package is presented to the media under the label “eco-district”, in order to ensure public consensus for the elimination of the public space. Beside Boeri, who is also coordinating the architectural plans for hosting the next G8 summit on the Sardinian island La Maddalena, two American architects have been called to build on the parks: Mc Dowel for a so-called eco-sustainable office building and Lagrange from Chicago for luxury dwellings.²

The whole project could be defined as “eco-gentrification”³, an even more insidious form of top-down urban development capable to co-opt the desires and demands of the inhabitants and translate them into fashionable slogans that mystify the devastating impact they have on the less privileged inhabitants of those areas. An impact that has been effectively summed up by Saskia Sassen’s comment “Too much dislocation, too much power pushing the weakest ones out!”⁴

And indeed the first people that have been evicted from the district were the craftspeople who lost their workshops in the “Stecca” and several homeless people who lived in the building. But things will only get worse: there will be an economical impact on the local network of small shopkeepers, who will have to face the competition of a huge shopping mall. And there will be a social impact too, caused by the arrival in the neighbourhood of a whole new class of wealthy residents, attracted by the construction of the luxury apartments, which will change dramatically the nature of the neighbourhood.

The real estate development agencies and the right wing city council hoped to silence the opposition by destroying the factory building and by fencing off the green areas. But eight years of common fight for public space have created a strong community. Isola Art Center continues to organize shows, lectures, meetings in squares and in several other public and private venues across the district, which host its projects out of solidarity: shops, a cultural association, a restaurant... The centre is also using the shutters of many district’s shops as exhibition space and is looking for new alternative sites for its community activities in the neighbourhood. The result is an art centre without a specific building.

In January 2009 the court stopped the construction of Ligresti’s mall for the second time. And soon other courts will have to pass judgement on several other legal actions, which could virtually bring to an end the whole development of the Garibaldi-Repubblica area.

So the end of the dispute is far from settled.

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¹ Salvatore Ligresti was in jail in 1992 for corruption. He is still the most important real estate promoter in Milan and he is currently involved in nearly all the building projects for the international Expo 2015 in Milan.

² From Lucien Lagrange official website, he presents himself as the architect for “the filthy rich”, see <http://www.lucienlagrange.com/>

³ Expression coined by Vasif Kortun.

⁴ Reply to a question regarding the new urban plans for the Isola, interview to Saskia Sassen on the Italian national newspaper La Repubblica, 7th July 2007.