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Spontaneous Regeneration in Prato City

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Textile district transformations characterizing Prato contemporary history, left many empty spaces: changing economy new urban landmarks. Indeed manufacturing production crisis has the depletion of many areas of the city as a consequence; and large areas, even into the city center, are disused.

This paper wants to recount what happening today into some of those places no more empty. Some city places, economy and image of the city are changing and those places are part of this change. This is a survey about new cultural industry and manufacturing rising into industrial disused places in Prato city center and attempts to describe the transformations linked to a different use of spaces after a period of neglect.

Research used observations and interview as tools

I visited some of the areas of the city occupied by the new cultural activities and interviewed some stakeholders: girls and boys who use these spaces for recreational purposes, groups of young people who have started collaborating on common interests and who are trying to make businesses, groups and associations operating in the cultural sector into the city from several years. In addition I interviewed stakeholders in public administration, which have an overall look at the phenomenon and helped me to identify which is the new city tendency, like *Officina Giovani Cantieri Culturali Ex-Macelli* operators or *Osservatorio* about youth public policy.

The paper describes a Prato framework and tries to do some preliminary considerations on the role that these trends in cultural and business can play into a new urban landscape.

Introduction

The new trend characterizing Prato is part of a phenomenon that has invested European cities from a long time (especially in northern Europe), that we used to call 'urban creativity'. Economies related to culture are becoming in Italy more important than in the past (only in Milan, the phenomenon is rooted long ago), changing characteristics and at the same time appearance of some part of the cities. The increasingly significant role that these economies are taking is demonstrated by the volume of business that moves around the culture in Europe in 2006 amounted to 6.5% of GDP (twice, for example, than in the car industry)¹.

In Italy most of the volume of business, linked to the cultural sector revolves around the art cities, museums and what is considered culture in a 'classic' sense; we have to underline, however, that, referring to Eurostat data, countries where there are more employed in the cultural sector are: Netherlands, United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden and Denmark; all countries that are not at the top about a long time rooted culture history. Today even in Italy the culture importance in an economic point of view, and the economy that we used to call "experience related economy" is quickly growing; at the same time new users and new demand are growing up.

If we analyze new cultural entrepreneurs and culture consumers we notice that are mostly young people with a high education level. Economies culture related are replacing traditional industrial districts in Europe, especially in advanced economy countries.

We can explain growth of economies culture linked in these context looking to the nature of culture cities: any cultural production process is an expression of a specific historical and geographical context; creative industries need a substrate and a specific place conditions are difficult to reproduce in different context and it is difficult to export them from their specific context. Users are important actors too, culture cities have a strong relationship with their users. Tight networks exist between users and producers and roles sometimes are intertwined: all are both producers and consumers of culture, "because, and this is very important to talk about economies of experiences necessarily hold together the side of the supply and demand of experience".

While the technological development and globalization stimulate and encourage manufacturing relocation, you cannot do the same with ideas and experiences. It is difficult to create in other contexts combinations of factors that have made possible the realization of some particular cultural product, makes the production linked with creativity firmly rooted in place and the people, who become producers and consumers simultaneously. In these contexts, the 'creative district' replace the industrial district (inside layered city) and characterize it not in goods producing, but in ideas production.

In addition, this type of company has a strong urban characterization "because only in the city and perhaps only in this type of town and in that kind of neighborhood are possible". This new kind of production, sometimes intangible, can stimulate urban regeneration, and the redevelopment of abandoned industrial areas and craft. New spaces of expression born, not places institutionally linked to the culture, but reinvented containers and enriched old places thanks to new meanings.

This model of revitalization and new functions could be particularly interesting in Prato, where the strong place characterization of industrial district (active since a few years ago) it's at the same time city's characteristic and identity.

Interviews conducted researching show that the spaces were not chosen by young artist for a random (all spaces are characterized by industrial or handicraft textile architecture with different connotations depending on the location in a more or less central area or in the suburbs), but in the knowledge that they represent the urban culture and that these architectures were the first witnesses of an entrepreneurial fervor that typify the city.

1 Data by KEA European Affairs for European Commission in 2006



A survey on Prato

Prato is an interesting study case that can help us to describe dynamics of a “cultural neighborhood” construction and transformation. Before getting into specifics is necessary to point out that actually city’s attention in culture and contemporary art is characterized by episodic interest.

Appearance on the local scene of a youth culture is a recent phenomenon and therefore its evolution is still at an embryonic stage, although in recent years the phenomenon has unexpectedly accelerated: opening spaces specifically dedicated to youth culture like “Officina Giovani”, the promotion of youth projects and the opening of a university that offers a course specialized in Design and Management of Arts Events (PRO-GEAS) have sparked the interest of many citizens to the culture and especially on entrepreneurial culture. The idea to become a culture city is slowly emerging. We talked about it with some stakeholders like Centre for Youth Policy accountable and “Officina Giovani” accountable.

Despite the recent phenomenon, there are very interesting aspects that we will try to bring out in the article.

Just try to describe truthfully which are phenomena investing the city we decided to use interviews as our instrument of investigation and research. Were carried out interviews with people who care for their activities now disused spaces that have hosted production activities related to the textile industry. Also were interviewed, as mentioned above, people who are concerned with cultural promotion, youth policies and culture events organization.

We decided not to use a predetermined interview line but leave freedom in order to stimulate story telling, without focusing on something especially. We just tell that we want to know how they used spaces, which is their job and why they choose these places. We had the description of a bustling city, constantly moving and changing, though often this fervor remains hidden and is not valued.

Each interview opened new spaces and contacts, make we know new people and stories and while doing our research, which lasted only a few months, many closed and unused spaces have been filled, allowing us to further widen our field of investigation and prompting us to a first positive assessment on the extent of cultural transformation, urban and youth movement that is generating.

Even just the way we managed to get the contacts of all the people and groups we realized that in addition to a revitalization of the space network is developing a very lively and in constant evolution that has as main objective to promote the contemporary culture and art in the city and at the same time to maintain its historical identity related to textile production and spaces.

Recycled spaces are concentrated in two main zones: a central zone, that is cold Santa Chiara, close to the new city library and Textile Museum; it’s characterized by small spaces holding activities related especially with theater.

Space is characterized by an open court on which currently overlook even small artisan and industrial activities, proposing a mixité new version (historically characterized the urban Prato factory). The court of Santa Chiara is, in the historical center, a focal point of activities related to art and culture.

Another similar situation is Via Genova, a road just outside the city center close to so called ‘Macrolotto Zero’, an area where Chinese immigrant population is concentrated.

Even here on a single court facing several spaces with different functions: art gallery, music rehearsal and recording music, art workshops, offices and associations; also small crafts and traditional industrial production. Here everything evoke history and atmosphere of industrial city: buildings, chimney and even more courts.

Via Genova is actually one of the most dynamic space of the city: it is to underline that in the short period we conducted interviews this is the area where new spaces and new activities are born .

Also in this court, as in other nearby, they have established and still remain those that can be identified as reuse more historicized, like those related to music production. In the city the activities related to the artistic and cultural production are recently planted, while those related to music production occupy spaces aban-

done by the industry for the longest time: indeed music at first animated and characterized Prato cultural landscape.

Other art related places are in several villages outside the city, where activities related mainly to art and theater are located within the 'big rooms' craft, relating to the production of textiles, which were the economic heart of the peripheral villages until a few years ago.

Despite architectures are different from the central areas to peripheral intent of the artists using these places are similar: conserving a heritage and a urban structure typical of Prato through reusing containers discarded by textile production and commerce for new jobs and new economic activities; a physical resistance to conversion of industrial spaces into houses, often dictated by speculative interests.

Santa Chiara, here phenomenon is more historicized, persons working in these areas are mainly young people aged around 30 years, with a medium-high level of education, which are sometimes from outside (also from neighboring cities) or who have rediscovered Prato after a period abroad.

Some are young entrepreneurs looking for an original way to overcome the crisis, other guys try to turn their passion in art, music or photography in a work, other young designers looking for interesting spaces from which draw inspiration as well.

The young age of the occupants, their desire to turn in their own image and likeness of the city's culture, make these areas places dynamic, ever-changing, spaces where young artists, designer, graphics, designer, graphics, marketing expert mingle together, not only with colleagues in the same city or neighboring cities, but with young people from other Italian cities through a network lively and active.

Thought people's words the article will attempt to restore the vitality of the urban transformations that invest the city, often overlooked and undervalued. The report of the interviews did not follow a chronological order, or based on the location of the spaces that the young men and women involved, but will seek to identify common themes that emerged from the interviews and on these restore an image to the phenomenon.

The first aspect that binds everyone in the disused industrial spaces of the city is the motivation that led them to choose these places.

Surely the multitude of brownfield sites available in the city, even at low prices, has boosted employment by young people (women and men) willing to open new businesses. But the ease of retrieval and low cost spaces are not the only reasons for this choice.

Culture and art factory

"... we are very attached to the industrial spaces for two reasons, one that concerns the identity of our city and then to the spirit of the workshop and laboratory they have; production places and not museum of city history..."

"We like to show how we can transform and reuse these places: not only apartments that blot out the memory, architecture and history. Through our work we seek to see other possibilities for these industrial areas.

Then, however, Prato stimulates these choices, it is easy the possibility of finding free spaces for rent, proximity to the center. In another cities a space like we have is not allowed. Our colleagues who come from nearby towns tell us that they cannot find spaces so. The prices here are quite content and a young man who has to start a business does not always have the opportunity to make big investments"

"... the choice of space is not a random choice, these were the symbol of the textile areas in our city "

"I am not from Prato and before I had a traditional store then I fell in love with these spaces, for the charm they have."

During the interviews it emerged on several occasions an urban transformation project staff that the artists have clear in their mind.



Their intention is to radically transform from a cultural point of view the city of Prato, but at the same time to maintain an architectural aspect and are mindful of the urban industrial history. The spaces chosen are relevant from this point of view, and their desire to recreate real artistic and cultural districts are moving in this direction. The idea of many of them, especially of those who first occupied these spaces and have subsequently tried to steer the transformations, is to rebuild the structure of the industrial courts, transforming them into artistic short.

“... this space shall not disappear [...] for this we have involved the owner for a foundation with the aim of preserving these spaces even if with different functions ... “

“Over the years the work and space are changed. I’m here in the court for 4 years, before I had a smaller space I shared with the musicians. Now the musicians occupy almost the final area of the court. I have always believed in this project of court art, and for 4 years I have stimulated the birth of this experience, I have given to people who seemed interesting touch of those who manage these spaces are all of an owner. Let’s say that here the neighborhood is chosen, , we try to share as much as possible but the opinions and different ideas remains “

Certainly the ease of finding the space is relatively small, but behind this choice young reading a deeper purpose, to direct the transformation of their city, to express their disagreement with land use decisions that have been taken by the administration and they want to preserve a heritage not only urban and architectural as well as cultural and also inspired by the shapes and locations of the industrial city.

Even more than the individual industrial buildings courts represent the characteristic of the urban fabric of Prato. Around these, mixité that has characterized the city, is structured. The courts were not simply the space onto which the individual assets, but the places of sharing, discussion, information, and cross contamination. After some years of neglect now these courts have begun to fulfill their original function.

“The concept of industrial court is what we like to develop more, part of the history of the city, the place where they passed the information, where we met. A city within a city. The fact that all of our places are opening on the court facilitates collaboration and encourages us to meet “

“The court is an open space and also our places are open not only to exhibitions or events, in particular we want to become the places open to ideas”

“...we have distorted the sense of space. The distribution of the art studios reflects that the space in which we are, two workshops and a common space that functions as agorà [...] the open space invite you to come in and browse”

The courts live 24 hours 24: during the day the guys working in their laboratories, meet, confront, receive outside visitors attracted by the charm of brownfields; in the evening the premises overlooking the courtyard organize concerts, film screenings. Sometimes the courts are transformed into outdoor art galleries, sometimes housing markets organized by the artists themselves or are rented together with the external space to organize events and parties. These events have two main functions, to make known to all citizens of the space and the idea that this want to promote and to publicize the work that is done.

“Before I worked at home. Since I’m here not only I work better and more, thanks to the stimulus and the comparison with the others, but I also have more jobs that are commissioned to me”

Through these operations there is a perception that the industry of the city - factory relive old times, in different ways.

The young artist and crafters through their works and their productions characterize these spaces and try to make them as comfortable as possible.

As mentioned the opening moments to the city are also opportunities to promote their work. The multiplicity of functions that overlook the court makes these areas a bit of the great global shop, where you can find everything, but where there are also events, often functional to the promotion of entrepreneurship. And the artists / artisans take care of everything, organization, communication and graphics. Together they work as a single team in which everyone brings their professionalism: is anyone involved in graphic arts, those of communication, design, construction, photography, art, fashion and furniture.

The coexistence within the courts is beautiful and exciting, but not always easy, especially in situations where traditional crafts still coexist with new functions.

The fact that the courts do not have a unique character (very close artistic activities, craft, industrial sometimes some residences) gives a more stimulating to the neighborhood but also presents difficulties. Sometimes the collaboration is narrow and the young are supported in their efforts by other occupants, other times it is difficult and conflictual coexistence.

“...Here then the collaboration for the realization of events, there are also groups that are not strictly related to art, the knitwear factory near here encourages us and provides us with even spaces, even the combination of sailing ... we try to involve others, but from someone is difficult to accept that a work of artistic type can bind to other types of work and collaboration that will be useful to all”

Networking and joint projects allows you to go beyond the limit of your specialization, to explore new areas and to devise and carry out complex and innovative projects. Sometimes projects are designed by the worker themselves sometimes are developed for external clients. However, the group is always involved in all phases of a project, from conception to marketing and communication.

“Between us there are already trading business, but success is not always so easy. The idea is to create a network among the tenants of the court, between the experiences in the city and other cities. It would be nice to be able to make a network of people who have occupied abandoned and degraded areas, not just industrial. We are not the first and our experience is not original, but the phenomenon is emergent and purpose of young people are more or less the same...”

The collaborations also do not occur only among artists but also move in search of contamination with other areas, such as research in the field of architecture, urban planning and sociology.

From this point of view there are interesting experiences related to the description of the city in its transformations, it's become a multiethnic city and those related to the research directions for the planning of the plan of the city.

“We have always woven together literature and visual art with other research such as architecture or urban planning. We try to cross the language, architecture and writing have always crossed the lot, even through collaboration with buckets on several occasions both in town and out, as happened in Brescia”

The internal organization of youth groups is advanced and collaborations, as they describe, are numerous. One of the goals now that the groups are asking is to sensitize the public administration incentives to reuse this different spaces.

The boys created for this association for the promotion of culture, the reuse of industrial areas and work together on many projects with the institutions, especially through dialogue and collaboration with Officina Giovani and theater Metastasio (some of the experiences, more established, we have encountered, arise from a stimulus born from the relationship with the cultural institution of the city, particularly the theater Metastasio)



Officina Giovani, cantieri culturali ex macelli

A peculiarity of public cultural policy in the city of Prato is precisely the conception and implementation of a project for the youth culture as Officina Giovani.

The draft Officina Giovani was founded in 1998, and at the same time To face the city of the first forms of interpretation by the young people of the territory of a contemporary culture underground, linked in particular to the music.

Initially the space it currently occupies the property, the former public slaughter was to be devoted to the exhibition center. It is believed in 1998 to give greater characterization, making it a center dedicated to youth culture to take care of that in urban and metropolitan regards music, theater, dance, visual arts and multimedia.

The project started in 1998, but then the spaces were only available one year later, in 1999. In this year's Officina Giovani spreads in the city as an idea and then also occupy a physical space. The first workshops promoted took place in different places of the city.

In 2000 the offices of culture department moved into Officina Giovani's space and it is from this moment that a program growing kicks off.

The aim of exploring youth culture at 360 ° is achieved by programming events (also offered by individuals, young and associations), laboratories, workshops, aimed at beginners, but not for professionals. Furthermore, the various courses, as all activities are completely free.

The close relationship that the administration and its staff can tighten with the youth of the area is demonstrated by many events or workshops at Officina Giovani realized together, the space is a place that is open to contaminations, can shaped ideas, and there are still a lot of unexpressed potential.

“...we are pleased to collaborate in workshop with young artist, and we hope to have more and more collaboration with them”

“We constantly working could make it even more vital space and help for a truly effective communication”

Despite Prato is not a capital of contemporary culture, Officina Giovani is an original idea and almost the only one of its kind that also has great further potential. There are not many spaces as those of the Yards Cultural completely open and free, where ideas can circulate and make a full and complex reasoning about the contemporary youth culture.

Moreover, the presence of Workshop opens up the city to the comparison with the outside world, often accepting projects that come from outside metropolitan area and here there is one of the few available spaces which also provides technical support and help implement the ideas .

One of the aims behind the creation of Officina Giovani and that makes it an interesting place in the urban landscape is the desire to not only make art but to convey the idea of art as a profession and not as a hobby or pastime, to propose as one of many possible and urban economies.

“Culture is work, the artists are professionals, it is not fun”

This idea of art represents a unit of intent between Officina Giovani and respondents who would like to do with their art and their ideas a profession.

“So many times when I talk to adults, and unfortunately often with my peers, I wonder if I have a job in addition to my hobby. For them to be an actor or musician in general is not a job, if one does not produce something tangible, which immediately gives an economic return does not work [...] this is frustrating for me. “

The relationship with the theater Metastasio, another important cultural institution, is now less strong and steady.

In particular, the collaborations with the theater were strong and frequent in the late eighties early nineties. In those years, thanks to the active involvement of the city by the institution theatrical, were born many associations and groups related to theater. Today the theater is a landmark, but the collaborations occur very rarely.

“The theater Metastasio had a strong public vocation, were held in the city of high-level theater courses. I attended workshops Ronconi from where he was born the Center for Semiotics Theatre created and run by Mario Rellini. The center was located in the theater Magnolfi, one of the spaces in the city recovered thanks to the workshop “

“...was a center of education and freedom of expression. [...] In those years was achieved utopia, a sort of city theater.”

Ideas for a culture future

As mentioned some of the experiences in the city more established were born because of the stimulus given in collaboration with the theater. In particular, activities related to theater, dance and literature which are mainly concentrated in the district of Santa Chiara.

The opening in the immediate vicinity of the space used by associations and groups of the Textile Museum and the new city library could further transform the appearance of this part of the city which is located between the castle, and the walls to the caisson Frascati door.

Here, as in via Genova spaces overlook an internal courtyard that gathers new activities related to art and culture and small businesses textiles.

Such as spaces, also resemble the intentions of those who ‘lives’.

The desire to transform their passion for art, theater and culture in a profession is strong and the movement is trying to get more and more cities.

In the short period in which they were conducted the interviews I’ve seen open two contemporary art galleries, a local rehearsal rooms, filling empty spaces before new content.

This fervor linked to the presence of more established urban reality as precisely *Officina Giovani*, *Metastasio* and the *Museo Pecci* and new realities such as the University with the *PROGEAS*, suggest a change in the city, certainly of image, for many brownfield sites, but probably also the emergence of a new economy related to art and entertainment.

This second hypothesis could be even more true if we consider the role of the city of Prato in the metropolitan context Florence, Prato, Pistoia. Manufacturing spaces in Prato could accommodate new businesses related to art in its many meanings (including graphics, communications, advertising) and research and technological innovation and represent a new center for the metropolitan area.

The effort that the young artists working in Prato are doing is great and thanks to their contribution to the city is changing its face, but the individual initiatives could be even stronger if inserted in a context of public policies that encourage this type of transformation and try to offer a multiplicity of functions and reuses the space of textiles now emptied of their original function.

One respondent spoke of a city of theater, art and culture, which has shown in his history a cultural vitality equal to the industrial vitality, a city projected into the future looking for a new identity and vision of the city, emerging from meetings and interviews, offers a dynamic image that tries in every way to become visible, though still an institutional point of view is not recognized as a proper importance.

