

ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

by DANIELE LAURIA



(4) The "Plaza de Bolsillo" at the junction streets of Santo Domingo and Teatinos, Santiago. Photo: Daniele Lauria

On January 31st, exactly forty years ago, the Centre Georges Pompidou was inaugurated. It seemed as if an alien spacecraft had landed in the centre of Paris and that this project designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers was a hazardous bet. Instead, it turned out to be a real success, although controversial, that could express the value of an iconic architecture for culture. This value had some forerunners, such as the New York headquarters of the foundation Guggenheim, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Another example is the Niterói Contemporary Art Museum (1) designed by Oscar Niemeyer, which was in line with an architectural tradition that has its roots in his projects for Brasilia. However, no building dedicated to culture was able to express that concept more than the Guggenheim in Bilbao, opened just twenty years ago. It is the work of Frank Gehry who managed to turn the city of Bilbao into an international tourism destination and to put an end to a long economic crisis. At the same time, the Bilbao's Guggenheim gave the green light to a global process that over the years, has involved a lot of archistars and the most important cultural institutions in the world.

Parallel to these authentic urban marketing operations, in recent years and especially after the 2008 crisis, new options are starting to respond to the principles of sustainability. The recovery and reuse of architectures of the past and the aim to turn them into spaces for culture are swelling in demand. A process that, even in this case, has many successful examples, starting from the London Tate Modern,

designed by Herzog and De Meuron and based in the former Bankside Power Station, that was reused since the year 2000.

I, in a much more modest scale, have tried to stimulate my career as an architect with the principle and techniques of re-use of historical buildings for cultural functions. It started when I was involved in the restoration project of the former prison "Le Murate" in Florence, designed by Renzo Piano and converted into a vital centre of culture. This experience was crucial for subsequent initiatives of my firm. From 2005 I worked on the restoration of the Florentine convent of Santa Maria Maggiore, a seventeenth-century building abandoned and closed for over twenty years. After a long recovery process, it was reopened as the headquarters of the "House of Creativity" (2). More recently, after similar experiences in South America, I signed the project for the re-use of the royal building of "Le Pagliere", which was built in 1868 simultaneously with the passage of the Italian capital from Turin to Florence (3). The work has just begun with the aim to transform the building into a space for art exhibitions and cultural events, all in collaboration with the Uffizi Gallery who runs it.

Obviously, this is a drop in the bucket of a much larger process that is trending in Italy as well in others countries. Among the most important examples, I can reference the reuse of the medieval Hospital of Siena as the museum of "Santa Maria Della Scala". Not to forget, is the restoration of some wool factories of Biella, a little city halfway between Milan and Turin.



(1) Niterói Contemporary Art Museum, Rio de Janeiro. Photo: Daniele Lauria



(3) The "Le Pagliere" building, Florence. Photo: Daniele Lauria



(2) The "House of Creativity", Florence. Photo: Daniele Lauria

The famous artist Michelangelo Pistoletto turned one of them in the headquarters of "Cittadellarte" (The Citadel of the art), a foundation active in the world for urban art projects.

It is, in fact, the urban art that can positively affect the city's scenery and play an important role in the urban transformation and social renewal processes. I have been a direct witness of this, between 2007 and 2009 when I was the Artistic Director of the Festival of Creativity in Florence. During these years, together with the Pistoletto's foundation, we decided to support the project led by Juan Sandoval for the recovery of the Moravia district in Medellin, Colombia. It was an urban art project that accompanied the city's renewal plans and the

creation of the Moravia's Cultural Centre designed by Rogelio Salmona. In those years, artists from various countries formed laboratories with the populations to get them involved in the process of urban transformation.

Another example is Favela Painting Project created by Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urhahn. Their largest work involved Rio de Janeiro's Santa Marta favela painting of over 34 houses, covering an area of 7000 square meters at the central square of "Praça Cantão". This resulted in an explosion of pastels rays of sunshine, which turned in a powerful weapon to catalyse social change.

A last case is the "Plazas de Bolsillo", a Santiago enterprise of recovering urban abandoned spaces for new social uses, focusing on art. The most famous project is the one in the historical centre of the Chilean capital, at the junction streets of Santo Domingo and Teatinos. (4) Here, a coloured mural of 850 square meters was made by Dasic Fernández, a famous Chilean artist who lives in New York. In this mural, he transmits the great tradition of the Chilean murals featuring the charming city of Valparaiso.

In fact, the best-known kind of urban art is that of the graffiti which characterises entire cities such as Berlin, where the famous wall hosts the renown kiss of the communist leaders Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev, painted by Dmitri Vrubel. This graffiti echoes a certain irreverence of Banksy's graffiti. Always in the same wall, the works of Thierry Noir seems to have found new life in the characters that the Brazilian artists "Os Gêmeos" are painting in various cities including Vancouver, Boston, New York. Finally to celebrate urban art as a global phenomenon not only of redevelopment processes but also of powerful actions of urban marketing it can be pointed out the decision of the city of Chicago, famous for its public works including the celebrated "Flamingo" by Alexander Calder, to designate 2017 as "the Year of Public Art,".

It can be said that art in the form of emblematic architecture or freely shown in urban contexts, is really an instrument of great strength for the economic and social growth of a city.

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