

# ART AND TERRITORIAL CHANGES IN THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

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## 1. The city and its 'creative milieu'

As Hall reminds us, "cities have always been places where human creativity flourished" (Hall, 2009: 49) fostering the greatest art but also the most advanced thoughts, technological inventions, industries and markets. Cities indeed grow in scale, population, economic power, and become the place of innovative solutions to great urban management problem. Hall then distinguishes four kinds of urban innovation: cultural/intellectual; technological/productive; cultural/technological; technological/organisational. In the end, the author forecasts a merge of the four during the twenty-first Century. Patterns of development of such cities can be quite unclear or characterised by unexpected or emerging factors, but a few recurring elements can be found.

Cities become creative because of their 'creative milieu'. This statement hints at clarifying that creativity is an intangible factor of success. Even when we talk about cities shaped by artists, the key is not just the artifact, but the shared knowledge itself (Tornqvist, 2004). A creative milieu in nurtured by exchange of people. Creatively rising cities become an attraction for talents and capitals. Notwithstanding, "the physical *milieu's* continuity makes it an important historical source" (Tornqvist, 2004: 232). In order for a process of urban renewal and for its creative attractiveness to flourish, "even the architecture of a city's buildings, as well as their interior decoration and colours, are thought to have a certain importance" (Tornqvist, 2004: 232).

A situation of instability is necessary for the development of a creative milieu. Hence, an “unstable phase characterized by stagnation and confusion” (Tornqvist, 2004: 234) is the phase in which ideas start conflicting and original creative people converging. Also, a previous situation of wealth – that could match Tornqvist’s *stable phase* (Tornqvist, 2004) – positively affects the rise of a creative city. Hall states that creative cities were *bourgeois* cities – but *bourgeois* cities were not necessarily creative. Here, culture was prompted by a minority of people and wealth was unequally distributed<sup>1</sup>.

Such a duality can lead to several risks and misunderstandings but a synthesis of these two factors can still be offered. Following Hall’s assertion, talent is considered more important than wealth and, in the end, wealth must be considered as a means towards long-term cultural benefits. This is the most misunderstood point. Openness is therefore a basic factor of success for cities which prove open when they accept migrations of talents and knowledge. Through history, an oligarchic patronage of creativity<sup>2</sup> lets artists shape cities and their environment. Such a process results not only in urban landscape’s significant changes but also in quality of urban life and urban atmosphere.

Today, cities compete for liveliness and quality of life (Hall, 1998, Richards and Palmer, 2010). They struggle to be attractive for workers, residents and tourists. In this light, attraction of talents and tolerance as, for instance, Florida puts in his writings, should be interpreted in a reverse way. Florida (2002) argues that creative classes are instrumental to economic development and innovation of the city. Comparing this perspective to Hall’s, it rather seems arguable that a sound economic basis is a means for creativity to emerge and quality of life to increase. This said, the arts offer cities a range of impacts that is much

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting cue is given by sociologist Bourdieu, who argues that social and family conditions are largely responsible for individual disposition to cultural consumption and the definition of aesthetic taste (Bourdieu, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Florence with de’ Medici and Rome with the Popes.

broader than the mere economic development, and their role is instrumental to wellbeing and happiness of people<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Public places

What we are talking about is public benefit: the arts deserve to be publicly underpinned and offered to the public, that is the urban community (Matarasso, 2004). Moreover, even if the intangible nature of creative milieu has previously been marked as essential, its material component shows a remarkable importance in the development of a creative city. Proximity is a basic factor in territorial development and this is still true in the cultural realm. For instance, cultural and creative exchanges used to take places in *piazza*, *agora* or cafés. These public places played a key public and social role.

As the reader might have noticed, the term “public” has been mentioned in this sentence many times with many different meanings. Public space, public intervention, the public, public art, all these *publics* refer to different stakeholders<sup>4</sup> that, all together and mutually interconnected, constitute the territory.

Public spaces of cities are the places where non codified relations and connections occur. They are used or at least crossed by the whole urban population, with little or no distinction related to social differences. Hence, public space can be the perfect scene of a non-prejudicial and fruitful experience of the arts, with no threshold dividing people from art consumption. In this respect, public space is better defined with the term ‘public realm’ (Lavanga and Pastorino, 2006). This im-

<sup>3</sup> Recently Professor Marie Briguglio exposed her findings about quality of life and cultural participation at Valletta 2018 Fouth International Conference “Living Cities, Liveable Spaces: placemaking and Identity”, 22-24 November 2017 La Valletta, Malta <https://newsmavens.com/news/women-to-watch/924/economist-marie-briguglio-culturally-active-citizens-are-happier> (website consulted on Jan 2018)

<sup>4</sup> An interesting insight on the stakeholders view is offered by Moore and Khagram (2004).

plies that art in urban public spaces could be the place where democratisation of culture can actually be applied. People crossing and acting within the public realm are the public and at the same time art consumers, addressees and funders of public policies and interventions.

Then, art in the public realm (*i.e.* public art) is to be considered a preferred option in order for cultural borders to become wider, for civic openness to increase and for creative milieu to flourish. Public art is a multi-faceted form of art difficult to be described by one single definition. Seia (2011) observes that the “languages of the arts are mind-trainer and when art is practiced in a public space, out of the unconventional cultural places, it can reach various publics, different truths and new scenarios”<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Art in public spaces: some experience

Art in public spaces is a powerful means of social transformation. This trend has been underpinned by institutional actions such as the European Capital of Culture program but, as Hall and Robertson (2001) argued almost two decades ago proving right also nowadays, claims of benefits generated by public art still have to be scientifically demonstrated. Such claims concern communities' sense of identity, sense of place, communities' needs and social inclusion, educational values and social change. Furthermore, it is also remarkable that those claims do not take into consideration the intention of the public artwork's author, the artist her/himself. With regard to this point, it can be noted that the artist willing to cope with public art is looking for a “dialogue with a different patron, a new way of exploring the reality and its constraints related to the promoter, who is not simply the collector anymore, but someone who asks for creative interventions for the community” (Detheridge, 2004: 106)<sup>6</sup>.

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5 Translation by the author of this chapter.

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Recently, the discourse around what art can do to society is arising and this is getting confirmed by practices such as Public Art Fund's latest exhibition by Chinese refugee artist Ai Weiwei "Good fences make good neighbors"<sup>7</sup>. Also, Public Art Fund states in its own mission to commit to a broad public for free exhibitions and impacting on the urban experience<sup>8</sup>. Similarly does the collective The Federation, whose website resolutely states: "Art is essential to democracy"<sup>9</sup>.

Together with increasingly aware statements about the instrumental use of public art, a deeper consciousness around the importance of the role of creativity and art in the cities is rising with evaluation attempts. For instance, a remarkable example of the rising interest for the assessment of the role of art for cities is the "City, Culture and Creativity Monitor" by European Commission<sup>10</sup>, an evaluation tool of the European creative cities based on three main pillars: cultural vibrancy; creative economy; enabling atmosphere.

Even if this is not the place for a long dissertation about the experiences of art in public spaces, a glance at a couple of examples is valuable for our purposes. The experiences to be examined are Christo's "Floating Piers" on the Lake Iseo and Kentridge's "Triumphs and Laments" frieze in Rome, both in Italy. "Floating Piers" is an installation by the Bulgarian-American artist Christo that took place in Lake Iseo for two weeks in July 2016. The project has been carried out and totally funded by an *ad hoc* limited liability company founded by Christo himself in Italy. The artist and his team installed a three-kilometres grid of floating docks connecting the three small towns of Lake Iseo (Sulzano, Monte Isola and San Paolo island), normally connected by boat lines, with a pedestrian path. The piers were covered with a vibrant turmeric yellow fabric that turned its shades with daylight and

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.publicartfund.org/ai\\_weiwei\\_good\\_fences\\_make\\_good\\_neighbors](https://www.publicartfund.org/ai_weiwei_good_fences_make_good_neighbors) (website last visit: Jan 2018)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.publicartfund.org/about> (website last visit: Jan 2018)

<sup>9</sup> <https://wearethefederation.org/> (website last visit: Jan 2018)

<sup>10</sup> <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/cultural-creative-cities-monitor/> (website last visit: Jan 2018)

when wet. "Those who experienced the 'Floating Piers' felt like if they were walking on water – or perhaps the back of a whale", said Christo. "The light and water transformed the bright yellow fabric to shades of red and gold throughout the sixteen days"<sup>11</sup>. In the end, the art piece was not just the material piers but the whole value of two weeks of as many experiences as the visitors were<sup>12</sup>.

"There were no tickets, no openings, no reservations and no owners. The 'Floating Piers' was an extension of the street and belonged to everyone"<sup>13</sup>. For sixteen days Lake Iseo has been packed with Italian and international visitors who took part of the installation and became part of a new temporary landscape. Even though, such a new landscape proved to be not so temporary. After two weeks the installation was dismantled but the perception of that landscape has changed for visitors and, also, for the socio-economic environment. For instance, one year later tourism was still at peak levels regardless of the "Floating Piers"<sup>14</sup>.

The latter experience concerns an art intervention carried out by South African artist William Kentridge along the Tiber river in the heart of Rome. The artwork is a frieze surfaced from the biological coat of river banks walls<sup>15</sup>. The frieze depicts eighty ten metres tall icons of the history and chronicle of the city: a parade of Rome's triumphs and laments, its victories and defeats. Icons have been selected among pictures drawn from history of art, literature, journals and newspapers, movies, monuments and other sources. The elements of the frieze, realized with an environment-friendly technique based on high-pres-

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<sup>11</sup> <http://archive.thefloatingpiers.com/the-project>

<sup>12</sup> 1.2 millions, according to the impact analysis report carried out by JFC: [www.jfc.it/ricerche-istituzionali/christo-the-floating-piers-consuntivo-appraisal](http://www.jfc.it/ricerche-istituzionali/christo-the-floating-piers-consuntivo-appraisal)

<sup>13</sup> <http://archive.thefloatingpiers.com/the-project>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/06/17/edizioni/milano/sul-miracolo-del-floating-piers-lago-anno-dopo-linstallazione-diseo-christo-visitata-da-milione-turisti-mila-persone-continua-lafflusso-di-ygf8Nj58znQKf54iYhwdxN/pagina.html>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Biagioni A., Borriello C., Sassanelli V., *Triumphs and Laments di William Kentridge. Tevereterno per Roma*, Edizione Tevereterno, Roma, 2016

sure cold water cleaning, speak directly to Rome residents and visitors, called to recognise the icons and detect cultural and everyday chronicles recalls. By means of the technique of high-pressure water cleaning on stencil used by Kentridge to let icons emerge from the mosses of the bank walls, the frieze is intended to last for approximately five years. In fact, as no maintenance action has purposely been planned by the artist himself, the mosses will grow again with the result of a gradual maquillage of the figures.

The project has been managed by an Italian cultural nonprofit organisation named Tevereterno, whose mission is to give the banks of Tiber river back to civic usage, through a series of art projects, mostly connected with the foundation date of the ancient Rome (April 21, 753 BC). Kentridge's frieze has been the most ambitious project carried by Tevereterno so far, and it has gained a quite high fortune during its implementation and inauguration. In spite of this, numerous problems with the public administration emerged during the frieze proposal phase<sup>16</sup>. It took several years of negotiation between Tevereterno and the Municipality of Rome in order to gain the necessary permissions for Triumphs and Laments' execution<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, it is notable that the Municipality was not asked to participate in the project financially and all the funding efforts have been carried out by Tevereterno itself, by means of crowdfunding, sponsorships, volunteering. After two years from its inauguration, Kentridge's frieze still struggles to become Roman citizens' frieze, partly due to the weak action of the promoter organization, partly due to a general indifference of administrators towards the project. At this point one main and more general question arises: what can art do for the public places?

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<sup>16</sup> National and local chronicle largely focused on this issue. For instance, cf. Mozzetti C. *Graffiti sul Tevere, il ministero frena*, *Il Messaggero*, 15 gennaio 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Granovetter, M.S. (1973)

#### 4. Conclusions and implications

Some remarks can be drawn from the cases described before, that will lead to an attempt of answering to the aforesaid general question. A first element to be noted is timing. Both the public art experiences described above are temporary. Furthermore, such a feature has a twofold consequence. On the one hand, we find the importance of temporary artistic projects, *i.e.* events, for cities. As Palmer and Richards put it, “cultural events have become central to processes of urban development and revitalisation, as cultural production becomes a major element of the urban economy, and cultural consumption can dominate both the image of places and urban life in general”. Moreover, “[claiming distinction] also involves the creation of a lively atmosphere and a sense of place” (Palmer and Richards, 2010: 3).

Events and temporary engagement produce a deep exchange and interaction among groups because people feel committed to participate and to give their best (Granovetter, 1973). According to that, Christo’s action on Lake Iseo can be considered as a very powerful experience. It has produced an explosive (*i.e.* short term) range of benefits to the visitors and also to the socio-economic fabric; indeed, its effects on tourism and local economy have been and still prove to be significant. But the most powerful effect is that the “Floating Piers” experience has systematically changed the perception of the landscape for those who experienced a walk on them and possibly, also, by means of media and social media sharing contents, such a shift in perception might have addressed an even broader audience.

Eventually Lake Iseo, after “Floating Piers” was dismantled, might not have returned to what it was before Christo and people’s interaction with that landscape. Still with regard to the temporary nature of the aforementioned artistic events, on the other hand, another feature is to be taken into account: the success of an event with such a promising legacy cannot be taken for granted. This means that together with a short time artistic action, many more interventions need to be provided in order to support the long term legacy the event is charged to offer.

As Palmer and Richards (2010: 432) argue, “the eventful city planning process needs to be integrated with other planning frameworks to ensure that synergies with other policy areas can be maximized, and to enable events to be embedded into the cultural fabric of the city”.

In such a respect “Triumphs and Laments” shows some weaknesses. The very powerful aim of Kentridge’s frieze was to arise a subtle but increasing territorial change. Everyday life of city users would have been gradually affected by the presence of a very engaging *oeuvre* open to everybody at any time. This would have little by little enabled people to use and take care of that public space that could become public, *i.e.* everybody’s, place. Even if it appears to be promising because of its medium-term duration and its stance in re-establishing a portion of public space for its citizens, the lack of embedment in a more general and publicly underpinned strategy for the regeneration of that urban space performed as a failure factor, emphasized by the obstacles brought about by public governance in the implementation phase and by its almost absent interest in the whole project<sup>18</sup>.

To conclude, we must acknowledge that public art is not always self-standing. When not accompanied and sustained by other parallel efforts, public art actions can lose in success and prove mediocre in their impacts. Therefore, the lesson to learn seems to be that art alone does not prove sufficient to serve urban regeneration. Wider efforts must be combined in order for a cultural urban strategic project to be successful for people and their city.

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<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding, the frieze is still well visible and the five years have not expired yet. Hopefully, more and better could be done in the near future.

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