

Contemporary art and enterprise in the suburbs of Milan. The emergence of artistic geographies?

Descrizione

Abstract

How do artistic geographies emerge in certain territories? How does the entanglement of art and enterprise reflect the artistic geography of a territory? These are some of the research questions that this article aims to address by focusing on the urban shape of contemporary art enterprises which determined the rise of certain “art districts” in a metropolis such as Milan. An analysis of the urban space demonstrates that there are cultural institutions which can be identified in a certain number of areas that serve as not as mere examples of static contemporary art attractions, but are in fact active triggers of a new vision of a city that provoke the re-defining its character and shape over the course of a number of years.

Introduction

The artistic geographies of Milan from 1861 until present day have been a noteworthy subject of research conducted in the last ten years by the Contemporary Art Unit at the Department of History, Archaeology and Art History, Università del Sacro Cuore, Milan^[1]. Along with the interest it garnered among international contemporary art experts, the research conducted by this institution demonstrates an imperative for documenting additional case studies which exemplify the concept of ‘artistic geographies’. Given the multiplicity of artistic stimuli that the city of Milan offers in conjunction with the numerous contemporary art institutions with network-creating potential, a deepened analysis is rendered necessary, especially in the area of the suburbs where former enterprises have been converted into cultural institutions whose spaces are devoted to the promotion and the valorization of contemporary art. This

paper intends to examine how cultural enterprises shaped the artistic geographies in the suburbs of the city of Milan, investigating a circumscribed area from the South of Milan, via Vannucci 16, to the North East, Pirelli Hangar Bicocca. This followed a rising need for urban redevelopment and the redefinition of the boundaries of modern-day Milan in particular; this was a result of a historical drift in which the spatial and temporal demarcation lines became rigid, and lead to the aim of shifting all these boundaries. In a re-interpretative process of the overall surface area of Milan, these areas have proven to be fundamental above all for their strategic location as connectors between the interior and exterior of the city. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate whether there is any interaction between the peripheral places devoted to contemporary art and the urban fabric, and to observe the types of relationships that are established between these elements; after all, historically, Milan has been (and has presented itself more and more intentionally) as “a city of knowledge, a city of professions, a city of research” [\[2\]](#).

From enterprise to cultural institution: the connective's effects

The area examined in this paper demonstrates how the spaces that stand out for the versatility of their mission and their attractiveness are mostly labelled as relics of industrial archaeology[\[3\]](#). These include Cartiere Vannucci, Fondazione Prada, Spazio Ex Ansaldo (now MUDEC [Museo delle Culture]), Superstudiopiù, Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, the Fieramilano pavilions, Fabbrica del Vapore and Pirelli Hangar Bicocca. These central spaces for cultural initiatives have a common denominator, namely the fact that they were first and foremost factories rather than ‘centres’ hosting contemporary events. One might wonder why they have been considered more influential than the sporadic galleries active in the suburbs, since they exclusively consist of private institutions and are not dependent on municipal funding dynamics; nevertheless, they stand out as the driving forces behind initiatives. An explanation lies in the increasingly monumental and complex contemporary works that need capacious and flexible spaces, and these are conditions are offered by industrial pavilions. They are square-shaped, functional, readaptable; furthermore, modernity has unequivocally forced creativity to be beholden to industry[\[4\]](#). These institutions

also have impacts on the urban planning of the surrounding area and the transport sector; they create lively artistic areas that serve as landmarks for the city during the day and sometimes at night[5].

November 2000 saw the birth of several spaces dedicated to contemporary art[6]: Cartiere Vannucci, recovered from an old paper mill in Milan's Porta Romana district, which immediately became a reference location for art, meetings, special events, fashion shows, conventions and photo shoots; Fondazione Prada; Spazio Ex Ansaldo, now MUDEC; Superstudio Più (with the Accessible Art Fair); and the spaces (referring to the Fuori Salone locations) between one venue and another granted especially during the Salone Internazionale del Mobile in the Via Tortona area in Largo delle Culture. Cartiere Vannucci has both become part of and contributed to the creation of a cultural hub in south-east Milan meant for young people. Capable of offering rooms of different sizes that are connected and independent and can be used together or separately, it is virtually divided into two areas: the Happening Centre for initiatives of an entertainment nature and the Business Centre for hosting professional and corporate meetings. Cartiere Vannucci also stands out for its collaboration with industrial brands, which is absolutely in keeping with the original vocation of the sites as factories[7]. In this vein, in November 2000, the art critic Gianluca Marziani curated the exhibition *Dalla Mini al mini. 1959-2000: the maximum of technology in the minimum of space*. Sixteen artists, including Matteo Basilé, Corrado Bonomi, Davide Bramante, Chiara Fasoli m&m and Dario Ghibaud, interacted with the Mini icon, on the one hand tracing the effects of technological innovation on everyday objects, and on the other connecting with their creativity[8]. Another example of the encounter between art and business can be found a few years earlier in the area near Piazza XXIV Maggio. In April 1992, an exhibition entitled *Cocart. Bevete Arte Contemporanea* took place with the participation of numerous artists, prominent art historians and critics such as Achille Bonito Oliva, Rolando Bellini, Massimo Bonfantini, Manuela Gandini, Jean-Pierre Keller, David Platzker, Marco Senaldi, Fulvio Carmagnola and Giovanni Cutolo. Its aim was to tell the true story of the beloved drink in an exhaustive manner; the curators, husband-and-wife team Maria Teresa Biaso and Ugo Fadini, are two collectors who have been converted to the cult of Coca-Cola for about ten years[9].

If Cartiere Vannucci provides a minor role to the business world, Fondazione Prada becomes an exponential protagonist; this was exemplified especially in May 2015 with the inauguration of its new headquarters, in Largo Isarco 2, designed by Rem Koolhaas. Previously located in Via Spartaco 8, today's Fondazione Prada was founded

in 1993 under the name FondazioneMilanoArte at the behest of Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli. The involvement of international artists such as David Smith, Anish Kapoor, Michael Heizer and Laurie Anderson, who created interactions between different media, or who had a singular artistic path such as Mariko Mori (a former model and performer), is evident from the very beginning and makes the Fondazione a singular case in Milan's peripheral areas. Since 1997, when Fondazione Prada became its definitive name, there have been many articles that seem to promote it, alluding to a potential relaunch of culture through fashion, by means of Made in Italy (e.g., "The crisis can be overcome by focusing on culture"[\[10\]](#)[\[11\]](#)). The artistic richness produced in such places, which are used for site-specific installations, paintings and screenplays, leads to the formation of so-called "art villages"[\[12\]](#) in which not only works were exhibited, but where unpublished documentaries were also screened (e.g., Roman Polanski -inauguration of the Largo Isarco site, 9 May 2015). With the intervention of the architect Koolhaas, the geographical area became "Rem Koolhaas's Golden Suburbs. Not an Arcadia, but a "campus"[\[13\]](#), and created a boundary between "Made in Italy and Ancient Greece"[\[14\]](#). The area was later included in a real district, the "Distretto Ripamonti"[\[15\]](#), which the Foundation appears to have helped form.

While there are similarities to Fondazione Prada, Fabbrica del Vapore is nevertheless unique, showing a strong link to the industrial architecture that has hosted it since its debut in 2003 until the present. It attracts attention for having revitalized the surrounding neighborhoods and for the impressiveness of its structure which, unlike Fondazione Prada, has a link to the company whose space it has inhabited architecturally. It has 14 active workshops, which it set up between 2002 and 2007 in order to create a centre for youth culture, allowing the public to participate as creators and users; it thus offers itself as another novelty on the peripheral art scene. About 30,000 square meters can house the city's most vital proposals as well as others from the national and international scene with its nine buildings, including: Messina Uno, Palazzina Liberty, Reception, Centrale Tecnologica and Cattedrale; they host a variety of initiatives (contemporary art, music, dance, theatre), creative workshops and spaces for archives such as Docva (Documentation Center for Visual Arts). Fabbrica del Vapore became a place that attracted the cultural community around it; the context that allowed its emergence was and is closely linked to a process of economic, social and cultural transformation resulting from the importance assumed by the tertiary sector[\[16\]](#). An "urban revolution"[\[17\]](#) had been planned since 2008 in view of Expo2015. In 2015 the M5 metro project was completed with a stop in front of Piazzale

Cimitero Monumentale, facilitating the accessibility of three points that have become essential in the contemporary art scene in recent years: Via Farini, Fabbrica del Vapore, and the important Cimitero Monumentale complex. The latter, in consideration of both its historical architecture and for the sculptures inside (among the artists participating are Luca Beltrami, Giuseppe Sebastiano Locati, Carlo Maciachini, Camillo Boito, Giuseppe Sommaruga, Ulisse Stacchini, Paolo Mezzanotte, Giò Ponti, Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini), has recently been defined as a real “open air museum” [18]. There is therefore a strong interactivity between art and urban geography, a phenomenon that could be explained by recurring to the etymology of the concepts of city and civilisation reiterated by Giulio Carlo Argan: “The concept of city refers to the idea of community and culture, of human identity expressed in a broad design, involving the structures of living and dwelling” [19].

Since the beginning of the 1990s there has been a wave of repurposing industrial buildings with contrasting architectural approaches, similar to what happened with the Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, in Milan. It was a hydraulic turbine production factory that was converted into an exhibition space by Pierluigi Cerri and Alessandro Colombo (2005-11). This Fondazione, founded in 1994 as a documentation and study centre for the work of many artists, moved from Rozzano to Milan in 2005 on via Solari 35, inside the former Riva & Calzoni turbine factory, and was renovated by the previously mentioned architects; it was reconfigured as an exhibition structure and workshop space for art. Educational activities, theatrical activities, cycles of conferences, cultural events and workshops all contributed to turning this space into a true cultural center [20]. Initiatives hosting other artists were also held here: included among these was the anthological exhibition entitled *Gastone Novelli*; also included were *Jannis Kounellis. Atto Unico; Doppio Sogno 2 RC. Tra artista e artefice; Yves Dana. Recent Works; Magdalena Abakanowicz - Space to experience* and *Ugo Mulas photographs Arnaldo Pomodoro*. In the spring of 2013, the Foundation’s activities continued at the Darsena, on the Navigli, in the exhibition space of Vicolo Lavandai 2/a with entrance from Via Vigevano 9; adjacent to the Foundation’s Archives and Arnaldo Pomodoro’s studio, the new location creates a labyrinthine structure joining the place where Pomodoro’s sculpture was born, promoted and documented, thus reviving an alley that until 2011 had seen the Obraz Gallery as its protagonist. An indicator of the development of another cultural area among via Tortona, via Solari and the Navigli is evidenced by the relocation of Sibernagl Undergallery, which in October 2013 left its historical location on via Borgospesso 4, for Alzaia del Naviglio Grande 4 after twelve years of activity, a few months after the transfer of Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro.

In 1987, between the Fiera area and Villapizzone, the International Fair of Contemporary Art was organised by EXPO CT, and Primo Piano was established as a venue located in Piazzale Laghi based on the initiative of several protagonists of the Milan scene related to culture such as Enzo Rullo, Ivan Frassi, Christos Stefanaris, Attilia Procopio and DJ Sergio. At the International Fair, a conference was held on the theme of the 'new art system', presenting new Milanese galleries such as Studio Marconi 17, Studio Casoli and Studio Guenzani. Angela Vettese also curated the exhibition Eight Young Proposals in Milan (Umberto Cavenago, Jin-Jong Chen, Fabrizio Crivelli, Angela De Biase, Hossein Golbe, Pino Rosa, Bernhard Rüdiger and Karl Heinz Steck). Primo Piano, in turn, revealed its momentousness for prompting a change in Milan's nightlife. Along with the discothèque Plastic, it launched a succession of exhibitions and events, not only including the geographical and artistic area as the former industrial archaeology[21], but also involving nightclubs that became contemporary venues, some of which subsequently changed their names. Primo Piano, for example, later became Primo Piano Gallery after moving to Viale Certosa and flowing into a project lead by art curator Milli Gandini, who invited young critics as curators.

Continuing the investigation on artistic geographies, which includes the area from MiArt[22] and Palazzo del Ghiaccio towards the northern part of Milan to Pirelli Hangar Biccoca (a foundation created in 2004 from the transformation of an industrial plant), the end of this area can be reached by arriving at Via delle chiese 2, completing the suburban semicircle investigated in this article. The name itself of Pirelli Hangar Biccoca indicates three elements of unity in the space: the Pirelli company, the architecture and the district in which it is located[23]. From an international point of view, the fortune of this foundation, both from an artistic perspective and for its territorial interaction, has likely exceeded that of the areas analyzed so far. This is not only due to the choice of hosting permanent installations by artists of consolidated talent, such as Anselm Kiefer and Fausto Melotti, or artists who have exhibited in privileged artistic kermesses (e.g., Ragnar Kjartansson, Alfredo Jaar, Kyshio Suga, Philippe Parreno, Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi), but also for the inclusion of university research in the foundation's collaborations in creating the Biccoca District. Pirelli Hangar Biccoca seems to be a point of continuity of an artistic geography related to contemporary art since the Fieramilano pavilions are destinations for Miart, so much so that this artistic urban continuation from the art fair was documented on the press as early as 2007: "From the fairgrounds to Biccoca: contemporary art on display". The relaunch and the influx of attention on this area has benefited from the

nearby consideration paid to the city of Sesto San Giovanni, which has been described as “the first archi-town” [\[24\]](#) following the investment in its redevelopment and in its re-design by Renzo Piano. Pirelli Hangar Bicocca has also benefitted from the timing of its birth, which took place when Milan was the protagonist of Expo2015. It had been planned since 2008, the year in which the Lombard capital was selected, leading to an arrangement of streets and neighborhoods not only in the center but also on the outskirts becoming tourist destinations.

Conclusion

This last observation allows us to conclude the analysis carried out so far of the Milanese peripheries, distinguishing the growth of five cultural areas in particular: 1) via Vannucci and Largo Isarco; 2) via Tortona and the Navigli 3) Procaccini and via Farini, 4) the area surrounding Fieramilano 5) the Bicocca District. These areas are likely to receive increasing recognition as cultural districts provided that certain specific factors and processes within its territorial boundaries are identified and considered; these will provide a basis for appropriate indicators to be constructed, allowing for an accurate interpretation of the high degree of connectivity of the flows that shape the cultural face of Milan. These districts have been enhancing and modelling the city’s skyline over the years, and lately have dominated as new points of centripetal forces: by enlarging and enhancing the territory, they have proven to be essential interlocutors of Milan’s artistic geography, undeniably participating in its gentrification and tying contemporary art more closely to the city’s identity. In this perspective, this article has observed the change of the areas surrounding Milan since the Nineties, identifying how artistic geographies have been shaped by peripheral cultural areas.

[\[1\]](#) For the concept of artistic geographies and the studies published by the Contemporary Art Unity of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, refer to: Tedeschi, 2011; Di Raddo, 2016; Schinetti, 2016; McManus, forthcoming 2023.

[\[2\]](#) Vv.Aa., 2005, p. 22

[\[3\]](#) Colleoni & Guerisoli, 2014, p. 19.

[4] Ceresoli, 2005, p. 35.

[5] An instance is Carnevale Transmediale della Fabbrica del Vapore, February 2015.

[6] Vettese, 2003, p. 30.

[7] Fioroni, Titterton, 2007, p.8.

8 Among the other artists who exhibited at Cartiere Vannucci one can see: Alessandro Gianvenuti, Franco Giordano, Francesco Impellizzeri, Enzo Lisi, Giorgio Lupattelli, Antonio Riello, Silvano Tessarollo, Adrian Tranquilli e Giuseppe Tubi.

[9] S.N., 1992, p. 228.

[10] Bertone, 2002, p. 2.

[11] Sotis, 1997, p. 47.

[12] S.N., 2015, p. 11.

[13] Bucci, 2015, p. 33.

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Caprara, 2015, p. 1.

[16] Ciavoliello, 2005, pp. 359-360.

[17] Di Martino, & Buttafava, 2009, p. 88.

[18] Fumagalli, & De Bernardi, 2014.

[19] Ibi., p. 359

[20] In a dialogue with Flaminio Gualdoni, recorded and posted on the website of the Foundation, Arnaldo Pomodoro says: "I have always felt in me the involvement from a social point of view, to go out of what is one's own studio... I have always thought that the task of the sculptor is to go out and involve oneself with what is the urban fabric of the city". See <https://simonamaggiorelli.com/tag/scultura/>

[21] Battisti, 2001, p.35.

[22] The name Miart has changed to miart in 2012.

[23] Panza, 2007, p. 1.

[24] Bucci, 2010, p. 43.

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