

## How sublime theory could teach us when an urban renewal project could really work

### Descrizione

In 2005, in “A discussion between two architects”, Gharib Abbas and Bahram Shirdel, defined the expression “post-contemporary”, as a “forward-looking aesthetic philosophy distinguished by a re-constructive, global, human ethos which posits that the aesthetic experience is universal to humanity and that this experience can inspire understanding and transformation”.

Although a comprehensive definition of post-contemporary society is yet to come, in this still preliminary framework, culture plays an almost ubiquitous and multi-faceted role: from economics to sociology, from arts to mathematics, robotics, and engineering.

Narrowing the reflection on the relationship between culture and territory, in a certain sense, culture, today, seems to play the role that was played by nature in past aesthetic and philosophical theories.

Like nature, whose capability to conquer rubble and ruins was interpreted as a vital and re-shaping force, culture is asked to intervene in our post-contemporary human-built-landscape in order to re-shape and re-vitalize the rubble and the ruins of our modern and post-modern eras.

From Bilbao then on, culture has been chosen as one of the key drivers of the urban renewal phenomenon. There are many reasons that could illustrate why culture is so important for this kind of project: to somebody culture plays a greenwashing role in real estate, useful to communicate such investments as attempts for social development, while others underline the importance of culture as an essential social glue enabling the overall development of a peripheral area, and avoiding the specter of gentrification processes.

Regardless of this kind of evaluation, there is, maybe, an even more important question to which analysts try to answer: why do cultural-lead urban renewal projects

sometimes greatly succeed while on other occasions they're just a flop?

Of course, there is no always valid answer to this question, as the phenomenon has global dimensions, implying that every case should be interpreted on its own key characteristics.

Anyway, by borrowing concepts from other fields of research, it could be possible to look at the phenomenon from a different point of view, highlighting specific features that perhaps in the only "urbanistic-sociocultural-economic" interpretation could take second place.

In this way, we could, for instance, look at the urban renewal phenomenon as a contemporary and socially organized way to perform a peculiar form of "sublime".

Or, at least, we can use this concept, even in a non-strict interpretation, to analyze some features of urban renewal in order to understand some "practical" factors.

During the last centuries, psychologists, philosophers, and, later, art critics analyzed what the sublime is, and which are the conditions requested for experiencing it.

One of those interpretations that could be useful to take into account in this paper is Burke's point of view.

As the Tate website summarizes: "the theory of sublime art was put forward by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* published in 1757. He defined the sublime as an artistic effect productive of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling. He wrote 'whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime'.

Later, Burke himself stated the importance of a safe point of view is crucial for the sublime experience. That is, we are able to experience the sublime when we assist to nature's most important phenomena (a sea storm, for example), from a safe point of view (far from the storm).

Coming back to our topic, there are a few points of the reflections until now presented that could be useful when we're involved in understanding whether an urban renewal cultural project will work or not.

The first one is to interpret the portion of the cities that could be interested in an urban renewal project as contemporary ruins.

In some way, those ruins act on citizens like a defeat. They're the tangible proof of something that has "gone wrong", or, even worst, they're the tangible proof of the consequences of our contemporary lifestyle.

In this sense, abandoned industrial sheds are the ruins of a "modern era". Where those abandoned buildings are, there has probably been a shift from an "industrial age" to a "post-industrial age". Unused waterfronts are often the symbol of the past richness of a territory. In many cities, and thus, for many citizens, they were one of the most important territorial economic driving forces in the past and became today a symbol of loss and decline: elements that have always been one of the most significant threats to society and its survival.

Successful urban renewal projects, therefore, are the way our contemporary and post-contemporary society affirms its "strength", its economic power, and its wealth.

In doing so, thus, they act in the same way the romantic paintings acted with natural disaster: they put people in front of something that could awe them while keeping them safe.

In other words, successful urban renewal projects enable citizens to experience the "sublime".

Despite the theoretical approach, such an interpretation implies a very pragmatic understanding of what an urban renewal project should be, in order to be successful.

The most obvious consequence is that it should communicate "safeness" to citizens, in the same way as romantic paintings, with the exception that this kind of safeness is a bit more complicated.

In order to give this feeling to the citizenship, urban renewal projects should testify to a "real shift" in the citizenship. Take the example of a peripheral area of the city: there are abandoned buildings, not well-managed roads, a different quality of public services, higher rates of unemployment, etc.

Actions in this kind of neighborhood should therefore be addressed in identifying a topic that could "affirm" the strength of the society, and this implies that culture (in the tighter interpretation of the term) could be not the right one.

Each city has its own “city economy”, in which there are established, emerging, and/or declining elements.

Urban renewal projects should be addressed to those topics that identify the emerging economy, as said, the industries and productivity sectors in which there are more “entrepreneurial efforts”.

Obviously, culture and creativity often are one of them, but are not the only ones.

There are cities where emerging economies are, for example, in the technological sector, retail, in green-production, in data-analytics services, social media marketing, and so on.

By identifying the right “topics”, urban renewal projects could attract all the agents who’re working in a specific industry.

If we look at the usual cultural-led urban renewal project, we can see a public-private intervention on representative buildings of a specific neighborhood. When the project reflects the overall city peculiarities, the flagship building is capable to attract, when combined with other institutional actions, what at the beginning of 2000 we used to call “creative class”: artists, galleries, and so on.

This is the case of numerous successful cases, from Los Angeles to Milan.

But “creative class”, is, after all, a name with which we’re used to identifying the “business community” of what today are known as Cultural and Creative Industries.

And so, this implies that “cultural-led urban renewal projects” project that, by intervening in built-environment and, most of all, in representative buildings, create a “new business environment” related to culture and creativity itself.

To make this operation succeed, it should take place in those cities where there is a sufficient number of “creatives”.

This is the crucial difference: when a cultural project is located within a city where there are cultural and creative industries, the project will attract such a business environment, and this implies that not only the “representative building” but the neighborhood in its whole will be interested in the phenomenon: artists will rent a house, gallerist will open new exhibition point. This will affirm the strength of the “contemporary city”, respecting the first condition of the “sublime”: to be in safe.

Citizens will come over and will experience the sublime, because not only does the building now have a new role, but the entire neighborhood has.

When projects do not reflect the “cultural and creative” business environment, they’re set to become “white elephants”: there is no emancipation from our social fear; no social redemption is there. There is no connection between what the project would like to claim for the city and the real-life city conditions.

This relation works also on other kinds of projects: the Toronto Smart City project run by Alphabet was unique in its kind, and maybe, it could have been one of the most important “experiments” focusing on the implications that the realization of a hyper tech-smart-city on the daily life of citizens and on their lifestyle. But that project was not the reflection of citizenship.

By understanding this kind of “relation”, we should therefore extend our common concept of “cultural-led urban renewal project” by introducing within this definition also “malls”, or “tech-buildings”.

Maybe, at this point, a clarification is needed: what has been said does not affirm that a Mall is a cultural project. Rather, a cultural-led urban renewal project could consider the Mall-form to redefine a neighborhood.

Similarly, what has been said does not transform a “social innovation” project into a “business innovation project”: the relevance of an emerging economy is crucial for two main reasons: the first one is that a project should represent somebody in the city, and not only a few members, or the wish of a part of the population that never will change their address in the “early stages” of the redevelopment. The second one is that when we talk about “emerging economies”, we define also a potential emerging community.

Every Urban renewal project is “cultural”, even when there are no CCIs, no galleries, and no hippie communities.

It is “cultural” because it should reflect what we call the “culture of a specific city”, by integrating the abandoned neighborhood with the other city parts.

Culture does not need “a frame” to be culture. Culture does need thoughts.

## **Campi meta**