

REPAIR Good Practice Example: *Florence, former prison of Le Murate*





Recent history of conversion of the historic prisons, due to their specific spatial structure, originally serving for secure detention, often limits conversion to new uses such as hotels or museums, limiting the impact of these uses on the regeneration of the surrounding urban area.

A different approach is demonstrated in the case of ongoing conversion of Le Murate prison in Florence into a multi-functional hub of the historic area in Florence, where the new uses have been determined by the needs and vision and serve social and

economic sustainability of the broader regenerated neighbourhood.

In creating a living urban environment in a former prison, 3 notions have been essential: growing a formerly secluded space into the urban pattern and life of the neighbourhood, creating a productive mix of functions, and achieving a balance and interaction between those who traverse the site or purposefully visit it and people who come to live there. Le Murate demonstrates that homes in a former prison are feasible and desirable.

LE MURATE, Florence's city centre former prison, stood vacant since 1985. In 1997, Renzo Piano was commissioned to propose an idea how to regenerate the site. Planning regeneration was a great challenge: to respect the historical and architectural value of the Grade 1 listed complex, and to integrate it into the city centre.

The vision was to create the widest possible mix of features and functions.

Plugging in to the complexity and the richness of the surrounding urban space and opening it for pedestrian through-traffic, and bringing residents back to the historic centre.

The plan has been drawn in complete respect to the principles of preservation and conservation, in a fruitful collaboration with the Fine Arts Trust (La Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici).

Existing building elements (stones, iron elements like gates, roof tiles, wooden beams...) were reused as much as possible. The techniques of regeneration required by the Fine Arts Trust allowed the City to accept higher costs than usual for social housing, integrating social, commercial, leisure and art functions.

The project is managed by the Social housing office of the City of Florence, and this ensures that time schedules and desired quality were stringently observed. The first ten-year phase resulted in 73 social dwellings, 2 new urban squares, a commercial-leisure gallery and public and services spaces. The highly innovative approach has been recognized by the European Union, financing a network of cities "Reprise" under Raphael 1998 programme, enabling Florence to lead exchange of experiences on the regeneration of abandoned historic prisons.

The project has been strongly supported by the citizens in the neighbourhood. Commitment of the Mayors and the city Boards lasted through the ten years. The City is now actively promoting the site, with involvement of almost all the City Board responsibilities (housing, town-planning, economic development, culture, social affairs).

The current phase 2010-2013 includes 36 new social dwellings for young couples and artists, open space for performances and a subterranean parking below the performance space, 24 places for accommodation with common services dedicated to "smart dissidents", costing 1,8 MEUR financed by City,

culture laboratory to gather young artists from the whole town in a new and attractive location, 0,7 MEUR part-financed by Region Tuscany.

On top of the skilful integration into the urban spatial pattern and life of the neighbourhood, Le Murate's regeneration is architecturally daring. The architects of the City's social housing office (Roberto Melosi, Mario Pittalis, Giuseppina Fantozzi, Santi Garufi) courageously juxtapose the historic and the new architectural elements, intertwining them into a harmonious, functional whole.

The Smart dissident 2.0 is a shelter for journalists persecuted in their countries. Here at Le Murate they have a place to stay with common services and support to their activities, including computer training, creation of websites and other means of publishing their work on the Internet, telling the world about injustice in their countries without being censored and subjected to violence. Here they can meet, share their experiences, and devise new, better strategies. SUC - Spazi Urbani Contemporanei (also inspired by "souk" – a Middle East market) is a laboratory of contemporary culture. Coupled with the Smart Dissidents, this part of Le Murate is not just not a mere exhibition venue, but an area open to contemporary, interdisciplinary interaction "at 360 degrees", a permanent laboratory of cross-fertilising artistic ideas at the heart of Florence in the fine and audiovisual arts, music, performances, fashion, botany and cooking.

This all-pervading openness and freedom: the innovative integration of uses in the courageously rearranged historic space, integrated into the life and space of the neighbourhood is the essence of Le Murate – a prison made free.



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