

HOW A SINGLE BUILDING CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE REGENERATION OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD and why historic cities should put more people in prisons

Paulius Kulikauskas

20 09 2010



Recent history of the conversion of historic prisons often limits new uses of the old prisons to hotel and museum functions due to the specificity of their spatial structure - buildings created for secure detention purposes. Whilst conversions of prisons to hotels provide us with some outstanding architectural examples, the impact of these uses on the regeneration of the surrounding urban area is narrow. A different approach is demonstrated in the case of the ongoing conversion of Le Murate prison in Florence (Italy) into a multi-functional hub of the historic centre. The new uses have been determined by needs and a visionary approach and serve social and economic sustainability of the broader regenerated neighbourhood. Its peer in the REPAIR network, Corradino prison in Paola (Malta), demonstrates an equally integrative approach.

WHERE TO WITH CLOSED PRISONS?

This article is not about getting tough-on-crime in the ways of Rudy Giuliani, the former Mayor of New York - however virtuous it may be. Yet it promotes putting more people in prisons... Read on. Old prisons, many of them in city centres, have become a headache for quite a number of cities: while built on what is now often highly prized land, and thus prime candidates for demolition and redevelopment, they are frequently protected as significant cultural heritage. Success stories of prison conversions to hotels around the world abound.

Small and medium sized urban areas where historically the military presence has dominated economic activity are especially vulnerable to withdrawal of the military presence. However, former military sites often have excellent potential as catalysts for urban regeneration. Many consist of historic buildings, which may be considered critical assets. The challenge is to transform these abandoned military heritage sites into thriving sources of economic activity, employment and social cohesion, so that the regeneration of these sites contributes to the sustainable development of the broader urban areas within which they are located.

*The partner cities in the **REPAIR** (Realization of the Potential of Abandoned military sites as an Integral part of sustainable urban community Regeneration) Thematic Network, led by Medway Council (UK), represent very diverse geographical, political and historical circumstances but they share some key common characteristics. Their 'sense of place' and identity have been shaped by the presence of large military sites and installations, now abandoned by the military authorities. Some of the urban areas have historic fortifications or other buildings dating back many centuries, protected as valued elements of the cultural heritage.*

*In REPAIR the partners are tackling a broader agenda. Their key task is to explore **how the successful regeneration of former military sites can also act as a catalyst for broader sustainable urban development.***

<http://urbact.eu/repair>

The Old Jail, Mount Gambier in Australia, Napier Prison, New Zealand, or Karosta prison, Liepaja, Latvia - all without major redevelopment - cater to backpackers with maximum authenticity and very basic comfort. In Prague the Pension Unitas occupies a former police detainment house, where Vaclav Havel was once jailed. Hotel Malmaison in a former Castle in Oxford, UK, Katajanokka in Helsinki, Långholmen in Stockholm, or Charles Street Jail in Boston have all been converted to luxury hotels, preserving the most presentable architectural features and spaces, but now providing a high level of comfort.

Yet a large hotel is not always the best new use for such a complex in a neighbourhood to be regenerated: it becomes a building that is almost entirely isolated from the local neighbourhood, as if the spaceship from another planet has landed. It burdens the neighbourhood with additional traffic, and while some expect that the local shops and restaurants will benefit from patronage of the hotel's guests, this is only true of the smaller hotels, as the large ones tend to be self-sufficient...

Can a former prison be used for something else? Can it serve the neighbourhood by becoming an integral amenity, by responding to its needs, by driving the regeneration? Can other uses be economically sustainable? Will these uses preserve the original architecture better, than a hotel?



Le Murate: new social housing and new city squares. © Luigi Borgogni

MORE THAN A HOTEL

The regenerated prisons in the REPAIR Thematic Network stand out from the crowd.

Corradino and Le Murate cases are unlike each other: Le Murate project is run by the City, while the Maltese example is leased to a private company. Le Murate is in a historic centre, and Corradino's immediate surroundings are devoted to sports and industrial land uses. Le Murate is older and larger. The implementation of its reconversion has been going on for 10 years, and is now half-way completed, whilst Corradino has just started. Yet they share the common effort seeking to integrate former places of isolation into the surrounding neighbourhood.

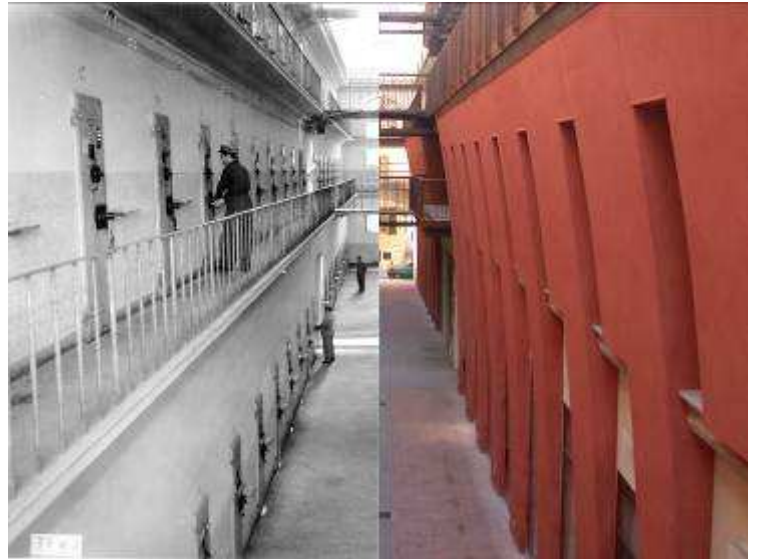
Whilst Florence is known for difference of opinions and heated debates among its citizens in respect of development proposals, regeneration of Le Murate did not stir up much resistance in the neighbourhood. The new commercial and art-leisure activities target the local community, offering new jobs to the unemployed, and attracting university students who live and visit the area in which two seats of the architecture faculty are located. The formerly secluded block is now completely open for through passage, and two new squares are open to the public for enjoyment and for performing arts.

LE MURATE, Florence's city centre former prison, stood vacant since 1985. In 1997, Renzo Piano was commissioned to propose an idea on 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, opening it up for pedestrian passage, and bringing residents back to the historic centre. The plan has been drawn adhering 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, at the same time 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 are stringently observed. The first ten year phase resulted in delivery of 73 social dwellings, 2 new urban squares, a commercial-leisure gallery and public and service spaces. The highly innovative approach has been recognized by the European Union, financing the "Reprise" network of cities under the 1998 Raphael programme, enabling Florence to lead an 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 continued throughout the ten years. The City is now actively promoting the site, with involvement of almost all the City Board departments (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 accommodation units with common services dedicated to "smart dissidents" (costing 1,8 MEUR financed by the City), a culture laboratory to gather young artists from the whole town in a new and attractive location (0,7 MEUR part-financed by Tuscany Region).
<http://lemurate.comune.fi.it>



Le Murate before and after. © Davide Virdis

Besides 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. Such a result is not easy to achieve while simultaneously complying with the stringent requirements of heritage protection. It is perhaps the only former prison in which parts the building have been converted to social housing.

BACK TO FREEDOM

The icing on Le Murate's cake is the area of the complex devoted to "Smart dissidents 2.0" and "SUC" activities.

The memory of a prison generally brings with it a dreadful image. The name chosen for the hotel in the former Charles Street Jail in Boston is not coincidentally the Liberty Hotel. The originators of Le Murate's regeneration project have taken a step further. *The Smart dissidents 2.0* is a shelter for journalists who have been persecuted in their countries. Here at Le Murate they find a place to stay with common services and support to allow them to continue their journalistic 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.

The **CORRADINO** Military Detention Barracks (Prison) has been in the last 30 years encroached on by the expanding industrial zone of the Marsa and Corradino. The Prison, itself a scheduled Grade 1 asset is close to the Corradino Lines - a part of the Harbour Fortifications on Malta's Tentative List for World Heritage, and Kordin III - a Temples Site designated on a World Heritage List. In the rehabilitation and regeneration of the area which includes the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology Campus, the Prison will be a point of reference for sports, recreation, tourism and education.

The Prison is currently managed through the granting of a lease of 49 years to A.S. Hibernians Ltd. who promote sports activities and exchanges. There has also been a close consultation with the Malta Environment and Planning Authority as part of the restoration and redevelopment application, to consider sustainable conservation in the light of the existing land-use policy for the area. In the development of the project the Paola Local Council has come forward to support the development of this vision and there is further support from The Paola Heritage Foundation, The Malta Industrial Parks and The Malta Tourism Authority.

The Conservation Management Plan includes a restoration and rehabilitation of 3 Cell Blocks with adaptive reuse of the East Block as a Museum and the South Block as a Hostel to be opened by late 2012. The project needs the support of the Local Council and the possibility of developing transport and pedestrian links to and from the town centre. These links will be vital for the tourism offer of diverse heritage assets in the area of Paola and Corradino.

The key aspirations of the regeneration project are private sector involvement and investment in socio-economic regeneration, creating a distinct niche market through the services offered, in synergy with the Maltese International Convention Centre, thus maximizing return on investment to make the project sustainable in the long term. The project is expected to catalyse neighbourhood empowerment as a means of instilling a sense of belonging and civic pride incorporating heritage as part of the regeneration process.

SUC – the *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 incorporating fine and audiovisual arts, music, performance, 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 which has been set free.

CAN A HOTEL WORK FOR A NEIGHBOURHOOD?



Entrance and Guardhouse of the Corradino Prison. © Heritage Enterprise

In Malta, Corradino's planned uses are more mainstream than the Firenze experience: involving the introduction of a museum and a hostel. This is however not a result of simply following trends or copying quick and easy solutions developed elsewhere. These functions are determined by the needs of the Hibernians organisation, the company that leases the building. The organisation requires such facilities to enhance the offer for international sports exchanges, and so complement the neighbouring building that houses a huge sports arena.



REPAIR Partners and Local support group meet at Corradino.
© Petr Šnejdar



The restored wing of Corradino. © Heritage Enterprise

The Action Plan creates green corridors through the Paola town square and previews a kilometre of pedestrian connections linking the Prison to the town centre, Hal Saflieni and Kordin III World Heritage Sites and to other architectural landmarks. The centre of Paola is transformed into a hub feeding 23 bus routes. A “park and ride” facility and a pedestrian bridge together with the new campus development are being contemplated. What makes the Corradino project innovative and integrative is how its new role in the larger area is being determined, conceiving future interaction with other elements of the holistic district vision, and planning appropriate development of infra-structure to serve the whole neighbourhood.

PROJECTS TO LEARN FROM

Using the prisons as drivers for regeneration is a characteristic objective shared by Le Murate and Corradino, along with the endeavour of both projects to integrate new uses into the life of the neighbourhoods and their communities. In this way the value of the interventions are extended and enhanced by firmly determining the future of the regenerated prisons within the vision of a wider area rehabilitation, while at the same time establishing connections to other key city locations.

In creating a living urban environment in a former prison, as the REPAIR prisons demonstrate, 3 notions are essential: transforming a formerly secluded, closed space to interact with the urban pattern and life of the neighbourhood; creating a productive mix of functions; and achieving a balance and interplay between those who traverse the site or purposefully visit it and people who come to live there. As Claudio Fantoni, member of the City Board of Florence puts it: *“A living urban neighbourhood is hardly possible without housing. This not only contributes for the healthy mix of functions – we are also retaining social diversity in the area where most of the people cannot afford to live on market conditions. Le Murate demonstrates that homes in a former prison are not only feasible but also desirable.”*

Karlskrona, a REPAIR partner, and Vilnius are two of the cities who still have functioning historic prisons in their city centres. Both have announced closure, so the debates on the future of these prisons are imminent. The discussions are now ongoing in Berkshire about the future of the Broadmoor Prison. We in REPAIR hope that, following Le Murate, these cities will equally choose to steer more people to live in prisons!

This article was written using sources kindly provided by REPAIR partners: City of Florence (Dr. Marco Toccafondi), and Paola Local Council (Heritage Enterprise: Dr. Malcolm Borg).

URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme promoting sustainable urban development.

It enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal challenges. It helps them to develop pragmatic solutions that are new and sustainable, and that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. It enables cities to share good practices and lessons learned with all professionals involved in urban policy throughout Europe. URBACT is 300 cities, 29 countries, and 5,000 active participants

www.urbact.eu/repair

