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Life Between Monuments. Local Identity and Global Tourism in the Neighborhood of San Lorenzo in Florence

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Abstract

The paper reflects on how the identity and authenticity of art cities, with special regard to those that are considered as best practices in the field of heritage protection, can be undermined by processes of tourist gentrification stimulated by the global interest they exercise because of their recognized universal value. The neighborhood of San Lorenzo within the World Heritage Site of Florence (Italy) is presented as a case study of a historic community whose socio-economic fabric has deeply changed over the years due to increasing overtourism. The paper focuses on the action research “San Lorenzo Laboratory”, coordinated by the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, which aims to define, on a participatory basis, a shared strategy for the socially sustainable regeneration of the neighborhood, leveraging the redesign of public space and the reuse of an abandoned historical complex - the former monastery of Sant’Orsola. The results of the Laboratory, which took the form of requests and design concepts derived from discussions between experts, citizens, and stakeholders, have been delivered to the public institutions concerned and are intended to pave the way for a development and management model for the entire historic center, alternative to the tourist monoculture. The paper concludes by highlighting how the first effects of the initiative can be seen today in some policies and measures implemented by the City Council in response to the social and economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: World Heritage Sites, Overtourism, Action Research, Participatory Design, Urban Renovation, Post-Covid City

1. Introduction

1.1. *The potential conflict between the identity and image of art cities*

The basic question underlying this paper is: What role can the historic city play inside the contemporary one?

There is broad consensus on the need to preserve the architectural and artistic heritage: an issue that has become one of the most pressing of the current “urban age” (Burdett and Rode 2018), along with sustainable development, for instance, to which it is strictly related, given the social – and therefore also cultural – implications of sustainability (Barthel-Bouchier 2016, Soini and Dessein, 2016)

The protection of historical heritage is probably the field in which the contribution of Italian academia, architects and planners has been more relevant and recognizable over the last sixty years in international debate on contemporary urbanism, pushing the idea that the historic settlement as a whole – that is not only the most outstanding buildings and landmarks – is an asset to be protected, and eventually adapted to the changing needs of communities in the most careful and respectful way, as a structural part of the human habitat.

A milestone in this sense is the Charter of Gubbio on historical centers, launched by a group of Italian scholars, professionals and politicians at the end of the founding conference of the National Association of Historic and Artistic Centers, an association that is still very active in Italy, held in the medieval town of Gubbio in 1960 (Selicato and Piscitelli 2016); this was a few years prior to the creation in Venice of the ICOMOS organization and the publication of the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (the so-called Venice Charter) on the occasion of the 2nd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments in 1964.

According to the definition of “monument” set out in the first article of this fundamental act in the history of heritage preservation, «The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilization, a significant development or a historic event. This applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time» (ICOMOS 1964).

In the following decades, awareness of the common responsibility to safeguard the tangible constructs of the past for future generations has significantly grown worldwide, supported by many international initiatives in the wake of the Charters of Gubbio and Venice, like the Declaration of Amsterdam, released on the occasion of the Congress of the European Architectural Heritage in 1975; the Convention of Granada for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe in 1985, the Charter of Krakow, signed on the occasion of the International Conference on Conservation in 2000, and the further charters, declarations and documents promoted in all continents by ICOMOS over the years (Goetcheus and Mitchell 2014).

However, it is worth noting that the idea of heritage as a key element in defining the identity and image of the city raises questions that do not only concern building integrity, if we assume that the aim of preserving the identity of a place does not end with the conservation of its monuments, even in their broadest sense defined by the Venice Charter.

From an anthropological point of view, “identity” has to do with a community’s sense of belonging to a place shaped over time by its previous generations, which is something different from, and potentially in conflict with, the recognizability of its image by a wider public.

According to the French scholar Marc Augé, anthropological places «have at least three characteristics in common. They want to be [...] places of identity, of relations and of history. The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placement of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual [of the community] to a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social» (Augé 1995: 52). According to Augé, an inhabited place which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity (like, for example, an airport, a shopping mall, a business center, a theme park, etc.) is therefore, from an anthropological point of view, a “non-place”. The globalized world, as Augé’s thesis claims, produces “non-places” where people spend time living, working, moving around, shopping, and engaging in leisure activities, without having any durable relationship with other people or developing a sense of belonging. Non-places are not necessarily anonymous or unpleasant places; on the contrary, they may have – and they often have in fact – a strong, recognizable image – for instance airports or exhibition centers, which are often designed by world famous architects.

Therefore, we must distinguish between local identity, which implies a community rooted in a place, and the image of the place, which makes it recognizable, even at global level, regardless of its anthropological significance.

In fact, if not governed, the dialectic between local and global, which today also affects the fruition of architectural heritage, can result in the expropriation of urban spaces and monuments by mass tourism and in the escape of residents, with the effect of undermining two of the three above-mentioned immaterial characteristics that distinguish a place from a “non-place”: local identity and durable relations between people and their living environment. This is what another French

scholar, Françoise Choay (1992), described as the “loss of reality” of the historic city in the current “post-urban” condition – a city that is often no more than a place to live in rather than an image to be consumed on-site. Paradoxically, this is a destiny that threatens above all the most preserved art cities (Dallen 2020, De Luca *et al.* 2020), which is occurring, to different degrees, in many cities in Italy - the country that boasts the largest number of World Heritage sites - affected, like Venice and Florence, by overtourism.

This emerging concept (Goodwin 2017, Capocchi *et al.* 2019, Dodds and Butler 2019, Żemła 2020) reflects the leap in scale that has occurred over the last decade in the tourism industry, resulting in the out-of-control increase in global flows and local impacts of mass tourism in certain destinations: “a ‘perfect storm’ of visitors” (Dodds and Butler 2019: 520) with a wide phenomenology depending on the different contexts, induced by the ICT revolution in the tourism market on both the supply and demand sides.

In art cities, whose recognized universal value and iconic townscapes make them attractive to global tourism, preservation strategies should therefore include the maintenance of good living conditions for residents, preventing gentrification and the risk of transforming the historic core into a sort of “theme park” exclusively dedicated to the fruition of art and consumption: a prospect which, in the long run, can act as a boomerang to the tourist reputation of the same cities (Goodwin 2017).

1.2. The case study: the neighborhood (“Rione”) of San Lorenzo in the Historic Center of Florence.

The Historic Center of Florence has been listed as a World Heritage Site since 1982. In the rationale for the recognition of its Outstanding Universal Value, the core of the city is described as «an absolute chef-d’œuvre» hosting «the greatest concentration of universally renowned works of art in the world»¹. A destination of cultural pilgrimage since the eighteenth century as a stage of the Grand Tour through Italy carried out by many North European aristocrats, and an object of special veneration by British travelers (Sweet 2012), Florence was among the first Italian art cities to suffer, since the 1980s, the assault of the incipient mass tourism: the label of “Disneyland of the Renaissance”, used to criticize a vision of the city based on the exploitation of its past greatness, dates back to that time (Gherardi & Tondelli 1987).

The process of tourism specialization has been accompanied by a progressive reduction in the number of inhabitants in the protected area: from 73,000 in 1991 to 39,500 in 2019 (but according to estimates that calculate the official and actual residents, the latter could number only 33,000), with an increasing percentage of non-Italians, from 15 to 23%.

According to a survey commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce of Florence, before the Covid-19 pandemic the total number of overnight stays by tourists, coming to Florence from 170 countries, reached a record 23 million in 2019, including both registered tourists (15.5 million) and off-the-book guests (CST 2019): that is an average of about 63,000 people per day, almost double the estimated current residents in the Historic Center.

This is the background of an action research, called “Laboratorio San Lorenzo” (San Lorenzo Laboratory), which will be presented in the following paragraphs. The initiative was coordinated by the Department of Architecture (DiDA) of the University of Florence, in partnership with the Chamber of Architects of Florence and the civic group of residents “Santorsolaproject”, and focused on a significant part of the UNESCO site: the neighborhood (“Rione”) of San Lorenzo.

¹ The full rationale is available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/174/>. In July 2021 the area of the UNESCO Site, originally comprised within the perimeter of the 14th-century city walls (demolished in the 19th century), was extended to include a hilly area dominated by the millennial monastery of San Miniato al Monte.

“Rione” is an informal definition of an urban area with specific characteristics that determine its identity from a geographical, historical, architectural, social and economic point of view.

Around the perimeter of the study area, at a few minutes walking distance, there are some of the main monuments and points of interest of the city (Fig.1), including the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, covered by Filippo Brunelleschi's dome, the undisputed worldwide icon of Florence and 'Florentinity'; the Fortress of San Giovanni, built in the 16th century on a design by Giuliano da San Gallo and used today as an exhibition center; the church and monastery of San Marco, with its extraordinary collection of works by Beato Angelico, one of the most important masters of Italian Renaissance painting; the Church and Museum of Santa Maria Novella, with its façade by Leon Battista Alberti; and the central railway station by architect Giovanni Michelucci, which is the main gateway to the city from the outside and, at the same time, a masterpiece of Italian rational architecture, dating back to 1935, and listed in turn as a national heritage site.

Inside the neighborhood, we find the church and museum of San Lorenzo, one of the major historical-artistic complexes of the city, from which the Rione takes its name. San Lorenzo is a unique compendium of Italian Renaissance architecture and art, formed by the Basilica, designed by Brunelleschi, its old and new sacristies, respectively by Brunelleschi and Michelangelo, the attached monastery with its beautiful cloisters, and the so-called Laurentian Library designed by Giuliano da San Gallo and accessed through a staircase by Michelangelo, and finally the magnificent chapel where the tombs of the Medici family are located, adorned with statuary by Michelangelo and precious marble paraments.

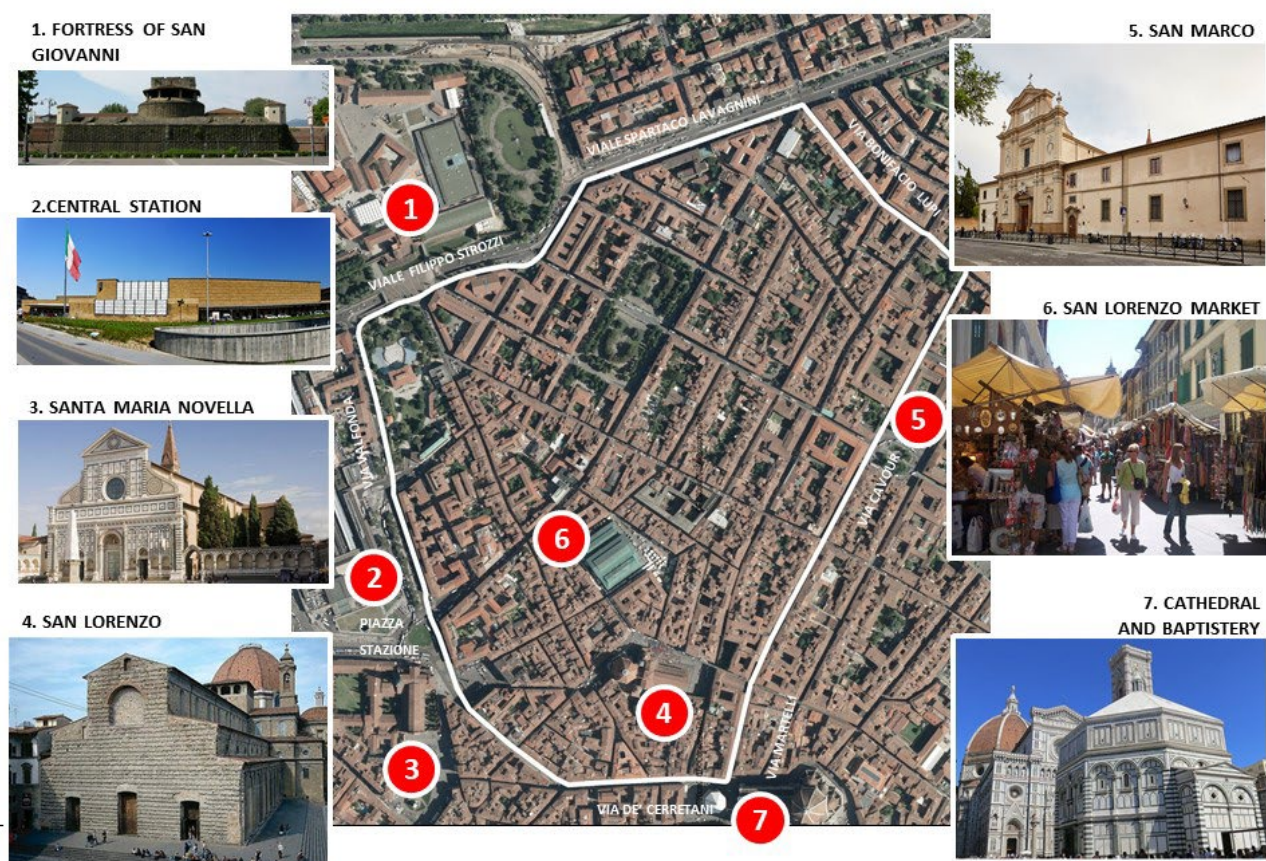


Figure 1. Monuments and points of interest in the surroundings and within the San Lorenzo neighborhood

Moreover, the area hosts the Congress Palace, functionally linked to the nearby exhibition center at the Fortress of San Giovanni, and the most famous markets of the city, located in the immediate surroundings of the church of San Lorenzo:

- the Central Market, a charming 19th-century building, which houses the largest food market in Florence on the ground floor, still very popular among the Florentines, and a food court on the upper floor; inaugurated in 2014, it is very busy at all hours especially with tourists.
- the street market of San Lorenzo, whose stalls selling leather, clothing and souvenirs are arranged around the Central Market. Once very popular among the locals, it is now almost exclusively a market for tourists, with many low-quality imported products.

Besides the complex of San Lorenzo, the area is full of minor, yet very significant, monuments.

Maps produced by the DiDA research group for the San Lorenzo Laboratory show that the public and private buildings inside the neighborhood listed as national heritage number 77 in total, occupying almost a quarter of its surface area (Fig. 2). Most of them are non-residential buildings, including both public and private schools, university buildings and facilities, and a significant number of abandoned buildings (Fig. 3), previously used as offices, an old people's home, a hospital, a hotel, and two cinemas.

1.3 A “black hole” in the neighborhood: the abandoned monastery of Sant’Orsola

Among the buildings of the Rione waiting for a new use is the ancient monastery of Sant’Orsola (Fig. 4). Founded at the edge of the medieval city in 1309, it has since undergone countless transformations, both before and after it was decommissioned as a monastery in 1810, when Florence was under Napoleonic rule (Bargellini and Guarniero 1978, Centauro 2014). Between 1816 and 1818, the complex was converted into a tobacco factory, a function it retained until 1940. After the Second World War it was used as a temporary shelter for displaced people and later, until the early 1970s, as a home for evicted people.

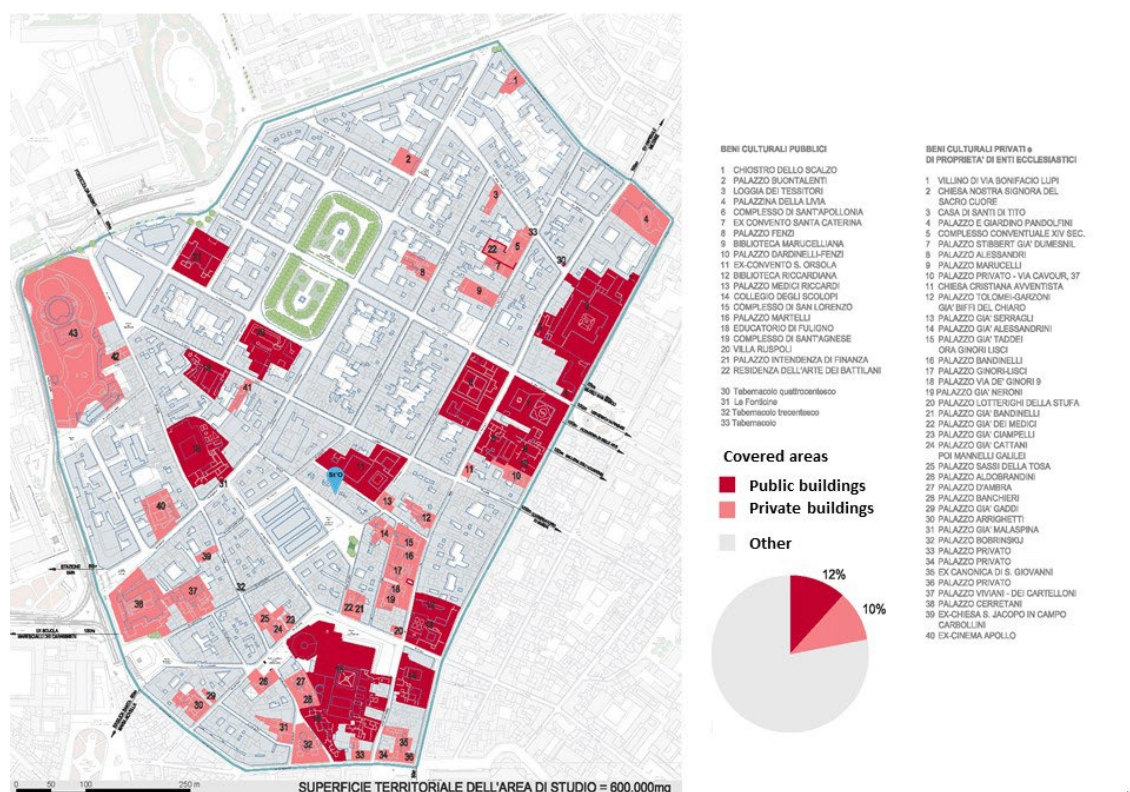


Figure 2. National listed buildings

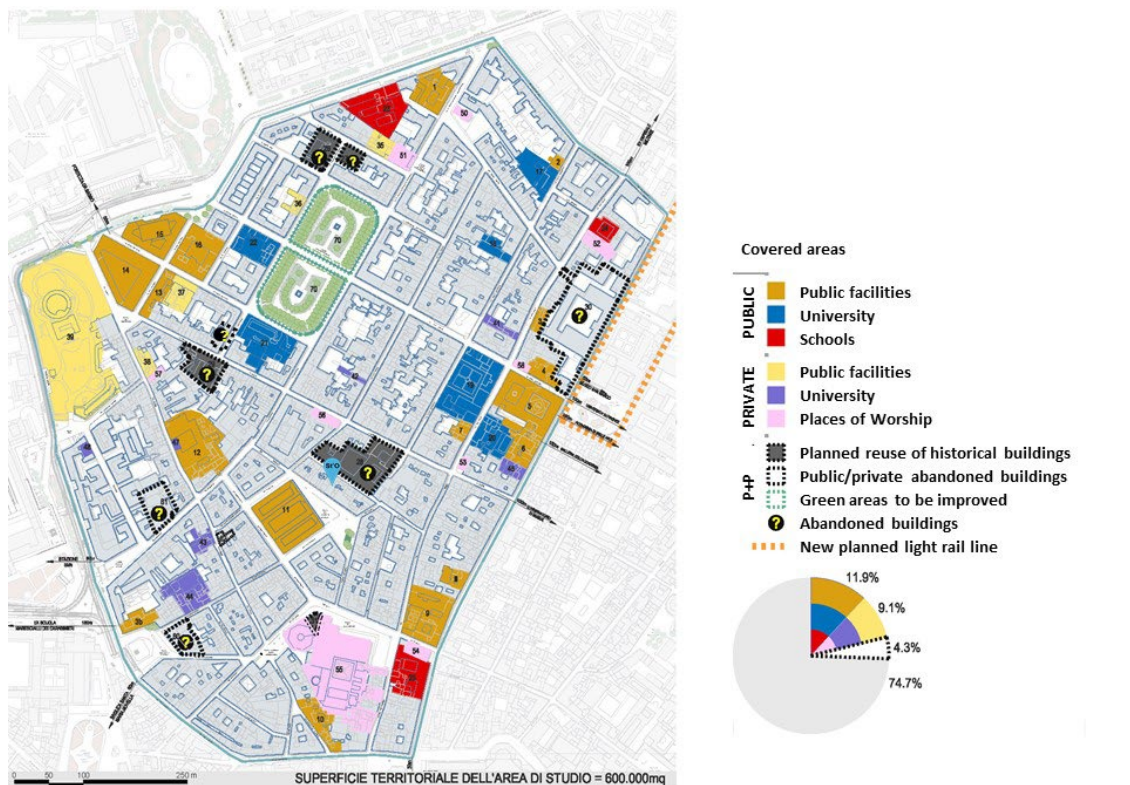


Figure 3. Non-residential buildings



The former monastery of Sant'Orsola, waiting for a new use.

Figure 4.

From that moment on, for over 50 years, every attempt to reuse the building has failed. After the abandonment of a project to convert it into a service center for the University of Florence (1975-1979) (Bacciardi *et al.*, 1979), in the mid-1980s Sant'Orsola was destined to become the headquarters and barracks of the Financial Police (Guardia di Finanza) in Florence. The renovation work, which was destructive and disrespectful of the historical significance of the complex, was never completed. Since 1990 Sant'Orsola has been left in a state of neglect and subject to progressive degradation. In 2007, it was acquired from the State by the Province of Florence, with the constraint of maintaining public ownership of the building. Between 2009 and 2011 the province's technical office drew up a renovation project based on a functional mix, including a high school and an art academy, socio-cultural, sports and recreational facilities, shops, a guest house, and the public use of open spaces, but this too was abandoned due to a lack of funding. At the request of the Archeological Superintendence, however, from 2011 to 2013 an excavation campaign was carried out, which brought to light the remains of the original church of the convent, where archival sources attest that Lisa Ghirardini del Giocondo, the famous "Mona Lisa" portrayed by Leonardo da Vinci, was buried in 1542, after spending her last years assisted by her daughter, a nun of Sant'Orsola (Cianferoni and D'Aquino 2014). Moreover, an architectural survey of the complex was conducted by a research group from the Department of Architecture of Florence, aimed at recognizing the historical stratifications of the complex, as a premise for future redevelopment (Centauro 2014).

In the following years, the Province and the Metropolitan City of Florence, which replaced the former in 2015, unsuccessfully tried to involve private investors with four different calls for bids: one call for project financing proposals and three calls for the concession of the building, all aimed at creating higher education facilities with an attached guest house, a museum and commerce on the ground floor.

In the meantime, special openings of the archaeological area, along with two temporary installations created in 2013 and 2017 on the street façades of the building by the artist Vaclav Pisvejk, in collaboration with the local association "Insieme per San Lorenzo", turned a spotlight on the complex. In 2012 the civic group Santorsolaproject was set up to urge its reuse as a livable space for the entire neighborhood: a sort of "compensation" for the deterioration of the place endured for decades by the inhabitants of the neighborhood (Serrini 2019). Two years later, Santorsolaproject, in collaboration with the school of photography Fondazione Studio Marangoni and the voluntary help of other associations, professionals and artists, organized "La città dentro San Lorenzo" (the city inside San Lorenzo), a festival of readings, music and exhibitions inside Sant'Orsola. The event attracted over 3000 visitors in three days, achieving wide media coverage.

Such initiatives succeeded in increasing citizens' awareness of the great inherent potential of that urban block, which had remained inaccessible for so long. With an overall built-up area of more than 17,000 m² and an extension of courtyards and colonnades of approximately 2,500 m² usable as public space in the very heart of the city, it was finally clear that Sant'Orsola represents a strategic asset not only for the regeneration of the San Lorenzo Rione but also for the whole city.

In 2018, while confirming its willingness to receive new proposals from the private sector, the Metropolitan City decided to allocate 4.4 million euros to urgent restoration works, starting with the repair of the roof, in order to prevent further damages to the building.

2. Method

The San Lorenzo Laboratory was conducted on a two-track basis: on one side, updated maps and data to describe the cultural, social and economic features of the Rione were gathered and rendered by a DiDA research group; on the other side, all partners, supported by a professional facilitator, led a participatory process, involving inhabitants, local stakeholders, experts and public officials in the building-up of a shared strategy for the regeneration of the neighborhood, the upgrading of its public space and the reuse of the complex of Sant'Orsola. The participatory process aimed to guide public policies for the relaunch of the Rione, as a sample and a model for

the whole Historic Center. The San Lorenzo Laboratory was endorsed by the Metropolitan City of Florence, owner of Sant'Orsola, and co-financed with 25,000 euros by the Authority for Civic Participation of the Tuscany Region on the basis of a public tender.

Officially, the Laboratory started in March 2019 with a kick-off meeting held at the Chamber of Architects, attended by the representatives of around 20 civic associations and cultural institutions active in the Rione together with individual citizens, and ended in December 2019 with the presentation at Palazzo Medici Riccardi, seat of the Metropolitan City of Florence, of the proposals and requests addressed to the institutions concerned as resulting from the participatory process. However, the collaboration between the three promoters of the initiative has continued, and is still ongoing, as reported in paragraph 4.

2.1. Analysis of the “Rione” – state of the art before the pandemic

The surveys carried out by the workgroup from DiDA include spatial, demographic, and socio-economic analysis, with a focus on the role of the tourist sector in the recent changes to the economic fabric of the Rione.

2.1.1. Spatial analysis

To provide an accurate cognitive framework of the study area, thematic maps have been created, based on the regional technical cartography, using open geographical data from the platforms of the Municipality and Metropolitan City of Florence, Tuscany Region, Ministry of Cultural Heritage, and other public institutions, as well as information taken from the urban planning instruments of Florence, integrated with field surveys. The mapped themes include:

- Public space: provision and type of public green areas and squares; street pattern and characteristics of street pavements (materials and state of maintenance).
- Heritage buildings.
- Non-residential uses within the urban fabric by type of use and ownership (public or private)
- Disused buildings and planned transformations.

Focusing on livability, a significant aspect that emerged from the spatial analysis is the extremely low rate of public space compared to the surface area of the Rione: 6.2%, of which only half is green and actually usable as a community space. In fact, the only green area worthy of the name is the 19th-century Piazza Indipendenza, whose planned transformation into underground parking has been successfully countered in previous years by a civic committee. The other squares within the study area are either monumental (Piazza San Lorenzo) or used for street trading and car parking.

2.1.2 Demography

Demographic analyses were performed by extracting data from municipal statistics for the year 2019 and comparing the data referred to the neighborhood with that of the Historic Center and the entire city. The data shows that there are around 6,300 official residents of the neighborhood, spread over an area of 61 hectares. The density is therefore about 1,000 per hectare, that is one third higher than the whole UNESCO site (population of 39,501 on 505 ha) and three times the average density of the city (population of 376,529 on 10,232 ha). Most households are made up of singles (63%, +13% than 2009), while the number of people over 64 years old is slightly lower than the average of the city (19% compared with 26%), confirming that the living conditions of the neighborhood, like those of the rest of the Historic Center, are not attractive for families with children or elderly people.

1/3 of the neighborhood's population is non-Italian, twice the average in the whole city. Most are non-EU citizens, although the rate of EU residents (17%) is higher than the averages of both the UNESCO area (11%) and the city (9%). The most represented nationalities are Bangladeshi (16%), Chinese (13%), and Filipino (8%), whose populations and businesses are mainly

concentrated around the markets. Close to Sant'Orsola, the old church of San Barnaba is now the seat of the Filipino catholic community.

2.1.3 Economy

Further maps were provided by the DiDA researchers through the geo-referencing of data regarding economic activities.

The first one shows the high number of businesses recorded at that date in the register of the Chamber of Commerce of Florence (2,555), spread all over the neighborhood (Fig. 5). 8% are food shops, mainly concentrated inside and around the Central Market. Surveys revealed that most of them also operate as take-away or street food restaurants, in addition to traditional restaurants and bars (15% of businesses). The demand generated by tourism has substantially changed the socio-economic fabric of the neighborhood, gradually replacing traditional shops for locals with multiethnic mini-markets, restaurants and businesses aimed at tourists.

As shown in the same map, there are also 318 registered hotels in the area. But how tourism induces gentrification and leads to the expulsion of residents is even more evident looking at another map, produced by exporting the data of rooms and apartments made available for tourist rentals by the Airbnb online marketplace. Almost 1,200 accommodations, most of which are managed by professional agencies, are found in a very limited part of the city center in addition to the offer of traditional hotel beds: a market that was constantly growing in Florence and throughout Tuscany before the pandemic.



Figure 5. Registered businesses (2019)

2.2 The participatory process

Facing such a situation, the participatory process regarding the regeneration of the San Lorenzo Rione attempted to find shared answers to some basic questions, with the aim of guiding public

policies in defense of the local identity of the neighborhood and permanent residency in Florence's Historic Center:

- How can residents be protected in a context under strong tourist pressure?
- How can multiethnicity be reconciled with historical identity?
- How can private investments be reconciled with social needs?
- How can heritage protection be reconciled with innovation?
- How can space for community activities be obtained in a dense overcrowded neighborhood?

The process was structured into different phases and steps (Fig. 6), as summarized below:

- *Backstage work sessions* of the partner teams (Dept. of Architecture, Chamber of Architects, Santorsolaproject group);
- *Community engagement activities*, such as reconnaissance trips through the neighborhood with citizens, stakeholders and focus groups. The reconnaissance trips were organized into three different occasions to record the different lives of the Rione: a workday, a Sunday and a Saturday night. Map drafts of the strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement from citizens were derived from the reports of the reconnaissance trips and focus group discussions, with reference to 5 categories: the built environment (i.e., buildings and public space), mobility and accessibility, the economy (with special regard to the quality and health of the commercial fabric), social aspects, and city management (e.g., the provision of public facilities, green and waste management, etc.)



Figure 6. Some moments of the participatory process. Above: a pause during a reconnaissance trip; the information stall in Piazza San Lorenzo built on the occasion of the neighborhood's feast day. Below: associations introduce themselves during the process kick-off meeting; attendants of a focus group discuss around a big aerial photo of the neighborhood

- *Interviews with strategic actors of the neighborhood and the city* Approximately 30 interviews were conducted to gather opinions on the current state and future prospects of the San

Lorenzo Rione from prominent figures in the fields of culture (directors of museums and cultural and educational institutions, the UNESCO office in Florence, etc.), the economy (i.e., the president of the City Exhibition and Congress Center located in the area and also president of the Chamber of Commerce of Florence, and the commercial director of the upper floor of the Central Market), and in the social field (e.g. the prior of the Church of San Lorenzo, the director of the local branch of the Comunità Sant'Egidio, a national association working with immigrants, etc.).

- *Sharing, dissemination and communication activities.* These included: periodic public meetings on the progress of the participatory process, where external experts, public officers and politicians were also invited to hold discussions with the partner teams and attendants of the Laboratory; a seminar on participatory urban regeneration in Italy, in the presence of the Councilors for Culture and Urban development and planning of Florence and experts from other Italian cities (i.e. Rome, Milan and Bologna); an information stall set up in Piazza San Lorenzo on the feast day of Saint Lawrence, patron saint of the Rione, where people could also leave their suggestions for the future of the neighborhood and the reuse of the Sant'Orsola complex.

All the steps have been reported and the deliverables published on the website of the San Lorenzo Laboratory, hosted by the portal of the Tuscany Regional Authority for Civic Participation².

3. Results

The outputs of the research by DiDA and the citizens' perception and feelings have fueled a wide-ranging debate on the present and future of the San Lorenzo Rione and the entire Historic Center of Florence.

In diagnosing the status of the neighborhood, it is interesting to note that citizens and strategic stakeholders highlighted almost the same strengths and weaknesses.

- The strengths include:
the strategic location of the Rione within the city center, the presence of a rich artistic and cultural heritage, as well as many places of memory, art schools and institutions, dance, yoga and martial arts schools, and urban facilities; the relatively high – although steadily decreasing – number of traditional shops and craft laboratories; many civic associations. Even the multiethnic variety of residents has been identified as a positive feature of the neighborhood, despite the existence of well-known situations of conflict between old and new residents in the areas of the Central Market and Piazza Indipendenza (Alberti and De Luca 2017).
- The weaknesses include:
the poor maintenance, furniture, and equipment of public spaces, along with their progressive privatization due to the increase in bar and restaurant dehors; the decay of San Lorenzo street market; the loss of residents and traditional activities, hand-in-hand with the increase in short-rental apartments and low-quality shops for tourists; the consequent loss of identity of many streets and squares, overcrowded by tourists and avoided by locals. Further problems identified by some strategic stakeholders are the fragmentation of the museum system and the lack of a long-term vision for the Historic Centre by the city government.

The clou of the process was a one-day community design workshop aimed at turning the many suggestions collected during the nine months into concepts and action plans for the regeneration of the Rione, with the support of the experts from DiDA and the Chamber of Architects (Fig. 7).

The proposed key actions to increase livability focus on the enhancement of public space, to be achieved through the redesign and re-greening of the existing squares, the opening to the public of the courtyards and cloisters of disused old buildings within the urban fabric, the creation of a new

² <https://open.toscana.it/web/laboratorio-san-lorenzo>

streetscape along the main streets, and the improvement of pedestrian links inside the neighborhood and to the surrounding public spaces. A concept plan was designed specifically for Piazza del Mercato Centrale, reclaimed as a community place by partly removing and displacing in a more rational way the existing selling stalls, parking spaces, restaurant dehors and waste collection points serving the Central Market. The improvement of the street market of San Lorenzo was, in turn, another important issue put forward by the Laboratory.

As far as the complex of Sant'Orsola is concerned, clearly the most important element for the future of the neighborhood, a non-negotiable point, which has been accepted in principle by the city administration, is to make it fully permeable to pedestrians, transforming its courtyards and colonnades into a pattern of public space. The consequent request is to provide it with mixed-use functions addressed to the city and its residents rather than to attract mass tourism. The hypotheses put forward to bring new life, after decades of neglect, to the centuries-old building range from a place for culture, education and the performing arts to a civic center with spaces for sport, children, and the elderly; a school and exhibition center dedicated to arts and crafts, a place of exchange between different cultures, or a hub for innovation, urban creativity, and higher education.

At the end of the participatory process, the package of analyses and proposals was delivered to the institutions concerned, with the request to officially adopt them in their planning and programs, and to maintain a direct line with the citizens, through the promoters of the Laboratory, on any future choices concerning the neighborhood.

4. Discussion

4.1 New scenarios for the Historic Center of Florence after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic

«[...] there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction» (Gilmore *et al.* 1986: 161). Concluded in December 2019 with the delivery to local administrations of a list of desiderata and project proposals as the result of the joint work between experts, citizens and stakeholders, the San Lorenzo Laboratory can be seen as a starting point of the critical reflection on public policies concerning the Historic Center of Florence - to a great extent focused specifically on the San Lorenzo Rione - which developed in the following months in a context transformed by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a paper on the risks of massive touristification, Carta and Tarsi (2020) prophetically described the surreal landscape of the streets and squares of the Historic Center of Florence emptied of tourists and the dramatic socioeconomic impacts of a hypothetical tourism lockdown. What was intended as a *reductio ad absurdum* has become reality because of the pandemic and the restrictions on free movement and economic activities adopted at national level to contain infections.

In addition to workers in the tourism industry who lost their jobs and the many entrepreneurs who have gone bankrupt despite the aid allocated by the Italian government to compensate them for lost revenues, the crisis has also had a negative impact on the budgets of tourist cities. In Florence, the budget deficit due to the non-collection of tourist taxes was 15 million euros in 2020. Although the first signs of recovery are immediately visible with the reduction of restrictions, the pandemic has raised widespread awareness of the structural fragility of an economy based on a tourism monoculture (Carta and Tarsi, 2021).

In the debate on the future of the city that has developed in the local media, many of the themes raised by the San Lorenzo Laboratory have been taken up by intellectuals, politicians and exponents of the economic categories. These include both general issues, such as the protection of permanent residents in the UNESCO area, and specific themes, such as, for example, the

improvement of the San Lorenzo street market. With the agreement of the merchants, who in the past had shown themselves hostile to any change, in December 2020 the City Council approved a new regulation for the market aimed at reorienting its offerings over the next three years towards Made-in-Tuscany quality products, and also aimed at the local public rather than only at the hit-and-run tourist.

The San Lorenzo Laboratory itself was indicated by social geographer Mirella Loda as a good practice to be implemented and replicated in the construction of a regeneration strategy for the entire Historic Center.

The repopulation of historic neighborhoods through housing policies aimed especially at young people, the increase of public facilities and green areas along with the care of existing public spaces, the diversification of economic activities, the regulation of tourist rentals, and the promotion of more sustainable tourism are all themes widely discussed in the Laboratory and highlighted in the interim reports and in the final document, which have been included as key points for the relaunch of the UNESCO area in the program “Rinascere Firenze” (Florence reborn)³, announced in July 2020 by Mayor Dario Nardella as a response to the pandemic: a significant change of pace, compared to years of laxity regarding the ongoing touristification.

Consistently, some of the resources of the React program, funded by the EU as part of the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience, have been allocated to the greening of public spaces in the central area of the city, including the San Lorenzo Rione.

4.2 The Sant’Orsola complex at a turning point

Despite the current difficulties, the turning point for Sant’Orsola came in the middle of the pandemic, with the signing of a concession contract for the complex between the Metropolitan City and the French real estate company Artea for the same uses established in the unsuccessful calls for bids. The project by Artea, which will bear all the restoration costs of the former monastery and then manage it for 99 years, takes into account many of the requests and proposals made by the San Lorenzo Laboratory, presented directly to the representatives of the company by the partners of the Laboratory in two meetings, held at the end of 2019 and in the summer of 2020, immediately after the contract was signed. In fact, the project involves the transformation of the courtyards into public spaces, including a green area, the opening of the complex on all sides of the block, the use of one of the basement levels originally intended for parking as a gymnasium, and the introduction of elements of contemporary art on the external façades of the complex, altered by consolidation works carried out in the 1990s. On the other hand, one line of discussion that is still open concerns the type of higher education facility, with an adjoining guesthouse, to be located on the upper floors: the Laboratory partners considered the hypothesis of a hospitality management school, also sponsored by the municipality, contradictory with respect to the history of the complex, as well as the wish to link the regeneration of the San Lorenzo Rione to the promotion of innovative activities not directly related to the tourism industry.

Finally, the choice of the San Lorenzo neighborhood for a pilot project involving the revitalization of the economic fabric affected by the pandemic, launched in June 2021 by the City of Florence, can be easily related, in turn, to the suggestions that arose within the Laboratory. By means of a public tender, the Municipality intends to purchase abandoned commercial spaces, located in the streets adjacent to the block of Sant’Orsola, to be allocated to art and craft activities, including the training of young apprentices. The goal is to recreate a craft district in the Historic Center, capable of reviving and innovating a tradition of excellence of the city. Additional resources will also be allocated to repairing street paving and new public lighting in the area between the Central Market and Sant’Orsola.

³ The program is available online at <https://www.comune.fi.it/rinascefirenze>

5. (Open) conclusions

The case study discussed in this article is an example of bottom-up resistance to the processes of tourism specialization, which for over a decade have threatened the demographic stability of many important art cities in the world and which, with specific reference to Florence, risk identifying the city not so much as the cradle but as a Disneyland of the Renaissance.

The debate that developed during the health crisis caused by the Coronavirus on the need to rethink the models of economic and urban development that have prevailed until now (Alberti et al. 2020, Banai 2020, Campanella & Vale 2020, Florida 2020, Lenzen et al. 2020, Sennet 2020, Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir 2020), of which the pandemic has highlighted not only the already known environmental and social unsustainability but also the structural fragility and lack of resilience, has actually created favorable conditions for the requests and suggestions made by the San Lorenzo Laboratory to be incorporated into the public policies for the UNESCO area of Florence.

Faced with the homologating effects produced by overtourism, initiatives to counter it must necessarily be markedly place-based, and therefore difficult to replicate in contexts other than those in which they arose.

However, some strengths of the experience presented can be generalized:

- The cooperation between promoters with different profiles - specifically a public subject (the University), a professional association (the Chamber of Architects) and a civic group (Santorsolaproject) - which facilitated the discussion between public and private stakeholders and citizens.
- The combination of scientific research and civic participation, which has fostered a well-argued but never academically abstract discussion on the critical issues and potential of the neighborhood.
- The definition of non-negotiable objectives (e.g., the public use of the courtyards of Sant'Orsola), accompanied by the willingness to engage in dialogue also with actors with legitimate private interests (such as San Lorenzo street market sellers and Artea) looking for win-win solutions.

It is too early to evaluate whether the transformations announced for the San Lorenzo Rione will actually move in the direction desired by the Laboratory.

What is certain is that Florence, like many other art cities in Europe, is now at a crossroads. The choices made in the coming months will decide whether its Historic Center will be reclaimed as a place of collective identity and, at the same time, a vital part of the city, or whether it will be consigned, perhaps forever, to an autonomous destiny as an open-air museum or theme park.

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