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Redevelopment by Tradition

Venice, Florence, Genoa, Amsterdam: Recent policies and projects for Urban Renewal in Historic Centres

For decades, the measures and methods of conservation of Historic Cities have been a disputed section of urban planning. In the 1960s citizen's movements started to oppose clearance plans. In the 1970s various types of consensus between authorities and citizens were reached. In this respect, two interesting 'extremes' are the Urban Renewal (*stadsvernieuwing*) in Holland versus the Urban Rehabilitation (*recupero urbano*) in Italy. In Holland, renovation follows systematically physical (and later also social) decay, assuring the permanence of a large part of the original population by means of social housing. In Italy social housing has played a very small role, but physical conservation and rehabilitation have brought about a coherent urban landscape. Both approaches were sustained by public opinion in the respective countries.

Our (2008) study starts from a Dutch perspective and tries to draw lessons from the Italian rehabilitation policies and projects over the period 1968-2008. This research, was financed by the Belvedere programme of the Dutch Architecture Fund as well.

We have called the Italian approach 'Redevelopment by Tradition' – the way in which European cities changed over centuries, before the radical large scale transformations took over, mainly during the 20th century. In Italy redevelopment is still 'traditional' – with some exceptions, mainly caused by the replacement policies of the 1930s Fascist regime.

This research has been elaborated on the national and regional policy level, the instruments applied in the cities and the organisation of the projects (55 in total). We started our analysis of the Italian policies and projects from 'Dutch' principles – like: solid planning of procedures, maximum use of the location, financially sound realisation in connection with the economically most convenient functions.

In the Italian practice these principles are far less leading. Instead, there are the monumental or historic values of the properties which principally guide the type of intervention and the destinations afterwards.

For the verification of these hypotheses – that in a first stage were verified by analysing essays, research and legislation – some 40 interviews were held on policies and realised projects. After draft-reporting, the texts were sent to the interviewed persons and general referents. Their comments were integrated in the final report.

Three questions were central in our analyses:

1. Why is the Italian approach different?
2. How do its objectives and instruments work out?
3. Is the approach applicable in other Heritage cities?

1. Which factors determine the Italian difference?

In Italy the opposition against redevelopment saw its first public expression at the Congress of the Association of Historic-Artistic Municipalities in Gubbio. The Charter of Gubbio, supported by 50 municipalities and many representatives of other administrations and professionals, put the safeguard and rehabilitation of Historic Centres as an urgent national problem and as the basis for the development of the modern city as a whole. The second turning point, resulting in much broader public awareness, came in 1966 with the floods in Venezia and Firenze, when many works of art and buildings were damaged. From this moment, inner city policies changed to conservation, even if the realisation of restoration projects started only in the following decades.

Other, underlying, factors that determine the prevalence of rehabilitation are: the symbolic values of the Historic Centres, which have a much longer history than the present Italian state; these Centres as a focal point of regional pride; clearance policies that recall the 20 years of Fascist regime and are difficult to practice by democratic (left wing) urban governments. Given the small impact of active public interventions and the fractioned private properties, small scale rehabilitation is also the most practical solution.

2. The impact of rehabilitation policies

The research has been focused on the city centres of Venezia, Firenze and Genova. Like Amsterdam, these cities present similarities as capitals of former merchant republics and have been (partly) recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage.

The documented and analysed projects can be divided in four main categories by the level of intervention: maintenance; restoration/renovation; conversion of destination (after rehabilitation); reconstruction.

In Dutch redevelopment practice most projects consist of new construction. As the selection of projects in this report is focused on the major (and more incisive) interventions in the Italian cities, one might expect a considerable representation of reconstruction. Still, the share of conversion projects is much larger than in Holland. Re-use and upgrading of existing properties (maintenance, restoration and conversion) cover about two thirds of the Italian projects – and even some 80% of the floor space after the interventions. Geographically, many of the Italian projects are located in the fringes of the Historic Centres. Here, a considerable part could be realized for public uses, like (social) housing, university faculties or recreation facilities - also because the area was already (largely) in public hands.

3. Which policies present 'lessons' for Urban rehabilitation?

In contrast to the Dutch or English practices, Italian inner city policies between 1968 and 2008 have used quite different instruments. Some of them can be good examples for the conservation of the urban landscapes:

1. Public institutions as 'planners' (not as developers). In northern Europe, public-private partnerships have been the key to urban renewal. This makes it difficult for local administrations to judge project proposals in which they were more or less involved;
2. Urban plans which indicate also intervention levels (not just volumes and destinations). The research report shows examples of recent Urban Plans (PRG/PUC) of Genova, Venezia and Firenze with this type of detailed indications;
3. 'Modern' users willing to remain or to 'fit' in renovated old structures. Some fine examples are the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital in Firenze (founded in 1300 and renovated in 2010); the Murate and other prisons in the same city used for housing and universities; monumental warehouses in the Old Port of Genova, used for the 1992 Expo and afterwards for cultural destinations; the new Hilton hotel in Venezia's old Stucky mill and other industrial archaeological buildings along the Canale di Giudecca;

4. Take more time for research, competitions and alternative designs. Some projects, like the Uffizi and Fortezza da Basso in Firenze or the Venetian Arsenale have extremely long preparation periods and a very phased realisation – but with results well related to their history;
5. A design that respects the Genius Loci – by means of Urban plans and rehabilitation projects that are not fixed on a maximum use of space - or profits - but refers to their historic context. The hills near Firenze, the Venetian Lagoon or the Genovese Waterfront do not support densification. The same might be true for the old ports of Amsterdam or Liverpool, where the preservation of urban landscapes is at the focus of the actual urban debate.

A summary of our research and the project documentation is available on this

[] pdf-file: **RedevelopmentbyTradition**

We would be interested to get in contact with researchers or practitioners on the same field, that is: the recent history and effects of urban renewal in historic city centres since 1968. We would be glad to receive your reaction on:

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