

Anna Laura Palazzo*

CULTURE-LED REGENERATION IN ROME: FROM THE FACTORY CITY TO THE KNOWLEDGE CITY

ABSTRACT: In the early 1990s, the notion of culture-led regeneration entered the urban agenda of several European cities confronted with drastic economic changes due to losses in their industrial base. This paper critically addresses a major case in the City of Rome, indeed less affected by these phenomena. In here, the densely populated working-class districts of Ostiense and Testaccio along the Tiber River just outside the City Centre have become part for some years now of a culture-led regeneration program conveying a brand new idea of “Knowledge City” deemed able to supplant the previous image of the “Factory City.”

KEYWORDS: Culture-led regeneration, urban planning, urban design, urban governance, Tiber River.

The “Progetto urbano” at a glance

The southwestern sector between Rome and the coastline along the Tiber River has recently turned out to be the most dynamic region in the Metropolitan City. Urban growth is linked to citywide facilities, such as Fiumicino international airport, two harbours, a major exhibition centre, several main roadways, a subway line and two regional railways. New suburbs (mainly low rise detached dwellings) merge into, or stand opposite to, few stretches of still unspoiled nature, imposing archaeological landmarks and enduring farming features dating from the first half of the twentieth century.

* Department of Architecture, “Roma Tre” University of Rome; Largo Giovanni Battista Marzi, 10-00153 Roma, Italy. Email: annalaura.palazzo@uniroma3.it.

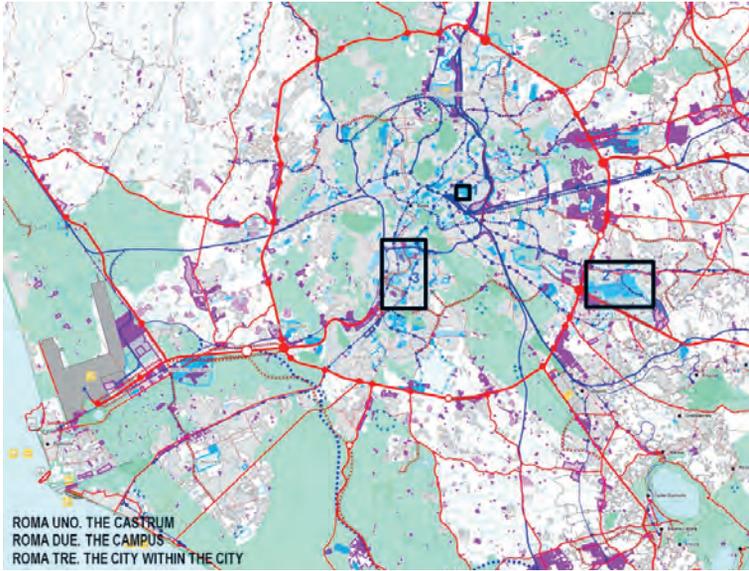
The core areas of this huge wedge (630 sq km, 760,000 inhabitants) are the Ostiense-Testaccio and the Marconi districts located next to the City Centre on both sides of the Tiber River that once housed the bulk of the industrial activities. Following the dilatory Roman industrialisation, urbanisation spread through this area from around the beginning of the twentieth century fairly steadily until the 70s. In recent decades, other urban peripheral areas have been preferred: further south – justified by the Metro B-line and the train connection to the seaside (Ostia), and on the right side of the river – partly justified by the train connection with Fiumicino airport.

In the early 90s, the neighbourhoods showed disaggregation and a lack of focal points. In order to address industrial decommissioning, a regeneration process was launched, focusing on two major drivers, culture and environment, regarded as powerful tools to enhance social cohesion and collective identification, impetus for economic growth and strategies for good governance. The triggering event was the national law allowing major public universities to gemmate in order to downsize within more physiological thresholds.

“La Sapienza” University, holding at that time some 200,000 students, was strongly committed to the establishment of a spin-off, “Roma Tre” University of Rome, provided with juridical power of its own. Unlike “La Sapienza” and “Tor Vergata” University, conceived as set apart from the urban life respectively as a “Castrum” and a “Campus,” “Roma Tre” facilities would be mainly accommodated in brownfields and formerly factory buildings displaying even monumental features of “unachieved modernity” intertwined with high-density residential development (up to 400 inh./hectare). Its location within the crowded Ostiense district, with over 140,000 residents, and along the Tiber bend of “Valco San Paolo” complied both to the wide availability of public areas and easy accessibility compared to Roman standards (Fig. 1).

Such a model of a “City within the City” was expected to contribute to citizens’ needs through cultural, sporting and leisure facilities, overcoming the specific purposes of an efficient Knowledge City, and definitely to forge a new identity for the whole area. Well beyond the reuse of the wholesale market and other brownfields, industrial plants and warehouses, the strategy aimed at rearranging the Tiber shores which still hold high environmental potentials with leisure areas and a Botanical Garden encompassing the archaeological remains of Roman piers and catacombs, and the Cathedral of Saint Paul outside the Walls (Figs 2, 3).

Fig. 1. The three Public Universities in Rome



Source: Province of Rome.

Fig. 2. Unachieved Modernity. Brownfields in the bend of the Tiber River called “Valco San Paolo”



Author: Anna L. Palazzo.

Fig. 3. Along the Tiber River. A repository of nature. Some hidden boathouses



Author: Anna L. Palazzo.

The earliest sketches and layouts provided by “Roma Tre” University conveyed the idea that such cultural attractions and amenities, scattered as they are, would necessarily bring gratifying formal signs, pleasant and filtering vegetation, adjoining various stimuli for implementing commercial and service activities, and eventually some university residences. The existing rail and bus connections would encourage students to enroll in order to relieve the overcrowded “La Sapienza.”

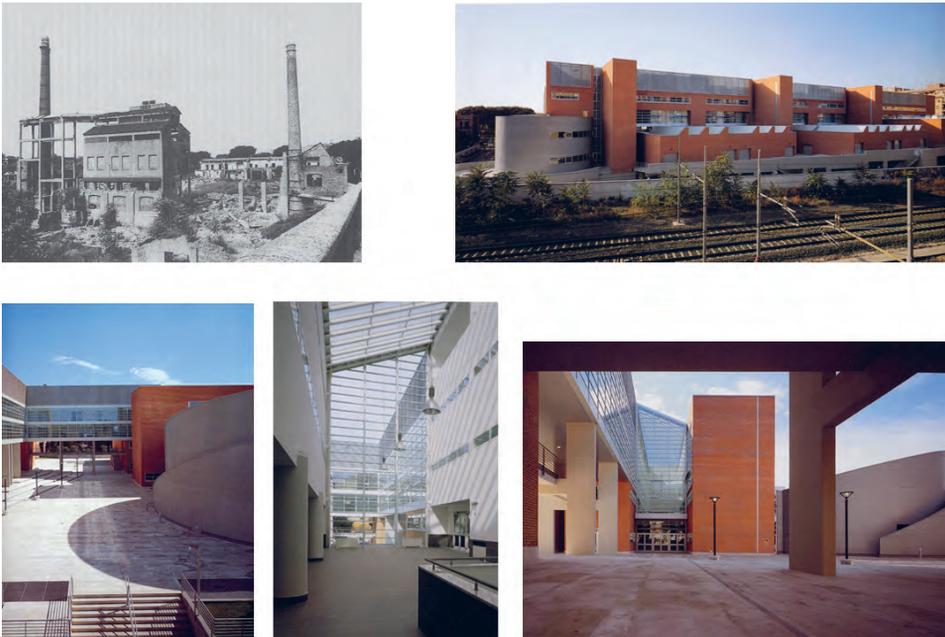
In that same period, the Municipality of Rome was about to launch a challenging planning process, the so-called “Progetto urbano Ostiense-Marconi,” conceived as a flexible tool in terms of locations and uses, expected to cope with unpredictable evolutions in needs and interests at stake. The “Progetto urbano” aimed both at restoring and enhancing the huge industrial heritage just outside the City walls, and at promoting formal, functional and ecological links between Rome and the seaside (Ostia). Among all stakeholders committed to the project, “Roma Tre” was envisioned as the lead partner, due to its public mission and steady presence in the area (Fig. 4).

The “Progetto urbano” addressed accessibility to the whole area, accommodating a new expressway along both banks of the Tiber River, and transforming the main street, the Via Ostiense, into an urban

Compared to the first stage proposal encompassing the wholesale market as a core location for “Roma Tre,” some major adjustments entailed a scattered layout. Several facilities were to be accommodated within the urban fabric along the Via Ostiense in the place of demolished buildings, such as the glass factory for the Rectorate and the Department of Law (Fig. 5), and in the site of Valco San Paolo, in brownfields (Department of Science) or inside the former model tank (Department of Engineering) (Fig. 6).

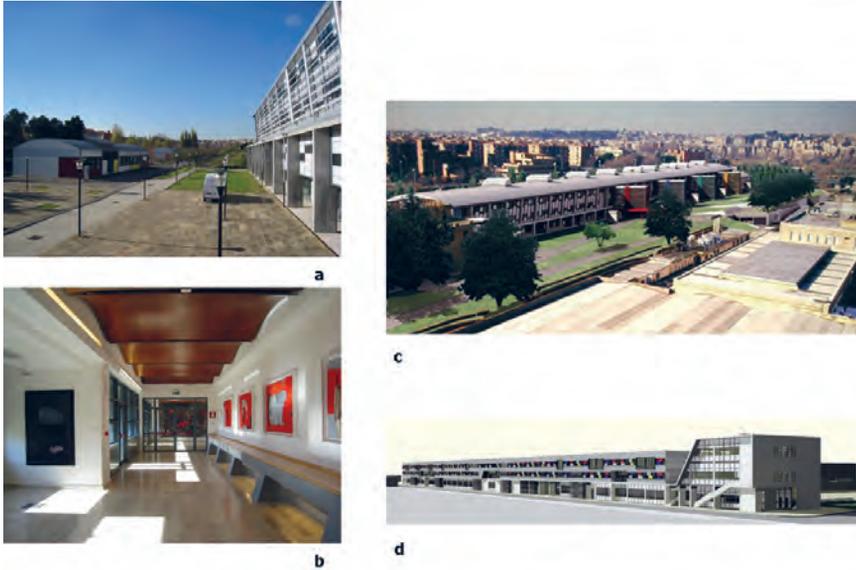
Within the walls, in the Testaccio district, the so-called “City of Arts” corresponding to former Slaughterhouse (Mattatoio), would accommodate the Department of Architecture, originally envisaged in Valco San Paolo, along with the Academy of Fine Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Arts (Macro). The pedestrian path crossing the City of Arts was expected to be open to citizens providing direct connection between two parts of the City that are currently split up by the large enclosure of the building complex (Fig. 7).

Fig. 5. Via Ostiense. The former glass factory, now Rectorate and Department of Law (arch. Alfredo Passeri and Giuseppe Pasquali)



Source: “Roma Tre” University of Rome.

Fig. 6. Department of Engineering, arch. Andrea Vidotto (a,b,c); Student House, arch. Lorenzo Dall’Olio (d)



Source: “Roma Tre” University of Rome.

Fig. 7. Mattatoio-Testaccio. The complex of the former slaughterhouse, as it was (a1,a2,a3), as it is (b1,b2), as it is likely to become (c1,c2)



Source: “Roma Tre” University of Rome.

Following negotiations with a major electricity network company, a brand new “City of Science” – a Museum and a Library – would be located on the premises and the skeleton of the former Gasometer, next to the power station “Montemartini” transformed into an exhibition space for the Capitoline Museums. The former wholesale market was allocated to the “City of Youth” including new facilities for young people (a large multiplex and a shopping centre) and neighbourhood facilities. On the opposite river bank, the “Teatro India,” stemming from the well renowned “Teatro Argentina,” was located in a former soap factory.

Last but not least, “Campidoglio 2,” the new headquarters of the Municipality of Rome with some 4,000 employees, was to be built up next to the Terminal Ostiense that eventually proved an attraction thanks to Eataly, the exhibition of our food industry’s best products.

As for open space, a number of areas were assigned for purposes concerning the community at large, such as green spaces for leisure and cultural facilities, in order to shape a new “welcoming frame” to residents and visitors, and structure strong relationships within the neighbourhood. Among others, the “Parco Tevere Sud” was expected to connect all sites in the area encompassing the new Botanical Gardens in Valco San Paolo.

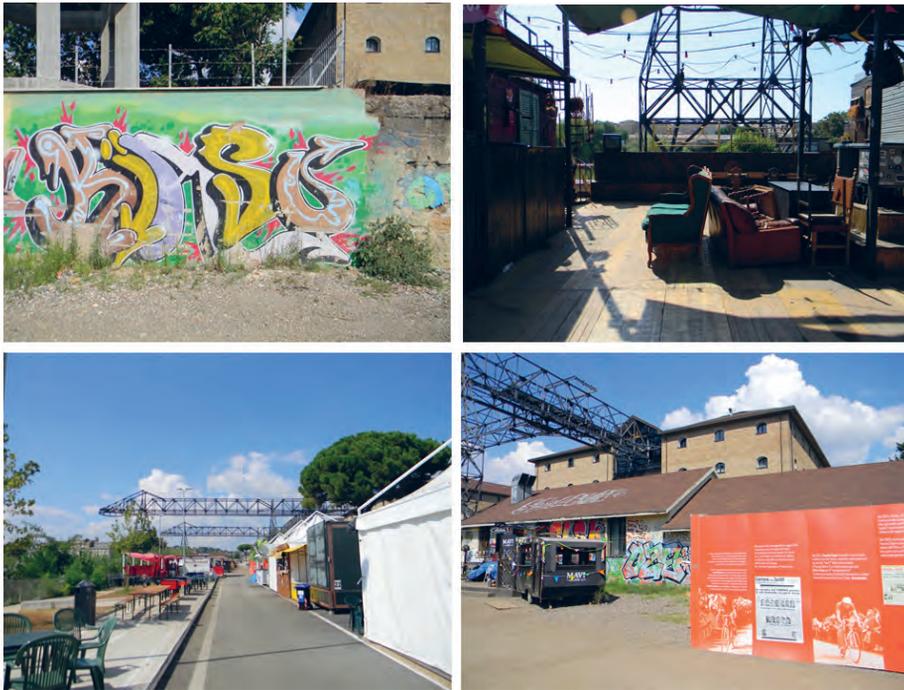
Over time, despite continuity in urban leadership, several critical opinions have significantly affected the renewal strategy. According to its statute, the “Progetto urbano” was meant to face a decision-making process allowing for some minor amendments that should not affect its general philosophy: yet, some technical issues were not sufficiently clarified, resulting in inadequate or unfeasible arrangements that, everything considered, were never dismissed. This was the case with heavy infrastructure provisions running along both banks of the Tiber River that virtually hinder any new hypothesis for a soft mobility system. Feasibility studies and simulations on alternative scenarios were lacking, and the overall management was poorly adapted to the new setting prompted by an urban regeneration process. Even though the City and University were strongly tied up within a series of partnership agreements, the time schedule was not well-defined. At the turn of the new century, due to high decontamination costs of a few hectares of industrial land in the former premises of the Gasometer, the challenging program of the City of Science was abandoned. As for public space, poor attention was devoted to urban design apart from the setting of the “Parco Shuster” next to Saint Paul outside the Walls.

Lately, the implementation of the “Progetto urbano” has undoubtedly rested on “Roma Tre,” which implemented most

forecasts and is now well-established in the City context, ranking second to “La Sapienza” with some 34,000 students enrolled. This has caused the whole area to be more and more attractive for resident and non-resident students from all over the City even as a sort of “pleasure district” due to the large number of night clubs, pubs, etc, prompting further investment and transformations. The Ostiense district is home to a major concentration of creative sectors ranging from advertising to architecture, the performing arts, and software and computer games (see: Lelo in this issue).

Activities related to leisure time, culture, and entertainment have also settled down, changing the urban pattern. The whole area appeals to Roman underground cultures, hosting art works by leading Italian and foreign street artists, joint exhibitions or live performances, and illegal street art, too – posters, stencils and stickers. Following the ancient tradition of writing messages in public spaces, graffiti is using ever more elaborate and inventive images challenging the gloomy atmosphere of the neighbourhood’s “unachieved modernity” (Figs 8, 9).

Fig. 8. The pedestrian path along the Tiber River. The General Warehouses are currently home to the City Fire Department



Author: Anna L. Palazzo.

Fig. 9. “Waterfront,” large mural in progress along the two corner walls of the former air force barracks occupied by squatters (May 2013); “The Swimmer,” the headquarters building of the historic fish market Ostiense (October 2011); urban skyline from the subway station “Garbatella”



Author: Anna L. Palazzo.

Challenges to be met

The regeneration philosophy of the “Progetto urbano” enacts public commitment to certainty over strategy, and flexibility over implementation, linked to a set of transformation goals to be achieved by means of public-private partnerships (the so-called “Accordi di Programma”).

Updating forecasts and scheduling implementation, putting in place activities and arrangements with manifold stakeholders linked by proximity, conjuring up simultaneous yet different uses in the same areas, are indeed relevant issues. This last point, especially, is underpinned by a strategy including various demands and expectations in order to create the conditions for a common and complex identity of the whole area; hence the metaphor of the “City”

– of Science, of Art, of Youth. It is worth noting that such a challenging coexistence of mixed uses, public and private sectors, free and costly activities, basically inclusive and essentially exclusive initiatives, refers to management models not quite experienced in the Italian case.

As previously discussed, these regeneration practices lie in an approach able to harness decision-making to the inherent unexploited values of Nature and History. This topic entails the various ways in which our past vanishes and reappears always different, always the same. Along with continuity meant as connectivity in urban space, continuity over time goes far beyond traditional practice in handling historical remains, in acknowledging the material signs and addressing physical preservation, since it implies intangible heritage as well.

How to convey a sense of place within land use schemes and development guidelines while responding to new requirements? Taking history into account entails cultural and symbolic investment, after all re-use practices and “overwritings” are far from neutral: they may range from radical philological reconstructions to ways facilitating perceptions of past uses and learning experiences of the material culture, technologies and lifestyles of our ancestors, to options conferring the territorial project the status of “open work.”

For Mattatoio-Testaccio, the *idée force* to match within this huge space exclusivity requirements (University and Research activities, headquarters of the Academy of Fine Arts, new facilities for cultural life) and inclusivity needs (the Testaccio Centre for popular music and other social, leisure and retail activities) undergoes risk if side effects are not duly considered. As for the concept design, the recovery of the animals’ precinct of the slaughterhouse is under way by using shapes and materials that, lacking a communication strategy, are likely to cause commodification. In fact, visitors might be misled by the new setting encompassing street furniture, fences, pavements and even greenery that obviously were not part of the former building complex.

Valco San Paolo is an iconic “part-for-the-whole” since it gathers the main features of Ostiense and Marconi neighbourhoods, being central in the urban geography but marginal in common perception and completely overlooked in its territorial structure. It is both an unsettled place and a rich repository of overlapping memories of its industrial past. It holds a piece of almost untouched nature invisible to pedestrians and city users, and deeply deteriorated, awaiting a better destiny, such as a Botanical Garden. It is “global” for the student flows daily attending the University (Engineering, Sciences)

and the State Institute for Cinema and Television “Roberto Rossellini,” and “local” due to introverted residential space, worn by cohabitation problems with a large gypsy community, the most populated one in the Roman area until 2002. Will a Student House next to the enclosures of the University facilities be helpful in such a difficult cohabitation?

Coming to the present day, after a progressive clarification of the most relevant aspects concerning program priorities, procedures and implementation tools, the ideal momentum of the “Progetto urbano” wore down. Citizen associations formerly concerned about gentrification are now far less committed to urban development, while current debate focuses on the setting of the Parco del Tevere Sud, the river park running alongside the walls of several former factories where residual landmarks of industrial archaeology are being destroyed due to risk of collapse. As a consequence, the brand new Science footbridge supposed to facilitate accessibility for residents and students within the neighbourhoods turns out to be a dead end (Fig. 10). Why should one cross it?

Fig. 10. The footbridge over the Tiber River leading to the Gasometer; former Mira Lanza Factory buildings; skyline with hoppers before demolition works



Author: Anna L. Palazzo.

As for the “City of Youth,” after a break during a decade, a much more market-oriented proposal is currently under way.

Under these circumstances, the pressure of the real estate market in such an inner part of Rome is likely to bring about re-zoning and land uses changes. The “Progetto urbano,” more consistent with a strategic approach than with a land use plan, has no prescriptive tools to secure its strategy. It lacks, everything considered, a steady road map addressing structural, functional and temporal priorities in establishing specific rules for the negotiation process, even related to the additional costs that could be reinvested in the form of local benefits.

Conclusions

Twenty years after its launch, the “Progetto urbano Ostiense-Marconi” is bearing fruit. The image of a “Knowledge City” has somewhat supplanted the image of the dull neighbourhood bearing the signs of a “Factory City.” Yet, the challenge is far more ambitious and much remains to be done. Besides side effects in terms of space conflicts among residents and city users which need to be addressed (traffic, noise, etc.), difficulty in establishing an urban governance mediating between the different interests at stake has featured highly segmented dynamics along the multiple paths of ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic difference. Under the burden of such a multifaceted legacy, different scales and concerns are summoned.

First of all, the Tiber River, as a waterway determining from the earliest times the destiny of the whole region between Rome and the sea, conveys a long-standing history and an inexhaustible myth yet largely unexploited. Thinking about today, history turns into a chronicle split between general interests and vested interests far more tenacious that are likely to influence and re-direct urban debates. However, according to the procedure of the “Accordo di Programma,” public-private partnerships and engagements are only valid within the “enclosure” of any single intervention. As a matter of fact, such an approach allows for a sort of “Russian Doll” operational approach, turning in a drawback for the space in-between and open space that fail to stand as a key priority. This also holds true for all stakeholders involved and their relationships. Communication and inter-institutional coordination costs are

not currently incorporated as administrative charges and seldom supported on a voluntary basis. And the list could go on.

It goes without saying that in this stage of its life, the “Progetto urbano” should be supported by a new political will and a new vision prompting a need for a precise definition of policy design measures, actions and instruments, and possible negotiation trajectories in case of conflicts. The City administration of Rome in its entirety (the Mayor, the City Council and the “Municipio VIII,” the local authority District) is called upon to play the regeneration game as a “*primus inter pares*,” devoting its reputation and guaranteeing transparency in decision-making. In turn, communities, increasingly more aware of their prerogatives, are supposed to force the rigidity of the built environment and to embed new meanings and insights in their everyday life. Still, such a broader dimension of “futureness” is bound by an administrative tradition rooted in the legitimacy of the public action and a yet “imperfect” devolution process: the “Municipio” has limited financial resources.

It is to be hoped that the new urban governance provides a sound theoretical basis by considering public space as a “common place” for sharing opinions and visions between expert knowledge and local knowledge; a sort of visioning dealing with different cultures, uses, economies, and ecologies in space and over time, enhancing the extensive resources of landscape and landscaping, so little experienced and even less shared.

References

- Avarello, P., et al. “Il Quadrante Ostiense tra Otto e Novecento.” *Roma moderna e contemporanea*, 1 (2004): 3–368.
- Bortolotti, L. *Roma fuori le mura*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1988.
- Cuccia, G. *Urbanistica, edilizia, infrastrutture di Roma Capitale 1870–1990*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991.
- D’Apice, C., et al. *Roma Tre attore di sviluppo locale*. Roma: Ediesse, 2003.
- D’Errico, R. *Ostiense. Assetti proprietari e trasformazioni economico-sociali di un settore dell’Agro romano (secoli XVIII–XX)*. Roma: Cromia, 2007.
- Neri, M.L., et al. “Industria e città. I luoghi della produzione fra archeologia e recupero.” *Roma moderna e contemporanea*, 1/2 (2000): 3–288.
- Neri, M.L. “Note sull’espansione di Roma verso il Mare.” *Storia urbana*, 82/83 (1998): 31–48.
- Ottolenghi, M., and A.L. Palazzo. “Three Universities in search of Actors: A Capital City Case.” *The Urban University and its Identity: Roots, Locations, Roles*. Ed. H. Van der Wusten, Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997: 87–98.

- Palazzo, A.L. (ed.). *Campagne urbane. Paesaggi in trasformazione nell'area romana*. Roma: Gangemi, 2005.
- Ricci, P. "Il progetto urbano Ostiense-Marconi." *Urbanistica*, 116 (2001): 62–63.
- Smeriglio, M. *Città comune. Autogoverno e partecipazione nell'era globale*. Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2006.
- Università degli Studi Roma Tre. *Piano di assetto per l'attuazione del progetto urbano Ostiense-Marconi*. Roma: Kappa, 2004.