Florence: a squandered heritage

The urban area, as defined on the map (part of the biggest area of Central Tuscany that gathers along the Arno valley about half of the population of the whole Tuscany), is dominated by two big cities (Florence on the left side and Pistoia on the west, with a strong industrial district in crisis), with a pre-eminence of Florence in terms of cultural, services and facilities. In the past the population was strongly concentrated in Florence city centre. Recently all the region around grew up, mainly because of movement of population inside the area where many people left the main centre to re-locate in the surroundings, looking for cheaper housing or more comfortable lifestyle (parking facilities, less urban congestion, peace and quiet, etc.).

From the point of view of demography we are in a relatively small town on the European context and also local economy is not significant on the global scale. What makes Florence part of the global VM is therefore its image of cultural centre and masterpiece in the history of art, that gives to the city a position in the global market of high level cultural tourism because of its heritage and because of a policy of preservation of the historic city centre (UNESCO world heritage site). The network of museums and historic archives supports the attractiveness of the city for cultural tourism and the image of historic treasure is easily marketable for both luxury and cheap “mass tourism” residences, hotels, shops, restaurants with related consequences on the city everyday life. This image is also relevant for:

- international institutions of the academic system that locate here research centres mainly connected with history of art and restoration (Harvard University Centre for Italian Renaissance Studies, Scuola del Rospo, Kunsthistorisches Institut, etc.);
- research of foreign universities (Syracuse, Stanford, New York, etc.);
- the European University Institute, one of the most relevant EU research institution.

Florence VM is, as a matter of fact, based on the past and not efficiently supported by recent public policies. This explains the relevance of commerce and real estate income in the area.

The city seems to live from the consumption of existing cultural values, being unable to innovate and produce new culture:
- no big university but without high standard faculties or departments;
- no important classical music theatre but always under serious difficulties;
- some book publishers, but not any more of national scale;
- all important movement in the cultural life of the city.

Alternative movements tried, in the recent past, to innovate the cultural landscape (music, figurative art, theatre) and to have an impact on the social situation (housing fight movements, squatted social centres, alternative economy initiatives) with the supposed secondary effect of influencing the cultural, economic and political scene. The process failed because of a lack of local policy vision to support cultural and social bottom-up innovation and because of a local entrepreneurialism more accustomed to exploit land rent than to develop innovation.

The described situation of Florence as tourist attraction increases the cost of dwellings, and an almost not existing social housing system increases the housing shortage for low and medium income people.
The Flore MM is characterized by: inability of the political economic, social, cultural system to fulfill the minimum plans and to promote or take advantage of innovation.

- Public administration relies on public-private partnerships to provide public services and utilizes back offices to create long-term plans and to promote or take advantage of innovation.

- Public administration shares the same approach with the private sector in housing, public utilities, cultural activities, etc. This implies that many public properties are sold and this is particularly visible in the public and social housing.

- Public housing sustains only a small range of very low income people; the others are left alone by public policies. They do not attract people to public housing, which is merely built by private enterprises heavily subsidized by the public sector. The result is that there are no opportunities for new, with the right to buy as an higher amount of housing facilities. A significant number of people therefore have a pre-eminance of the commercial and real estate market.

- The housing shortage is exploiting, involving not low income but median people as well. In this situation a social public center "outside the market" hardly find a private use of public spaces and built heritage. This implies an imbalance between costs and benefits.

- The crisis hits hard also with losses of jobs and families that are not able to pay the mortgage, or the rent and are evicted from their homes as a result of rising costs. This has been more particularly noticed between December 2008 and December 2009 in the total local market; in the period Jan.-Feb. 2009 the total evictions are 250, significantly higher than 2007, 117,4 as a result of 676, more than one period for other reason: the 2008 for the less of both the lease for: "Evicted and (Figures from the Ministry of Interior)."

- There is a rich set of grass roots movements able to propose social innovation and bottom-up initiatives (see Le Piaggio projects, to be financed by public administration).

- In the recent years we had been expressing protests both to stop urban projects, like the high speed train or the increment, beyond the city limits, and also against the cuts in the out of the public budget. There are many grassroots movements fighting against urban transformations. At the same time we have movements with a long history. The art work clearly makes us feel the strong and meaningful but at the same time in order to find a clear vision of a better future to share with other similar groups. All the memories of past, as clear in the Tuscan territories, could give rise to new and strong possible urban worlds.