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Artistic and Curatorial Power in Cities' Historic Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses and compares three neighbourhood/site projects in Athens, Salerno and Sunderland. Despite being on a small scale, they trigger vitality and revive spaces that invite creative uses. These examples have the aim to involve local residents and artists in creating public places and claim their right to oppose top-down impositions and globalization of cultural consumption returning decision-making power to the local communities. The ambition is that small artwork interventions can gradually propose meaningful transformations in a wider perspective.

KEYWORDS

Creativity; Urban Revival; Curatorial Light; Performing Arts; Community Knowledge

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This article critically examines, through the analysis of public spaces, the transformation and redefinition of historic areas of 3 European cities during the last decade. Streets, squares, open places and public buildings have long been evoking social practices and traditions but also progress and modernity and are now becoming the driver for curatorial activities, borrowing their methods from artistic and museum practices. The decision to concentrate the analysis on three very different sites grew out of the need to examine urban renewal strategies and narratives, where ideas about artists and community building can take shape and be challenged. Each selected site encapsulates a new model of cultural space beyond the traditional categories of “protection” or “enhancement” and tries to respond to the questions on how are the new interventions created regarding a diversified contemporary cultural production.

The first site, the Church of *San Sebastiano del Monte dei Morti* (Mountain of the Dead), known as “Morticelli’s church”, is located in the historical centre of Salerno, in southwestern Italy. In the 80s, the church was completely abandoned as a consequence of earthquakes and lack of maintenance and became a synonymous of decay with few connections to the “lower” historical centre¹.

The “San Sebastiano del Monte dei Morti Living Lab” (SSMOLL) is the process activated in 2018 by the Blam association group, the Municipality of Salerno, currently the owner of the building, and the Federico II University of Naples, aiming at reopening the former church, inserting it into a wider process of urban regeneration and social innovation applied to the “higher” historical centre.

The reopening of the former church in December 2018 indeed marked the start of a process of adaptive reuse of the historical asset through a collaborative process in which the community becomes the main interpreter of the new use value of the asset. Developed and generated over time inside the former church, the Creative Living Lab becomes the brain of a culture-led regeneration process, in which an abandoned ecclesiastical space becomes a place of community and incubator of creativity.

Since 2018 key ad-hoc performances are held in and outside the square adjoining the church with specific site installations as when curating an art show. A team of local artists has installed artworks and has worked together under the coordination of Flavia D’Aiello, a storyteller, puppet master and producer responding to an art call launched by the group association Blam. The living performances have built interactions and reflective relations among performers, a double-bass, video makers, ballerinas, illustrators and designers, as well as architects. Artists and assistants have installed the artworks on site, and the technicians set up the lighting and technical equipment exhibiting how culture enters into action while simultaneously proposing a connection to the topics of love and death in line with the symbolic meaning of the church. Contrary to the



FIG. 1 Church of San Sebastiano dei Morti—Blam Ludovica La Rocca

idea that curatorial activities are only interested in large budgetary works, candles lighting a temporary pottery exhibition in the square adjoining the church demonstrate the willingness to arrange a lot with very little, warning us on the theme of abandoned souls (so-called “anime pezzentelle”).

The idea of using artworks as a tool to activate participatory processes for regaining spaces in the collective urban imagination also exists in the creation of the “Museo Luminoso Diffuso”, a Luminous Museum spread all over the city, starting from the ex-church of the “Morticelli”. The aim of the project is to build a map of interventions able to bring light to abandoned and neglected places, maybe in popular quarters, traditionally seen as the “anomalous” localities of the city, and to examine how such images may change through the redefinition of urban space.



FIG. 2 Minerva Garden, Salerno—Luciano Mauro

In a similar fashion and without the fear of attributing new spatial experiences, the intervention “Lumina Minervae” in the Minerva Garden creates an unusual scenography and crafts a stage of lights, images, costumes and sounds to represent the history of the Salernitan Medical School.

The *Giardino della Minerva* (Minerva Garden), a 12th century terraced therapeutic botanical garden, is not exactly the first place that many visitors see when arriving in the city. It is indeed located in the highest part of the historic centre of Salerno. The Garden was part of the *Scuola Medica Salernitana* (Salernitan Medical School), considered to be the first medical educational institution in Europe and one of the forerunner universities. Salerno has been the home of the Salernitan Medical School since the 10th century. More than 300 plant species are grown here, arranged according to the ancient principles of humours (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile) and linked to the fundamental elements (air, water, earth and fire) found in ancient medical literature. The temporary light intervention has the fundamental premise to emphasize the timelessness and secrecy of the site and mark the hidden alleys to reach it.

The second selected project² is a micro-experiment of urban revival consisting of a participatory light installation and artistic interventions aiming at “illuminating” the abandoned Pittaki Street in Athens, Greece. From 2012 until 2018, the project succeeded in establishing a profound dialogue with the local reality, addressing the concept of the place, the people involved and the power of curatorial light. It included creative groups in the placemaking process and engaged citizens to co-create a homely public

2 Stephania Xydia, “Illuminating Darkness: The Case Study of the Synoikia Pittaki Participatory Light Installation in Athens,” in *Our City? Countering Exclusion by Designing Cities for All*, ed. Minouche Besters (Rotterdam: STIPO & European Placemaking Network, 2019), 303–8.



FIG. 3 Pittaki Street, Athens—Beforelight

space attempting to offer an alternative to the dominant trajectory of urban decline. The project was initiated by Imagine the City³, an informal network of citizens focusing on urban regeneration, and was developed in partnership with Beforelight⁴, a creative group focusing on light design. The light installation was initially supported by the Municipality of Athens in terms of permits and technical support.

Pittaki street was selected as a fulcrum of Athenian urban decline. However, its historical links to antique dealers selling light fixtures and its proximity to the required electricity infrastructure, offered a fascinating opportunity to host the SynOikia⁵ lighting concept on the troubled street. In autumn 2012 the resourceful, creative action of a group of inhabitants of Psyrri and wider central Athens donating old light fixtures was fundamental in order to finally bring this street out of dereliction and back to use. For a period of two months, an abandoned shop on Pittaki Street was converted into an open workshop offering opportunities for refurbishment of light fixtures. Over 150 chandeliers, lanterns, metal lamps, bell shades, glass bowls, colourful light fixtures were gathered, resulting in a colourful

3 <www.imaginethecity.gr> now established as Place Identity Clusters NGO <http://www.placeidentity.gr>, accessed 6 October 2020.

4 <www.beforelight.gr>, accessed 6 October 2020.

5 The project branding constituted a wordplay on the Greek word *synoikia* (quarter/district), separating its suffixes *syn* (co-) and *oikia* (home) to create a “CoHome” for Pittaki street.



FIG. 4 Pittaki Street, Athens—Nikos Libertas

bright canopy that covered Pittaki street. Parallel to the light installation, murals with pastel colours were painted along the walls of Pittaki street, and a series of community events enabled local people to reclaim their space. The small project of Pittaki Street proved extremely successful for its local impact, becoming a catalyst for a set of important changes in the neighbourhood.

The creation of public space for cultural fruition increased social and community participation and showed that the most effective and intelligent way to fight urban decay and disorders is not to build a security apparatus but to build places driving a sense of local pride and ownership of a “common” artwork. Soon, SynOikia Pittaki sparked the flourish of new businesses in empty stores and the return of inhabitants in the neighbourhood; it mobilized community activities such as murals painting, hosted

urban dinners and street parties and served as a source of inspiration for new urban interventions and artistic works in the city, offering a bright landmark of hope at times of severe socioeconomic crisis.

The third selected site in Sunderland, UK is still at an embryonic stage.

Sunderland's 'Historic High Streets' is a Heritage Action Zone (HAZ).⁶ HAZs are a 2017 initiative by Historic England, that aims to use heritage to unlock problems of deprivation and dilapidation, with a particular focus on high streets. This particular HAZ area reflects the early urban history of Sunderland, a post-industrial city in the north-east of England. It is exploring how to develop a viable future for the area through restoration of the historic environment, in a neighbourhood ranked amongst the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in England. The project is managed by a partnership including Sunderland City Council (SCC), Historic England (HE), Sunderland Heritage Forum, the Churches Conservation Trust, Tyne and Wear Building Preservation Trust (TWBPT) and Sunderland Culture (SC). They are collaborating on researching, repairing and regenerating historic buildings and developing community projects encouraging local people to get involved.

The TWBPT is currently restoring three buildings in the HAZ: 170-175 High Street West. They were built as merchant houses in the 1790s and only a few years after they were built the houses were turned into shops and offices as the street they are on became the "high street", and the commercial heart of the town. The changes in commerce and city structure have meant a loss of function and use for the buildings, which led to vacancy and deterioration⁷. After being left vacant and in disrepair for at least the past two decades, the buildings were finally obtained by Sunderland City Council and gifted to the TWBPT in 2018. The renovation is undertaken in collaboration with various other local stakeholders, to develop new use, create mutual benefit in doing the buildings up, and providing accessible space for a variety of users.

To support the restoration, events and activities are being organized in collaboration with (future) tenant(s) and users, local organizations, SMEs, artists, neighbourhood organizations, schools, and local government. These vary from heritage informed events such as lectures and exhibitions on the history of the buildings and the area, to a community mural and pop-up coffee shop⁸, an exhibition and workshop on "Rebel Women

6 HAZ is a policy tool, applied in nearly 90 local authorities across England. It aims at having restoration and reuse contribute to dealing with poverty, austerity, and socio-economic inequalities in public space.

7 Martin Hulse, Loes Veldpaus, and OpenHeritage, "Highstreet West, Sunderland Great Britain | OpenHeritage" (2020), <https://openheritage.eu/heritage-labs/high-street-sunderland/>, accessed 6 October 2020.

8 Loes Veldpaus, Sally Watson, and Amelia Turner, "Heritage Open Day - 170-175 High Street West Collaborative Lab - Sunderland" (2019), [https://hwsunderland.openheritage.eu/processes/events](https://hwsunderland.openheritage.eu/processes/events;); <https://youtu.be/RmyFtVz4ZfQ>, accessed 6 October 2020.



FIG. 4 Marion Phillips and Kenickie by Kathryn Robertson

of Sunderland” developed with Sunderland Culture⁹ and Sunderland University¹⁰, and various music performances, podcast recordings, and arts and crafts workshops organized by Pop Recs and partners (2020)¹¹.

Pop Recs, a Community Interest Company (CIC)¹², is involved from the beginning as a local partner and future user of part of the buildings after restoration, and have the rights to temporary use during renovation. The involvement of Pop Recs helps to bring life and creativity, raise the profile of the project, and show that the restoration project is about more than restoring material. Their involvement through temporary use helps test the building and explore how that temporary use may develop into a permanent fixture.

The “Rebel Women of Sunderland” exhibition and events were led by Sunderland Culture, whose mission is to improve life for everyone in Sunderland through culture, set up to support activities to performing arts in Sunderland. They commissioned two young women creatives—illustrator Kathryn Robertson and writer Jessica Andrews—to collaborate on the project, producing illustrations and stories to tell the tales of historic and contemporary women with importance to Sunderland.

On the one hand, the mural by Robertson lining the walls creates an open dialogue with the past, by emphasizing historical fragments and having people join in the drawing. On the other hand, a new generation of women

9 Sunderland Culture et al., “Rebel Women of Sunderland,” Sunderland Culture (2019), <https://sunderlandculture.org.uk/rebelwomen/>, accessed 6 October 2020.

10 Dr. Sarah Hellawell, “Dr Marion Phillips: Sunderland’s First Female MP (1929-1931),” Women’s History Network (August 14, 2019), <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/dr-marion-phillips-sunderlands-first-female-mp-1929-1931-by-dr-sarah-hellawell/>, accessed 6 October 2020.

11 Record Shop, a Coffee Shop, an Art Space and Live Music Venue Ran by Frankie & The Heartstrings” (2020), <https://www.facebook.com/poprecsltd/>; <https://www.poprecs.co.uk/>, accessed 6 October 2020.

12 A CIC is a special type of limited company, which exists to benefit the community rather than private shareholders.

could create a new interpretation of the city which would seek innovative ways of understanding culture where the historical background is added to other and more recent creative knowledge. Crowd-sourced through social media, this project has shown to have a rare aptitude for mobilizing the local community and the media, drawing attention to the “People Power”, as Laura Brewis, Creative Producer at Sunderland Culture said and convert unknown stories into achievements of women from the city from a historical and current perspective.

It seems possible to state that there are significant similarities between the three situations analyzed. They are isolated projects on a small scale, however enjoying vitality and reviving spaces that invite creative uses. These examples sought to involve local residents and artists in creating public place and claim their right to oppose top-down impositions and globalization of events and cultural consumption returning decision-making power to the local communities. It remains to be seen if the neighbourhoods/sites redesigned by artworks and community engagement have not only the power to provoke and reconsider but also believe that transforming the state of things is possible, starting from small interventions and gradually proposing meaningful alternatives to anticipate the future.

Cristina Garzillo Employed with ICLEI since 2005. Having almost 20 years of experience working in and for local governments, Cristina is recognised for her work as expert in local sustainability processes, integrated management and governance as well as author of numerous publications in the field of local sustainability, cultural heritage and knowledge brokerage. Cristina is an external evaluator for the URBACT III programme and an expert for the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions. She can also draw on a wealth of academic experience gained from previous role as contract professor at the University of Parma.