Artistic and Curatorial Power in Cities’ Historic Spaces

Abstract

This article analyzes and compares three neighborhood/site projects in the cities of Athens, Salerno, and Sunderland. Despite the small scale of the projects, they trigger vitality and revive spaces that invite creative uses. These projects 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 by returning the decision-making power to the local communities. The ambition is that small artwork interventions can gradually lead to more meaningful transformations from a wider perspective.

Keywords

This article critically examines the transformation and redefinition of historic areas of three European cities during the last decade by analyzing their public spaces. Streets, squares, open places, and public buildings have for long evoked not only social practices and traditions but also progress and modernity; they are now the driver for curatorial activities, borrowing their methods from artistic and museum practices. The decision to analyze three disparate sites emerged from the need to examine urban renewal strategies and narratives in places 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 attempts to respond to questions about how these new interventions create 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 center of Salerno, in southwestern Italy. In the 1980s, the church was completely abandoned after an earthquake occurred in the region, leading to lack of maintenance, and the decaying church seemed to have few connections to the “lower” historical center.1

The “San Sebastiano del Monte dei Morti Living Lab” (SSMOLL) restorative project was initiated in 2018 by the Blam association group, the Municipality of Salerno, the current owner of the church building, and the Federico II University of Naples, to reopen the former church. The plan was to incorporate the restoration into the wider process of urban regeneration and social innovation as was done to the “higher” historical center.

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

Since 2018, there have been key ad-hoc performances within and outside the square adjoining the church, with specific site installations as those present when curating an art show. A team of local artists installed artworks and worked together with the coordination of Flavia D’Aiello, a storyteller, puppet master, and producer, responding to an art call launched by a group named Blam. The live performances led to interactions and reflective relations among performers, a double-bass, video makers, ballerinas, illustrators and designers, as well as architects. Artists and assistants installed artworks on the site, and technicians set up 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 idea that curatorial activities are focused only on large budgetary works, candles lighting up a temporary pottery exhibition in the square adjoining the church demonstrate a willingness to arrange a lot with very little, a warning based 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 is also part of the creation of the “Museo Luminoso Diffuso,” a Luminous Museum spread across the city, starting from the former church of the “Morticelli.” The aim of the project is to build a map of interventions 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.

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 twelfth-century terraced therapeutic botanical garden, is not exactly the first place that visitors see when they arrive in the city. It is located in the highest part of the historic center 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 a forerunner among universities. Salerno has housed the Salernitan Medical School since the tenth century. More than 300 plant species are grown here, arranged according to the ancient principles of humors (blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile) and linked to the fundamental elements (air, water, earth, and fire) mentioned in ancient medical literature. The fundamental premise of this temporary light intervention is to emphasize the timelessness and secrecy of the site and mark the hidden alleys to reach it.

The second project selected for examination is a micro-experiment of urban revival comprising a participatory light installation and artistic interventions aimed 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 place, the people involved, and the power of curatorial light. It included creative groups in the placemaking process and engaged citizens in co-creating a homely public space attempting to offer an alternative to the dominant trajectory of urban decline. The project was initiated by “Imagine the City,” an informal network of citizens focusing on urban regeneration, and was developed in partnership with “Beforelight,” a creative group involved in light design. The Municipality of Athens supported the light installation project initially in terms of permits and technical aid.

Pittaki street was considered the 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 SynOikia lighting concept on the troubled street. In autumn 2012, the resourceful, creative action of a group of inhabitants of Psyrri and wider central Athens led to donations of old light fixtures to bring the 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 for the refurbishment of light fixtures. Over 150 chandeliers, lanterns, metal lamps, bell shades, glass bowls, and colorful light fixtures were created, resulting in a colorful bright canopy that covered Pittaki street. Parallel to the light installation, murals with pastel colors were painted along the walls of Pittaki street, and a series of community events enabled local people to reclaim their space. This small project on Pittaki Street made a successful local impact, becoming a catalyst for a set of important changes in the neighborhood.

The creation of public spaces 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 flourishing of new businesses in empty stores and the return of inhabitants to the neighborhood; it mobilized community activities such as mural painting, led to urban dinners and street parties being hosted, and served as a source of inspiration for new urban interventions and artistic works in the city, offering a bright landmark of hope in times of a severe socioeconomic crisis.

The third site chosen for study is Sunderland, UK, but the project on this site is still in the embryonic stage.

Sunderland’s “Historic High Streets” is a Heritage Action Zone (HAZ). HAZs are a 2017 initiative by Historic England, which aims to use heritage to resolve problems of deprivation and dilapidation, focusing particularly on high streets. This particular HAZ area reflects the early urban history of Sunderland, a post-industrial city in the northeast of England. It explores how, through restoration of the historic environment, a viable future can be built in a neighborhood ranked among the 10% most deprived neighborhoods 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 collaborate on researching, repairing, and regenerating historic buildings and developing community projects, while also encouraging local people to get involved in the process.

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 meant a loss of function and use for the buildings, which led to vacancy and deterioration. After being 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 being undertaken in collaboration with various other local stakeholders to develop new uses, create mutual benefit from the renovation, and provide 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, neighborhood organizations, schools, and the 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 shop, an exhibition and workshop on the “Rebel Women of Sunderland” developed with Sunderland Culture and Sunderland University, and various musical performances, podcast recordings, and arts and crafts workshops organized by Pop Recs and partners (2020).

Pop Recs, a Community Interest Company (CIC), has been involved from the beginning as a local partner and future user of part of the buildings after restoration, and the company has the rights to temporary use during renovation. The involvement of Pop Recs helps to bring life and creativity, enhance 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 strength and explore how temporary use may develop into a permanent fixture.

The “Rebel Women of Sunderland” exhibition and events were led by Sunderland Culture, which was set up to support activities related to performing arts and improve life for everyone in Sunderland through culture. 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 of importance in Sunderland.

On the one hand, the community mural by Robertson lining the walls creates an open dialogue with the past, by emphasizing historical fragments and inviting people to add their own creations in the drawing. On the other hand, a new generation of women creates a new interpretation of the city seeking innovative ways of understanding culture wherein the historical background is combined with other more recent, creative knowledge. Crowd-sourced through social media, this project has succeeded in mobilizing the local community and the media, drawing attention to “People Power,” as said by Laura Brewis, Creative Producer at Sunderland Culture, and converting unknown stories into achievements of the women belonging to the city from a historical and current perspective.

One could observe significant similarities among the three sites analyzed. They are all isolated projects on a small scale; however, they all enjoy vitality, and reviving these spaces invite creative uses. These examples sought to involve local residents and artists in creating public places 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 whether the neighborhoods/sites redesigned by artworks and community engagement have the power to not only provoke and reconsider but also transform the state of things, starting from small interventions and gradually proposing meaningful alternatives in anticipation of the future.