Gentrification in Milano

INTRODUCTION

The British sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term Gentrification during her research on London's urban sociology in 1964. She described the process as follow:

One by one, many of the working class neighbourhoods of London have been invaded by the middle-classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences … Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly, until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed. (1)

Gentrification is described as a phenomenon of global urbanisation that represents the shifting of entire urban areas with the aim of creating wealthier neighbourhoods with high value properties. It improves real estate investment, local economic development and local government. Furthermore it is a process that improves the quality of lifestyle and even can be a strong asset to future sustainability.

On the other side Gentrification causes deep social and cultural transformations of neighbourhoods. The negative consequences of this process are the privatisation of public spaces, higher renting costs and the changes of area's functions and character, as well as homelessness, marginalisation and psychological issues. Usually all these elements are discussed separately, but the term Gentrification describes all the relationships within an urban area and define a situation in all its complexity.

This process usually takes place in areas with deteriorated housing where there is cultural diversity and slow economy. Areas with these characteristics gain a proper excuse to be changed rapidly and to grow in relationship with its surrounding.
Gentrification in Italy is also spreading, in this case under the spell of modernisation and requalification. A crucial example in the city of Milano is quartiere Isola.

(1)   http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Gentrification

Here Gentrification has been going on for more than a decade, slowly changing the identity of the area and modifying its functionalities. The whole project has been promoted as an eco-gentrification, expression coined by the Turkish curator Vasif Kortun, of the neighbourhood, with the aim of attracting the public enthusiasm. (2)

Many citizens of Milano see this process as a positive change for the city, describing the shifting of the area, as mentioned above "modernisation", a step towards the future of modern living in an urban context. For others citizens it is an area affected by a disease, the disease called Gentrification. They criticize every single decision taken from the city hall. They are those in favour of memory and authenticity. They fight through active participation in order to maintain their space original.

Why does gentrification always comes along with the protests from the citizens? What are the shocking and controversial factors that in the case of quartiere isola led to a big disapproval from part of its inhabitants? On the other hand, if the process started with the intention to change for the better, and become something good for the city, what are the positive results?

To better understand the gentrification processes of Isola neighbourhood, it is necessary to analyse the motivations, to go through a spatial research in order to understand the changing of functions, structures and the relationship with its new identity.

So, to begin with, who is behind this project and why?
The book "Effervescenze Urbane: quartieri creativi a Miano, Genova, Sassari" explain that with the decreasing of industrialization of Milano, around 1988, the local government decided to urgently intervene with modern projects around the city. The programme for Isola promoted from the European Union in 1994 was aiming to repair the spatial and economical segregation of the citizens of this suburban area. The main goal of this programme was

(2)   http://eipcp.net/n/1244798405, 2009

to reorganize social services, infrastructures and overall to improve local entrepreneurial and economical activities. (3)

The urban plan originally included the idea of a public park in the middle and houses, offices and commercial buildings around it. But it was a very risky plan. Except for the park itself, the aim of the project was to "sew" the existing inner areas together, on the contrary, the structure of the plan (with an "inverted Y" shape), cut the Isola neighbourhood in half and segmented it into different parts.

In 2005 the city hall of Milano decided to sell the project to a new generation of multinational investors, such as Hines. The company got a big interest in the district and bought a large part of the public property on the southwest area of quartiere Isola. After that they immediately started to develop their urban plan, together with Ligresti. They both started their constructions plans in 2009 and own together three quarters of the whole area. (4)

A study paper regarding the development of quartiere Isola "L'arte del conflitto in Isola" creates awareness on a shocking fact. During the nineties quartiere Isola had an important artistic centre that was belonging to local craftsmen and artistic associations, it was called La Stecca. In 2007 Hines organised the demolition of La Stecca to give room to the development of the urban area. The transformation of this neighbourhood became drastic and severe.

What was quartiere isola and how did it gentrify?
Isola is a neighbourhood in the heart of Milano, the name literally

(3)   "Effervescenze urbane: Quartieri creativi a Milano, Genova, Sassari" Laura Bovone, Antonietta Mazzette, Giancarlo Rovati, 2005, pag. 28
(4)   "L'arte del conflitto in Isola" Urban Planning and Policy Design Carolina Pacchi, 2013, pag. 20

means Island, because of its separation withthe city centre due to two nearby railway stations. It has always been an area with a strong spatial connotation, through the time one of the two train stations was transferred to another place leaving behind a great empty space. The working-class was living mainly in a typical Milan architecture that it is still present around the city: walkway house. These dwellings were forming quartiere Isola with shops underneath, with local handcrafts and local art. People slowly started to move to the area even coming from the South of Italy. The singular spatial and social cohesion that grew through the years was the reason that made the citizens claim their land and fight against the system of speculation.

Quartiere Isola at the time it was including a working-class neighbourhood with diverse housing, two public gardens and an urban square. Nowadays the area consists of 290.000 square meters due to an enlargement of the site. It is still in progress and it is going to gain 20.000 square meters of green space. Three skyscrapers, are already completed, two of them with high value apartments and the other is the venue of Unicredit bank offices. There are also housing buildings of the architect Lucien Lagrange, the palace designed by William Mc Donough with Google and Pandora's venues and underground parking lots. Moreover offices buildings have been built along a new bike lane and a whole new shopping street is now becoming the core of the neighbourhood.

Stefano Boeri the architect of the two skyscrapers both called Bosco Verticale was awarded from the International Highrise Award 2014 for having designed on of the best skyscrapers of the world. On his website, stefanoboeriarchitetti.net, his project is described as follows: It is a model that operates correlated to the policies for reforestation and naturalization

of the large urban and metropolitan borders.

On flat land, each Bosco Verticale equals, in amount of trees, an area equal to 10.000 sqm of forest. The Bosco Verticale is a system that optimizes, recuperates and produces energy.

The Italian architect organised together with other people involved in the project, public meetings with associations, neighbourhood committees and institutions. They led over a 100 meetings in order to understand better the neighbourhood requirements and improve his design and urban planning.

But the protest continued, the inhabitants of quartiere Isola presented a petition against the urban renewal project denouncing the way people think of the quartiere Isola as an old, poor and empty space. They wanted to prove that quartiere Isola was a solid neighbourhood with innovative and alternative activities. The citizens tried to reactivate the neighbourhood just before the beginning of the constructions through a variety of initiatives. For instance with a project of the first urban farm Mobile in Milan and a monthly organic market in the gardens, in collaboration with AIAB (Association Italian Organic Agriculture) that aims to promote organic farming and development of eco-rural and natural nourishment. (5).

The local activist movement stop protesting and after almost 10 years they lost their fight. What we see today is an active and new urban space of a large scale that created a new character for the city, a character that we could define as global.

CONCLUSION

According to the definition of Gentrification, Quartiere Isola turned out to be a gentrified neighbourhood, if not completely, enough to have changed its integrity.

Walking through quartiere Isola during Christmas time, I noticed how the space is clearly designed so that people can enjoy it. It has a central public square with a fountain and all around high buildings with shops and cafes on the ground level. A Christmas market was taking place in the main square, and the park that soon will open will be appreciated it by the whole

(5)   "Effervescenze urbane: Quartieri creativi a Milano, Genova, Sassari" Laura Bovone, Antonietta Mazzette, Giancarlo Rovati, 2005, pag. 28

city.
As I could see the project, even though not totally completed yet, is already attracting a variety of people, coming also from outside the city to probably satisfy personal curiosity. But what I could also see, regarding the overall design, is that it appears as a layer of modern buildings that covers almost completely the former soul of the neighbourhood.

The new urban context seems to have totally eliminated the former identity of the neighbourhood. The solution might have been retrieving the existing identities, incorporating them into a renewal plan that could respect the intimate soul of Isola. Designers spoke of the neighbourhood as an abandoned area, but I believe it is a mistake to have considered the area a land where it is possible to build excessively. Quartiere Isola had a history and a tradition of its own that now has been modified and almost eliminated forever. (6)

What is also worrying me is that the project will invite wealthy class people that will arrive to settle in the luxurious buildings. This movement will clearly affect the social aspect of Isola. But what will be worst is the competition that shopkeepers and restaurateur of Isola will encounter with the recent opening of commercial chains, shops and restaurants.

Certainly it appeared to be a well thought project for quartiere isola. Unfortunately at the end speculation and personal achievements led the whole process of requalification of the neighbourhood. Creating a big separate and contradictory tissue of global-style buildings completely detached from the original identity of the area.

(6)   http://reload.realityhacking.org/prop/folders/20040204_quattro.pdf 2004, pag 4

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