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## **A Consensus Building Process and an Architectural Competition for the Future of the Old Foundry**

As an industrial town in Northern Italy, Modena is not a very big city (181.000 inhabitants), but it is nevertheless one of the areas, in Italy and in Europe, with the highest income per capita since its province includes several industrial districts. The ceramic tile industry, the textile industry, and the bio-medical industry own a relevant share of the global market, but are not probably so well-known as the most traditional sector of light engineering industry which includes about four thousands of small and medium-sized firms specializing in the production of mechanical parts as well as final products for end users, such as Ferrari and Maserati cars. This is the core of the so-called “Emilian model” where industrial policy, local government and social consensus are tightly knit into a successful system of local administration which, as a case-study, attracted great interest from University research in the ‘80s.

The mechanical industry started to develop in the XIX century and expanded especially in the first half of the XX century in an area immediately north of the railway line which borders the city centre. Here, a whole industrial settlement developed until, mainly in the ‘70s and ‘80s, these industries, several of which were foundries, experienced a crisis and closed down. While two important industrial plants still survive in the area (Maserati cars and Case New Holland – FIAT), for the rest it has been re-planned and is now being re-built as a mixed residential-commercial-office area.

This plan aroused much controversy, in particular because all the remnants of the industrial past of the town were destroyed with the exception for an old foundry called “Fonderie Riunite di Modena”.

The reason for this fortunate rescue is due to historical/political reasons. The building is in fact the testimony to the most dramatic event in the recent history of the town: in its vicinity, on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1950, six workers were killed by the police during a strike. It has therefore stood, since then, as the symbol of the fights for the workers’ rights and for better working condition.

When, in 2005, the city administrators had apparently in mind to demolish the plant and build some municipal offices in its place, a protest was set up against this decision by many citizens who made appeals and requested that the new use of the building should retain its symbolic meaning for the whole town. In 2006 an agreement with the city administrators was eventually achieved on the following grounds: if this building is so “sacred” and dear to the citizens, then the citizens themselves must be called to decide upon it, and take in part the responsibility of its future on their shoulders.

During a working lunch - as it seemed appropriate in a town which is also a renowned food sanctuary - among the Mayor, two deputy mayors and an expert of Participatory Methodologies, prof. Marianella Pirzio Biroli Sclavi from the Polytechnic University of Milan, a strategy was agreed upon accordingly.

An experience of deliberative democracy seemed a good choice as the most suitable way to meet the proposals of different groups. The “Consensus building approach”, in fact, looks for mutually advantageous agreements and works towards that end by putting aside the win-lose thinking that resides at the heart of traditional parliamentary procedures: through an inclusive democratic process where listening to the minorities and trust in the

group's creativity are the two main rules, it aims at meeting the most important interests of everyone concerned.

The experience has seen a wide participation of citizens with a variety of proposals and goals and has given birth to a new project inspired by these proposals but shaped into a thoroughly new idea: the prospective creation of a centre for research and experimentation in the fields of industrial design, science and technology, local development, social history and contemporary art. The old foundry will therefore be refurbished for a shared re-use in view of multidisciplinary initiatives as well as training experiences for students of the local schools and University.

The process started in March 2007 and a Call for proposals about the refurbishment both architectural and urban of the site was launched in July 2008.

Previously, a board composed by representatives of all the stakeholders concerned, and supported by the competences of both the City Council and the Professional Association of Architects, had produced a document with detailed information and clear, stimulating clues about the prospective destination and use of the spaces, thus engaging the architects in a complex and original task.

In spite of the complexity of the plan, which required careful consideration of the importance of the relations among the different functions in order to plan spaces for active and creative connections among them, the Call proved very successful: about 60 proposals were submitted and on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2009 the winner was proclaimed.

The chosen project (by a team composed by Centro Cooperativo Di Progettazione, Studio Sofia Cattinari, and Modostudio-Cibinel Laurenti Martocchia architetti associati) focuses on a conversion of the former metal-smelting complex into a mixed-use public space by creating glass and metal towers of different heights that enhance the potentiality for sharing the spaces while preserving the existing fascinating spaces of the old plant beneath. These new volumes will be clad in perforated shining metal, which the architects claim will evoke the past use of the building and qualify it as a new landmark, clearly recognizable in the urban pattern.

## **How the Consensus Building Process worked**

The two key words around which the whole process was planned were "Consensus Building Process" and "Open Space Technology". The last one conveys the idea of a meeting to convene the concerned stakeholders and active citizens and to collect their initial ideas and proposals. Then the "Consensus Building Process" focuses on meeting everyone's interests, looking for a general solution which hopefully each of the participants will like better than their original proposals.

The procedure is about *generating mutually advantageous proposals* and discussing disagreements through the "Active Listening" approach, a joint exploration and the enlargement of the range of possibilities. Thus the process draws upon the best available information and ensures that a range of possible solutions, including some that no one had thought of before or were considered as "impossible", are taken into account and discussed.

The final agreement is reached not by simply "voting", but by coming as close as possible to meeting the most important interests of everyone concerned and stating how and why agreement was reached.

The process developed through five steps: 1. convening, 2. assigning roles and responsibilities, 3. facilitating group problem setting and solving, 4. reaching agreement, 5. holding people to their commitments.

The participatory process was set off by a series (45) of interviews to community leaders, among whom all the main political parties, the trade unions, the association representing the industries, local authorities, youth organizations etc.

The project was presented to the town as a chance for Modena to strengthen its presence in Europe by doing something important, beautiful and oriented toward the empowerment of a local/regional community in a postmodern world.

A training course of 16 hours was offered to young facilitators (they were 32) who volunteered in order to explain the participatory process to local groups in the schools, elderly people associations, different types of associations, etc. Besides giving information, they invited everybody to contribute to the various actions and moments of the process by offering ideas and proposals.

The convening phase started with "The city explores", a presentation and common discussion about interesting examples of re-use of former industrial buildings from all over the world, and a first collection of ideas posted on a "board" in a dedicated web-site (<http://www.comune.modena.it/fonderie>) and in two other locations in the town. Besides, guided visits to the industrial plant of the old foundry were promoted in which anybody interested in the project could take part.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> March 2007, an Open Space Technology town meeting was proclaimed, where whoever had in mind a proposal could make it official and discuss it. At the end of the session, an instant book with all the proposals was produced and given to the participants.

The "Consensus Building Process" phase, which represents the heart of the process, was set up at the point when the 20 different ideas which had been proposed were meant to mingle together into a single project which everybody liked and approved.

The original proposals were the following:

1. A park, to extend the local green areas
2. A sports centre
3. A cultural associations' network centre
4. A school of DESIGN, at university level
5. "Doing things together": a Participatory Foundation to implement shared projects
6. A centre for performing arts
7. A centre for research on the history of work, with exhibition rooms and laboratories
8. A project for the refurbishment of the old building, restoring it to its original shape
9. A transparent roof for the foundry's court, to be shared as a common space
10. A centre to enhance the quality of life, promoting slow times, healthy food, soft gyms
11. A network centre for NGO, and no-profit associations
12. A centre for the memory of the industrial past and industrial innovation
13. "Officina Emilia": a University project to foster local competences and innovation in the light engineering industry sector
14. A drug-free Club for teen-agers
15. A centre for the elderly and co-housing apartments
16. A centre of studies on how to promote participation for handicapped or marginalized people
17. A museum for locally produced race-cars, with emphasis on technological information
18. A multi-ethnic centre
19. A contemporary art centre
20. "Public money must be spent on projects which are useful for the city": a proposal which opposed the idea of refurbishing and re-using the building.

A board of representatives of the 20 proposals was set up, and several meetings took place in the course of the next three months, which was the assigned deadline to achieve a definite result. The situation evolved: some of the proposals became the main focus of the discussion, while some were withdrawn in different moments and for different reasons, and others found different locations in the city (for example the sports centre, the museum...). Anyway, most of the proposals were essential for the project as important contributions to its richness, diversification and vibrant vitality, in fact the final agreement was signed by almost all the participants.

The final project presents itself as a unitary, interdisciplinary project, with a central management (through the creation of a Foundation), to be developed on largely shared spaces (80% of the total area) by the different initiatives which are looked upon as the overlapping and interplay of four main areas or “connections”: Design, Arts, Science and Technology (hence the acronym DAST).

An important clue towards a positive result was the linguistic analysis of the original proposals for the re-use of the foundry site, many of which were clearly expressions of the local culture and contained some meaningful key-words that became the actual and symbolic focus around which the final proposal was built.

Such key words were, for example, “Officina” (technically “industrial workshop”, but with a much wider resonance addressing the arts, etc., which was also the name of one of the proposals: “Officina Emilia”), and “Prototype” (referring to the capabilities of Modena’s mechanical workers and engineers specializing in the art and science of the production of unique mechanical parts). Slowly and through personal hard work, “workshop and prototype” came to be used as “lenses” through which the original proposals could be looked upon and reconsidered to the end of imagining and building a new, shared one. A crucial result was achieved when the “Design” key word came to be seen as a postmodern continuation of this local practitioners’ tradition. *They had always been “designers”!* became the new, shared awareness of an important aspect of the local heritage.

From here to D.A.S.T. the step was easy.

The role of the “facilitator” (prof. Marianella Sclavi) appointed by the City Council in order to follow, guide and monitor the whole process, was essential and the professional technique adopted cannot be overemphasized in consideration of the final result which led, in the course of one year, the local administrators to change their plans and launch an international architectural competition for the refurbishment of the industrial building which they had had in mind to demolish.

The industrial plant of former “Fonderie Riunite” will therefore be preserved, both for its historical/symbolical value and for its fascinating architecture, as a testimony to the industrial past of the town, a prominent aspect of the local cultural heritage. In order to bear witness to all this, a further result of the consensus building process was achieved with the publication of a book which Officina Emilia (an initiative of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, one of the participants in the process) edited in Italian and English as a contribution of information and historical documentation - to be enjoyed also for its beautiful images - in view of the international architectural competition (Ruggeri 2007).

Pictures



**Facade of the industrial plant of "ex Fonderie Riunite", early '40s. Fotomuseo Giuseppe Panini**



**Inside of the building in its present state (2008). Fotografia di William Guerrieri**



Session of the Open Space Technology phase, Consensus building Project "Ex Fonderie Riunite", 17th-18th March 2007



idem



**Meeting of the representatives of the proposals for the Consensus building Project "Ex Fonderie Riunite", April 2007**



**Project for the refurbishment of the industrial plant, Call for the internazionale architectural competition, 9th January 2009**

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