Tiburtino III come appare oggi.

Confined to the edges
reflections on visual research in Bologna

Giorgia Aiello

The Urban Archives (UA) project was conceived to create publicly available digital records of "ephemeral street texts, allowing them to continue speaking as documents long after they have been removed from the physical landscape" (Gendelman, Dobrowolsky & Aiello, 2010, p. 190). We collaborated with undergraduate students and the University of Washington Libraries Digital Collections to build a searchable database of images of the city. The outcome is an archive of over 2,000 fully catalogued and tagged images of political graffiti, ghost signs, commercial signage and storefronts, architectural landmarks, protest marches, murals, and so on (Urban Archives Database, n.d.).

When I look back at images taken in my hometown, Bologna, I realize that I had a somewhat idealized view of the Italian urban context. As a researcher in the United States, I was influenced by my own experience of Italian city centres as 'organic' compounds of competing discourses and functions. This experience resonated with Jane Jacobs' views on great American cities, an outlook which shaped many scholars and activists' perspectives, with its emphasis on the heterogeneity and density of people, buildings, and activities as key traits of 'healthy' cities (Jacobs, 1961). In The UA, we valued cities' ability to deploy a multiplicity of voices. We documented graffiti and street art as a way to affirm the presence of illegal and spontaneous communication in the regimented settings of US downtowns and residential neighbourhoods.

In Bologna, not only were graffiti and street art abundant and ubiquitous, but they were intensely political or wildly creative – if not both. In 2005, I set out to document a large mural by the Italian street artist Blu, which wrapped around the former wholesale fruit market located in the historically working-class Bolognina neighbourhood. In 2002, the former market warehouse had been occupied by the radical collective XM24 after having been vacant for almost a decade[1]. We had already documented some of Blu's work on a squat in via Avesella, in Bologna's historic centre, which is now gone[2].

In my urban walks, I was similarly drawn to the unsanctioned talk and images that populated the *Ex Manifattura Tabacchi*, the central area where I grew up. This used to be Bologna's Renaissance harbour and the city's main industrial quarter until the 1930s, when the canals were in part paved over and the war was on its way. The neighbourhood was extensively bombed during the war and by the 1950s the ancient harbour had disappeared. Between

Giorgia Aiello is Lecturer in International Communications at the Institute of Communications Studies, the University of Leeds. Her research focuses on the relationship between visual culture and globalization, with an emphasis on how identities are formed and social and cultural differences are negotiated across cultures and through visual means——including mediated imagery, the urban built environment, design, and branding.

g.aiello@leeds.ac.uk

---

1 Pict. 1. Part of mural by street artist Blu on the building occupied by the XM24 collective in via Fioravanti 24.
2 Pict. 2. Mural by street artist Blu on squat in via Avesella.

the 1970s and the 1990s, the *Ex Manifattura Tabacchi* became a place of heroin addiction and condemned buildings, and a visible and painful split in the city at large. It was not until the late 1990s that the area was included in official city plans for preservation and renovation, which until then had eminently focused on more 'noble' sections of the historic centre. In 2003, the renovated area was inaugurated as Bologna's first 'citadel of culture', and "one of the largest in Europe" (Parisini, 2003), under the name *Manifattura delle Arti* (MdA). The citadel brought together several prominent cultural institutions, including the University of Bologna (Department of Music and Performing Arts and Department of Communication Studies), Bologna's world-renowned Film Archive (Cineteca), the Modern Art Museum (MAMbo), and the national headquarters of Italy's main LGBT organization (Arcigay).

> *The urban built environment is used as visual-material currency, as it is regularly exchanged through the linguistic and visual means of public communication and other mediatized representations*

In 2009, I documented MdA systematically. With the aid of the visual research framework developed through the UA, I took nearly 300 photographs of Bologna's citadel of culture. Previously, I had conducted ethnographic research on the European Capital of Culture programme and had been able to observe some of the ways in which cities such as Luxembourg and Sibiu (Romania) styled their cityscapes to perform their capital of culture status for local, European, and global publics. Alongside this research, and through a study of building façades in several post-communist cities, I began to outline some of the key visual-material resources deployed by cities to acquire cachet – or symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) – in contexts of global capitalism.

The urban built environment is used as visual-material currency, as it is regularly exchanged through the linguistic and visual means of public communication and other mediatized representations. The appearance of our cityscapes is increasingly regulated by logics that transcend local or national politics and economics. Not surprisingly, plans to renovate and reconvert the *Ex Manifattura Tabacchi* area came into being in the wake of Bologna's status as a 2000 European City of Culture. Hence, I became interested in MdA as a medium of global – and globalist – communication.

In a 2011 academic article based on my visual research in Bologna, I argued that MdA *interrupts* the city, rather than disrupting it through countercultural and political resolve or organically integrating its renewed landscape into the existing visual-material fabric of the city (Aiello, 2011). This argument was unexpected, given the UA's early appreciation for Italian cities as havens for both disruptive and organic communication. Through an analysis of my field photographs and on-site observation, I found that MdA is quite literally made of visual-material gateways and boundaries. These define the citadel as a separate section of the Porto neighbourhood in which it is embedded. MdA is characterised by careful signposting of inclusion and exclusion through institutional signage, physical barriers, and markers of access[3]. Its boundaries are also defined by subtle cues such as colour, typography, and texture[4]. In addition, MdA performs a distinctive identity in relation to the city as a whole. It does so by combining architectural styles in ways that highlight the juxtaposition of different historical eras, the combination of 'local' and 'cosmopolitan' details, and even a fusion of

3 Pict. 3. Plexiglas post marking a point of entry into MdA.
4 Pict. 4. Textural boundary between MdA and the surrounding neighbourhood.

citations that span across time and space[5]. Through these visual-material performances, MdA positions itself as an exclusive and distinctive enclave in Bologna's historic centre.

MdA's communicative features contribute to the performance of Bologna as a 'world-class city' and synthesise some of the key exigencies of post-industrial capitalism. These are an emphasis on cultural production and creativity as privileged areas of economic activity, the communication of distinctive identities and markers of difference such as heritage and local 'colour', and the deployment of generic architectural genres and 'formats' that are now globally recognised and prized, like the combination of glass, steel, wood and unusual shapes – for example, the red cylinders included in the architectural design of the Film Archive's theatre and the Museum of Modern Art[6].

Because MdA relies on symbolically profitable cues of exclusion and distinction, it becomes crucial to understand its implications for the specific urban contexts in which it is situated. Several groups and forms of identification have been marginalised in the course of the discursive and physical construction of MdA as a global(ist) communication project. In the early days of MdA, a collective of creatives called MetroLab took over the former Cinema Embassy, but were immediately evicted by the police. Ever since, the citadel's disused cinema has remained vacant, although the city has considered turning it into a music auditorium to be designed by celebrity architect Renzo Piano. In addition, despite Arcigay's national political and cultural import, its Bologna headquarters (known as Cassero) were excluded from the public communication of the newborn citadel by right-wing mayor Guazzaloca. Later, left-wing mayor Cofferati considered moving Arcigay away from MdA, despite its strong record of collaboration with other institutions located in the citadel. Recently, a new app for the public communication of the city defined the Cassero headquarters as Salara, although the latter name refers simply to the historic building that houses Arcigay and not to the local branch of the LGBT organisation itself. Needless to say, what is or is not 'sayable' contributes greatly both to the symbolic and material marginalisation of specific groups, insofar as they are positioned as 'deviant'.

A project like MdA may very well be an all-Italian combination of the model of urban regeneration promoted by Richard Florida's (in)famous notion of 'creative city' and the New Urbanism model developed in North America as a response to suburban sprawl. Here we have a former industrial area reconverted into a site of cultural production, which relies heavily on signifiers and institutions of elitist or 'high' culture. But here is also a citadel, an urban village of sorts, which aims to 'design' diversity into its planning and uses (cf. Day, 2003). Alongside cultural institutions, MdA includes a community centre for senior citizens, low-income housing, student housing, and a weekly farmers' market. However, from a planning perspective this kind of project privileges an overdetermined sense of place identity (Day, 2003, p. 83) and "a utopianism of spatial form" (Harvey, 1997, p. 3). As a carefully planned site of preservation and citation, but also of stylisation and overall aestheticisation, MdA seems to leave little room for the complexity, glitches, and 'dirt' that characterise social processes that are not contained by the "logic of capital accumulation and class privilege" (Harvey, 1995, p. 3). This said, over the last few months I have been able to observe the burgeoning appropriation of a park that was recently opened within the citadel – Parco del Cavaticcio – by groups that operate at the crossroads of radical politics and lifestyle communities for events such as

5 Pict. 5. Fusion of 'medieval' architectural style and 'contemporary' materials, colours and shapes on new student housing building.
6 Pict. 6. Cylindrical construction on the side of the Modern Art Museum (MAMbo).

inaugurations, festivals, and flash mobs.

In Italy, approaches to planning similar to those embodied by MdA still seem to be limited to disused yet historic urban areas on the outskirts of city centres. Though confined to the edges, this planning approach may also contribute to consolidating and augmenting the interruptions, splits, and overall physical and social divides of Italian cities. MdA is performed and contained within its own carefully designed physical and stylistic boundaries. What remains to be seen is whether a site like MdA can be 'infused' with some of the same disruptive voices and organic layers that my colleagues from the UA and I idealistically attributed to Bologna's urban context.

Dalla retorica fascista alla riqualificazione: Alle vie dedicate agli strumenti rurali si affiancano le nuove vie dei musicisti classici.

References

Aiello, G. (2011) From wound to enclave: The visual-material performance of urban renewal in Bologna's Manifattura delle Arti. *Western Journal of Communication*, 75(4): 341-366.

Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Day, K. (2003) New urbanism and the challenges of designing for diversity. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 23(1): 83-95.

Gendelman, I. and Aiello, G. (2010) Faces of places: Façades as global communication in Post-Eastern Bloc urban renewal, in Adam Jaworski and Crispin Thurlow (eds.) *Semiotic Landscapes: Language, Image, Space*. London: Continuum, pp. 256-273.

Gendelman, I., Dobrowolsky, T. and Aiello, G. (2010) Urban Archives: Public memories of everyday places, in Jeff Hou (Ed.), *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*. London: Routledge, pp. 181-193.

Harvey, D. (1997) The new urbanism and the communitarian trap. *Harvard Design Magazine*, 1997, 1-3.

Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Parisini, F. (2003) Manifattura delle Arti domani il primo ciak. *La Repubblica Bologna*. http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2003/06/27/manifattura-delle-arti-domani-il-primo-ciak.html (accessed April 7, 2012)

Urban Archives Database (n.d.) University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collections. http://content.lib.washington.edu/uaweb/index.html