

OUT (Office for Urban Transformation) / IDA - Isola dell'Arte

Isola Quarter, Milan

IDA - Isola dell'Arte is an association founded in 2003 by artists and critics that aims to work with the Isola quarter in Milan, to save a former industrial building called the "Stecca degli Artigiani" and the adjacent gardens from demolition foreseen by the Garibalidi-Repubblica Urban Development Plan by the Municipality of Milan.

Isola (literally "Island") is one of Milan's historic industrial quarters. It has long been considered a degraded area, and was effectively separated from the rest of the city by a railway line and drainage system. It owes its name precisely to these urban "barriers". Even now this "isolation" still persists, at least in part. Since the mid-nineties the area has been undergoing profound changes. Its centrality has attracted creatives and professionals and now the quarter is rich in exhibition spaces, social centres, architect's studios and ethnic restaurants. However, despite becoming a somewhat trendy area it has still retained much of its original industrial character.

A former industrial building, now owned by the council, the Stecca degli Artigiani is practically at the centre of the quarter and for some time now has been used by small crafting activities and cultural associations (among which, Cantieri Isola, Isola Tv, Contoprogetto, Apolidia). It divides the gardens in via Confalonieri, a green space reclaimed by the Parco-Legambiente Company. For the Stecca degli Artigiani area, the Garibalidi-Repubblica urban development plan, which involves over 200,000 sq. mt. of buildable land in a state of abandon for over fifty years and on which the new headquarters of the Lombardy Region and the Città della Moda ("fashion city") are to be built, foresees the construction of a through road and a series of residential towers. The risk of losing the identity and urban character of the quarter has mobilised a number of local groups (the I Mille quarter Committee, Cantieri Isola, Legambiente, in addition to the Shopkeepers Association, parents and the local Parish) in a collective action in opposition and as an alternative to this reclamation plan.

In this context, Bert Theis began collaboration with Cantieri Isola in 2001 to develop an activity in the quarter involving a number of artists and critics in the Isola Art Project, among whom Stefano Boccalini who was already working with Cantieri Isola. For the event *La strada rovescia la città* (2001) (the road upturns the city), organised by Cantieri Isola, in the via Confalonieri gardens Theis realised a one-hundred metre white palisade, with units to use as benches and a palm (*Untitled/Untitled*). The work, built precisely at the point where the road should pass, became a symbolic barrier against the urban development plan.

OUT – the Office for Urban Transformation - was established in 2002. In 2003, through the organisational commitment of Francesca Pasini and Grazia Toderi, IDA was formed, to bring together the activities of the Isola Art Project as well as to attract support from the Italian and international art worlds.

As its first move, IDA launched an appeal to the Municipality of Milan proposing to use the upper floor of the Stecca (circa 1,500 sq. mt.) as a contemporary art centre, with a project to safeguard the area based on the principles of urban quality and cultural development. The appeal was signed by all the associations in the quarter, numerous citizens and exponents of the Italian and international art worlds.

Since its establishment, IDA has been working as if the Centre already existed. A bar cafe was opened along with a library (with design contributions from the A12 group).

The strategies IDA fields are diversified and not organised according to preordained methods. The primary aim is to give IDA and the art centre position and visibility with respect to various public entities (the town council, the quarter itself, the city as a whole and the national and international art scene), through a series of activities and actions both cultural and communicational.

IDA has organised a series of meetings with Italian and international guests, an international convention on the theme "What space for contemporary art?" and four single evening events entitled *Le Mille e una notte* (a thousand and one nights), to which around forty artists were invited to the complex to present ad hoc, temporary or permanent works (20 works are still at the Stecca today). The title stands for the desire to fill the space each time with different stories, each unique, exceptional and spontaneous. The events, with a festive spirit, also aimed to offer ideas for an alternative use of the space. These events were organised to coincide with the biological market promoted by Cantieri Isola and so formed part of an open day in the quarter with great power of attraction. IDA was also at the centre of the *Frammenti di un discorso italiano* (fragments of an Italian story) at Geneva's Mamco in the summer of 2003.

In terms of communications, IDA has organised a press conference for the launch of the Centre, and a communication to the quarter on all the activities in progress, along with a campaign for support and a petition to back the appeal to the Municipal administration, and has also intervened at quarter and public assemblies along with the other associations and representatives of the Council, as mouthpiece for cultural initiatives. In this direction, the work of OUT (Bert Theis and Marco Vaglieri) has been fundamental, realising an image for the Stecca and the gardens based on the desires expressed by the local population (with the concept of the Centre), becoming IDA's interface with the quarter.

The activity of IDA has been undertaken up to now in the precarious dirty cube rather than the institutional white cube. For the artists involved this means working not only on the space, but on time as well. In effect, the artists have been present since the start of the process, contributing to the conception and birth of the spaces in the Art Centre. They express themselves with a plurality of visions. Artists who don't explicitly pose social questions have also been involved, with the idea of adding value to the place through the quality of their works. Others have instead worked more specifically with the concept of "service" to the quarter (for example Stefano Boccalini with the community garden).

Up to today, the following artists and critics have taken part: M. Airò, S. Arienti, gruppo A12, M. Bartolini, S. Boccalini, L. Cecchini, A Constructed World, P. Di Bello, S. Dugnani, S. Licitra, G. Di Matteo, M. Maloberti, E. Marisaldi, M. Migliora, M. Morgantini, O. Mocellin, N. Pellegrini, L. Moro, O. Nicolai, A. Paci, L. Pancrazzi, Park Fiction, S. Piccolo, M. Potrc, OUT (A. di Giampietro, B. Theis, M. Vaglieri), A. Sala, G. Sato, G. Toderi, Undo, F. Vezzoli, C. Viel, L. Vitone; M. Brugnara, C. Bernard, R. Cortese, E. De Cecco, A. Daneri, A. von Furstenberg, L. Parmesani, E. Quarestani, G. Setari, G. Ciavoliello, C. Casorati, L. Cherubini, G. Di Pietrantonio, F. Pasini, R. Pinto, A. Pioselli, A. Poggianti, G. Romano, M. Scotini, G. Verzotti, A. Vettese.

The project is no budget, self-financing and self-managing. Since the Municipal Administration has approved the development plan, the fate of the Stecca appears to be sealed. This poses IDA the question of revising its strategies. If up to now its work involved emergence and spontaneity, the future is going to take more organisation and structure, which will require definition of an organic program, precisely because the Stecca is definitively at certainly more reasoned and targeted risk.

Among the strategies for the future: a series of conferences, exchanges with Italian and international institutions, a schools project, as well as greater intervention and integration with the quarter. Isola today is a workshop, because it has a heterogeneous nature and the various social components, among which the artists, have found they share a common aim that has unified differences and brought needs to the forefront. This is the heritage that could in some way be valorised.

Anna Daneri, Alessandra Pioselli, Alessandra Poggianti