

The safeguarding and enhancement of the Historic and Traditional businesses of the Historical Centre of Florence

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Abstract

The relationship between the historic city and the businesses that form an essential testimony of the historical and cultural urban evolution is an emerging theme on the international scene. The research program has analyzed the traditional economic and social context of the centre of Florence in relation to the city's urban zoning and building facades. The study highlighted the need to integrate the documentation and survey phases of the physical realities of the places of commerce with the recording of intangible cultural heritage. The latter are strongly interlinked with the authenticity of a place its features, whose disappearance may irreversibly change the environment itself. The introduction of this patrimonial category, with the UNESCO convention of 2003, led to the development of investigation tools and protocols that also involved, specifically, the scientific sector of architectural-urban design and survey to evaluate the impact of intangible features on the evolution of the city's image over time.

Keywords

Florence UNESCO historic centre, Digital survey, Census of historical shops, Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Introduction¹

Trade is a reflection of society, its culture, wealth, myths, and fashions, and as such, it creates the city's image in its various forms. The urban fabric generates and develops not only as a result of the concentration of the population or the physical production of goods, but also as a response to the quantity and variety of commercial activities². In the European UNESCO protected historical town, which is the referred geographical area of this study, trade and craft activities, of all forms are an essential part of our cities' architectural and urban structures. In particular, the architectural structures that host these activities impact entire parts of the city with various types of equipment, from visual messages to decorative techniques aimed at attracting attention and exploiting aspects of human perception to stimulate customers' interest. The introduction of this patrimonial category, with the UNESCO convention of 2003, led to the development of investigation tools and protocols that also involved, specifically, the scientific sector of architectural-urban design and survey to evaluate the impact of intangible features on the evolution of the city's image over time. The street front and the street itself is where the highest concentration of urban life takes place: the ground floor is the one most subject to the ever more rapid evolution of "fashions" and contemporary phenomena of globalization. It has begun to lose its specific local value to the

advantage of uniformity on a global scale. The historic centre of Florence, declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982 based on 5 of the 6 ICOMOS criteria, requires great responsibility and a series of challenges, including safeguarding the city's identity: «the uniqueness of Florentine craftsmanship and traditional shops are a concrete testimony of its past, ensuring the continuity of an exceptional tradition connected to the image of the city».



Fig. 1 Pictures taken during the census and documentation campaign of historic shops, coordinated by profs. Marco Bini and Marco Jaff in the 1985-90 and recently digitized and archived.

Florence and commerce

To summarize the development of the features of commerce and commercial architecture – including artisanal or small-sized ones – some fundamental moments must be identified³. In particular, the most significant impact occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the layout of the city and its structure – which for centuries had accompanied Florence's historical, artistic, and productive evolution – changed radically. With the Poggi plan, bourgeois-style residential buildings were built in the undeveloped bands facing the perimeter of the walls, often without commercial activities on the ground floors. Therefore, we witnessed the development of a building renovation policy aimed at redeveloping the image of the city. The old shop, which had formed one of the founding matrices of the urban layout of the ancient centre, acquired new connotations and formal solutions. With the increase in population and city traffic in 1869, the "Regulations for the removal of obstacles from public land" led to the demolition of commercial structures that still insisted on roads and sidewalks protruding beyond the facade. Large shop windows, which appeared for the first time in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century, replaced the typical shops with *devanture* and "*muriccioli*" (low walls) that for centuries had defined the urban fronts of the Florentine centre, with structures inspired by the academicism of international culture.

The most usual typological scheme in the operations of reconstruction of commercial streets, such as the



Fig. 2 From left: Interior of the Gozzini Antiques Bookshop, in via Ricasoli. Typefaces for pressure printing of the company La Litorilievo in via Silvani. Wood carvings by the Bartolozzi and Maioli company in via dei Vellutini. Firenze.

enlargement of via Calzaioli, was composed of facades aligned with the entrance door in axis with large shop windows on the sides. This scheme was also repeated in the enlargement of via Martelli. With the construction of the railway line and the Maria Antonina station, via Nazionale, via Panzani and via Cerretani became the most important commercial arteries of the city at the time, with a large concentration of hotels, cafes, and restaurants.

The most important intervention within the walls was the rehabilitation of the central district of Mercato Vecchio, carried out through the demolition of the ghetto and a large part of the ancient centre with a different organization of the road layouts around the great void of the new square, which is now Piazza della Repubblica. The traditional shops that had always been part of the facades of the buildings, modestly integrated into the elevations of the ground floors within the profiles of the doors, began to have an independent life. Detached from the façade, the shops shone with large displays and signs. New materials, such as cast iron and exotic woods, were used and the designs conformed to European models and Piedmontese typologies. The clear differentiation between the traditional and artisanal workshop – a place of production and sale – and the purely commercial businesses, the shop, can be traced back to these years. This new typology spread in the city centre, constantly renovating its showcases to attract attention and invite customers.

Between 1935 and 1938, most of the last spontaneous elements of Florentine commercial architecture disappeared, and this disappearance accelerated even more when Adolf Hitler visited the city on May 9, 1938, under the guidance of the engineer Alessandro Giuntoli. He was commissioned by the Municipality to take care of the reconstruction and decoration of the shops along the streets included in the parade. In this period, not only did many of the medieval aspects of the city disappear, but also those features linked to the social structure of the nineteenth century. A vibrant culture that developed between the two centuries took over, with a focal point in literary cafes, a meeting place for artists and writers who had made the Florentine Futurism movement a crucial cultural centre on the national level. Amongst others, the two main meeting places in the city centre in those years were the Caffè Le Giubbe Rosse and the Paszkowski.

In the final stages of the Second World War, the German command in charge of slowing down the advance of

the Allies in 1944 undermined and destroyed all the bridges in Florence, excluding the “picturesque” Ponte Vecchio. This decision was offset by the demolition of the buildings on both sides of the river to block any access to the bridge, hence losing one of the last important commercial parts of medieval Florence⁴.

During the post-war reconstruction, a progressive change in taste was strongly influenced by American aesthetics, which saw the development of new formal solutions in the shops and their windows (Fig. 1). The signs changed, becoming bolder through the introduction of neon lights⁵. What was left of the ancient shops, partly recovered during the post-war recovery, was then destroyed by the flood of November 4, 1966, when the few surviving historical activities became sporadic evidence of years of trade-driven urban evolution. Florence, similarly to the settlements that have survived the challenge of history, is nothing more than the result of the superimposition of innumerable and feeble images that have followed one another over the centuries.



Fig. 3 The census was carried out within the municipal perimeter. The image shows the four pages of the data-sheet census form, the GIS with the location of the historic shops in the UNESCO centre of Florence and some characteristic historic shop windows.

The Historic and Traditional Businesses in Florence

Investigating the evolution of the historical framework of the shops does not only mean studying the history of the city and the development of its political and economic power, but it is also and above all, highlighting and analysing the social relations and the fundamental role that trade, crafts and tradition have towards culture and urban image (Fig. 2). For various reasons, the heritage of Italian historical centres, especially the one under UNESCO protection, is now generally considered at risk, from natural risks to the action of anthropogenic pressure in its various forms, i.e. housing, work, and tourism. On top of that, we must now consider risks that have recently reappeared such as a pandemic or a war. Their protection requires a profound knowledge of what has been handed down to us and the relative values from a historical and cultural point of view before the development of adequate and sustainable methods of intervention. Protecting economic, historical, and traditional busi-



Fig. 4 Perspective images of the colored point-cloud and technical drawings of the Baccani shop for frames, prints and chandeliers in Borgo Ognissanti, Firenze.

static conception of “cultural object”⁶, but rather to a dynamic preservation system that accepts their evolution and constant change, which is related to the economical sustainability of commercial enterprises.

In 2017, through a research agreement between the Municipality of Florence and the DIDA – Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, a documentation campaign, which is still in progress, began.

This includes all the historical commercial activities present within the municipal perimeter and required the creation of a special digital filing system designed to define guidelines and parameters for documentation and safeguarding (Fig. 3). The research then continued through the analysis of some activities sampled for their historical-architectural value, an analysis which carried out through digital survey campaigns aimed at developing a representation system that could also consider the intangible aspects of the historical heritage of commercial activities and their way of relating to and defining the urban front (Fig. 4). These tools made it possible to develop a multi-layer methodology to connect and integrate qualitative and quantitative surveys with architectural ones. This defined a new survey protocol linking the cultural and social aspects of intangible heritage to those of the structured and formal built heritage.

Conclusions

The research aims to develop a protocol for the documentation, management and safeguarding of historic shops, especially in the historic centres under UNESCO protection, that is applicable both nationally, like in the example of Florence, and on the European and international scene. The goal is to define a broader and more complete cognitive framework of the economic and cultural dynamics that link these businesses – strongly characterized

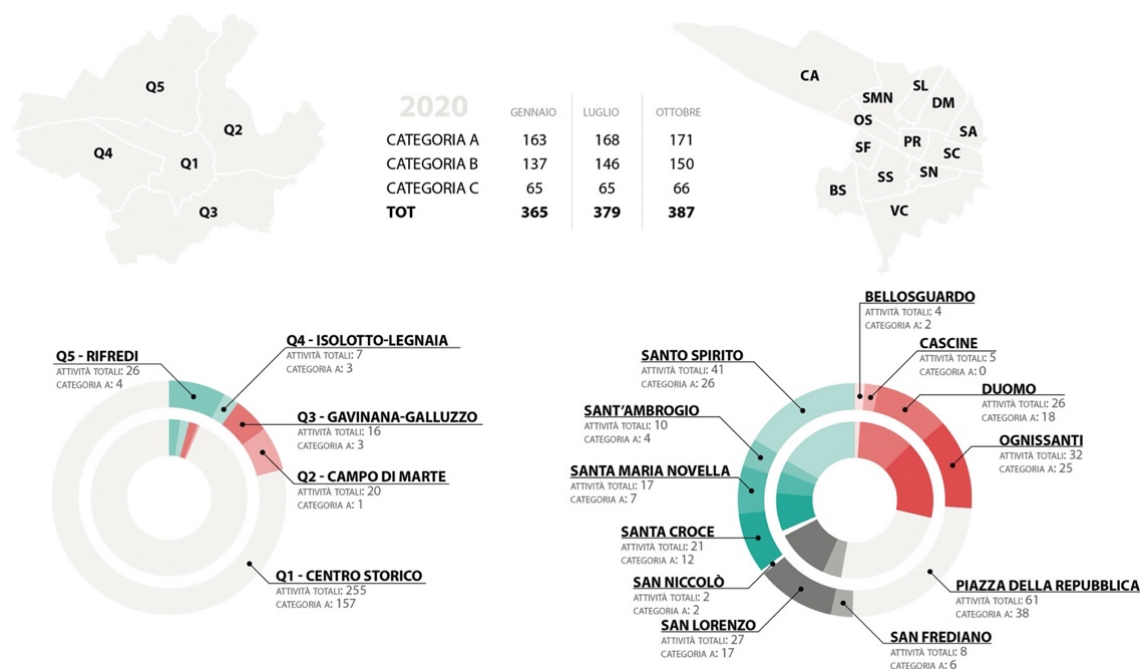


Fig. 5 Census report showing the distribution of historical businesses by neighborhoods and by areas of District 1, updated in January 2020.

by patrimonial aspects introduced in 2003 with the UNESCO convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage⁷ – to their respective territories and cities. The value of “authenticity” of the historic centre of Florence, included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1982, is in fact strongly linked to the uniqueness of the aspects of Florentine craftsmanship and traditional shops which, as a concrete testimony of its past, guarantee the continuity of an exceptional tradition connected to the image of the city⁸. The methodology developed in the research’s final stages provides an integrated approach that combines the need for protection, conservation and management of urban heritage with the socio-economic development needs of individual activities. In conclusion, the research on the historical and traditional commercial activities of the city of Florence presented an articulated system of activities that boast a ten-year and, in some cases, centuries-old tradition: craft shops, cafes, pharmacies, bookstores and more (Fig. 5). These activities, together with the numerous monuments, are hold priceless cultural heritage and are the identifying mark that makes this city unique.

¹ “Introduction” and “Florence and commerce” paragraphs are attributed to Stefano Bertocci. “The historic and traditional businesses in Florence” and “Conclusions” are attributed to Federico Cioli.

² Cfr: VANNI CODELUPPI, *Lo spettacolo della merce. I luoghi di consumo dai passasse a Disney World*, Milano, Bompiani 2000, p.35.

³ Cfr: STEFANO BERTOCCHI, FEDERICO CIOLI, *Firenze, città e commercio. Negozi storici e attività tradizionali*, Firenze, Edifir 2022.

⁴ Cfr. GIANLUCA BELLÌ, AMEDEO BELLUZZI, *Una notte d'estate del 1944. Le rovine della guerra e la ricostruzione a Firenze*, Firenze: Polistampa 2013.

⁵ The Silvaneon company was founded in Florence in 1947, which installed the now historic Martini sign on the roofs of Borgo San Lorenzo in 1950.

⁶ Cfr. CHIARA BORTOLOTTI, *Il patrimonio immateriale secondo l'Unesco. Analisi e prospettive*. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2008.

⁷ UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Paris, 17 October 2003.

⁸ FIRENZE PATRIMONIO MONDIALE, *Secondo Piano di Gestione del Centro Storico di Firenze* 2016, p. 19.