

Giorgia Aiello
Manifattura delle Arti

I grew up here, on the edge of the area that used to be known as Ex Manifattura Tabacchi. As a child and a teenager I witnessed heroin addiction, saw condemned buildings slowly crumble down, and experienced all of the prohibitions and dangers associated with run-down urban environments. The area that is now known as Manifattura delle Arti (MdA) was a bleeding split in the city, both literally and metaphorically. It was never a 'good' place and it was not until the late 1990s that it was included in official city plans for preservation and renovation.

My birth neighbourhood was turned into MdA through a top-down urban regeneration project, which aimed to convert a problematic former industrial area into a site of creativity and cultural production while also actively planning diversity into its infrastructure and uses. Alongside institutions of high culture, MdA includes the national headquarters of Italy's main LGBTQ organization (Arcigay), a community centre for senior citizens, student housing, and a weekly farmers' market. So, the area has improved. It is now clean, safe, enjoyable and vibrant.

And yet, I feel strangely nostalgic. MdA leaves little room for the glitches, dirt and messiness that set apart lived-in urban spaces. MdA does not disrupt the city centre through countercultural resolve or political dissent nor does it organically integrate its renewed landscape into Bologna's existing material and social fabric. As a carefully planned enclave, MdA interrupts the cityscape to communicate Bologna as a 'world-class' city.

MdA's visual identity and material boundaries are defined through cues like the colour of signposts, the typography used in institutional signage, the textures of pavements and façades, and the juxtaposition of both historic or local and modern or cosmopolitan architectural details. Likewise, its social status and symbolic distinction are maintained through establishments and practices that cater to particular lifestyle publics—university students, art gallery goers, and artisanal foods lovers among others.

Unsanctioned voices, unexpected images and unplanned narratives can still be found on MdA's walls. But they are both accidental and ephemeral. We need to keep asking whether 'culture' can be infused into a place and, if so, what and whose culture is being infused. We also need to keep wondering whether designing 'diversity' into urban planning is desirable or even possible.