

Turin

Out of the gloom and into the light

Yvette Gieles

The original capital of a unified Italy; the epicentre of the Italian Industrial Revolution and the home of Fiat; the birthplace of Italian film: this was Turin as it once was. The Northern Italian city has had to relinquish many of these attributes during the course of its history. But, in 2009, the city is once again capable of taking on the might of Rome and Milan. As a creative city, it also attracts international attention. These are the results of an impressive process of transformation involving, as its most vital ingredients, a strong sense of cultural identity and the capacity for decisive government.



The alderman responsible for culture, Fiorenzo Alfieri, is the first to admit that he is not the most unbiased of commentators when it comes to his city's achievements. However, he proceeds to recount a convincing story about the manner in which a desire for beauty and creativity can be utilised to tackle the decline of a city. Something had to be done in Turin in the late 1990s. The city had been deteriorating as a result of an explosive growth in population and a

hopeless crisis within the automobile industry, which was by far the area's biggest employer. Alfieri was given the responsibility of turning the tide, and so he developed a strategic plan in the course of two years which was supported by no less than fifty different parties. In the first place, he sought his inspiration abroad, in cities that were struggling with their own outmoded industrial character.

From manufacturing to creative industry

The strategic plan is the motor for processes of change in many different areas. One important goal is diversification of the local economy. Fiat is a major employer, but it is not healthy to rely too heavily on the waning giants of the manufacturing industry. Even without this car manufacturer the labour market in Turin should be large and varied enough to offer the local population work and opportunities for future development. The creative industries have now taken up residence in many old industrial

buildings. Investment in facilities such as studios and workshops has led to the return of Turin's film industry, which had relocated to Rome after the First World War. Other former factory buildings now house a youth theatre and a centre for professional art courses, for example.

The strategic plan is also intended to stimulate administrative cooperation at a higher governmental level; the development of education and research facilities; the business climate and the quality of urban life. "Turin as a city of culture, tourism, commerce and sport" is a neat synopsis of the desired outcome of the entire transformation process, which is gaining ever more credence with the Torinesi themselves. Alfieri was understandably irritated by the headline "The old Turin wins out" in the national newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. The article went on to claim that the city's crisis could only be resolved with the help of the automobile industry. "Turin has truly moved into a new era, which is something that had to happen, as the golden days of the automobile industry are over", according to the alderman. Nonetheless, Fiat has made substantial investments within the framework of the strategic plan. Alfieri suspects that this is from a sense of contrition, as Fiat's troubles have clearly left their own mark on Turin.

The city as a school

Good cultural policy plainly involves more than simply assigning a cultural use to deserted factories or redesigning untidy parking lots into archaeological displays. Alderman Alfieri has a much higher goal in mind: "Cultural policy should transform the city into a school for a lifetime of learning. Culture is not only for the elite; it belongs to everyone. Education and participation are therefore very important, especially in the cities, because it is here that the complexity of modern life manifests itself in all its intensity." Naturally, the museums and the historical buildings in the city are clearly visible to all. However, the contribution made to the process by the cultural sector and in particular the smaller organisations is harder for Alfieri to evaluate. He prefers to allow independent experts to assess the interaction between the city government and non-institutional organisations. He does observe that the opportunities for young people in general and young artists in particular have radically improved in recent years. There is ample space for young artists to exhibit their work, and many of the younger inhabitants are proud of their city. The institutions of higher education attract more and more students from outside the city. Alfieri's wish list contains at least one more extensive project: a new public library. The plans have been drawn up, but until now there have been insufficient resources to execute the venture.

Culture and the Games

The allocation of the 2006 Winter Olympics to Turin was a decisive moment in the entire process of transformation. With admirable resolve, the city developed its candidacy once it became clear that Vienna also had hopes to entertain the Games. "You can't ski in Venice, so that was a big chance for Turin" is how Alfieri explains the success of the bid book, which was both persuasive and ambitious. One of the traditional elements of the Games is the cultural Olympiad. In Turin, this led to an increased momentum in the development of the cultural infrastructure. This was based on a number of existing

festivals and facilities. For example, new life was breathed into the old Automobile Museum. After the Games, Turin continued to organise international events, such as the World Architects Congress (2008) and a large annual book fair. Naturally, the acquisition of the title of World Design Capital in 2008 was a welcome snub to the neighbouring city of Milan.

A lively city

“Never ask yourself if you have enough money. There is never enough available for these large-scale processes”. Alfieri refuses to be drawn on the amounts involved, but presents himself today as an inspired visionary. The mission that he embarked upon more than ten years ago was unambiguous: “Don’t allow this city to die”. This vocation gave him the platform with which to convince dozens of public and private parties to contribute to the necessary revitalisation of Turin. As a result, the city again speaks to the imagination of people both inside and outside Italy. This is the essence of the message he has to offer to other cities who dream of taking such a great leap forward: “Make sure that everyone asks themselves: How on earth did they manage that?”

