Walled Cities & Open Societies: Managing Historic Walls in Urban World Heritage Properties

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Historic Centre of Florence, Centrica

Florence (Italy)
Info sheet
1. City background information and brief history of the walls

The last circle of Florentine walls was built between 1284 and 1333. In the midst of the economic and population growth, Florence was one of the great metropolises of the time and was therefore surrounded by one of the largest wall system in Europe.

When the wall works was complete, along the 8,5 kilometres wall perimeter there were twelve majestic gates which guaranteed the access to the city and some minor posterns, alternated with mighty and tall towers. The gates with high towers were preceded by an “avamporto”, a masonry structure supported by one or two arches which arched over the wide moat outside the walls.

The walls kept this appearance until the twenties of the 16th century, when with the development of new military techniques arouse the necessity of adapting the walls to a defensive function.

In those years, the gates were transformed into embrasures; the walls were strengthened by buttresses and bastions were built in the most fragile points.

After the siege in 1529 and the final return of the Medici to power, the defensive walls were modernized, with the aim of defending the Duke from possible sudden internal attacks instead of being a protection from the external enemies.

In the times of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany the walls lost their defensive function for ever: since then they served for the needs of the customs and, in some cases, were used as a flood barrier therefore the bastions were gradually dismantled, the towers in some cases became barns or warehouses and icehouses were created along the moat bed.

The unexpected choice of Florence as the capital for the Kingdom of Italy (1865-1871) had created a great turmoil and the need to adapt the city to the demands of its new role. In 1864 the municipal commission, which was in charge of the renovation and enlargement of the city, chose Giuseppe Poggi to carry out a project of the construction of a boulevard circle in the place of the ancient city walls. Indeed, the city walls created a sort of exclusion of the people living outside the gates and the wall’s large size poorly suited to the villas under construction. The demolition of the walls would have favoured a more harmonious development between the old and the new city. Therefore, in 1864 the walls that had protected Florence for five hundred years were torn down without any objection.

The Oltrarno walls, which can still be admired today, are the only evidence of the ancient walled circuit of the city of Florence.
As well as the Oltrarno walls, some towers, two strongholds (the Fortezza da Basso and the Forte di Belvedere) and almost all of the city gates survived. Porta San Frediano, Porta Romana and Porta San Miniato are still attached to the walls, unlike Porta alla Croce, San Gallo and al Prato which are isolated monuments along the city boulevards.

2. Current functions and management/governance framework

The wall system is represented today by Oltrarno walls, gates, towers and two Medici strongholds (the Fortezza da Basso and the Forte di Belvedere).

The surviving gates and towers now has a monumental function.

On the other hand, the strongholds have different functions. The Fortress of Saint John the Baptist in the north, popularly known as Fortezza da Basso, has the function of an exhibition and fair centre and it is also one of the workshops of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure. The Fort of San Giorgio, better known as Forte di Belvedere, which is located amongst the hills of the south side, has the function of an exhibition centre and it is the building of the Municipality’s Newspaper and Periodical Library.

Regarding the management/governance framework, the Municipality of Florence and the Archaeology, Fine Arts, and Landscape Superintendency are in charge of the conservation and maintenance. On the other hand, the Department of Sports and Tourism of the Municipality of Florence, of which the UNESCO Office is part, together with the in-house association of the Municipality of Florence, Mus.e, deals with the activities of heritage promotion, interpretation and monument opening.

3. Role of the walls with the regard to the OUV of the WH property and its management system

The Florentine walls play an important role regarding the OUV of the Historic Centre of Florence: the presence of the Arnolfian walls, which date back to the 14th century and surround the Historic Centre of Florence, are one of the elements necessary to express the Outstanding Universal Value of the property.

The Historic Centre is traditionally identified as the area within the ring road avenues which correspond to the old wall circle. As stated within the WH property’s Statement of OUV “the present historic centre covers 505 ha and is bounded by the remains of the city’s 14\textsuperscript{th} century walls. These walls are
represented by surviving gates, towers, and the two Medici strongholds: that of Saint John the Baptist in the North, popularly known as “da Basso”, and the Fort of San Giorgio del Belvedere located amongst the hills of the South side”.

Regarding the **management system** of the property, since 2006, the Historic Centre of Florence has a Management Plan in place naming the Municipality of Florence as the party responsible for the World Heritage property. The Municipality, as the party responsible for the site, has created an ad hoc office responsible for the Management Plan (the UNESCO Office of the Municipality of Florence) and to carry out tasks for the site’s conservation and development. The office identifies and develops the guidelines with other managing parties, plans the shared actions, and supervises the progress of the projects. Therefore, in conjunction with other Municipality’s offices, with the University of Florence and Florentine associations, it also plans, supports, and supervises the development of projects and researches about Florentine walls as important elements of the OUV of the property.

### 4. Main challenges and opportunities concerning the management of the walls

The walls in *Oltrarno* area and the gates of the city are a concrete testimonial of the urban history of Florence and therefore their conservation should be a priority. Equally important is their use and enhancement.

In this case, one of the future **challenges** is to systemize the process started with the opening of the Tower of San Niccolò (*Torre San Niccolò*), the Tower of Zecca (*Torre della Zecca*), and the Roman Gate (*Porta Romana*) with the opportunity to raise awareness among Florentines and visitors about the importance of the walls monumental complex.

Besides, the two city fortresses (the *Fortezza da Basso* and the *Forte di Belvedere*) should have a stronger cultural function beyond the expositive one. In particular, the possibility to show the OUV of the Historic Centre of Florence from the *Forte di Belvedere*, from which there is an impressive view on the entire World Heritage site, is an **opportunity** not to be missed.
5. Main past, on-going or planned activities for enhancing the walls

Restoration of the ancient towers and gates of Florence

Since 2010 the Municipality of Florence has launched a restoration plan and the cultural promotion of the walls that still surrounds part of the Historic Centre of Florence, in which its defensive walls and towers offer a unique perception of the urban context.

The main objective of the project is to restore and to open to public the main architectural elements of the last circle of walls and re-establishing their function as features of the city identity.

In the previous years, the Torre San Niccolò and the Torre della Zecca have been restored and after their restoration they have been open to public.

In 2016 a restoration of the Porta San Frediano was awarded. Currently a building site has been opened and its work will end in 2017. After the completion of the walls restoration and consolidation, a vertical connection will be developed with the aim of making accessible, from the wall walkway located in Piazza Verzaia, the wide attic of the Porta San Frediano. Moreover, railings will be installed along the walls walkways. The project aims to raise awareness among citizens, tourists, educational institutions, scholars, regarding the ancient walled circuit of the city of Florence; to promote their use and to widen the cultural offer in the Oltrarno area through a significant landscape path which can be taken by foot and at height through the ancient fortified track (Santa Rosa Walkway - Verzaia walls).

Restoration will be undertaken even at Porta San Giorgio in Costa San Giorgio.

All these works are part of the unified plan of the old city wall enhancement which amounts to a total of five million euro and will be completed by 2019.
Opening of the Torre San Niccolò, Torre della Zecca and the Porta Romana

The opening project was developed by Mus.e, the in-house association of the Municipality of Florence, in collaboration with the Department of Culture of the Municipality of Florence, its UNESCO Office and the Angeli del Bello Foundation.

The conditions of access of the different architectural elements have been defined on the basis of safety requirements (Crowd control safety and security risk assessment - The Operational Safety Plan) drawn up by the Municipality.

Furthermore, the visit to the monuments have been planned considering their specific characteristics and contexts, developing a wide range of guided tours from June till October 2016, at the price of 4 euros per person.

In 2016, the Torre San Niccolò registered 3369 visits, the Torre della Zecca 884 and the Porta Romana 823.

For the year 2017, Mus.E Association, in agreement with the Department of Technical Services of the Municipality of Florence, the Department of Culture of the Municipality of Florence and its the UNESCO Office, has planned to guarantee the reopening of the Torre San Niccolò, the Torre della Zecca and the Porta Romana and to implement the enhancement of the city walls through the return to the public of further important architectural elements which are included within the 14th century walls.

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