



Turin's transformation a model for other cities

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CHRISTOPHER HUME

TURIN, ITALY - Like so many cities around the world, Toronto included, this northern Italian powerhouse has spent the last few years reinventing itself.

As the home of Fiat, Turin was once the manufacturing capital of Italy. At its height and into the 1960s, Fiat employed 125,000 people. Today, it's about 20,000. And that's just one company.

Faced with the prospect of its own demise, Turin set out to remake its economy. Rather than try to replace these older industries in decline, the city adopted a number of strategies ranging from culture and the arts to research, academia and public transit.

Though Turin remains a work in progress, it has made enormous strides. Despite a population of less than one million, the city is building a second subway line, constructing a new underground train station in anticipation of the arrival of high-speed rail and burying a rail line that historically divided the city in half.

But as Turin's hugely popular mayor, Sergio Camparino, makes clear, much of his energy is spent figuring out ways to raise money. That means arranging public/private partnerships and even selling off utilities to institutional investors.

"The private sector will play a big role in the future," says Camparino, a former Communist some expect to move to national politics at the end of his current term. "The question is how to maintain public control but put a number of shares on the market."

But Camparino is equally excited about the role contemporary art now plays in the city's economic life. If that seems a stretch - as it would here in the Creative City - consider the centre built and financed by collector Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in 2002.

"Turin has been able to create a new image of the city," she explains. "Art has come to Turin. We have established a whole infrastructure of art; it's not just about tourism."

Her foundation, a large building that occupies what was once the site of a factory, sits on city-owned land. The foundation, which has a 99-year lease on the property, held an international competition to find an architect to design the place. Included are a theatre, a gallery and other cultural facilities. It brings artists to town, organizes exhibitions, publishes catalogues and otherwise contributes to the apparatus that constitutes an art scene.

"We think it is important for us to help Italian artists and curators," says Rebaudengo.

Tourism, she points out, though important, only started with the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics. It has been growing ever since, but the competition in Italy is fierce – Venice, Rome, Florence ...

The Olympics may be the biggest prize in terms of international events, but Turin didn't stop there. This year, for example, it was declared the World Design Capital. As part of that program, the city was divided into 43 areas, each of which was put together with a designer. Each team focused on one issue, a specific local problem in need of attention. The idea is to improve the physical realm and raise awareness of design.

Like so many cities, Turin has also decided to deal with the growing problem of gridlock. The most obvious response was the new subway line, which opened in 2006. The national and regional governments paid for it as cities in Italy, like those here, are poor. A series of measures has also been introduced that ban cars from certain areas at certain times. Turin's fight against the car continues, and much remains to be done. But considering that some of the city's most beautiful and historic squares once served as parking lots, serious progress has been made.

Christopher Hume can be reached at chume@thestar.ca