

AGRIGENTOSMART - Integration and sustainability in the regeneration of an urban public space. A case study.

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Keywords: unauthorised construction, public space, urban regeneration, citizenship, economic and social development.

Italian urban planning for the last twenty years has used new ways to intervene in the areas of planning and territorial policies, focusing primarily on *governance*, environmental sustainability, and city and territory development following pre-established international urban participation experiences. Participatory practices, supported by several organizations and promoted by many programs for sustainable development (such as the CITIES OF SERVICE¹ initiative and the URBAN and URBACT programs), have also been incorporated into Italian legislation. Particularly in the fields of urban regeneration, social policies and local development interventions, in order to improve the quality of life, promote solidarity, protect health and increase the well-being of citizens. It deals with new forms of participatory collaboration and shared management of common goods (materials and immaterial) where citizens and administrations work together for individual and collective well-being, according to the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, as defined by our Constitution (Article 114 paragraph 2, 117 paragraph 6 and 118).

The main objective is to facilitate the relationship and collaboration between citizens and the public administration in the care of the city through simple and practical rules that can be adopted by all municipalities. Unfortunately, however, urban settlement policies, together with the need for economic revival and modernization have transformed urban structures over the years. The traditional city - «due in part to a bankrupt territorial management policy that is no stranger to personal and private interests» [Cilona, 2015] - «is no longer the container or attractor of social and economic processes» [Indovina, 2005]. Conurbation phenomena have taken upper hand: leaving local places and identities to disintegrate, marking a clear break between community and settlement, erasing its sign of belonging, and throwing the concept of common good and the enjoyment of public spaces in crisis. In particular, there has been a progressive deterioration in the layout and physical appearance of public spaces and a worrying loss of functionality. This degradation is due to the gradual disaffection and inattention of citizens towards these places and services of common interest, which fail to acknowledge these areas as public services of and for all and that serve to meet common needs. It is therefore necessary to return to the concept of «public space as a result of social action» [Crosta, 2000] in order «to return to us citizenship thought of not only as client users but as active citizens and people» [Vitiello, 2005]. In our country, forms of collaboration, active citizenship and civic participation between citizens and administrations are increasingly spreading. The inhabitants provide their abilities and skills for the care and co-management of common goods

(public parks, refurbishment of buildings and abandoned spaces), for the resolution of problems in the general interest, and for the building of public policies - particularly in urban planning - as well as being the main recipients of such.

In this respect, we mention some organizations that operate in the national territory such as the Florentine Association of Urban Volunteers called *Angels of the Beautiful*, which take care of the green spaces and decor of the city of Florence. The *Reggia Carditello Foundation* and *Regi Lagni* in Caserta, which aim at the recovery of sites and their development. The *House of Volunteering* in the city of Gela, in the province of Caltanissetta, which has given way to a true permanent education center for active citizenship and solidarity, promoting the revival of the territory. The *Farm Cultural Park* in Favara, a town in the province of Agrigento. «The *Farm* is a workshop, a construction site for social innovation, in a small portion of the historic center where a community of citizens and creatives process develop intervention strategies, trying to maximize resources, to reuse, regenerate, re-interpret, revitalize» [Cilona, 2017]. And finally, the city of Bologna, which in February 2014 adopted new rules for a shared management: sort of agreement *or pact of cooperation between citizens and local government* inspired by the principles of mutual trust, transparency, accountability, sustainability, proportionality, and civic autonomy. It is an organizational tool, useful for recognizing and organizing the resources and social capital present in the community, whose goal is to facilitate the relationship and collaboration between citizens and the public administration in the care of the city through practical and simple rules. In this scenario, it is indispensable to start from the *cultural factor* to finally build a sense of belonging to an open and inclusive community that knows not only how to adapt itself, but manage the complexity of change, as well as technological and cultural evolution.

One has to put People at the center of the development model, not the technique, the market or consumption. In order for this to happen, shared policies and designs from a systemic perspective are necessary: to preserve, promote and share territorial resources to reaffirm the richness, variety and multiplicity of cultures as well as social and cultural landscapes, in order to create a public, social and communicative space capable of clearly reaffirming the value of being citizens where globalization has highlighted inequalities at the local and global level. According to a 2016 study (ANCE-CENSIS) - regarding interventions on the existing city in relation to three fundamental dimensions: building heritage, urban mobility networks and collective space - the development of cities has followed a wrong direction over the years that has caused uncontrolled soil consumption, a waste of energy, an increase in vehicle congestion and pollution, and a reduction in public space. This survey also reported discomfoting data. Italy is a country that does not invest in the future of its cities and its inhabitants. Though the cities are rich in history and an excellent patrimony inherited from the past, they are unable to provide to the majority of their own users adequate *standards* in terms of habitability, quality of urban services, aggregation sites, and living spaces. Neither is their attractiveness linked to the ability to renew themselves. For this it is necessary to focus on the development of existing assets through re-use as the best strategy for restoring form and function to obsolete, degraded public spaces, but also to create different meanings and to promote new ways of use.

Public spaces, the primary resource available to administrations for implementing integrated policies and urban regeneration, should be properly designed as continuous, articulated and integrated systems, also through the development of participatory processes that represent a real right of citizenship². That is why local governments should adopt specific strategies for redeveloping public spaces, a useful tool for relaunching the city and suburban areas and reducing the phenomena of social exclusion and marginalization. The issue of integration is, in fact, one of the issues that public administrators cannot afford to ignore, especially considering the many abandoned and crumbling urban areas where social exclusion phenomena are persistent and connected to the presence of diffuse Immigrant communities. In the context of urban regeneration of degraded neighborhoods - from an environmental, social and economic point of view - and populated by a large number of foreigners it is useful to adopt strategic urban regeneration procedures or *smart governance*. Among the virtuous cities we recall Malmo, Sweden, and the city of Turin [A. Boeri, C. Testoni, 2015]. The *intelligent* aspect of the operations consists in adopting policies for functional integration to promote social cohesion, to foster local economic development by strengthening the same immigrant communities. The scope is to delineate shared strategies of neighborhood redevelopment, consolidate a sense of belonging to the site, promote forms of resilience and self-sufficiency in the community, promote initiatives aimed at combating socio-cultural discrimination, activate synergies between local municipal representations and immigrant associations.

The following study proposed, of multidisciplinary approach, points to the southern part of Agrigento's historic city center and aims to redevelop a large, open public space (fig. 1). An area where municipal planning in 2010 expected to implement an Integrated Urban Redevelopment Program³, later approved in 2012.



Fig. 1 - The location of Agrigento in Italy (a); Aerial photo of the historical center (b), the considered area is highlighted in red.

This program is intended to be an effective integrated strategic planning approach in which an essential part is dedicated to policies for integrating the vast multiethnic community that has been living in the neighborhood for decades (fig. 2). The peculiarity of the intervention is the recognition of the immigrant community as a local economic development strategy, enabling immigrants to become the primary protagonists in the socio-economic processes of the place, through the formation of a more competitive and structured professional *background*. The design solution refers to an exercise conducted within the teaching activity of the Urbanistica II course, a. a. 2014-2015, at the university campus of Agrigento and foresees the creation of a multiethnic market⁴.

Agrigento, located on the southwest Sicilian coast, is known by many for its history and for the Valley of the Temples Archaeological and Landscape Park (UNESCO site, Italian Landscape Award 2017, ranked first place in the Agri Gentium project: landscape regeneration and Italian candidate at the Council of Europe Landscape Award). In the past, the city was a national and international trading center, a destination of great travelers, inspirational muse of writers, poets and painters of every age, and underwent a number of transformations, especially between the '50s and '70s. In particular, we refer to the calamitous event of July 19, 1966. A landslide phenomenon of disproportionate dimensions, caused by construction sector speculation from that period, indelibly scarred the territory and the historic center. Since then not much has changed. Many areas affected by the landslide, along with the ancient center of the city, are still waiting for serious redevelopment. Meanwhile, the historic core, while possessing a great historical, architectural, monumental, cultural and social heritage, continues to depopulate. Additionally, «the open spaces have lost their identity because they haven't been able to create a connection between the citizen and the place, and where interventions have been attempted, they've failed due to lack of maintenance or bad project choices» [T. Cilona, M. F. Granata, 2014].

The city, is today struggling to regain possession of those urban spaces taken from senseless speculation; assigning to them a renewed urban and social connotation capable of marrying beauty with utility and trying to heal some of the major wounds of the past, with the awareness that it is not an easy, nor immediate path. The issue of public space and its renewed use indeed assumes a crucial role in the process of urban regeneration. That is why, in rethinking the future development of the city, it is necessary to start from the recovery of its historic center. Urban culture should be promoted where the urban redevelopment project aims to enhance the local landscape heritage by identifying areas for leisure, recreation and socialization. A project that promotes civil and cultural growth and contributes to the improvement of the psycho-physical health and of the life of its inhabitants. The Bourbon Cartographic maps describe an Agrigento surrounded by medieval walls with 206 blocks and 5 neighborhoods: 1- San Michele, 2- San Gerlando, 3- Vallicaldi or San Pietro, 4- Borgata del Molo, and 5- Borgata di Montaperto. The historic urban settlement of about 80 hectares, located on the highest part of the hills of Girgenti, follows the orography of the place according to the terraced, south-facing slopes. The blocks of irregular perimeter, have buildings with two or three floors from the ground divided by roads, steep stairs, courtyards, hanging gardens, lanes and open spaces. The road system – characterized by east-west routes (Atenea street, Garibaldi street), and north-south (Matteotti street) - follows the progression of the level curves and is characterized by steep slopes, long stairways, cordoned and turning passages.

As said previously, our focus is aimed at the southern edge of the old city, on the neighborhood Vallicaldi San Pietro, which over time took the name of Ravanusella [C. Miccichè, 2006], consolidated between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, historically linked to crafts and commercial activities - with its epicenter centered exactly in Ravanusella square. The public space examined, about 5,000 square meters, used as a market until the first half of the last century, and for this called «*scaro vecchio*» in the dialect or market for fruit and vegetables, is one of the largest squares of the historic center (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 - Ravanusella Square in some historic photos.

From late nineteenth-century cartography, the area consisted of small and sparse residential buildings, nestled between gardens and orchards. Today it is between Empedocle street (on the south), Vallicaldi street (to the east), Bagli street (to the west) and the historic buildings preserved from the building speculation of the '60s, and by newer ones (to the north). Of particular value are: the traces of the medieval walls demolished to make way for the railway tracks in 1933; the presence of several city gates – the Panitteri Gate to the east and the Gate of the Saccajuoli to the west; the Church of Santa Lucia; and the system of hypogea⁵.

The texture of the built fabric was changed between the '60s and' 70s from multi-story buildings - to a terrible city skyline seen from the sea and the Valley of the Temples - which, together with areas improperly used for parking, have transformed the urban landscape. Currently, it is largely inhabited by a large community of immigrants (fig. 3) from Senegal, the Maghreb, Tunisia, and Morocco, that are so integrated with the city that in March 2015 they purchased a building for use as a mosque, a place of worship and a center of prayer. The square is in a state of neglect, deteriorated and relegated to a single function, that of parking lot (fig. 4), with but a few, timely business activities including a pizzeria, a car wash, a gas station and an immigration center (called Agrigento Services).

The same instead could be an important meeting place, given its central position, restoring to it the original urban role favoring the whole city and territory. The design solutions proposed, through a participatory management of the common heritage, aim at the aesthetic, functional and technological recovery of the site, following a precise technical and cultural path of socio-economic integration, dedicated to *beauty*, but also useful, *functional* and for everyone, in accordance with the 2007 Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities⁶, the provisions of the Detailed Plan, approved in 2007⁷, and the 2012 Integrated Program of Action (fig. 5).



Fig. 3 - The immigrant community - Convivial moments.



Fig. 4 - Ravanusella Square - The Place as It Is.



Fig. 5 - Aerial photo, Ravanusella square (a) and Integrated Urban Redevelopment Program, municipal project (b).

In this sense, they want to engage and configure certain receptive/commercial services, car parks and public transport, for a multi-ethnic citizenship with complex and differentiated needs in an area that is severely degraded and underutilized. The indispensable interventions (fig. 6) for the reorganization and redevelopment of the area, unfortunately the object of recent collapses, aim at the following objectives:

- a- Symbolic recognition of the historic market square, with valued urban centrality;
- b- Creating an attractive and user oriented public space;
- c- Involving citizens in the recovery process;

- d- Strengthening the local economy as well as integration and social support policies;
- e- Environmental sustainability of existing buildings, avoiding the consumption of other spaces;
- f- Improve the road, accessibility and mobility system (pedestrian walkways, caravans, car parks, shuttle buses, mechanized systems, escalators);
- g- Insertion of furnishings and green spaces.



Fig. 6 - The design solutions proposed. Some views of the square.

All this is good urban planning practice that is advisable and replicable in other experiences regarding policy programming for a smart city. It is therefore necessary to encourage and stimulate the ability to re-invent the patrimony - material and immaterial - through participatory processes that are not just re-appropriation by part of the local society but new opportunities to design the city's development centered around the cultural resources of the territory. After all historical centers have millennia of history, visible by reading the road system, the knowledge of the architectural heritage, the recognition of the stratified stylistic testimony. But if they were once the heart of the city, today, they witness the depopulation along with a rarefaction of productive activities and the gradual loss of business and crafts. That is why immediate action is needed to ensure that recovery is begun effectively to achieve an optimal quality of life starting from the redevelopment of public spaces.

Public spaces are potentially multifunctional areas, places of collective memory, host to commercial activities, offer education and culture opportunities, and are an integral part of the urban architecture and landscape. This helps to counteract isolation by fostering new social ties and

opportunities for encounter and assimilation, not only between the local residents but also in the sense of tourist accommodation. One of the challenges for Agrigento is to push cultural differences to excel in contributing to smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. We are convinced that the value of foreign communities can contribute, in the same way as social cohesion, to local economic development as set out in the Europe 2020 strategy, where recognition of cultural identity and diversity is the basis for building more integrated societies, but also the starting point for concrete economic and social development processes.

Notes

In New York, in September 2009, a group of 17 American mayors, with the support of the Bloomberg Philanthropy and the Rockefeller Foundation, launched the Cities of Service initiative, a project aimed at converging citizens' energies into initiatives for the sustainable development of its own city.

Public Space Charter, Public Space Biennial, 2013.

3. Integrated Intervention Program for the renovation of Ravanusella square in Agrigento, Delta Engineering SRL company, financial commitment of € 9,230,200.00 by private individuals, of which € 1,470,000, for the renovation works of Piazza Ravanusella in Project Financing, with the procedures set forth in art. 153 of DLgs 163/2006.

4. The multiethnic market project was drafted by student architect Davide Palumbo.

5. Map of the Hypogea of the territory of Agrigento, published by the Sicilian Region - Office of Civil Engineering (Genio Civile) of Agrigento - ARTA - Superintendence to the BB.CC.AA. of Agrigento.

6. Leipzig Charter: EU 2007 DE_ FINAL DRAFT, 02 May 2007 - Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities.

7. The intended use of PPCS for Ravanusella square is *Pedestrian Square with green furnishings*, with the following vegetative recovery indicated - Conditions of vegetation: Areas of neglect susceptible to improvements (see Table 5.6 of PPCS).

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