DE-GROWING PERIPHERIES: GRASSROOTS PRACTICES AND PLANNING TOOLS FOR REGENERATING LIBRINO, CATANIA

DE-CRESCER AS PERIFERIAS: PRÁTICAS E FERRAMENTAS DE PLANEAMENTO PARA A REGENERAÇÃO DE LIBRINO, CATANIA

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at discussing how can new urban peripheries be regenerated in order to overcome the economic and cultural crisis that is affecting western societies and that has been exacerbated during the last decade. We investigate how to activate context-based urban practices to be shaped and implemented with citizens themselves. We ground our reflections on an empirical experience that has been developed in Librino, a periphery in the Metropolitan area of Catania that has been designed according with the principles of Modernity in the 70s and that has revealed several struggles along the years in terms of lacks of services. We explore the hypothesis of de-growth in this case, and we investigate how may planners collaborate with the grassroots in order to define real requirements and demands, and in order to shape context-based windows of opportunities.
Keywords: Urban peripheries; Community Gardens; Participatory Action Research

Resumo

O artigo discute alternativas para regenerar as novas periferias urbanas com o objetivo de superar a crise econômica e cultural que afeta as sociedades ocidentais, a qual se agravou durante a última década. Nós investigamos como ativar práticas urbanas baseadas e implementadas pelos próprios cidadãos. Nós baseamos as nossas reflexões sobre a realidade de Librino, uma periferia na área metropolitana de Catania, que foi concebida de acordo com os princípios da modernidade nos anos 70, mas que se revelou ao longo dos anos como uma total falha nas diversas dimensões sociais, como por exemplo, a sistemática falta de serviços urbanos. Nós exploramos a hipótese de de-crescimento, neste contexto, e investigamos como os construtores de periferias urbanas podem colaborar ativamente com os cidadãos, a fim de definir os requisitos reais e demandas, criando espaços de interação entre os dois que sejam baseadas nesse contexto real de oportunidades.
Palavras-chaves: Periferias urbanas; Hortas comunitárias; Investigação-Ação Participativa

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the historical evolution of mankind, cities have always kept a primary role in terms of centers where socio-economic dynamics occur, within a specific environment, reflecting the characteristic of the culture that creates and nurtures them. Phases of apices and decline have been alternated constantly as the expression of the born and death of specific civilizations (Munford, 1966). During last centuries, Western societies have started going through an enduring phase of growth and development that has deeply affected values, culture, and the democratic decision-making processes. The continuous economic growth of western civilizations has produced the belief that the current models of city, based on the myth of efficiency and the hubris of technologies, may endure. On the other side, examples of failures of big cities, such as the bankrupt of Detroit (Coppola, 2012), have posed precise questions to urban planners in order to investigate the proper approaches and tools to face the ongoing phase of global crisis toward different organizational models that may adapt to current and future challenges (Gunderson and Holling, 2001) such as social, financial and ecological urban disasters, and the huge divide between the wealthiest and the poorest communities.

These are not new challenges for planners. As a matter of fact, despite scholars have fully debated the *limits to growth* – recalling the well-known Meadows et al.'s milestone and its updates (2004) – new paradigms are still at an early stage. Narrowing the scenario to urban peripheries in Italy, historically they developed for an incremental request of houses with a subsequent request of urban services. During the 60s, the Italian Law DM 1444/68 answered these requests through the tool of *standards*, with the aim of guaranteeing high quality of file through the minimum amount of squared meters of urban services, to be provided for each citizen based on a general assessment of citizens' needs. But public administrations were not always able to sustain the economic costs of required services, since the 80s, when the conditions arose for the formation of the unsustainable public debt that led the Italian State close to bankruptcy in 1993. Moreover still since the 80s, the rising debate about sustainable development has influenced the way planners approached urban peripheries, with a new awareness about environmental issues and quality of life. Planners embraced thus the idea that environmental issues cannot be addressed without taking into account the socio-economic dimension. This idea has been stressed within the overall debate about

sustainability and its different discourses, from mainstream approaches to grassroots and unconventional practices within the stream of literature of the so-called *Sustainable De-Growth* (Martinez et al. 2010): a set of theories and practices able to allow social justice and citizenry rights, in a social-ecological perspective, through the reduction of consumptions, especially of non-renewable resources. These discourses, rooted on the entropic theories of Georgesu-Roegen (1975) which underline the necessity of taking into account the unavoidable degradation of resources, have been influenced by political ecologists such as Gorz (1991) and Illich (1978), being also included into Daly's theories of *Steady State Economy* (1980), articulated by Latouche (2010), and studied by a variety of authors such as Kallis (2011), Muraca (2012) and so forth, who question if GDP and other quantitative indicators are proper measurement for the quality of the organizational status of societies. What all these authors have in common is the awareness that the finiteness of resources may be faced only by different organizational structures that take into account the ability of societies to endure using at their best the available resources they have, including the willingness of citizens to self-organize, without waiting for exogenous supports. This is not to say that *De-Growth* promotes societies based only on the self-organizing, but with no doubt the ethos of *De-Growth* relies on citizens' liberation (Freire 1972) and empowerment (Reardon, 1998) as opportunities for promoting different organizational structures of societies. For this reason, *De-Growth* has become, beyond scholarly discourses, a grassroots practice, as it can be observed at the thematic international conferences (see, for example, the proceedings of the De-Growth Conferences held in Paris, 2008; Barcelona, 2010; Venice, 2012; Liepzig, 2014) where it is possible to observe the variety of participants whose background are not related with the academia only, representing a vibrant community of active citizens.

With this theoretical background, the proposed paper is aimed at discussing how can new urban peripheries be regenerated in order to overcome the economic and cultural crisis that is affecting western societies and that has been exacerbated during the last decade. We question if and how to move from the tool of *standards*, which has been shaped around a generalization of citizens' needs, toward different planning approaches; the purpose is taking into account emergent needs of citizens, and catalyzing their direct involvement in order to address their real requirements and demands. In other words, we investigate how to activate context-based urban practices to be shaped and implemented with citizens themselves. We ground our reflections on an empirical

experience that has been developed in Librino (Reardon et al., 2008; Ferrara, A., 2008; Raciti and Saija, 2010), a periphery in the Metropolitan area of Catania that has been designed according with the principles of Modernity in the 70s and that has revealed several struggles along the years in terms of lacks of services. We investigate how may planning researchers and practitioners collaborate with the grassroots in order to define real requirements and demands, and in order to shape context-based windows of opportunities, under the light of *De-Growth* discourses in relation to the recent dynamics of global financial markets. We argue that this approach may be incorporated into the democratic decision-making process and we propose operative tools in order to allow a more structured collaboration between planning researchers and practitioners and the grassroots when facing new challenges – both environmental and socio-economic – that urban peripheries embrace.

2. METHODS

The methodology is based on participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989); the researchers report and discuss qualitative and quantitative data, gained during their direct involvement into a planning process, with the ethos of Participatory Action Research (Whyte, 1997), i.e. the impetus of activating and catalyzing stages of the process. The researchers analyze their observations with a narrative approach rooted on sociological theories of double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1984), whose core may be described as follows:

- the researcher is the "meaning giver", i.e. the observer of phenomena and societal dynamics;
- the researcher is also the "object of the study", being part of the same societal dynamics to be explored.

This two-folded position leads to a condition of reciprocity between the researcher and the context to be researched, so that the act of knowing is also an act of continuous reframing the way reality is perceived and described, based on reciprocal inputs that the observer" and the "object" receive.

In this paper, this approach has led to report pieces of reflections that have been written in the "grammar first person", that may be intended as notes that came out of the direct experience, commented with sentences that give integrative information. Someone can argue that this may be a highly biased research process; with no intention of discussing how biases may affect also the hardest sciences, this approach has been inspired by *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1983), where it has been widely discussed the validity of using the direct experiences as a valid base for producing usable knowledge.

3. THE LIMITS OF STANDARDS IN THE FINANCIAL-DRIVEN CITY. THE CASE OF LIBRINO, CATANIA

Catania is the second main city of Sicily in terms of inhabitants. In the 60s the Municipality counted about 400.000 inhabitants (Palermo, the Regional Capital, had about 500.000). In the 60s, like other Italian cities Catania decided to build a "satellite city" in order to answer to the rising demand for public housing. The proposal of building a "satellite city" has been embraced by all the local political actors, being capable to meet a variety of requests. To date: the left-wing, which was a minority in those years, was enthusiastic for the huge amount of public houses to be built, using this argument for electoral purposes in order to prove the validity of progressive policies through the case of Catania at the national level; the business sector, historically connected with the dominant right-wing politicians, had a variety of economic interests. Specifically, the businessmen and conservative politicians were highly motivated by two factors: first, the opportunity of allocating this new settlement for underprivileged citizens in a segregated area, far from another area of urban growth located in the healthy hilly belt, that has been contemporarily built for hosting the upper-middle class in a scenic and panoramic area; second, the opportunity of using Librino, with its arid clay soil located in a flat rural area, the so-called "Piana di Catania", for real estate purposes, replacing the former agricultural operations, specifically wineries, that were not profitable any more in the, when citrus trees were the most profitable crops on the market; the last factor determined a drastic change in land use and a loss in the local rural traditions.

Figure 1 - A historical picture showing a rural house in the surroundings of Librino. within the "Piana di Catania"
Source: Catania Municipality Archive

In the same years, the Municipality of Catania was regulated by the brand new issued General Master Plan (PRGC Piccinato, approved in 1969), which has established a 50.000 inhabitants settlement in an area that was isolated from the rest of the city, without proper mobility infrastructures, and that has been used just for agricultural purposes during the last decades. These have been the preconditions for the formation of Librino that actually did not have to face several oppositions. Few voices arose against it, bearing the argument of the extreme closeness to the Airport of Catania, together with the scarce wholesome state of the environment in that area, due to the clay soil connected with uncontrolled runoff, urban flood and hydrogeological instability, together with the heat of summer temperature. These problems have been somehow hidden by a collective sense of hubris for the magnificence of the project, nurtured by the convergent economic/political interests that the project was sealing.

Due to the epic nature and the physical dimension of the project, the Municipality decided to entrust the design process to an international well-known architect of that time: Kenzo Tange. The architect arrived in Catania together with his assistants, and in very short laps of time defined the main assets of the project, together with his team and a very limited group of local professionals. Out of his indications, the Plan for the new "Satellite City" has been formed, being inspired by the principles of Rationalism, whose mandates have been applied on the plan. In particular: the space has been organized accordingly with specific geometries that influenced all the morphological choices; the separation of functions has been implemented; the shape of blocks and squares, that

characterize historical European cities, has been substituted by "modern" macro blocks and urban greenways.
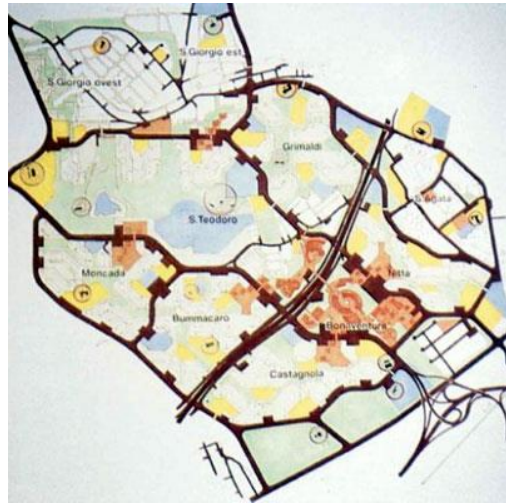

Figure 2 - Excerpt of the Catania General Master Plan (PRGC Piccinato, approved in 1969), which has established a 50.000 inhabitants settlement (Librino)
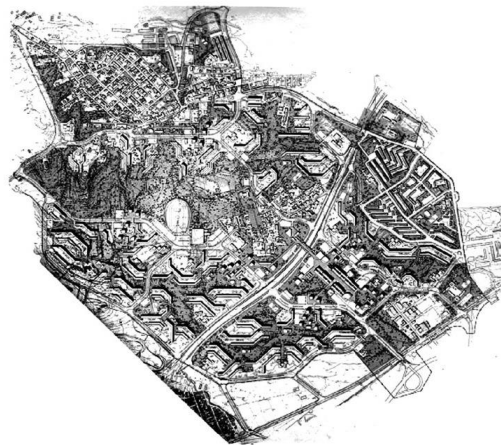Source: University of Catania Archive

Figure 3 - The Plan for the "New Satellite City" of Librino
Source: University of Catania Archive

Besides the discussion about the principles of the Athens Charter and the appropriate interpretation, the design presented several limits connected with its practical implementation. The

main obstacle was connected with financial resources that the Public Administration (PA) had to invest in order to build the necessary structures and infrastructures that characterized the project, way beyond the mere construction of the residential towers.

The Tange's Plan, in the attempt to become a model, has destined 45 m^2 per habitant, way more than 18 m^2 per habitant as the Italian Law DM 1444/68 requires for *standards*, in term of public green infrastructures, schools, parking lots and collective services. But the Plan did not take into account the costs and the mechanisms to gain funds in order to be implemented completely, relying in the capacity of public finance.

The costs have been found to be higher than the PA could afford. In 2002, 400 millions of euro have been spent and less than the 60% of the entire costs of infrastructures have been covered; green infrastructures, that have been designed to be the most important elements for connecting and integrating ecosystem services and sociability, have never been realized as they were meant to be. Moreover, since the 90s, many other public structures have been started up with insufficient funds, and their completion never occurred. That being said, the apartment houses have been built rapidly, while the streets, drainage systems, urban services and, above all, the green system, have remained unfinished and became derelict areas. Today, after about half a century from the construction, numerous buildings have already shoved the symptoms of poor materials and manufacture, with high levels of physical degradation, and above all the urban greenways, squares, connectors and infrastructures have never been realized. This fact has generated several difficulties in creating the necessary spaces for aggregation, social interaction and a vibrant life for the inhabitants of Librino. These neglected physical conditions, together with the controversial presence of groups connected with the organized crime, the *Mafia* that controls the local dynamics of power, has generated an extended misconception toward the whole citizenry living in Librino, by other citizens, living in the rest of Catania, who use to avoid this area, considering it a sort of "extreme periphery of periphery", a ghetto, such as other peripheries of big cities. This is not to say that the aforementioned problems are not there, but the perception that Librino hosts only criminals has exacerbated the disadvantaged conditions for all Librino inhabitants, being most of them disadvantaged citizens who have to face a lack of public services and the challenges connected with the obscure yet widespread presence of the Mafia along its streets.

4. HOW TO OVERCOME THE LACK OF PUBLIC SERVICES? LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

For the aforementioned reasons, Librino may be considered an interesting case to be explored as an "open air laboratory" for testing the common problems that contemporary cities have to face. From a planning educational standpoint, the "open air laboratory" could be offered as an opportunity for young planning students and scholars, in order to reflect about the legacy of the Modernism, as it has been applied in the local context, and how to work on uncompleted challenging contexts, such as Librino is. And, above all, Librino was an opportunity for undergoing innovative planning approaches and tools aimed at facing contemporary challenges. As a consequence, Librino has been chosen by a variety of scholars and professionals, from the local University of Catania and other international institutions who were attracted by the complex dynamics that may be observed in this specific area.

The two following paragraphs report the reflections of a local planning professor, teaching Urban Planning, and a local planning student, developing his Master Thesis, aimed at answering the question: how do planners have to interact with this interesting yet social challenged context in order to contribute to its regeneration, as an example for regenerating other urban peripheries? The following paragraphs, synthesizing their direct experiences as a valuable source for exploring phenomena, have the aim of supporting the argument that is going to be explained in the discussion.

4.1 The scholar perspective: innovating planning tools

At the end of the 90s, Italian urban planning literature focused on numerous neglected peripheries and urban neighborhoods, with elements of physical and, above all, social degradation. In Catania, a group of planning researchers started reflecting about the issues of historical and contemporary with the aim of identifying new approaches and strategies for addressing inhabitants' needs in derelict areas. The core of the strategy is the establishment of an Urban Center. Several reasons have firmly led our research group to study Librino, that represents an extreme example of contemporary urban peripheries produced by Western cultures, and could be an opportunity for experiencing alternative approaches, in order to face the Italian financial crisis in public investments occurred in 1993; in this sense, Librino could be used as training ground for young

planners in their educational process, focusing on alternative forms of urban economy aimed at sustaining the regeneration of neglected areas that the public sector was not able to manage. Although we were so enthusiastic of embracing the challenge, the possible outcomes were not so predictable. The implementation of Tange's design has produced environmental consequences connected with drainage and hydrogeological risk but, when we started studying Librino, our research interests shifted to deepen the socio-economic dynamics, in order to find windows of opportunities regarding hurdles. As a matter of fact, the most devastating phenomenon we could observe was connected with the lack of mechanisms of socialization, due to a lack of spaces for socialization, very needed in order to allow inhabitant to recognize and face their common disadvantage collectively.

As a matter of fact, the local institutions and the media have often portrayed Librino as the stereotype of neglected peripheries, and rarely given space to reasoning thinking that may allow a real empowerment of its inhabitants. Inhabitants themselves have constantly experienced a condition of segregation and a feeling of abandonment by local institutions; witnesses report the fact that, during the electoral race, several politicians use to visit Librino giving money, few usable goods and promises, in exchange for votes. The poor socio-economic conditions have not been included in policies able to determine a real change and the *status quo* has been maintained for years. The point was then to offer opportunities for opening up the public discussions in order to find practical solutions for changing.

Our scientific interest shifted from ecological concerns, connected with the implementation of the Tange's Plan that created several problems in terms of urban runoff, to the necessity of working with the grassroots for allowing a process of community empowerment. The more we explored, the more we understood that, beyond technical analysis, we needed to carefully listen to the local community building with them possible scenarios. We found that the quality of the listening process was directly related to the level of trust our students could gain working closely with inhabitants. As the level of trust was growing, every community meeting provided new inputs about necessities and priorities toward better living conditions for Librino. We understood that, if a real change had to occur, it was necessary to involve the variety of organizations that have been working in Librino for a very long time, such as NGOs, the Union, the church, schools, community-based groups. But we immediately perceived that the cooperation amongst these groups was one of the first challenges

we had to face due to the different systems of values and perspectives that characterized these groups. On behalf of the University as an Institution that may improve the context where it operates, the research group felt the responsibility of catalyzing the cooperation. A EU-funded project INTERREG IIIC was implemented, together with two International Summer Schools. The outcomes of the process were synthesized in a document called "Piattaforma per Librino" which has been signed by a variety of organizations and the Public Administration in 2006. The expressed priority was the requalification of the urban greenways, providing a proper dotation of green infrastructures that may be used as a space for socialization. The crucial point was focusing on the neglected areas that have not being transformed in Green Ways, subtracting them to the illegal activities controlled by the organized crime. The involved participants asked for public green spaces to be managed by the inhabitants themselves, with the awareness that the Public Administration did not have enough resources and the real willingness to manage green infrastructures in Librino. The main idea was realizing community gardens as a means to create a new identity, rooted in local history and culture, for Librino, as a community aimed at taking care of its environmental and socio-economic regeneration. Although the enthusiastic involvement of several actors, the first results of the process were highly discouraging. Good intentions have not immediately being able to be transformed into practice. This was due to several reasons. First, Public Administrations have changed its attitude toward Librino before and after every electoral race, being inconsistent in giving institutional support to the ongoing process. At the same time, the University was going through an enduring phase of institutional crisis due to structural cuts of funds connected to national policies. As a matter of fact, Southern Universities struggle in establishing university-community partnership (Reardon, 2000) for a lack of resources and opportunities. Specifically, the enthusiast students that have been variously involved into this project did not find a way to continue working in the role of engaged-scholars (Campbell, 2012), as funds for engagement projects, PhD programs and young researchers have been drastically reduced.

Moreover, in 2010 the University of Catania decided to start dismissing the Urban Center, established in 2003 with a special fund of 2 millions euro and coordinated by our research group, that has always had an active role in terms of community engagement in urban peripheries, included Librino. These changing and destabilizing conditions did not allow the research group to continue working in Librino, failing the trust and expectations that the community started nurturing

in the respect of institutions, in this case the University. But, again, institutions seemed not to embrace the challenge of providing policies able to revitalize this challenged urban periphery.

Despite this first failure, seeds of hope have been spread. Next paragraph describes how the idea of implementing innovative planning tools in Librino has been put in practice by a student who was deeply affected by the first university-community planning process and became an *insider-planner*, as it is described through his own words.

4.2 The student perspective: a learning process for innovating planning tools

I visited the *Iqbal Masih Center*, a grassroots group of social activists aimed at empowering Librino, in 2008 for the first time, thanks to a University Class in Urban Planning. My working team received the assignment of studying Librino, for the best or for the worst, as we used to say. Moreover, we were responsible for studying *Viale Moncada* and the so called *Palazzo di Cemento*, a popular *Béton brut* residential tower where drugs dealers use to make their business, amongst the most neglected areas of the satellite city, that has also an occupied space where the Center has been established in 1995. When we met Piero, the coordinator of the *Iqbal Masih Center*, we started discussing about the opportunity of demolishing the building, and we suddenly agreed on the fact that, if demolished, it would have become another empty space with no opportunity for socialization, as the other empty areas in Librino that the Public Administration was never able to manage. Piero explained the necessity of transforming this and other symbols of degradation in spaces for socialization, for giving opportunities to inhabitant of liberating themselves from their status of social segregation. I still have so many doubts and things to explore, but I embraced the challenge of going deeply inside this context as the only thing to do.

The name of the organization *Iqbal Masih* has been inspired by a seven years old trade unionist in Pakistan, murdered for having fought in order to gain rights for his young labor fellows, that were exploited as slaves by the Pakinstani Mafia connected with the illegal market of carpets. Iqbal was someway a positive symbol in contrast with all the negative iconic images of children living in Librino, representing the impetus for liberating children out of every type of slavery, including the one connected with living in a territory under Sicilian Mafia control. In this sense, the organization used to put in practice self-managed activities such as afterschool assistance, street

theatre, various forms of community arts and, above all, Rugby, intended as a tool for experiencing fair play on the field and in life. The sport team of *Briganti*, established in 2006, has been founded with the aim of involving the youth of Librino as an opportunity to avoid the insidious activities that the organized crime controls along the streets of Librino.

"Rugby expresses the willingness for Liberation and Emancipation. When, in 2009, I took part to the activities of the Iqbal Masih Center, I suddenly understood that the most of the children were someway related with the organized crime, of course not by choice but being victims of the socio-economic dynamics in Librino. Yet they use to play as other children, as all children, and they have the right to have a choice". The Rugby team does not have a proper field for their training in Librino, although a megaproject has been built in 1997, it has been never completed and then abandoned. It is the "Campo San Teodoro", a huge sports facility (50.000 m², with only 2% of constructed surface) that includes also a rugby field (5000 m²) in neglected conditions. Built for the International University Games, it cost 10 millions euro and has barely been used. Today the San Teodoro is a derelict area under the management of the Public Administration, although the Iqbal Masih activists have regularly asked to be assigned for taking care of it, via regular applications always declined by the PA itself. Again, the PA is not able to sustain the cost for the revitalization of a derelict area, but at the same time it is not able to find alternative solutions, although the Briganti Team has candidate themselves as a possible solution. Till 2012, The *Briganti Team* had to find other Rugby field in Catania with the limit that some children could not easily reach structures out of the Satellite City, although the activists of the Iqbal Masih tried to organize commuting at the best of their resources. In 2012 an unfortunate event occurred: Giuseppe Cunsolo, a 13 years old rugby player, died for a street accident. Giuseppe was one of those children who had difficult times in joining the training in structures located outside the Satellite City, and at the time of his death he was not part of the Briganti Team anymore because of this reason.

This tragedy was the main impetus for entering into the *San Teodoro* and liberating the structure out of abandonment. The activists decided to enter into the San Teodoro April 25th 2012, when Italy celebrates the National Day of Liberation from Fascism, with another symbolic attempt based on the concept of Liberation. The *San Teodoro* then became available to the Briganti Team and to Librino citizenry, as a space for opportunities. The *San Teodoro* could be something more than just a rugby field. The activists started reflecting about the opportunity of using part of the

derelict land as a space for experiencing what they have studied and debated for a long time, in terms of *De-Growth* discourses.

After a couple of months of discussion, it was time to put our hands into the dirt. The availability of empty space within the *San Teodoro* gates, the opportunity of opening the gates to Librino inhabitants, beyond those interested in Rugby, the willingness to create those green infrastructures, as spaces for sociability, that have never been realized: this impetus gave us the strength to imagine, design and implement a project of community gardens.

4.3 Community gardens as a context-based window of opportunities

The community gardens have been started in 2013, as part of the capstone project of the student that was developing his master thesis. After graduation, the student decided to keep involved into the process of building up and taking care of the community gardens; 16 units have been realized in less than a year, and the number increased in the following numbers to the number of 40. He has done so as an *insider planner* who was shaping alternative planning tools aimed at reusing a derelict space, with few resources and the direct involvement of the local community, in order to face the lack of funds that neither the PA, neither other funding sources within the market, could otherwise provide.

Figure 4 - Campo San Teodoro: a derelict space before its *Liberation*
Source: Authors' archive

Next paragraph describes the characteristics of the proposed alternative planning tools in terms of "community-based regulatory frameworks", aimed at providing an organizational structure to the self-established regeneration process a derelict area. Specifically, the regulatory framework has for the *Gardeners* who decide to participate to the project *SanTeod'Orto*, has been built collectively as a tool to manage the unavoidable conflicts amongst the *Gardeners*. The framework has been organized in a premise and 9 main points, subscribed by the gardeners and inspired by the following principles:

- a signer can have just a unit of garden (in order to avoid the request of expanding, alimented by various expressions of sense of greed, and to allow the inclusion of a higher number of Gardeners)

- it's signers' responsibility to take direct care of the assigned unit of garden (in order to avoid the mechanism of delegating, and to allow the pedagogical experience of assuming the direct duty toward a physical structure); moreover, signers have to participate to the community meetings aimed at organizing the activities for taking care of the system of gardens collectively (in order to avoid individualism and to allow cooperation)

- it's forbidden the use of polluting products out of the natural cycle of the garden itself (in order to avoid the mistakes connected with the industrialization of agriculture and to practice sustainable ways of cultivating the land).

Figure 5 - The San Teodoro after he student's intervention in the Community: the *SanTeod'Orto*.
Source: Authors' archive

5. DISCUSSION

The scholar (par. 4.1) has highlighted the consequence connected with the limits of public finance in sustaining the costs of *standards*. In the case of Librino, several factors have concurred, determining the lack of public services, the increasing of derelict lands, and the difficulties in facing the challenges:

- the limits of Tange's Plan, that did not take into account the real costs and the mechanisms for the implementation of *standards*;
- the PA negligence, the lack of public funds, the interest of the real estate market in building as much as possible in the short-run without taking into account the necessity of public structures and infrastructures as dictated by Law and by the Plan itself;
- the role of University, presented as a central core in catalyzing community-based practices and envisioning opportunities of change with the direct involvement of inhabitants, in challenging contexts where relations of power are directly controlled by the organized crime; although there exists research groups aimed at facing these problems, the crisis of the University as an Institution has caused a shortcoming in the complete fulfillment of this role.

Nevertheless, the limits of obtained results gained by the University, as an institution that may accompany a process of revitalization, has left elements of innovation that may have changed some inhabitants' perspectives (Busacca and Gravagno, 2005). The opportunity of using some derelict areas as community gardens and, above all, the collective re-appropriation of a derelict public space, have been aware actions, part of the local community experience, that may echo the public debates conducted years before with the participation of the University, as a long-run outcome.

The student (par. 4.2) has highlighted the consequence of implementing megaprojects, such as the *Campo San Teodoro*, in a time of ongoing public financial crisis that was also preempting the private financial crisis, proposing alternative solutions:

- the direct engagement within community-based practices in order to go deep inside a complex context, as a planner aimed at gaining an insiders' perspective;

- the necessity of implementing practices of emancipation, empowerment, liberation of inhabitants, using several tools with the ethos of experiencing a collective learning process, way before the implementation of physical project;
- the choice of appropriate tools in order to tackle the problem of lack of services, derelict lands, and the demand for green infrastructures as an opportunity for creating spaces for socialization.

Community gardens have been chosen as an integrated project in order the center multiple goals at the same time:

- providing the benefits, ecological as well as social benefits, related with urban green infrastructures such as community gardens, that were denied by the implementation of Tange's plan;
- revitalizing a derelict land, generated by the implementation of a megaproject that the PA has not being able to manage;
- providing opportunities for self-organization.

The proposed *operative planning tools* has been shaped, in this case, as a Community Based Regulatory Framework, to be coupled with an official *Memorandum of Understanding* that has been finally signed between the Municipality and the Association *Briganti* in order to mange the San Teodoro, with the institutional seal, in 2015 for six years. The meaning of these documents and the outcomes of this process are two-folded:

- on one side, they express the capacity of underprivileged communities to self-organize themselves, gaining tangible results in terms of operative means that may allow a structured process of regeneration; the role of the student, who has become an insider planner, has been crucial in supporting technically the process;
- on the other side, although institutions, such as the PA and the University, have shown pitfalls in providing effective answers to the specific needs of underprivileged citizens in Librino, they are specific actors, with their precise piece of responsibilities, to be included into the discussion as one piece of the complex process of regeneration of this urban periphery.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Community gardens and other forms of urban agriculture have been widely studied in planning literature as potential means for: providing ecosystem services, managed by a variety of cooperative organizations, in residential areas that have been highly transformed and lost biodiversity (Erickson et al., 2011; McClintock, 2012); understanding new forms of organizational structures inspired by the necessity of urban environmental stewardship (Enqvist, 2013; Uren, 2014); studying forms of social contagion (Hunter, 2011;) through environmental practice, and experiences of collective learning (Bendt, 2012), within the processes of governing common goods (Ostrom, 1990).

This paper has presented the preconditions, genesis, and characteristics of a self-managing practice in an abandoned public mega-structure (the *Campo San Teodoro*), with the establishment of a community garden, in a highly challenged urban periphery that presents a lack of public services. In the attempt of reflecting about the changing planning procedures and instrument that have to face the current crises, with an ethos inspired by the discourse about *Sustainable De-Growth*, a "community-based regulatory framework" has been proposed as an operative tool able to let citizens self-organize in the creation and maintenance of spaces for social and ecological regeneration, not with the aim of subtracting responsibilities to institutions, but with the aim of allowing inhabitants' empowerment.

Sustainable De-Growth has inspired the forms of action to be explored in the perspective of allowing forms of self-organization within the scenario of the ongoing financial crisis that several National Governments are experiencing; in the light of the current severe conditions, the mechanisms self-organization of disadvantaged communities may represent a possible strategy in order to tackle the fundamental needs that these communities express. This is not an easy task, though. Activating these strategies requires a cultural change matured by long processes of collective learning, in order to bridge the gap of knowledge amongst different social actors and allowing the disadvantaged communities to be able to influence political choices with competitiveness.

This necessity requires the activation and catalysis of continuous and deep processes of co-working between community members and "catalyzers", who may be defined as "insider planners", whose implementation is not often a priority for Public Administration. In this respect, this paper has put a strong emphasis on the role of the University as an institution that may embrace the challenge of catalyzing processes of collective learning. The current debate about the so-called *Third Mission,* as the act of linking research and education with community engagement and local development (see, for example, the Green Paper *Fostering and Measuring "Third Mission" in Higher Education Institutions*, 2012), is centered on the fact that University has an endogenous bent to embrace the challenge, whose results may be observed and measured only in the long run. The described case has highlighted pitfalls in this respect but, on the other side, has reported how some seeds that have been sown at one time (par 4.1) have generated manifested outcomes at another time (par 4.2). Finally, the way knowledge has been produced and transferred, within this paper, is connected with the direct experience of actors that have directly observed and reflected upon the entire process that hopefully may inspire to disseminate other seeds of hope for urban peripheries.

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