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# Shopping malls as pseudo-public spaces<sup>1</sup>

## The shopping mall as an emergent public space in Palermo

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*ABSTRACT. Much has been written on the role of public space in contemporary societies, and many scholars agree that public space today is a controversial and arguably critical concept. It may actually seem that even the basic idea of what is or should be 'public' is experiencing a deep and troublesome reconsideration, as new forms of privatization slowly but firmly erode its fundamentals. Within this conceptual framework, this paper aims at critically analyzing the idea of public space today, with particular attention to the idea of public space as a shopping mall. Characteristics of the Italian way of using shopping malls, and their social and spatial consequences, are investigated and analyzed through case studies in Palermo.*

*KEYWORDS. Public space, Local and Regional Planning, Identity, Shopping malls.*

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## 1. Introduction

As Doreen Massey (2005) pointed out, space matters. Does public space matter as well today? Since the early seventies, several studies have explored public space as an emerging, and in many ways innovative, universe of actors, spatiality and socio-territorial practices which invaded the public spheres of our cities (HABERMAS, 1979; ROSSI, 2008).

However, 'public space' may have a wide variety of interpretations which relate to a semantic overlapping between a sensitive material sphere -The Space- and an intangible metaphorical one -The Public- (BIANCHINI, 1990; CROSTA, 2000; HAJER et al., 2002; HARVEY, 2006; LOW et al., 2006; ROSSI, 2008). As Crosta (2000) reveals, a new dichotomy stems from those inseparable elements of public space: **material space**, conceived as the product of the relationship between territory and its society, and **public**, conceived as the result of the relationship between society and its country. This means that material space and public sphere become the cognitive domains and functions within which public space takes shape. From a disciplinary point of view, this duality, as Smith and Low (2006) emphasized, produced two different scientific literatures: a first series of studies, developed in the philosophical and political context, investigates an a-spatial public sphere, while a second trend almost exclusively relates to the spatial dimension, including disciplines such as geography, urban planning and anthropology. Therefore, together with the constitutive uncertainty of the planning discipline, which has been thoroughly discussed in urban literature (FALUDI, 1986; 1987), an additional uncertainty must be taken into account, proceeding from the polysemy of the term, and from the co-existence of different approaches.

From a critical reflection on the concept of public space as it is now used by urban scholars and city managers, this paper suggests that public space should not be considered as a **product** (defined through quantitative and objective parameters), but rather as a **construct** (defined through its qualitative and relational dimension) and a **process** (thus referring to the performative and deconstructionist theories inspired by Jacques Derrida). Public space will therefore be related to governance effects, considering the social interactions between institutional and non-institutional actors and practices (FERRARO, 1990; CROSTA, 2000).

Among the many kinds of public spaces, which are becoming more and more common inside our cities, shopping malls hold a distinctive place for their decades-long history and their growing diffusion in most Western countries. Several scholars have been reconsidering the relationship between contemporary public space and the existence of shopping malls. Can shopping malls be considered as a new form of public space? Or should they rather be considered pseudo-public spaces (MITCHELL, 1995)? This issue will be addressed according to the Italian case of Palermo, a Southern Italian city that is now experiencing a very late growth of shopping malls in its area.

## 2. Shopping malls development in Palermo

In the Southern part of Italy the phase of proliferation of the shopping malls has started less than ten years ago. A very different situation compared to the United States, Europe and Northern Italy. The first mall was created in the United States fifty years ago; at the moment, in the U.S.A., nearly 20 percent of the 2,000 largest malls are failing; in 2005, only three shopping malls have been built, none was built in 2008 and only one was opened in 2009 (REDELL, 2009). In an

opposing trend, in Palermo during 2006 the City Council approved, by an act in variant to the masterplan, with three different deliberations, the realization of the first three shopping malls. All the three malls have been realised in green areas that constitute residual, but structural, elements of the old Conca d'Oro<sup>2</sup>. The new shopping malls seem to have received a warm and positive welcome in the point of view of many social groups in Palermo. However, by considering the real social consequences they have brought, one could tell the true story beyond the curtains. It is, as always, a matter of representations and propaganda, and deconstructing the imagery connected to shopping malls reveals a more complex situation.

### **2.1. La Torre**

One of the three new commercial centres has risen beside the deprived neighbourhood of Borgo Nuovo<sup>3</sup>, in a green area of the Conca d'Oro. Inaugurated at the beginning of 2011, the new centre occupies a vast zone still holding the seventeenth-century Tower Ingastone, from which the area takes its name and for which the restoration proposes the creation a big lawn and of an amphitheatre. The architectural structure of the centre is composed of a gallery of 11,115 square meters with sixty shops and 6,000 square meters of hypermarket; there are also underground and surface parking areas for 1,700 cars. 908,000 persons can easily reach this shopping mall, within a 30 minutes drive.

This is an intervention that introduces different levels of complexity and that involves more aspects: social, economic and environmental. It regards the social sphere because in a district of public house building, deprived of facilities and standard services, whose population has, primarily, "antisocial", passive, sceptic and mistrusting attitudes (DI GIOVANNA, 2005), the shopping centre becomes the only place where one can meet other people and spend leisure time. It regards the repercussions on the economic fabric of the area because large-scale retail trade has altered the links among diffused stores in the district. Finally, it regards the environmental sphere considering that the shopping centre, with roads and parking, was realized in an originally cultivated area with oranges, lemons and olives.

### **2.2. Forum Palermo**

*Forum Palermo* was the first shopping mall to be opened, in November 2009. It was considered "a really nice and well done mall, a brand new experience for Palermo and its shopping habits" (<http://www.mobilitapalermo.org/mobpa/2009/11/24/il-centro-commercialeforum-apre-a-palermo-foto-video-dell-inaugurazione-24-novembre-2009-a-voi-lanteprima/>).

Being built in a marginal area, far from the city core, *Forum Palermo* initially suffered from the lack of convenient infrastructures that could positively connect it to the city. However, almost three years from the opening day, these infrastructures (including a train station and a motorway junction) have not been completed yet, whereas the commercial areas were built incredibly quickly, according to Sicilian standards.

Additional boasting announcements were diffused in November, 2009. "*Forum Palermo* expresses the extraordinary values and abilities that characterize *Multi* [the main investing company] – said Paolo Tassi, chair of Multi Development-C Italia, a subsidiary company of the Netherlands-based leading European company for the development of retail & leisure structures – and it will be a meeting place to

discover the latest news, taste local and ethnic food, spend some time shopping and relaxing, in a solar and Mediterranean context. It will also be a fundamental engine for developing the city and its surrounding areas, thanks to a potentially very high catchment – as many as 1,000,000 customers may be expected” (<http://archivio.siciliainformazioni.com/cronaca-regionale/forum-palermo-domani-linaugurazione-del-centro-commerciale/>).

Those who hoped that this mall would offer new job opportunities to the deprived economic structure of Palermo were disappointed to see how most new employees were non-Sicilian.

However, the worst social consequence of the opening of the new shopping malls was probably the destruction of local identities for the areas where the malls were created: *Forum Palermo* was built close to an existing historic borough (Brancaccio), but it does not mingle well with it; rather, it appears a completely out-of-place white elephant in the fringe fabric of the city.

### **2.3. Conca d’Oro**

The *Conca d’Oro* mall was built in a historic green area in a sprawling Northern part of Palermo, very close to an 18<sup>th</sup>-century aristocratic villa. Between 2006 and 2007 Maurizio Zamparini, the main investor for this shopping mall, negotiated a variant of the masterplan with the local administration, in order to have the required authorizations to build his mall. It did not matter that such a choice would have a deep impact on the surrounding area, would reduce the availability of green zones and definitely would endanger an already troublesome identity for the closest urban district, the ZEN (being an acronym for *Zona Espansione Nord*, Northern Expansion Zone). This neighbourhood holds an unattractive place in the records for its high criminality level, its lack of social and public infrastructures and the deprived lifestyles of its inhabitants (PICONE, 2011).

Zamparini, well known in Palermo for being the president of the local football team, repeatedly stated that his mall would offer an incredible opportunity for the ZEN district to improve its economic, social and urban condition, and perhaps turn it into a shopping centrality for the city of Palermo. He promised to recruit only or mostly local employees (which he failed at doing), and also to build public services – as part of the negotiation with the local administration – to support and improve the life quality of the neighbourhood. Up to the present time, however, such promises remain unfulfilled.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

The case of Palermo is the example of a condition that characterizes various cities in Italy in the last twenty years. In analogy to other urban contexts, Palermo shows a configuration characterized by a strong interrelation between city and territory. In such a context, the historical landscape tends to disappear: both because of the legal and illegal forms of urban sprawl, and because of the tendency to transform the agricultural areas, particularly the historical citrus groves, in spaces to be destined to commercial activities.

Shopping malls in Palermo may be considered a late, yet complex example of economic globalization processes. They have suddenly appeared during an economically critical time, when the traditional State-funded control policies have declined in favor of more governance-based, private-funded strategies of

development (ROSSI et al., 2010). This critical moment has favored the reception of shopping malls as a positive solution to the traditional economic issues that a fringe city like Palermo might have. Nonetheless, shopping malls have been built around the deceptive idea that they might redefine the essence of, or perhaps even replace, traditional public spaces, which have increasingly become unbearable for money-lacking administrations. Supported by weak political decisions and by the communicative abilities of unscrupulous businessmen, shopping malls have been described as the new frontier of economic, and even social and cultural growth for Palermo. Still, they can be considered a complete let down from a social point of view, as they did nothing to address preexisting social issues, but also endangered or even damaged the fragile identities of the closest local neighborhoods, as for the case of Braccaccio (*Forum Palermo*), Borgo Nuovo (*La Torre*) and ZEN (*Conca d'Oro*).

Shopping malls, in addition, cannot be considered truly public spaces, as they do not support an overall social growth, but preserve private economic interests instead (GRAHAM et al., 1997). Their role as *pseudo-public spaces* is also particularly questionable, considering how shopping malls are being increasingly abandoned throughout the U.S.A., where new forms of commercial districts are in development, and are instead pointed out as the most innovative kind of economic development a city like Palermo could afford to achieve.

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## 5. Biography

Annalisa Giampino, architect, graduated in the School of Architecture of Palermo. PhD in Urban and Regional Planning (School of Architecture of Palermo). At present she is post-doc in Urban and Regional Planning at University of Palermo. Her particular research fields are revolved around: the interaction between tools of planning and sustainable development, the study of urban sprawl and the public space. About these fields she published essays and presented paper to seminars and conference.

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Prof. Marco Picone, geographer, graduated in the School of Humanities of Palermo. PhD in Geography (School of Economics of Messina). At present he is Senior Lecturer in Urban Geography in the School of Planning, University of Palermo. Currently he holds courses of Urban Geography and Social Geography at the School of Planning of the University of Palermo. His main research interests revolve around

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<sup>1</sup> Although the article should be considered a result of the common work and reflection of the three authors, Giampino took primary responsibility for section 1, Picone took primary responsibility for section 3, and Filippo Schilleci took primary responsibility for section 2.

<sup>2</sup> The Conca d'Oro is the plain of Palermo; until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was characterized by an agriculture of value and it can be considered a real theatrical space (Turri, 1998). Natural resources and human activity have made this area one of the more well known places of the Mediterranean, both for the agronomic and aesthetical values of its agrarian landscape and for the important agricultural productive systems. Several urban contexts Palermo exist in Italy, still characterized by a strong interrelation between city and territory. In Palermo, the recent events, connected to the realisation of new shopping malls in historical agricultural areas, show the increasing tendency to read the green areas as neutral support on which any type of commercial object can be built.

<sup>3</sup> Just in these phases of growth and transformation of the city, among the Fifties and Eighties of the last century, Palermo reached the peak of expansion with the formation of public houses through the realization of satellite districts that often, however, had no connection with the morphology of the territory and with the typology of the pre-existing villages. One of these is the district of Borgo Nuovo, that was born as the core of economic and popular house buildings during the phase of growth in Palermo of the Fifties. A new satellite district, located at a great distance from the city because of the land market; a situation, therefore, that already at start saw the district cut out from the most important and alive zones of the centre. The new district, projected for a population of 20.000 inhabitants, foresaw the realization of 3,350 popular lodgings with equipments and services.