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EDITED BY ROBERTO ROCCO AND DANIELE VILLA

NEW URBAN LANGUAGES
Tales and images of spatial justice

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From alternative representations to prospective visions

The administrative subdivisions in Palermo (Italy)¹

Abstract

Alternative representations of the city are not only a useful analysis tool, but they also provide elements of a conceived new version of lived space that can contribute to ameliorate the spatial justice of the city. This is even truer for intra-local spaces that are the reference scale for many public participation policies, grass-root projects and activists.

In this paper, we present the case of Palermo where the administrative subdivisions of the urban space have been imposed – because of legislation about administrative decentralisation – on the historical and perceived ones.

Alternative mapping shows intra-local spaces as places of identity definition and civic engagement. In our paper we present some examples of how local stakeholders represent their prospective visions for the neighbourhoods they live or act in.

Keywords – alternative representations; intra-urban borders; neighborhood; mental mapping, qualitative GIS

¹ This paper comes from collective reflections of the authors. In particular, Bruno Buffa is responsible for the section 9; Maria Luisa Giordano is responsible for the sections 2 and 6; Francesca Lotta is responsible for the sections 3, 5 and 7. Sections 1, 4, 8 and 10 have been written collectively.

Bruno Buffa and Francesca Lotta have been carrying out a study on neighbourhoods and administrative subdivisions in Palermo since 2011, in the framework of a research team in the University of Palermo (Buffa, 2015; Picone & Schilleci, 2012). Maria Luisa Giordano is currently working on a doctoral thesis on the changing definitions and representations of neighbourhoods in Lausanne and Palermo at the University of Geneva.

1. Introduction

In this working paper we want to investigate the potentialities that alternative cartographies of intra-urban borders have in improving the level of spatial justice in a context of administrative devolution.

The wide concept of spatial justice – both in its quantitative application as distributional justice and in its qualitative one as the right to self-determination – is tightly linked to the concept of borders. Lines – in fact, are necessary to plan and govern the territory, but often they do not take into account current relationships and stability. When the territorial analysis is conducted within a framework of boundaries that distort reality (Dematteis, 1985), local development policies cannot improve the wellbeing of local communities.

We argue that alternative representations can contribute in ameliorating the process of subdivision in a social justice perspective through the integration of local actors' visions of the city.

In this paper we will explore the potentialities of a range of diverse cartographic tools for apprehending in depth the reality of intra-urban borders in the city of Palermo, Italy. After a short introduction that recalls the importance of bordering in a spatial justice perspective, we will present our case study – Palermo – and the methodologies we experimented with, focusing on three neighbourhoods.

2. Spatial justice and intra-urban borders: critics

Postmodernist political geographers have shown since the 1990s that border formation, at all scales, – from the national state to the neighbourhood – has to do with questions of identity and difference. The focus is mainly on the process of bordering and on the idea of transition zones (Newman, 2006).

The concept of intra-urban borders has often been linked to phenomena such as segregation and fragmentation within the city. Studies about ethnic, social and economic ghettos have been developed – since the 1970s – and have contributed to the theorization of the right to the city, spatial justice and environmental justice (Harvey, 2010; Lefebvre, 2000; Marcuse, 2009; Soja, 2010).

The evolution of border studies in postmodernist geographies also affects the urban scale. Instead of simple fixed lines, intra-urban borders become strips dialectically and dynamically constructed both from the inside and outside, as part of the construction of intra-urban identities (Karaman and Islam, 2012; Sandercock, 2000).

The necessity to define boundaries is also interesting from the point of view of urban planning. Scholars have shown the issues connected with territorial boundaries in the contemporary city (McGrew and Lewis, 1992; Nierop, 1994) and recent land-use policies have been trying to deconstruct the mere delimitation areal. European politics regarding metropolitan areas is a quintessential example, showing several dynamic geometries for planning and management in order to overcome administrative boundaries (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Herrschel and Newman, 2002; Nicholls, 2005).

Recently scholars have focused on the role of boundaries in the identity-formation of urban communities. The complex relationship between ghettoization and citadelization, in fact, cannot explain thoroughly the process of bordering in the contemporary cities (Marcuse and Van Kempen, 2008, p. 251). Recent studies show that

even if borders “may disable by excluding strangers” they can also “enable by defining a communal territory”, so that they have to be understood as “ambivalent and always-becoming interfaces” (Karaman and Islam, 2012, p. 235). From this perspective, Sandercock (2000) calls for attention to be given to the “right to difference” of communities and groups in order to avoid phenomena of exclusion.

As such, an intra-urban border is a complex phenomenon which can both disable and segregate, as well as enable and empower. Drawing on Karaman and Islam (2012) we contend the necessity of developing “adequate policy tools for addressing the ‘enabling’ aspects of bordering processes” (p. 235).

3. Spatial justice and intra-urban borders: challenges

Discovering the empowering potentialities of intra-urban borders, thus, is an exciting challenge for urban planning and policies. For decades, the necessity to identify boundaries has been at the heart of the concept of territory. The definition in the *Enciclopedia Einaudi* (Roncayolo, 1977, p. 218), for example, is a clear reference to the importance of identifying borders to recognize a territory and then to govern it.

The existing boundaries are the result of cultural and historical stratifications within a geographical area. Persisting over time, they tend to become sediments, because of the disconnection between the communities that defined them and the communities that live them.

The definition and representation of urban territories is often only delegated to professional languages, based on coded systems of signs and symbols (Lefebvre, 1974). Nevertheless, the territory must be interpreted as a “place of mobility, flow and everyday practices, and which reads cities from their recurrent phenomenological patterns” (Amin and Thrift, 2002, p. 7). A good planner will be able to interpret those places and define strategies for management only through a comprehensive reading of the aforementioned approaches, and thus invoking the overcoming of rigid disciplinary skills.

In this paper we focus on the ability to identify a contemporary territory – in our case the neighbourhood – through the fundamental elements of better planning and management.

4. Alternative representations of intra-urban spaces

Alternative representations ameliorate – we argue – our understanding of urban spaces, projects and scenarios. We state that they can make a link between scientific data and symbolic or intuitive information. Cartography, in fact, has traditionally been based on a mathematical approach, separate from social sciences. Nevertheless, representations of cities or regions based only on Euclidean space are not enough for human geographers.

The growing interest in local identities and local knowledge has encouraged studies and applied research on alternative cartography. Collective map-making, participative GIS, and qualitative cartography have been explored with the aim of integrating local ecological knowledge, the human sense of landscape, local identities or practices in several projects or research.

Changing the point of view and the framework within which cartography observes the city allows us to realize how it is the result of groups’ and individuals’ actions that deform, enrich and adapt the space to their needs.

Mapping the perception is as important as physical mapping. Quality of urban

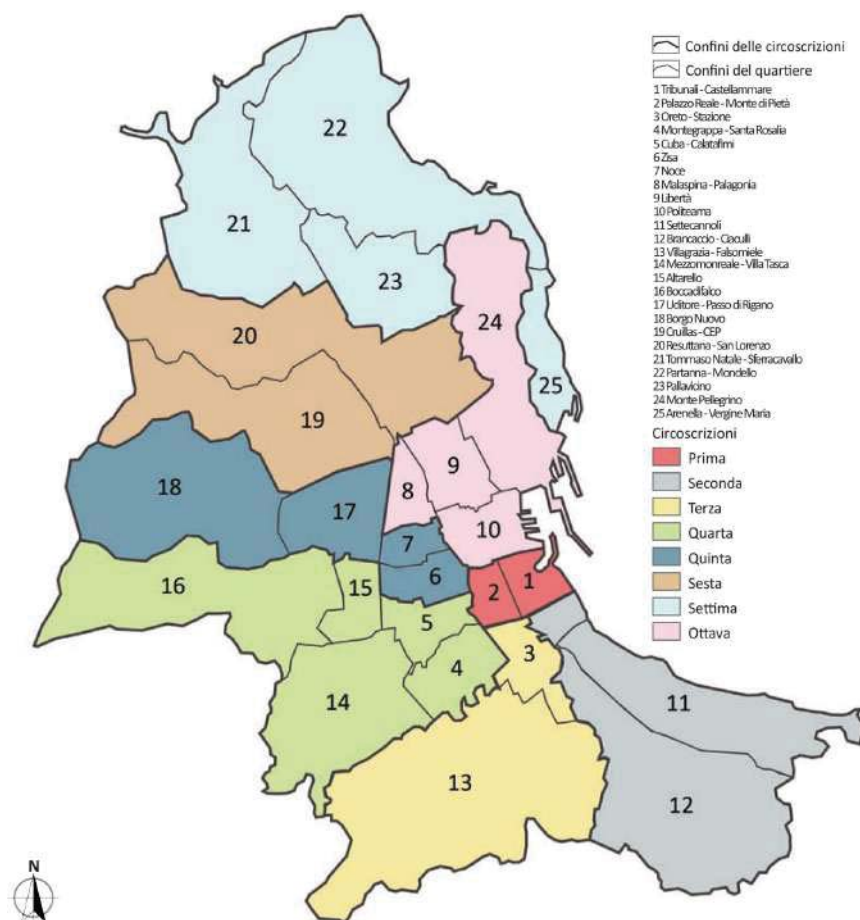
life is also determined by the “imageability” (Lynch, 1960) of the cityscape, and by the sense of identity and belonging of inhabitants to their environment.

We will focus here on three cartographic tools: mental mapping, qualitative synthetic representations derived from interviews that we have named re-elaborated mental maps, and qualitative GIS.

Gathering mental maps (Lynch, 1960) during semi-structured interviews offers the opportunity of identifying spatial orientation mechanisms, identity elements and the urban space as a result of human relationships. Moreover, pencil sketching limits the lack of non-professionals’ cartographic (and just graphic) competence. Drawing, in fact, can “represent a natural way of communicating spatial issues and values related to them.” (Soini, 2001, p. 235), and avoiding obligation of topographical precision makes mobilizing this competence easier (Debarbieux and Lardon, 2003).

Nevertheless, this is only a first step. The re-elaboration of mental maps by a planner is a synthetic exercise with the purpose of taking advantage of the information gathered during the interviews in its entirety: the professional drawer not only takes into account the graphic elements in the sketches, but all the information that emerged during the interviews (Picone & Schilleci, 2012, p. 68).

The third methodology we used is qualitative GIS. This quite recent approach to GIS drives us beyond the classic positivist approach, forcing the rigid structure of the software. The main goal is to modify a traditional GIS map, altering and deforming it according to the perceptions, points of view and emotions of citizens. For this purpose, the databases contain information collected through mixed quali-quantitative methods.²



Img. 1: Administrative subdivisions in Palermo (source: Picone & Schilleci 2012, p.73, re-elaborated by Francesca Lotta).

² Such as ethnographic interviews, mental maps, participant observation, active listening, brainstorming, focus groups, Planning for Real, neighbourhood walks etc. (Corbetta, 2003; Loda, 2008; Lynch, 1960; Sclavi, 2002).

5. The case study: Palermo and its intra-urban borders

The intra-urban subdivisions of Palermo – a complex and heterogeneous city of about 700,000 inhabitants – are the result of several cultural and administrative stratifications in its history, as well as over a decade of irresponsible government in its recent past. During the Modern Era the city was divided into sezioni and mandamenti³. These historical borders created a sense of belonging and identity over the centuries.

In the 20th century other subdivisions were created: 25 quartieri (neighbourhoods) in 1976, replaced by eight circoscrizioni (districts) in 1996 (Picone & Schilleci, 2012, cfr. Img. 1). The pressures of urban sprawl and of increasing administrative requirements drove the municipality to make choices which ignored the historical meaning of territories and boundaries.

In the process that led to the current subdivision – aimed at the decentralization of local services – the municipality expressed the will “to give back to the citizens their sense of belonging to a place” (Comune di Palermo, 1997, p. 49, personal translation). Nevertheless, the 25 quartieri have been regrouped in eight circoscrizioni that satisfy purely topographical and administrative criteria without any recognition of socio-urban identities (Pavone, 1980; Picone & Schilleci, 2012). The use of numbers instead of toponyms reflected the anonymity of the new subdivisions. Communities living in these places today do not recognize such wide and heterogeneous territories.

In the following paragraphs we will present three examples of how alternative representations – starting from the dimension of lived space that arises from inhabitants’ narratives – opened up our understanding of these multiple levels of urban subdivisions.



Img. 2: : V. 56 years old, working in Borgo Vecchio and living nearby.

³ Local names for intra-urban administrative subdivisions

6. Mental map analysis

Gathering mental maps from different local actors clearly shows the different levels of appropriation of historical or current subdivisions in Palermo.

The case of Borgo Vecchio – a historical fishing village just outside the walled city centre, integrated in the city during the 19th century – is rather representative. Today it is situated between the new harbour and the new city center of Palermo and, like them, it is part of the Ottava Circoscrizione, which comprises the parts of the city developed in the second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. As such, it is the most ancient neighbourhood of this circoscrizione.

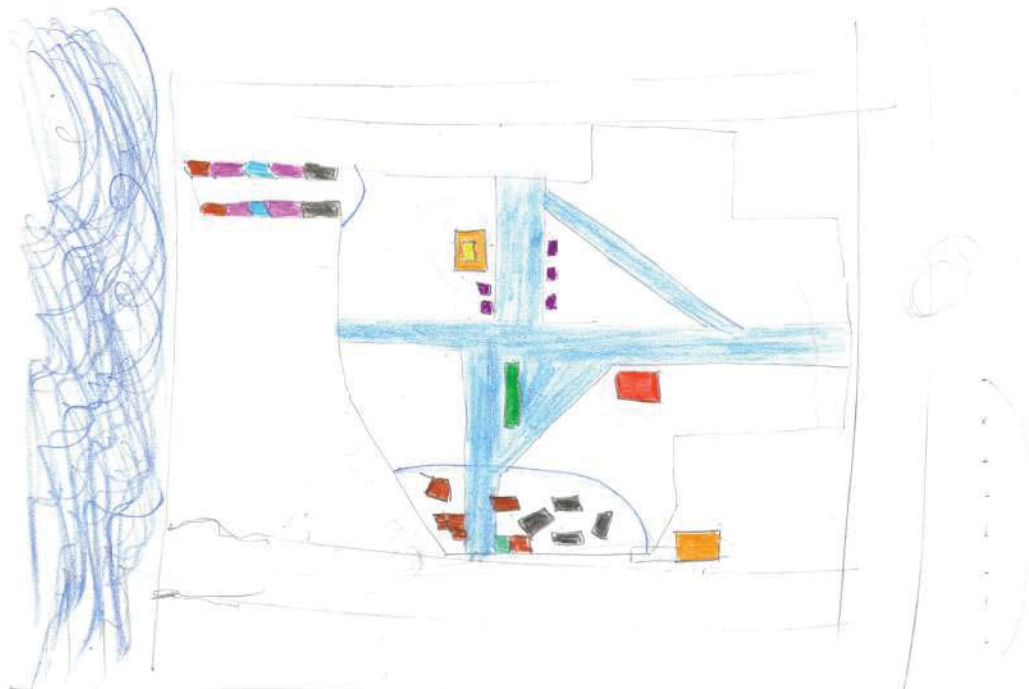
Mental maps 2 and 3 (Img. 2, Img. 3) show Borgo Vecchio as a squared insula within the urban fabric. Nevertheless, the isolation is not linked to architecture, but instead it has to be investigated in urban practices and local actors' perceptions.

It is interesting to notice that both local inhabitants and people living in close neighbourhoods represent Borgo Vecchio in the same way. The images from the inside and outside are almost superimposable.

For the inhabitants of Borgo Vecchio this ghettoization in practice is linked both to their strong sense of community and to the idea of isolation from the rest of the city. The neighbourhood is represented through the appropriation of public spaces, perceived as semi-private ones. Nevertheless, all inhabitants interviewed showed the diversity of their neighbourhood highlighting the proximity to the city-centre and the tourist attractions nearby.

Concerning the administrative subdivisions, local inhabitants are not able to define the borders of the Ottava Circoscrizione. The highest level they identify is the Quartiere Politeama (which existed in the administrative repartition previous to 1996). It is interesting to highlight that the Ottava Circoscrizione has no branches or services in Borgo Vecchio.

This brief analysis clearly shows the inadequacy of the current administrative subdivision. Even if it is not physical, a border does exist between Borgo Vecchio and the rest of the Ottava Circoscrizione. The strong identity within this neighbourhood deserves to be commended instead of becoming a reason for isolation. A devolution process should take this into account.



Img. 3: C., 45 years old, leaving in Borgo Vecchio.

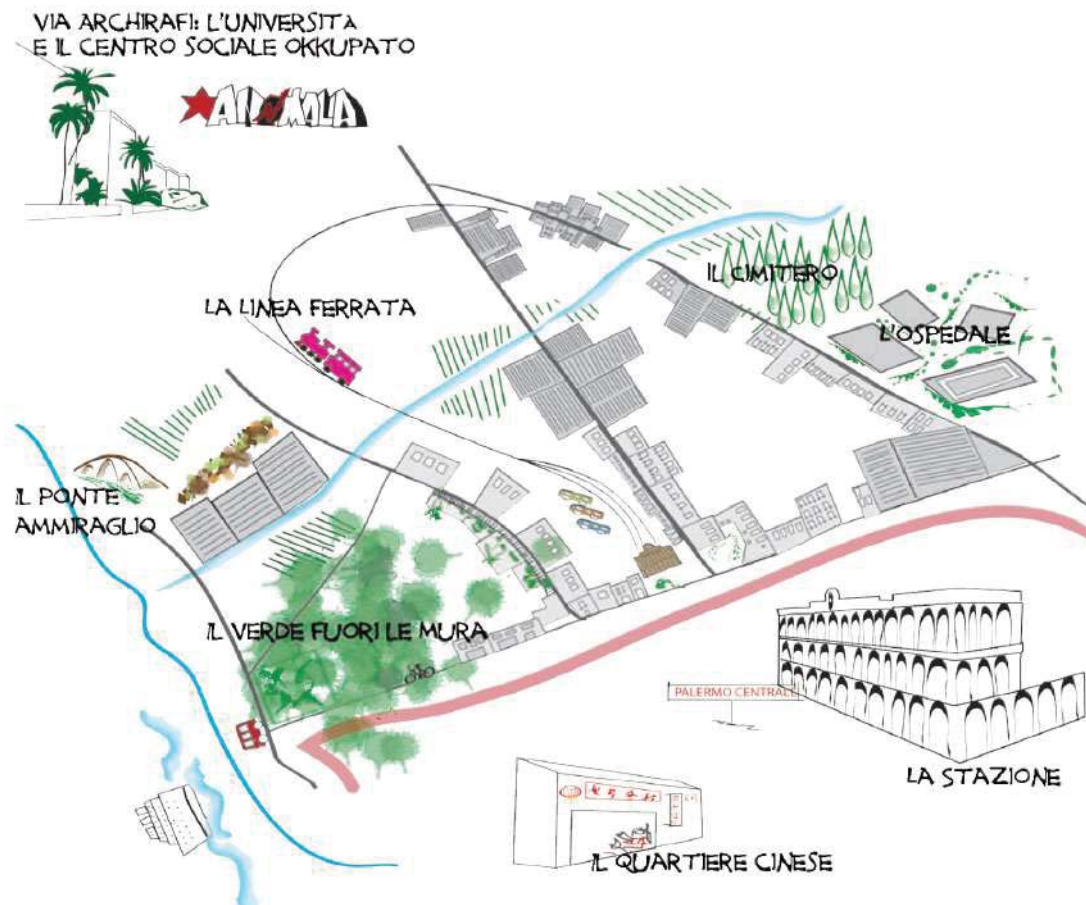
7. Re-elaborated mental maps

In 2011 an analysis of current administrative subdivisions of Palermo was carried out – both with quantitative and qualitative methods – in order to propose alternative solutions (Picone & Schilleci, 2012). A first analysis of statistical and technical data was followed by interviews and the study of local communities' perceptions.

This second step included the analysis of mental maps and their re-elaboration – together with other information which arose during the interviews – by a planner. The purpose of these qualitative representations – that we named re-elaborated mental maps – was to reflect the collective perceptions regarding the neighbourhoods and boundaries of all the people interviewed. The planner has thus played first the role of interpreter and then of drawer, transforming qualitative information about inhabitants' perceptions into graphics, with the aim of bringing out both the boundaries and other elements that identify the place.

A selection from the gathered information was necessary to define a shared and collective image of the neighbourhoods. We searched for two categories of data: firstly what Mandler (1984) called “inventory information” (typical elements that characterize places), and secondly interviews on spatial relationships. After this selective process we were able to identify the elements which formed a representative image of the neighbourhoods. This graphic rendering was an attempt to reflect a collective representation of individual's perceptions and schemes (Neisser, 1993).

Map 4 (Img. 4) shows, for example, the perceived boundaries of the neighbourhood Oreto-Stazione: two main roads on the east and north, a historical building and the railway lines on the south, the hospital and the cemetery on the west.



Img. 4: Perceived boundaries of the neighbourhood Oreto-Stazione

a unique neighbourhood within a wider circoscrizione, two nuclei of identity arise: one on the north Vergine Maria and the other on the south Arenella, testifying that the inhabitants' perceptions deserve consideration.

A second method has been applied to deform an orthophoto map using a re-elaborated mental map as a parameter. The orthophoto map has been overlaid and stretched with the re-elaborated mental map through the georeferencing tool. The comparison in the map 7 (Img. 8) shows many important elements previously invisible. The coastline on the border between the two boroughs – represented by the Cimitero dei Rotoli – appears broader in the deformed map, showing the residents' interest in regaining their relationship with the sea. It is possible to argue also that this social bond could create a real connection between the two boroughs. Phenomena of contraction or expansion are also visible in other elements of the neighbourhood.

Unlike the previous example of deformation, this method gives a clearer and more readable understanding, even to less experienced eyes; any resident might well orientate themselves better through this kind of representation as it is much closer to the reality of the territory.

Nome	Anni	Conoscenza del territorio	Riconoscibilità del territorio	Luoghi d'incontro	Servizi	Percezione della viabilità	Disagi urbani	luoghi d'incontro per bambini	Sicurezza	spostamenti
Domenico	70	dalla nascita	neutrale	"centro" (PRO Arenella)	Via Montalbo	poca accessibilità, assenza di regole	Fognatura, cava dismessa, fabbrica di lievito, rifiuti	Centro, chiesa	Media	
Alessia	24	dalla nascita	neutrale	Centro città. spiaggia	medico, poste, market, farmacia	poca accessibilità, assenza di regole		Chiesa	Medio Alta	
Agostino	70	dalla nascita	tonnara, chimica	cimitero, scalo(mercato ortofrutticolo)	posta	Esiste solo via papa sergio	arredo urbano assente, rifiuti,			
Salvatore	34	dalla nascita	chimica arenella, edifici incompleti dietro al GS, ospizio Marino, mare, monte pellegrino	piazza del quartiere (piazza tonnara)	tabacchi, poste, panificio, market, farmacia - centro o centro commerciale	poca accessibilità, assenza di regole, bassa considerazione dei mezzi pubblici	mancanza di centri d'accoglienza per giovani, spiaggia	giardino privato	medio	
Giuseppe	27	dalla nascita	le fabbriche abbandonate come spazi di gioco per bambini	piazza del quartiere, bar	tabacchi, poste, panificio, market, farmacia	servizio di trasporto pubblico assenti	rifiuti		Medio Alta	
Sandra	30	da 3 anni	discreta, basso	palestre, bar, pizzerie	supermercato, posta e di altro genere tutti facilmente raggiungibili	poca accessibilità			media alta	all'interno del quartiere a piedi, altrimenti utilizzo di un mezzo privato
Enrico	46	dalla nascita	forte	bar		poca accessibilità, assenza di regole		strada, chiesa	media alta	esclusivamente macchina
Giovanna	78	dalla nascita	Chiesa	Chiesa	a domicilio	difficoltà a camminare per i marciapiedi			alta	
Natale		dalla nascita	cimitero dei rotoli e ospizio Marino, tonnara florio, tonnara bordonaro	strada, bar, chiesa, pro arenella, punta di mastru piddu (porticciolo dell'arenella)	porto dell'arenella	pedonalizzare il borgo dei pescatori	mancano le biblioteche	chiesa		moto
Luca	19	dalla nascita	i vaneddi, il mare, l'ospizio marino, la spiaggia	mare, barca, bar, strada, tonnara	nel quartiere, la spesa settimanale all'auhan	strade strette bambini in strada di conseguenza rallentamento della velocità	mare, spiaggia	strade, chiesa	media alta	moto/macchina
Domenico	70	dalla nascita	neutrale	"centro" (PRO Arenella)	Via Montalbo	poca accessibilità, assenza di regole	Fognatura, cava dismessa, fabbrica di lievito, rifiuti	Centro, chiesa	Media	moto/macchina
Alessia	24	dalla nascita		Centro città. spiaggia	medico, poste, market, farmacia	poca accessibilità, assenza di regole		Chiesa	Medio Alta	

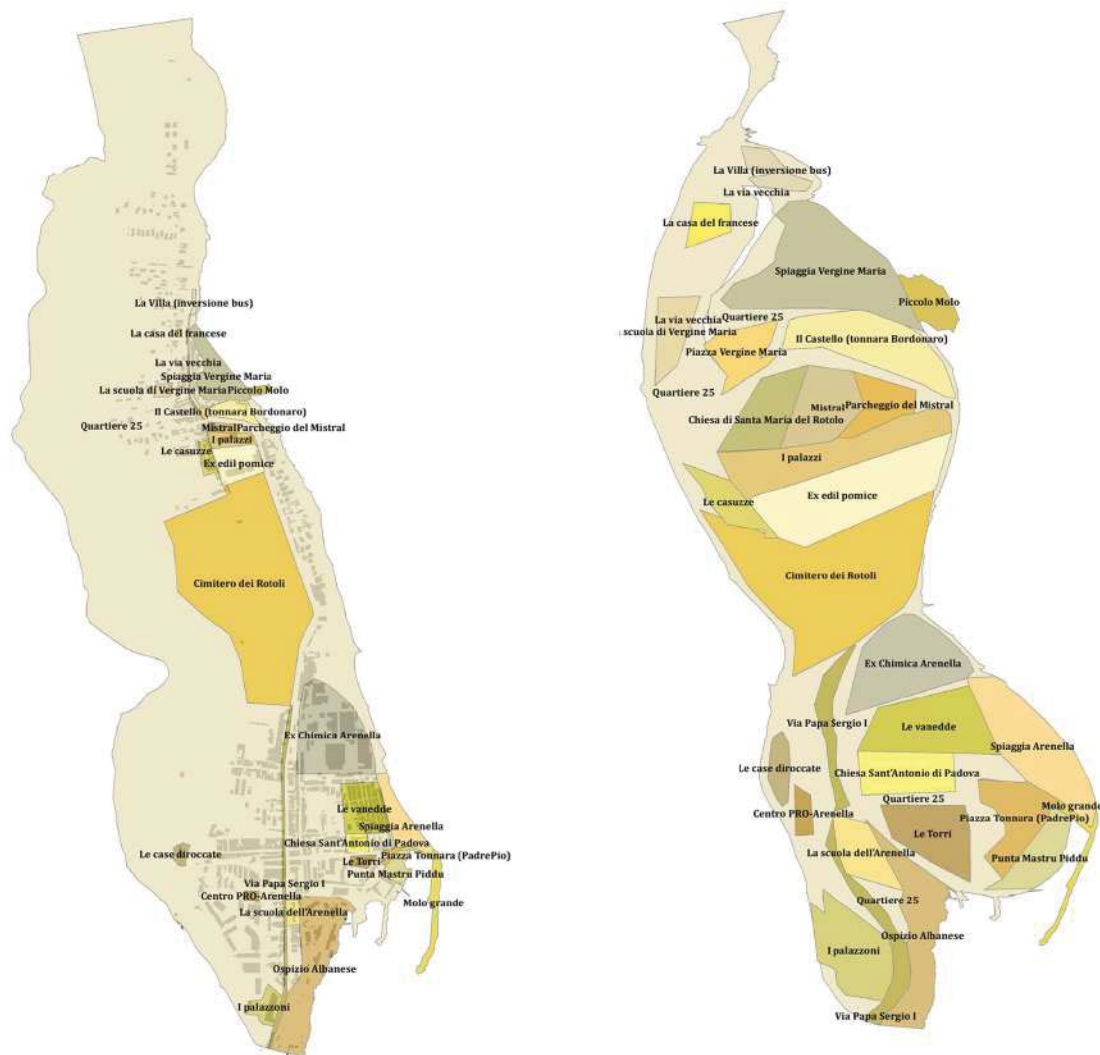
Img. 6: Table 1: Matrix extract of qualitative interviews

9. Conclusion

In this working paper we have explored the qualitative aspect of spatial justice. Distributional justice is the quantitative manifestation of the concept, which has been widely studied. The reflection on its qualitative characters, we argue, is also a big challenge. We contend that the theme of intra-urban borders is suitable for integrating both aspects.

Territorial management directed towards equal distribution exists only as a result of a profound knowledge of places built up also through the eyes of their inhabitants. Nevertheless, urban planning often quantifies welfare through the use of mandatory minimum measures for local services. This reductionist approach, however, often produces too few incisive local policies.

Alternative cartographic representations, we argue, have a lot of potential that deserve to be explored more in depth. As Crampton and Krygier (2006) state “[...] maps are active; they actively construct knowledge, they exercise power and they can be a powerful means of promoting social change.” (p. 15). From a spatial justice perspective, we think that different methodologies of alternative representations can be complementary in order to integrate scientific accuracy and accessibility to non-professionals, data from quantitative analysis and qualitative local knowledge.



Img. 7: Map 6: Identitary elements of the neighbourhood before and after the deformation.

As it has been said, administrative borders in Palermo are not recognized by its inhabitants. The lack of consideration given to citizens' perceptions and sense of belonging creates dynamics of alienation and disaffection, which can lead to a loss of sense of community.

Alternative mapping which takes into consideration citizens' perceptions and recognition of territories is crucial in developing dynamics of membership. In this sense, it lends itself to being used both by technicians or administrators and by citizens in participatory processes. As such, inhabitants would have an instrument of knowledge – a shared, public image of their own urban reality – suitable also for technical or political professionals.

Urban planning and management need borders, as well as some communities within the city that claim for the persistence of local identities, defined also by the use of urban space. Our three examples offer a much more complex image of the intra-urban subdivisions of Palermo than the administrative one. Identifying these borders, exploring them as ongoing dynamic processes, is in our opinion a step forward in the direction of a just city.



Img. 8: Map 7: Orthophoto map before and after the deformation

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