

# Can culture save us? Rethinking culture-led touristification from Palermo (Italy)<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the historic centers of many South European cities have undergone profound transformations in which creative production and tourist flows have played a leading role, converting entire neighborhoods into enclaves where touristification processes, sometimes associated with gentrification, have upheaved social composition, housing dynamics, and commercial fabric.

In this article, we try to rearticulate the nexus between culture-led regeneration and touristification by considering events that have occurred in Palermo (Italy), a Southern European urban context that has recently experienced an unprecedented wave of tourism pressure. The article offers a critical overview of the material and discursive changes undergone by the Kalsa neighborhood between 1993 and 2023, with reference to processes of what we call “culture-led touristification” and its controversial implications. Our analysis, employing an assemblage of qualitative and quantitative methods, offers some remarks on our case study and how it could provide a basis for reflecting on the concept of culture-led touristification in Southern European cities by taking the viewpoint of an under-explored and not-(yet)-overtouristified urban context.

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between touristification processes and cultural activities has recently been the focus of numerous works in the field of urban studies, within a broader debate on culture-led regeneration (Altaba Tena et al., 2025; Guinard & Margier, 2018; Marucci, 2025; Raposo, 2023). Indeed, over the last three decades, culture has played a key role in the construction of urban policies, decisively informing development strategies under the current regime of urban neoliberalism (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Miles, 1997; Miles & Paddison, 2005). Culture-led regeneration became a veritable urban orthodoxy in the space of a couple of decades and has been implemented in cities across both the global North and global South to foster economic growth and competition on an international scale (Miles, 2020). Both culture-led regeneration policies and their theorizations have traveled far from

where they were originally formulated, which has entailed progressively adapting – or attempting to adapt them – to different socioeconomic, political, and cultural settings. Throughout this journey, the debate on culture-led regeneration – as illustrated by Thomas Maloutas in relation to the conversation surrounding gentrification (Maloutas, 2018) – has generated a composite theoretical geography with its implicit contextual attachments.

Since it arrived in the cities of Southern Europe, the culturalization of urban development has necessarily revolved around tourism. Indeed, over the past ten years, the debate on Southern European cities has increasingly focused on the touristification processes that are rapidly transforming the social and economic fabric of these cities, especially in their historic centers. Although the concept of touristification was brought to the international Anglo-American debate by Kevin Fox Gotham with reference to the US context (Gotham, 2005a,b), it has

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always found a key ground in Southern Europe, recently sparking intense debate on its controversial associations with gentrification and, more in general, on the processes of socio-spatial exclusion to which it can give rise (Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020; Sequera & Nofre, 2020; Sequera & Nofre, 2018; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2020).

In this article, we set out to reread touristification and its corollaries based on the events of the last thirty years in the historic center of Palermo (Italy), a medium-sized Southern European metropolis that has recently experienced an unprecedented wave of tourism pressure. Specifically, we examine what we define as the processes of *culture-led touristification* that characterize the policies and rhetoric of urban change in Palermo, using this term to evoke a veritable urban hendiads that increasingly associates culture with tourism, reducing the former to a development driver for the latter. The epicenter of culture-led touristification processes in Palermo is the Kalsa district, which – since the early 2000s – has been at the heart of a targeted political strategy of culturally-based development designed to drive the rebirth of tourism in the city (Picone, 2021). The culmination of this trajectory – which received a first major boost in 2015 when parts of the historic center and the Kalsa district were recognized as UNESCO heritage sites – came in 2018, when Palermo was named the cultural capital of Italy and chosen as the venue for Manifesta 12, one of the most prestigious traveling, contemporary art biennials. Although the COVID-19 emergency interrupted the exponential increase in tourist arrivals, the dynamics of culture-led touristification in the historic center of Palermo have resumed with unprecedented intensity since the pandemic ended. This is because relaunching the tourism sector is one of the leading, conventionally recognized solutions for the Southern European urban economy in times of crisis. Our analysis of culture-led touristification processes in the Kalsa neighborhood of Palermo, allows us to demonstrate how the processes of culturalization and touristification are consolidated within precise relationships of dependency – namely, the increasing reliance of cultural policies on tourism development for funding, visibility, and legitimacy. This framing allows us to explore how culture is instrumentalized to serve tourism-oriented agendas, often at the expense of more autonomous or community-driven cultural initiatives. At the same time, it enables us to expand the discussion on touristification from the vantage point of an under-explored and not-(yet)-overtouristified urban context.

In the next section, we discuss the theoretical geographies of culture-led touristification from a critical urban studies perspective, highlighting the importance of disentangling the nexus between touristification, gentrification, and culture-led regeneration in favour of a more open and contextual approach. Subsequently, we outline the research design and methodologies adopted in our study. By using evidence from urban planning document analysis, interviews with stakeholders, media discourse and descriptive statistical analyses, the second part of the article offers a critical overview of the changes undergone by the Kalsa neighborhood in Palermo between 1993 and 2023, with particular reference to processes of culture-led touristification and their controversial implications. We conclude with some final remarks on our case study and how it could provide a basis for rearticulating the interplay between culture-led regeneration, gentrification, and touristification in Southern European cities.

## 2. Expanding the geographies of culture-led touristification

Twenty years after the publication of the special issue of *Urban Studies* on culture-led regeneration (Miles & Paddison, 2005), arts and cultures still are key ingredients in urban development policies and discourses. If the recognition of culture as a vibrant tool for urban change dates back to the earliest days of urban studies scholarship (Burgess, 1925), its consecration as a catalyst for regeneration was proclaimed in the UK and the US in the 1980s, when public and private strategies led to a cultural turn in policies for urban renewal, especially in post-industrial contexts (Miles, 2005; Paddison, 1993; Bianchini &

Parkinson, 1993; Zukin, 1995, 2010). Since its emergence, the discussion on the role of culture and the arts in urban change has moved across a wide range of approaches, topics, and cases, raising concerns over its interplay with social inclusion (Belfiore, 2002; Miles, 2020; Nakagawa, 2010), community involvement (Lin & Hsing, 2009; Yarker, 2018), and place branding (Andres & Golubchikov, 2016; Raposo & Nofre, 2024), among others. In this context, the nexus between culture-led regeneration and gentrification has gained wide scholarly attention. As it is generally stated, artists, art entrepreneurs, and art organizations may play a key role in the “class remake” of the city (Smith, 1996), especially in the first two stages of gentrification (Ley, 2003; Mathews, 2010; Zukin, 1982). This general statement has come under closer scrutiny over the last decades as several scholars have shown the opportunity to disentangle and complexify the nexus between arts and gentrification (Gainza, 2016; Grodach et al., 2018). In particular, the expanding geographies of culture-led regeneration – which are now not limited to the major cities of the West – have recently strengthened the ground for suggesting alternative and more open possibilities of articulation (Porter & Shaw, 2009: 5).

Leaving apart the multiple trajectories along which theories on culture-led regeneration have traveled, in this section we briefly map out their Southern European geography with particular reference to the theorization of its relationship with touristification. Before examining culture-led touristification in Southern Europe, it is essential to clarify what is meant by “Southern Europe” as a conceptual category. Since Lila Leontidou’s *The Mediterranean City in Transition* (Leontidou, 1990) which positioned Southern Europe as a distinct urban context, scholars have debated the idea of a “Mediterranean urban paradigm.” This framework suggests that cities in Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain share post-war development trajectories shaped by informal urbanization (Chiodelli, 2021; Cremaschi & Lieto, 2020), fragmented governance structures (Seixas & Albet, 2012), distinctive housing regimes (Arbaci, 2019; Tulumello, 2022), strong social movements (Leontidou, 2010, 2012), and specific socio-spatial arrangements (Chorianopoulos et al., 2010; Salvati, 2014; Munoz, 2003). However, this category remains contested (Cuadrado-Ciurana et al., 2017; Salvati et al., 2013). Rather than adopt a fixed or essentialist definition, this article draws on Giaccaria and Minca’s notion of the “Mediterranean alternative” (Giaccaria & Minca, 2010), viewing Southern European cities not as exceptions to dominant urban theory but as critical vantage points that challenge Anglo-American frameworks. In this way, the article moves beyond the binary of ‘Southern’ and ‘Northern’ theory, highlighting instead the epistemological and contextual diversity within the so-called global North, as illustrated by Southern European urban experiences (Chiodelli, 2021; Tulumello, 2022).

In Southern European cities, the discussion on the role of culture in urban change cannot but connect with tourism development (Aoyama, 2009; Campos & Sequeira, 2020; Raposo & Nofre, 2024; Rius Ullde-molins, 2014). In recent years, the marked increase in tourist arrivals to the central districts of certain Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Greek cities has led numerous scholars to question the relationship between tourism and urbanization, making touristification one of the leading research topics within Southern European critical urban studies. Recent lines of inquiry that originated in cities in the south of Europe include the role of tourism in the production of new urban development models in response to the financial crisis (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020b; Lestegás, 2019; López-Gay et al., 2021; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2020), the impact of tourism-real estate speculation (González-Pérez, 2020) and platform-mediated short term rentals on the urban fabric (Ardura Urquiaga et al., 2020; Bei, 2025; Bei & Celata, 2023; Brollo & Celata, 2022; Celata & Romano, 2020; Yrigoy, 2019) and urban landscapes (Jover & Barrero-Rescalvo, 2023), the foodification processes associated with the tourist economy (Bourlessas et al., 2021), the conflicts generated by overtourism (Pettas et al., 2022), and the disputed effects of the pandemic on all of these phenomena (Alexandri & Janoschka, 2020; Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou et al., 2022). Within this overall framework, the radical

changes that tourism is bringing about in the historic centers of Lisbon, Barcelona, Madrid, Florence, and Athens offer key grounds for revisiting the discourse on gentrification from a Southern European perspective (Cocola-Gant, 2016; Esteve et al., 2020). Given the drive to create cities that attract (and to a certain extent also fascinate) tourists, gentrification has become the main theoretical category for describing the socio-spatial cost of such processes.

The link between touristification and gentrification in Southern European urban studies has recently been called into question by scholars seeking to problematize both the contents of this theoretical association and the effects that could derive from it. More specifically, Sequera and Nofre outlined the marked conceptual and material differences between the two processes and advocated for thinking of them as distinct, albeit interrelated (Sequera & Nofre, 2018). According to these authors, reading the changes involved in the transformation of urban settings into tourist destinations within the framework of theories on gentrification implies failing to understand the diverse and distinctive nature of the social, economic, cultural, and – obviously – spatial impacts wielded by touristification (Sequera & Nofre, 2018: 7). An equally critical position but with more nuanced implications is that of Tulumello and Allegretti (Tulumello & Allegretti, 2020), who drew on the case of the Mouraria neighborhood in Lisbon and applied the concept of articulation to maintain an appropriate distinction between touristification and gentrification while acknowledging an equally inevitable correlation between the two processes. The most radical criticism of the tendency to associate all urban change with gentrification has been advanced from Seville, which provided the ground for Jover and Díaz-Parra to tease out the distinction between gentrification, transnational gentrification, and touristification, and call out the power imbalances underlying the excessively elastic use of gentrification and its corollaries (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020a). What is at stake, these authors suggested, is political as well as epistemological: when the category of gentrification is overused, this obscures the differences and nuances that characterize urban change, impoverishing our understanding of the processes involved and hindering opposition to the socio-spatial injustices that accompany these processes. In contrast, a more nuanced reading of change in cities would provide a more accurate picture of the actors, interests, mechanisms, and contradictions at play. This could usefully inform the work of both activists contesting changes and administrators with responsibility for developing social policy responses to change (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020a: 3046).

In the next sections, we aim to disentangle the interwoven knots of touristification, gentrification, and culture-led regeneration in favour of an approach that places more emphasis on the unfolding process of transformation than its outcomes (Gainza, 2016). This poses empirical and theoretical questions such as: how, when, and under what conditions the trajectories of culture-led regeneration intersect with touristification processes, what is the role of planning policies and strategies in the production of tourism-oriented “cultural quarters” (Bain & Landau, 2022), how local and international actors mobilize the existing cultural infrastructures to rebrand the neighborhood image to be touristically consumed, and which forms of symbolic and material disposition are at stake (if there are any).

Given the fundamental role played by culture and the arts in the process of touristification that are rapidly altering the historic city center of Palermo, we define this process of culture-led and tourism-oriented transformation as *culture-led touristification*, so highlighting the multiple entanglements between urban policies, cultural economies, tourism development, and urban change. Indeed, the historic center of Palermo provides the ground from which we set out to further expand some of the theories on touristification in Southern Europe and to critically investigate the correlations between culture-led regeneration, touristification, and gentrification. To this end, we examine culture-led touristification as a “problem-space”, as defined by the anthropologist David Scott; that is to say, as a historically and spatially specific “context of argument and, therefore, one of intervention” (Scott, 2004: 4).

Therefore, as called for by Jover and Díaz-Parra (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020a), we strive to return to the materiality of the local area and to eventually provide new openings to existing theories of culture-led touristification. This, we believe, should encourage reflection on the tension between the general and the particular that lies at the heart of every attempt at theorization, as well as on the need to situate our inquiry and to express our positionality as researchers.

### 3. Research design and methodology

To investigate the processes of culture-led touristification in the Kalsa district of Palermo, we adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined different sources of information (Table 1). First, we used descriptive analysis of statistical data at the urban and neighborhood scales to map socio-demographic patterns from 2001 to the present. The main sources were the Registry Office of the Municipality of Palermo (data updated to 2022) and the ISTAT census (data updated to 2023). To analyze changes in the neighborhood's commercial fabric, we drew on data from the Chamber of Commerce (years 2005–2018). The impact of tourism was mapped via a combination of data from the Statistics Office of the Municipality of Palermo concerning tourist numbers, arrivals, stays, and accommodation facilities (data updated to 2023). We further focused on the “airbnbification” of the neighborhood between 2018 and 2023, drawing on InsideAirBnB data to produce a series of graphs.

We categorized and geocoded cultural spaces and actors by combining information from multiple sources: the Italian Ministry of Culture's Statistics Office and map of contemporary art places, the CeSVoP observatory on third-sector cultural associations, and the collective of small craft and creative businesses, ALAB.

In assembling the case study, we carried out 34 in-depth interviews of 60–90 min duration between May 2021 and October 2023. The interviewees were public sector representatives (7), cultural and social workers (8), artists (5), former Manifesta12 workers (2), and residents (12). Interviewees were selected after reviewing urban policies, newspaper articles, social media, and other secondary sources on the cultural landscape of the neighborhood and then by using snowball sampling. The interviews aimed to gather data on respondents' views of the neighborhood transformation and the role of both tourism and culture within it and to map out their positioning in this process. All the interviews were directly conducted by the authors, electronically recorded, and transcribed. We also conducted urban ethnographic fieldwork in the Kalsa neighborhood via participant observation during key events and activities (street meetings, cultural events, residents' assemblies, and participatory processes concerning the revitalization of certain spaces). In addition, two of the authors, who had been residents of the neighborhood since 2011 and 2019 respectively, further supplemented this data via autoethnographic practices.

To investigate the dense mobilization of discourses and representations that accompanied and co-produced change in the city and neighborhood, we reviewed official documents (urban plans, public sector reports) and local and international media sources (newspapers, blogs, television reports, social media), using the approaches and techniques of critical discourse analysis. The assumption informing this part of the research was that processes of culture-led touristification in Palermo have had a profound impact also on the city's immaterial geographies.

### 4. The making of a cultural quarter: the Kalsa neighborhood

Throughout its history, the center of Palermo has been crossed by two main thoroughfares that intersect to form the city's four historic

**Table 1**  
Methodological summary.

Topics	Objects of inquiry	Sources of evidence/methods	Topics	Objects of inquiry	Sources of evidence/methods
Tourism	Tourism arrivals	Office for Statistics (Palermo) Port Authority (Palermo)	Retail	Commercial changes	Chamber of Commerce Interviews of retailers
	Tourism narratives	Media and journalistic sources Interviews Participant observation InsideAirBnB	Planning	Urban planning tools Strategic policies	Municipality of Palermo Port Authority (Palermo)
	Short-term rentals		Culture	Museums and other institutional spaces Cultural associations	Italian Ministry of Culture UNESCO Institute for Statistics National Institute of Statistics (Italy) Service center for Volunteers (Palermo) Free Artisans-Artists Association (Palermo)
Real Estate	Real Estate market trends and rent gap	Real Estate Market Observatory (OMI)			
Demography	Demographic changes	National Institute of Statistics (Italy) Office for Statistics (Palermo) Interviews of residents		Cultural networking The role of culture in neighborhood change	Interviews of cultural sector entrepreneurs Participant observation Auto-ethnography Critical discourse analysis



**Fig. 1.** Spatialized population increase in the Kalsa neighborhood.  
Source: Authors. Data from population censuses conducted by ISTAT in 2011 and 2021.

quarters. One of these is the district known as Kalsa – a variation on the Arab name for the city – which has a surface area of 81.69 ha and a resident population of 7.405 people, of whom 1417 are foreign nationals.<sup>1</sup> As we now set out to illustrate, this area of the city is highly representative of urban change in Palermo and its historic center over the post-war years and the subsequent period of economic expansion. It also reflects the new urban policies and programs that, beginning in the 1990s, have led the city to where it is today, along with its current image and representations. The restoration of the historic center has been a key component of Palermo's urban history over the past seventy years, giving rise to multiple processes of change. Based on urban plans and recent multi-component programs, we now attempt to piece together the fragmented history of an area that is considered to have led the “rebirth” of the historic center, a process that has accelerated further in the period

following the COVID-19 public health emergency.

In the following three subsections, we examine culture-driven regeneration as a government-led initiative from a historical perspective, exploring the conditions under which cultural development aligns with touristification. First, we explore how institutional actors have led Palermo's culture-driven regeneration, focusing on the mechanisms and strategies used to renew the city and its image. The second subsection focuses on how this cultural branding is reinforced through major events like Manifesta 12, which enhance the city's cultural appeal and vibrancy. The third subsection examines the expansion of the tourism sector within this regeneration trend, analyzing its impact on touristification and the sector's resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4.1. Planning the cultural rebirth (1993–2014)

Palermo was among the Southern Italian cities most heavily impacted by the World War II bombings; with 74,966 rooms destroyed or rendered uninhabitable (Pedone, 2013) and its key monuments reduced to rubble, it long bore the signs of the war. Kalsa was one of the

<sup>1</sup> Between 2001 and 2023, the population increased by 34,3 % (ISTAT, Permanent Population Census 2023, General Population Census 2011, and Industry and Services Census 2001). This data was provided by the Statistical Studies and Research Office of the City of Palermo (see Fig 1).

worst affected districts. The post-war reconstruction of Palermo followed the design and methods laid out in the new urban plans of the 1950s and 1960s, which envisaged the physical breaking up of the previous urban fabric via modifications to the street network. The upshot was the thinning out and dispersal of the historic center. The previous residents were thus pushed out of the center in the name of economic and technical needs with a gradual exodus of residents and businesses, which laid the ground for a subsequent phase of neglect and physical and social decay (Costantino, 2010: 501).

In 1993, under the political leadership of Leoluca Orlando,<sup>2</sup> with the approval of a new Detailed Executive Plan (PPE), the restoration of the historic center got underway with a series of interventions designed to maintain or recover the city's public and private architectural heritage (Lo Piccolo & Leone, 2008). With the primary objective of addressing urban decay and attracting back approximately 50,000 residents, early planning tools primarily relied on preservation and rehabilitation strategies. However, the 1990s marked a turning point, as more complex and integrated programs – shaped by the Europeanization of urban policy – gave significant momentum to the revitalization of Palermo's historic center. This shift signaled a departure from the strictly conservative and prescriptive approach of the PPE, embracing instead a broader, strategic vision centered on urban attractiveness and competitiveness, as well as a progressive opening to a private-sector governance.

During this period, the city engaged in the Urban I Community Initiative Program (PIC), part of the European Union's cohesion policy (Carpenter, 2006; CEC, 2004), aimed at regenerating deprived urban neighborhoods. Framed within a policy context increasingly oriented toward city marketing and place branding (Rius Ulldemolins, 2014), this participation positioned Palermo within a wider trend across European cities, seeking to leverage culture, heritage, and urban design to promote urban renewal and economic recovery.

In Palermo, the Urban I program targeted the neglected and decaying areas of the historic center, including the Kalsa neighborhood. As in many other European cities, investment initiatives like Urban played a pivotal role in enhancing Palermo's attractiveness and competitiveness, supporting the narrative of a “rebirth” of the historic center that gained traction in both political discourse and national and international media. The restoration and promotion of the city's historical and artistic heritage laid the groundwork for a reimagined urban identity – one increasingly centered around culture and aesthetics (Picone, 2021). Within this framework, particular emphasis was placed on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, especially local artisanal crafts, which were identified as “an invaluable resource for urban development and redevelopment” (Comune di Palermo, 2000). By assigning arts and crafts a central role in the regeneration of the historic center, the Urban program significantly influenced subsequent efforts to rebrand the neighborhood, shaping the evolving cultural economy of Kalsa.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2000s, Palermo's competitiveness and appeal were further strengthened by the strategic plan Palermo Capital of the Euro-Mediterranean, designed to stimulate the city's future growth. This plan builds on past initiatives through comprehensive programming while aiming to unlock untapped potential. Its vision structured around four key themes – environment, culture, mobility, and services for individuals and businesses – centers on nine strategic axes: the interconnected, productive, cultural, creative, tourism, leisure, integrated,

international, and metropolitan city. Within this urban imagery, the Kalsa neighborhood was definitively enshrined as the city's new cultural epicenter. Its public squares hosted a variety of events focused on contemporary culture and art. During Diego Cammarata's term as mayor (2001–2012), the center-right administration launched an urban development strategy aimed at repositioning Palermo on the national and international stage. The goal was to attract investment and promote the growth of the service and tourism sectors by enhancing the city's historical and cultural identity (Söderström et al., 2009). Within this framework, the Kals'Art festival (held in 2004–2006 and again in 2009) transformed the Kalsa neighborhood into “a great stage for shows, music, theatre and exhibitions”.<sup>4</sup> The process of relaunching the entire city starting from the regeneration of its historic center took another sudden leap forward with the “Palermo capital of the Euro-Mediterranean” project (2001–2008) followed by Palermo's application to be nominated European Capital of Culture in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the more common forms of displacement and aggressive gentrification associated with large-scale urban renewal – where surging property values render housing unaffordable for long-term residents – the transformation of Palermo's Kalsa district and historic center is more nuanced at this stage. It is important to note that the specific historical trajectory of Palermo's historic center – marked by post-war abandonment, demographic decline, and underinvestment – has shaped a distinct form of urban change. From a peak of 120,000 inhabitants in the mid-20th century, the population of the historic center dropped to around 45,00 by the late 70s (Abbate, 2002). In this context, the transformations of recent years have not triggered radical displacement or wholesale replacement of the resident population, despite some changes in the composition of the local population – made of highly educated people<sup>6</sup> – and the local retail sector and a progressive increase in temporary residents. In a real estate market that has remained relatively stable<sup>7</sup> over the past decades, urban policies are instead fostering subtle but significant changes. Through the construction of a new urban image (Picone, 2021) and the redefinition of local identity within a more cosmopolitan narrative (Söderström et al., 2009), these policies have driven a process of repositioning aimed at increasing the city's attractiveness and competitiveness. This so-called “rebirth” has been widely celebrated in national and international media, political rhetoric, and institutional discourse.

The rhetoric of rebirth has been a key theme in the political agenda of former mayor Leoluca Orlando. A pivotal figure in Palermo's contemporary history, Orlando is widely recognized for his stance against the mafia and his role in leading the so-called “Palermitan Spring.” His vision combined urban regeneration with a multicultural imaginary that often blurred the lines between migration and tourism. As he put it: “The flag of the world is mobility, which [...] is the recognition of a city's degree of change. [Palermo made] a radical choice in favor of mobility, incorporating the welcoming of migrants within this framework. Whoever arrives in Palermo is a Palermitan! This concept also extends to tourist reception. Between 2014 and 2020, Palermo became a major tourist city”.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Diego Cammarata on *Comuni Italiani*, 16 June 2008 (<https://rete.comuni-italiani.it/blog/00907>).

<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, Matera was selected as the European Capital of Culture in 2019.

<sup>6</sup> According to ISTAT data, between 2011 and 2021, there was a 21.8 % increase in the education level of residents in the Kalsa neighborhood, 50 % of whom are made up of single-person households (whereas in 2001, single-person households made up 35 % of the total).

<sup>7</sup> According to OMI (Osservatorio Mercato Immobiliare) data, the market value of residential properties (€/m<sup>2</sup>) in the area bordered by Via Vittorio Emanuele, Foro Italico, Via Lincoln, and Via Roma – largely overlapping with the Kalsa district – decreased by 16 % between 2011 and 2023. Prices fell significantly from €1550 in 2011 to €1100 in 2017 before gradually recovering to €1300 in 2023. While the overall trend is downward, recent years show signs of stabilization or a potential rebound (data processing by authors).

<sup>2</sup> Leoluca Orlando has been a key figure in Palermo's recent political history, serving as mayor in several terms: from 1985 to 1990, from 1993 to 2000, and again from 2012 to 2022.

<sup>3</sup> This was the background to the setting up in 2010 of the ALAB network (self-employed artisans and artists Balarm), which today comprises eighty artisan workshops and three hundred members and, more recently, the Palermo Mediterranean Gateway project, a spin-off of the Palazzo Butera project, that coordinates a “distributed school” of arts and crafts.

Yet, as demonstrated by other cases such as Turin (Bonini Baraldi et al., 2021), culture-driven renaissances are often framed uncritically in positive terms within policy narratives. In practice, however, the outcomes frequently diverge from these projections. Over time, such initiatives risk serving more as rhetorical devices than as mechanisms for inclusive and transformative change, functioning instead as tools of co-optation.

Beyond political narratives surrounding migration and hospitality, these rhetorical framings rarely translate into concrete practices. Instead, they contribute to storytelling in which migration is instrumentalized as a tool of urban branding, supporting a simplified and depoliticized image of the multicultural city. In efforts to position Palermo on the international stage, culture, and diversity were increasingly framed as drivers of urban development and magnets of attractiveness. Yet, in the absence of protective regulatory frameworks – and under the influence of the “creative and attractive city” paradigm (Florida, 2002) – development strategies have become progressively aligned with, and legitimized by market-oriented goals and interests.

#### 4.2. Kalsa on the world stage (2015–2019)

It was chiefly in 2015, with the addition of “Arab-Norman Palermo and the cathedrals of Cefalù and Monreale” to the UNESCO World Heritage List, that tourism became a powerful catalyst driving neighborhood culturalization processes. Indeed, from the moment that Palermo and its historic center were included on this “magic list of global status” (Askew, 2010), increasingly intensive processes of culture-led touristification took root in the neighborhood and began to deeply transform its socio-spatial structures (Taormina & Bonini Baraldi, 2022). Within this context of international restructuring, Palazzo Butera acts as both a symbol and an agent. This historic building, purchased by the collector Massimo Valsecchi in 2016 with the objective of opening a cultural center in Palermo, is perceived as a “model” for urban regeneration via the arts.<sup>8</sup> As observed by some of the real estate developers we interviewed, the reopening of Palazzo Butera prompted increased investment flows from other Italian regions and abroad, positioning Kalsa as “the nerve center, the symbolic point on whose fate depends the city’s international positioning and development”.<sup>9</sup>

The chief draw has been the neighborhood’s artistic and cultural resources and, consequently, its prospects for economic growth, which the “Palazzo Butera model” so usefully confirms.

Amidst a climate that emphasized culture as crucial to development within urban renewal policies and in light of the ambition to create a more international profile, the year 2018 was one of sea changes for Palermo. The city was simultaneously named “Palermo, Italian Capital of Culture”<sup>10</sup> and selected to host the contemporary art biennial Manifesta 12 (M12), whose theme was “The planetary garden, cultivating coexistence”, in keeping with the then-Mayor Leoluca Orlando’s vision for a “city of hospitality and of respect for the rights of all”.<sup>11</sup> The cultural, creative, touristic, and leisure-driven cities envisioned in Palermo’s Strategic Plan (see above) materialize through a series of high-

profile events with strong international appeal, positioning Palermo as a globally sought-after destination. Manifesta 12 ran from 16 June to 4 November 2018. During this period, the Kalsa district became the artistic center of operations, amidst a general atmosphere of exhilaration. Our analysis of the press coverage received by the city in 2018 suggested that the rhetoric in the media discourse was constructed around the themes of beauty, rebirth, hospitality, and multiculturalism. Indeed, the reviews of Manifesta 12 that appeared in the national and international press between July 2017 to November 2018 – with few exceptions – reflected the dominant narrative that the biennial was not akin to “a foreign body fallen upon the city like a meteorite”<sup>12</sup>; rather, to echo the “anti-mafia” mayor Orlando – as most of the newspapers referred to him – it represented a “sustainable platform for social change” that “truly engaged with Palermo’s cultural richness, its history, hospitality, spirit of peaceful co-existence and the city’s vision for the future”.<sup>13</sup> One leading symbol of the culture-led “renaissance” of Palermo that began with M12 was the reopening of the Teatro Garibaldi in Piazza Magione. This venue had been closed since the 1990s and had been the focus of a controversial restoration project in the early the 2000s, as well as the site of a temporary occupation for a short period during 2012. Although it was chosen as the headquarters of Manifesta while the biennial was running, it is currently closed once more.

According to the organizers’ final report<sup>14</sup> on Manifesta12, based on data collected by the OTIE (Observatory on Tourism in the European Islands), the tourist flows generated by M12 and the Palermo Italian Capital of Culture (PCC) events translated into an increase of 20 % in tourist numbers compared to 2017, suggesting that the “Palermo brand had been significantly reinforced at the international level”<sup>15</sup> by the generation of a new narrative transforming the “city of the mafia” into a “city of culture” under the charismatic leadership of Leoluca Orlando, a staunch defender of the maxim that “change comes from the outside”.<sup>16</sup>

Palermo, though late compared to other European cities such as Barcelona, Berlin, and Lisbon, perceives creativity and culture as a driving force for growth and the creation of wealth. The logic is to build a “brand” of a multicultural and creative city, becoming an attraction to draw further investments – none of which particularly will support the existing subcultural groups<sup>17</sup> – primarily to boost mass tourism, mistakenly equating tourism with culture. The regeneration policies and strategies aimed at creating a vibrant city – though nuanced, as discussed in the following section – underscore the potential inequalities of urban renewal when socio-spatial justice safeguards are lacking.

#### 4.3. The rise (and fall) and rise of culture-led touristification (2019–2023)

As noted above, culture-led urban policies in Palermo have operated more as an “event machine” than as a structured institutional framework for fostering cultural processes that function as social infrastructure (Enneking et al., 2025). Palermo’s cultural turn has certainly had some level of transformative impact on the commercial and residential fabric of Kalsa, especially in the catering and tourist hospitality sectors (see Table 2). In August 2019, the year in which Airbnb’s presence in the city

<sup>8</sup> In 2016, Massimo Valsecchi, a former art broker and collector, bought the eighteenth-century Palazzo Butera and launched a large-scale restoration project, the first part of which was inaugurated in 2018 on the occasion of Manifesta12.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Marco Giammona, engineer and entrepreneur. He was involved in the restoration of Palazzo Butera, purchased by Massimo Valsecchi. (18 May 2021)

<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the Ministry of Culture launched the “Italian Capital of Culture” program, translating the EU project into action at the national level, with the aim of leveraging the planning capital generated by the cities involved in the ECoC selection process.

<sup>11</sup> This vision recurred frequently in the rhetoric of Mayor Orlando, with implications for the debates on both migration and tourist flows (interview, 2 July 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Mayor Orlando, cited in an article by Michel Oren in *Sculpture* (29 April 2019).

<sup>13</sup> The Art Newspaper, 12 July 2017

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2017/07/12/manifesta-12-to-provide-blueprint-for-development-of-sicilian-capital>.

<sup>14</sup> Manifesta12 Palermo, Review and reflections - final report.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with the General Director of the M12 Foundation (23 June 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Leoluca Orlando, former Mayor of Palermo (2 July 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Out of the 15 interviews conducted with cultural and social workers, artists, and former Manifesta12 staff, all the interviewees perceive a disconnect between political and administrative actions and the commitment they carry out as cultural producers, not feeling supported by public policies. Some are concerned about the tourism-oriented direction of public action.

**Table 2**  
Arrivals and presences in Palermo.

Years	Hotel establishments			Non-hotel activities		
	Arrivals	Presences	Avd staying	Arrivals	Presences	Avd staying
2016	497.204	1.024.551	2.1	70.127	166.400	2.4
2017	521.969	1.101.931	2.1	95.471	247.454	2.6
2018	559.900	1.149.431	2.1	116.752	305.364	2.6
2019	598.126	1.257.716	2.1	127.949	336.471	2.6
2020	207.509	491.441	2.4	55.187	158.754	2.9
2021	318.572	740.953	2.3	90.686	246.102	2.7
2022	565.064	1.230.599	2.2	157.224	418.698	2.7
2023	651.663	1.412.323	2.2	184.629	472.955	2.6
2023/2019	+53.537	+154.607		+56.680	+136.484	
2023/2019 %	+9.0 %	+12.3 %		+44.3 %	+40.6 %	

Source: ISTAT

peaked before the pandemic, there were 7000 listings on the platform. Over half of these listings were concentrated in the city center, and more than 20 % were located in the Kalsa area.<sup>18</sup> During this period, approximately 70 % of the listings were entire apartments, and around 7 % were managed by only two multiple hosts. This surge in listings corresponded to about 10 % of the local offer, highlighting the growing popularity of short-term rentals in the city. The concentration of Airbnb listings in the Kalsa area can be attributed to several factors. One is its strategic reconfiguration as a cultural district also due to the high density of cultural spots that attract tourists eager to visit the city's heritage sites (see Fig. 2). Another is the well-known nightlife that draws visitors, coupled with the perception of Kalsa as a safer area compared to other historic neighborhoods like Ballarò and Vucciria.

The relationship between tourism, the cultural repositioning of the city and the concept of gentrification as it applies to Southern European settings helps to explain how strategies, policies, and the proliferation of cultural events have generated a sort of tourist enclave in the city's historic center (Cocola-Gant & Lopez-Gay, 2020). Although analysis of the real estate market suggests that the rent gap does not reflect a major issue with gentrification in Palermo, other urban changes and the expansion of homesharing services (Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018) imply that the population of the historic center is being impacted by two specific phenomena: first, the center is drawing an increasing number of digital nomads, tourists, and other types of temporary population; second, the redevelopment of previously rundown housing and real estate stock has attracted investment funds or the categories of temporary resident just listed, whose real estate purchasing power exceeds that of the historic local population (Brollo & Celata, 2022).<sup>19</sup>

This recent surge in short-term rentals is not the only reflection of the tourism-related and cultural transition of Kalsa in the years leading up to the pandemic. As other studies have shown (Bourlessas et al., 2021; Loda et al., 2020), food – alongside other retail sectors that changed

significantly in Kalsa in the same years,<sup>20</sup> has played a key part in converting urban spaces into tourist-friendly sites of consumption; these changes have sometimes been accompanied by the shutting down of key services, with the effect of pushing out – or in any case negatively impacting – residents. As one long-term resident put it: “Where once there was a shoe repair shop, now you find a pub. It's just bars, *aperitivi*, and Airbnbs. Living here is more expensive, and it's not even for us anymore”.<sup>21</sup>

However, the touristification of the historic center and Kalsa in particular, together with the construction of a suitable image for the city in support of this process, suffered an unexpected setback in 2020, when Covid-19 burst onto the global stage. The public health emergency disrupted the status quo and definitively put an end to the mildly catalytic effect that Manifesta12 had previously wielded in terms of fostering networks of “cooperation and joint action” among the city's cultural actors.<sup>22</sup> The restrictions on mobility imposed by the health emergency had a dramatic impact on tourist flows to the city of Palermo, as occurred in all cities around the world (Seabra et al., 2021). The processes that had accelerated in the period 2015–2019, causing a series of unprecedented changes to the historic center, now entered a phase of reconfiguration. However, in summer 2020 there was already a slight recovery, and tourist numbers were higher in the first six months of 2021 than in the same period in 2020. By June 2021, domestic tourist numbers had almost returned to 2019 levels.<sup>23</sup> This was partly underpinned by a progressive increase in cruise tourism, one of the fastest growing tourism sub-sectors in recent decades (Kester, 2002).<sup>24</sup>

Although our analysis and interpretation are complicated by unavailable or fragmented data, this pattern of alternate expansion and contraction of the tourism sector seems to have had ambivalent repercussions on processes of touristification in Southern European cities and beyond (Gössling et al., 2020a; Gössling et al., 2020b; Jamal &

<sup>18</sup> In 2024 Airbnb listings are 6687, and except for Kalsa neighborhood the most of them are concentrated in Palazzo Reale-Monte di Pietà (18.3 %), Politeama (15.7 %), and Partanna (12.5 %). The rest of the listings are more or less equally distributed on the other 21 neighborhood, with 12 of them with less than the 1 %.

<sup>19</sup> These two factors can be linked to the mechanisms of Tourism-Led Rentier Capitalism (Wijburg et al., 2024), further supported by Airbnb revenue data from Kalsa. According to an upward estimate and using OMI data, the monthly rent for an 80-square-meter apartment stood at 400 euros before taxes in the second half of 2023. During the same period, and more precisely in September 2023, Airbnb listings in Kalsa recorded over 642 reviews, generating an estimated revenue of 69,336 euros, equivalent to 189 months of rent in the regular rental market. Taking into account that right after the pandemic more than 100 listings on Airbnb were unused by tourists, it is possible to understand how Short-Term Rental system is increasing pressure on the real estate market not only economically speaking, commodifying the housing sector, but also eroding the market itself.

<sup>20</sup> There are around 300 catering businesses, of which one third are bars without kitchens and one third are restaurants (Chamber of Commerce). The net difference between business closures and newly registered businesses in 2021 was approximately –400 units, of which approximately 9 % were accounted for by retail outlets, mainly in the clothing (5 %), watches and jewelry (2 %), and footwear and leather accessories (1.5 %) sectors. Around 25 convenience and general grocery stores also closed, due to the opening of a new supermarket and food discount store.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a neighborhood resident (21 May 2023).

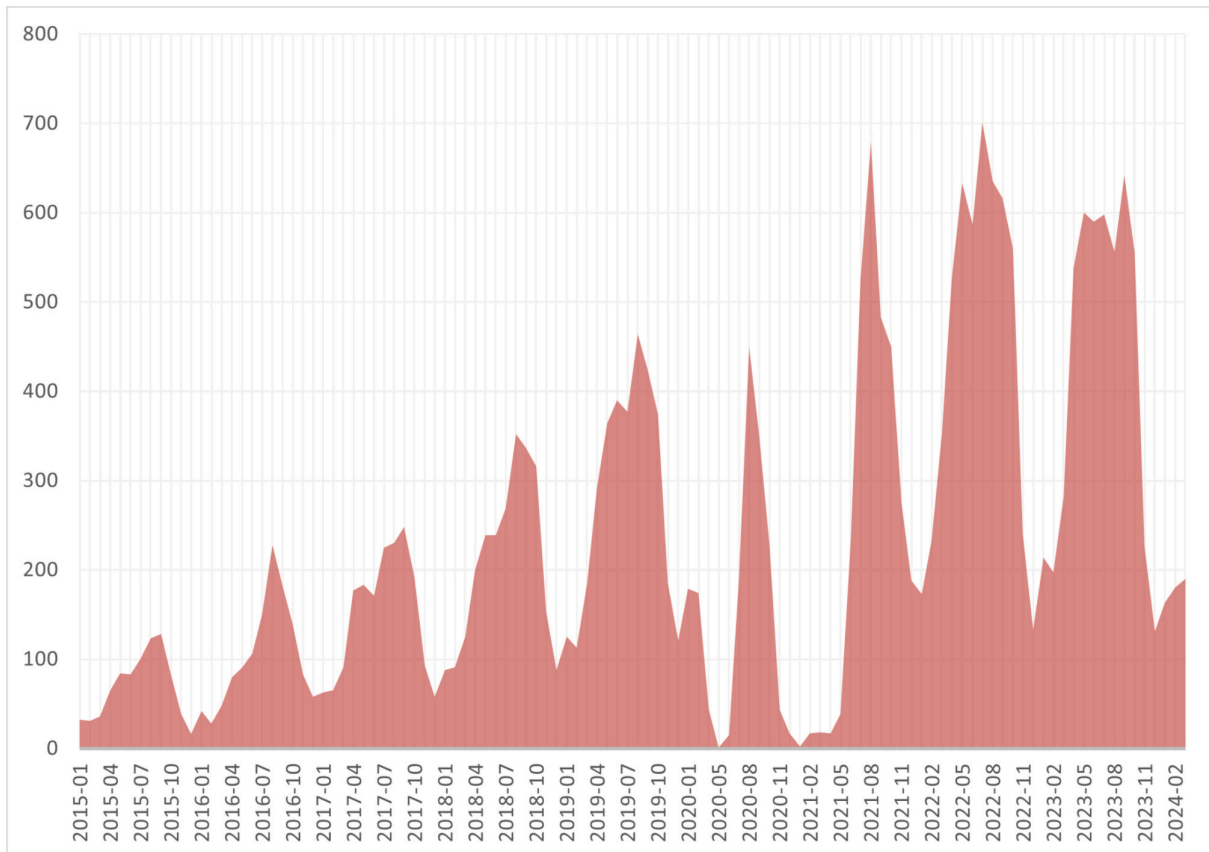
<sup>22</sup> Interview with the Project Manager and General Director of Manifesta 12 (23 June 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Tourism in Palermo during the first six months of 2021, Statistical Report, Palermo City Council, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> In line with the objectives of the Port Master Plan – which redesigned the urban waterfront to foster competitive growth and enhance both commercial and tourism efficiency – Palermo's cruise industry experienced significant fluctuations between 2019 and 2024, ultimately recording an overall increase of 99.49 %, according to the Western Sicily Port Authority.



**Fig. 2.** Kalsa as a cultural cluster.  
 Source: Authors. Data from Italian Ministry of Culture and CeSVOP (on the left). Airbnb listings' number in March 2024. Source: Authors. Data from inside Airbnb (on the right).



**Fig. 3.** Number of reviews recorded on the AIRBNB platform on all listings in the Kalsa district.  
 Source: Authors. Data from inside Airbnb.

Budke, 2020). In some cases, the ability to cope with fluctuations and reorganize accordingly has been linked with the flexibility and, consequently, the strength of tourism actors. For example, Airbnb and other similar platforms reorganized their supply base during the pandemic, with consequences that were most unevenly distributed between hosts managing one or two properties and multi-hosts (Cimadomo & Malaga, 2021; Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou et al., 2022). During the two main years of the pandemic (2020–2021), around 150 Airbnb properties in Kalsa were withdrawn from the platform, in line with the overall drop in visitors to the city. However, this did not affect the attractiveness of the neighborhood, especially during the summer months: specifically, leaving aside the record successes of summer 2019, the Tribunali-Castellammare district and Kalsa soon returned to 2018 levels (see Fig. 3). Nor was the city's cultural appeal diminished. Already in period immediately following Manifesta, a diverse range of local actors set out to leverage the vibrancy and legacy of the biennial, channeling these energies into new contemporary art projects, such as Kalsa Art District, a network of artists, curators, and cultural operators with the mission of setting up an integrated system of communications for contemporary art spaces and events in Kalsa. At the same time, there is a development strategy to expand the local calendar of events by confirming traditional fixtures while adding new public-private projects. The aim, as explicitly stated by multiple sources,<sup>25</sup> is to mitigate the dip in tourist numbers and arrivals in the low season by boosting Palermo's profile and appeal over the winter period.

Against this backdrop of ambivalence, public sector rhetoric continues to weld culture and tourism together, reducing the former to an event and viewing the latter as the “only solution, the only source of economic support”.<sup>26</sup> Although the pandemic pointed up the limitations and contradictions of this model, the narrative that continues to dominate frames tourism as an “engine” of economic development and reproduces a rhetoric designed to enhance the desirability of the city by leveraging on “cultural magnets”, fostering consumption by means of storytelling. This narrative includes the worship of the “redemptive” Palazzo Butera project, an emphasis on street art and the rhetoric of decorum and beauty. Against this backdrop, which risks generating new stereotypes and supporting the neoliberal logic of spectacularization, controversial and complex questions – surrounding the city's lasting legacy, the sustainability of eventification processes (Jakob, 2013), and future development scenarios – come again to the fore.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have critically engaged with the categories of culture-led transformation – particularly regeneration, gentrification, and touristification – through an in-depth analysis of urban change in the Kalsa neighborhood of Palermo. Adopting a mixed methodological approach that integrates urban policy analysis, spatial observation, media discourse analysis and interviews, we have attempted to nuance and contextualize the rapid shifts occurring in this neighborhood. Our point of departure lies in a critical re-reading of the geographies of touristification, with particular attention to the interplay between cultural policy and tourism development in Southern European cities.

By foregrounding the Palermo case, we demonstrate how policies of culturalization and processes of touristification are embedded within specific relationships of dependency, whereby culture becomes increasingly subordinated to tourism. This dynamic reflects a broader strategic alignment in which multiculturalism, heritage, and creative industries are mobilized as assets for repositioning the city within national and global urban hierarchies. As we have shown, this trajectory

culminates in what we define as culture-led touristification: a hybrid and uneven process in which culture is not only commodified but instrumentalized as a means of constructing an urban brand attractive to visitors, investors, and external publics.

At the same time, our analysis complicates dominant narratives on touristification and gentrification by focusing on a context that remains under-examined in international urban studies. Palermo's transformation does not follow the trajectories of other Southern European cities such as Barcelona and Lisbon, where processes of tourism gentrification have been more clearly mapped. While Palermo has indeed embraced the creative city paradigm – through policy instruments, cultural programming, and revalorization of the historic center – the actual outcomes have been partial, uneven, and marked by ambivalence.

With its newly generated image based on culture, mobility (of both migrants and tourists), and its distance from Northern European settings, the city appears to partially elude the categories developed in the debate on tourism gentrification in Southern Europe, thus demanding a situated research and analytical approach. This is especially evident in Kalsa, where symbolic renewal often precedes or outweighs material improvements, and where urban change has unfolded through a combination of public intervention and private speculation, without the large-scale urban renewal initiatives seen elsewhere.

Although successive administrations have presented tourism and culture as the backbone of urban regeneration – starting from the early phases of Leoluca Orlando's first mandate and continuing with Diego Cammarata's center-right policies – the effects have not been uniformly beneficial. While the first efforts aimed to rehabilitate the historic center and promote *social mixité* through heritage restoration and social housing initiatives, subsequent phases increasingly focused on enhancing the city's visibility and touristic appeal (Azzolina, 2009; Söderström et al., 2009). In this framework, Kalsa became the emblem of Palermo's “rebirth”: its aristocratic heritage, strategic location, and symbolic value positioned it at the center of a rebranding strategy, which included the redevelopment of the waterfront for cruise and luxury tourism.

Yet the transformation of Kalsa has generated clear tensions and contradictions. Despite the narrative of inclusion and creativity, culture-driven policies have increasingly functioned as tools for attracting tourism rather than sustaining everyday cultural practices or addressing long-standing social inequalities. What emerges is a process where cultural infrastructures are converted into symbolic markers of urban change, while public discourse equates culture with spectacle and consumption. Here, culture-driven urban policies have functioned more as catalysts for events aimed at constructing a “city brand” than as structural tools for supporting cultural processes conceived as “social and community infrastructures”,<sup>27</sup> becoming a draw for global tourism. Residents have voiced concerns about the disappearance of essential services, the rising cost of living, and the loss of community-oriented spaces. As we have seen, this shift not only disrupts daily life but also contributes to a form of symbolic and material dispossession, in which historical uses of space are overwritten by curated tourist imaginaries.

Guided by a strategic political vision, Palermo initially avoided overt patterns of gentrification – particularly during Orlando's first term – yet simultaneously promoted a thriving, though poorly regulated, tourism economy. This dynamic fostered a close intertwining of culture-led regeneration and touristification, laying the foundation for the city's rebranding as a cultural destination. Urban planning and public policy enabled this shift but largely failed to foresee or address its adverse effects, reinforcing Palermo's symbolic capital and appeal to tourism investment. As Bain and Landau (2022) suggest, planning can recast marginalized areas as spaces of creative consumption. Palermo's gradual

<sup>25</sup> Interview with the Head of the Tourist Promotion Office and former Deputy Mayor of the city, April 2020

<sup>26</sup> Interview with the Palermo City Councilor with special responsibility for Cultures (01 July 2021).

<sup>27</sup> This aspect emerged in several interviews conducted with third-sector actors in Palermo, as well as in public assemblies attended by the authors between 2021 and 2023.

turn from welfare-oriented regeneration to entrepreneurial urbanism (Harvey, 1989) transformed cultural infrastructures into tools of branding, reflecting the broader commodification of place. We observe a process of “cautious urban renewal” (Porter & Shaw, 2009), marked by moderate demographic shifts, rising presence of temporary residents, and the growing influence of short-term rentals and the leisure economy. The literature on gentrification, especially in its more aggressive and exclusionary forms, only partially captures these dynamics.

Palermo's case thus calls for a situated analytical lens that accounts for the complex and uneven effects of culture-based urban strategies in cities with fragile economies, high informalities, and contested cultural identities. Our findings suggest that while culture-led regeneration has generated visibility and symbolic capital, it has not been matched by structural investments in welfare, housing, or long-term cultural infrastructures. These transformations are shaped not only by institutional actors but also by networks of local and international stakeholders – such as Massimo Valsecchi – who mobilize cultural narratives and infrastructures to reframe the city's image for touristic consumption.

The pandemic, far from offering an opportunity to rethink tourism-dependent development, has further entrenched the narrative that culture and tourism are the city's primary assets for recovery. As evidenced in recent municipal discourse, exemplified by mayor Lagalla's claim that the goal is to “enhance the livability and appeal of the historic center for tourists,” urban policies remain oriented toward market-based revitalization rather than community resilience.

In conclusion, Palermo illustrates both the promises and pitfalls of culture-led touristification. It highlights how urban strategies rooted in heritage, multiculturalism, and creative branding can mobilize powerful narratives of revival, while at the same time producing subtle forms of exclusion, commodification, and socio-spatial inequality. Without a stronger regulatory framework and a more inclusive cultural policy agenda, these dynamics risk reinforcing structural vulnerabilities rather than addressing them. Palermo's story is not simply one of delayed convergence with neoliberal urbanism, but of the contingent, contested, and often contradictory ways in which global logics of culture and tourism are locally articulated.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Stefania Crobe:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Chiara Giubilaro:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Methodology. **Federico Prestileo:** Methodology, Writing – original draft, Data curation.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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