

Regenerating Landscape from Resilient Citizens: Parco Uditore, Three Years of "Low Cost Landscape"

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In Palermo, the always surprising capital of Sicily, a hidden garden of *opuntia indica* relics has been discovered again after decades of oblivion.

Discovering a place: a brief history

In this 9 hectares area, owned by the Regional Government of Sicily since 1963, the remains of a dense *opuntia* plantation characterizes a green forgotten area, survived to the building growth of Palermo. Along three decades (1963-1993), the Fondo Uditore was still an *opuntia*'s place, a place where the sweet fruits and the green and prickly "leaves" were sold respectively to feed people and animals. On the Master Plan of the City of Palermo (1998) the area was indicated as Regional Head Quarters offices, without any green areas inside.

A low cost philosophy vs "standard" design

The first designs for the area as a park, drawn by our group, were research activity developed in 2008 and 2011: two deep investigation on how to shape a park with or without the Region's HQ. Professors and Students of the University of Palermo investigated the area, with support of the local community. While research designs were in process, a big pressure was made by some citizens on the web and social media: save this area became a neighbours' goal. The community met the group of University researchers to start a participated design. A petition with 8.000 subscribers, coming from Facebook advertising, described clearly a social opportunity for a survived rural landscape. Hence, in late 2010 a park became a true possibility: while the City Council was discussing how to manage the petition, the regional government funded the works to make a park, asking the group of researchers to design it, not considering the Master Plan indication. The Urban Park is designed in 2011 according a *Low Cost Philosophy*; this makes immediately possible funding an early stage with few thousands of euros. Thus, the strategy was to recover the place as it survived along last 50 years and inserting minimal interventions to be offered (playgrounds, benches, fountains, pathways, fences), creating an identity and revealing the place to the city. A group of local craftsman were invited to work at the lowest budget possible, and KOMPAN offered a huge sponsorship donating the kids' playground and the open space gym, the first to be installed in Sicily. Once approached the design, was immediately clear that the main goal was to "care" the landscape with small traces: new paths, shaping the existing trees, specialized areas (kids, pets), saving the *opuntias* memory (only a few survived the 1996 cut). The design philosophy set the Park with an average cost of 0,50 euros per square meter: it is what the original budget was allowing. After a year of participated design and volunteer works, the area open to public the 15 October 2012.

Volunteers, events, social life

Parco Uditore is on stage because a group of citizens is taking care of this land, founding the association of volunteer which is running the Park daily. Some of the students of the School of Architecture and Agriculture, volunteers teachers and local citizens, allowed the opening of this incredible place 365 days a year. After the opening in 2012, the Government of Sicily made possible new works, the volunteer's work and some small private sponsors make a regular maintenance possible. Parco Uditore, due to the association's activity has become the place where most of the city life meetings are held. Every spring a "Spring Party – Festa di Primavera" takes place with up to 10.000 peoples coming to dance and play, farmer markets come out on a based schedule, every year the Birthday weekend (about 15 October) carries on several activities. Summer and Christmas are times to make social events.

The PIANTIAMOLA! event made possible to have new trees as a gift from local communities, schools, associations, private citizens. Now a growing amount of plants is implementing the landscape along the pathways, forming new woods and making barriers from the outer traffic and noise. More than 300 trees were donated in less than 18 month. More recently a set of urban orchards were prepared for the kids of the neighbourhood's schools, to discover farming and better understanding the importance of farming and how nature give us feeding. Furthermore, other events took place: poetry recitals, painting schools, kids laboratories and summer childhood, sport performances and a bamboo building workshop in which a group of twenty students had built a bamboo pagoda, who is now offering shading and perfumes thanks to a beautiful quartet of flowering *Tulbaghia*.

The Park and the city

Parco Uditore today is the only working urban park in Palermo. Parco Uditore now, celebrating three years since October 2012 opening, is a social park, organized with low costs for maintenance, open due to volunteers effort; moreover is a social landscape laboratory where the local community and the whole city spends its free time with dozens of events and activities. A resilient scenario for urban regeneration



1. Main alley during an event in full sunshine, 2014