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The shopping mall as an emergent public space in Palermo

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Abstract

As Doreen Massey (2005) pointed out, space matters. Does public space still matter 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 sphere -The Public- (Bianchini, 1990; Crosta, 2000; Hajer and Reijndorp, 2002; Harvey, 2006; Low and Smith, 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 a 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) emphasised, produced two different scientific literatures: first a series of studies, developed in the philosophical and political context, which 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 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 deconstructional 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). Much has been written on the role of public space in contemporary societies, and many scholars agree that today public space 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 privatisation slowly but firmly erode its fundaments. Within this conceptual framework, this paper aims to critically analyse the idea of public space which exists 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 analysed through a case study in Palermo.

Keywords: public space, local and regional planning, identity, shopping malls.

1. Introduction

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). Nevertheless, many studies agree that the rooting of the neoliberal economic and social model is the most plausible explanation for the current crisis and, at the same time, the primordial reason that caused new cultural categories to take hold in western societies, such as uncertainty, fragmentation and a generalised distrust in values and common goods (Giampino, 2012). Within the process of radical change that societies are going through, space, and namely urban space, has been affected by a shock wave caused by what scholars from different fields have named 'urban neoliberalism' (Sennett, 1977; Boyer, 1992; Davis, 1992; Sorkin, 1992; Mitchell, 1995; Filion 1996).

Hanging in the balance between commercialisation and privatisation, urban space in western cities has also been challenged by increasing social polarisation. Concerning planning practices and instruments, the progressive withdrawal of the State (Dewey, 1927) in the name of the alleged efficacy and peculiarity of public intervention measures, has questioned any traditional urban policies based on public monopoly, leading to major repercussions for administrative structures, subjects involved (Geddes and Le Galès, 2001) and the democratic and inclusive nature of urban government (Hindess, 2002; Purcell, 2003). As Sharon Zukin (1995) argued, public space is «(the) window into the city's soul». If we embrace as a working principle, the idea that «The city is not an artefact or a residual arrangement. On the contrary, the city embodies the real nature of human nature. It is an expression of mankind in general and specifically of the social relations generated by territoriality» (Janowitz, 1967, p.VIII), the structural transformation of public and private spaces offers inputs and alternative pathways for the theoretic interpretation of the non-excludable nature of public space. Over the last few years a growing body of literature has critically analysed the concept of public space. However, 'public space' may have a wide variety of interpretations which relate to a semantic overlapping between a sensitive material sphere -The Space- and a intangible metaphorical one -The Public-. 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 a society and its country. This means that material space and the public sphere become the cognitive domains and functions within which public space takes shape. In urban planning, public essentially means a space for collective use (as opposed to private) which is considered as destined and fit for collective use by a public authority. For Crosta (2000), this interpretation defines a relation between society and State where society expects the State to acknowledge and meet its needs: society is, and expresses, a social demand; it does not meet this demand itself, on the contrary it delegates that response to the political system. This paradigm is marked by the conviction that the solution to collectively perceived problems cannot be freely determined by individuals and their interactions. Furthermore, according to Crosta, "public" is not the space permanently destined for collective use. This would be a simplistic association: collective use does not equal public space,

> *[…] but rather a space is public when it is designed by social interaction under certain*

> *conditions: it is a possible, not a necessary social construct, [...].The public connotation is assigned to a place if and when all those who find themselves interacting in a situation of co-existence, using different methods and for different, unshared, reasons (co-presence can be – and usually is – characterised by tensions and conflicts), learn by directly experiencing diversity (of which they "feel" the problems) and by experiencing co-presence in terms of co-existence.Through this learning process they "become" public* (Crosta 2000, p. 43).

The construction of the public space as product of social interaction (possible outcome) can thus be considered as public policy. Such arguments have different implications for urban public space, its ambivalences have fuelled its politicisation in different ways. 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 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 deconstructional 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 due to 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 (Davis, 1992)? This issue will be addressed according to the Italian case of Palermo, a Southern city which is now experiencing a very late growth of shopping malls in and around its area.

2. Palermo 1990: year zero

The first significant date in Palermo's contemporary history is the year 1990, which marked the first change to the city's structure and local urban planning and its institutional approach. Many rapid and fundamental changes occurred in Palermo during this decade: in 1990 Palermo hosted the FIFA World Cup which brought in some public investment for projects pertaining to sports facilities, mobility (infrastructure) and accommodation; at the same time the *Piano Particolareggiato Esecutivo* (Detailed Executive Plan) was adopted for the restoration of the historic centre, where traditional models of public policy were replaced with new modalities of public-private intervention for the regeneration of degraded urban districts.

During this period it is possible to identify a common essence or thread in these projects: a redefinition of regulatory mechanisms that define the provision of urban goods and services. A renovated interest in urban public space is visible in the new Palermo masterplan (PRG) approved by the Sicilia Regional Government in 2002.

The new Plan for Palermo is thus the result of a "process", defined by distinct steps that have progressively led to its adoption by the City Council. The initial phase, which corresponded with the beginning of the Orlando government, placed a great deal of focus on the protection of green spaces and the implementation of services across the 1989 plan, a variation of the old Plan adopted in 1962.

The next step was the approval of a new masterplan, the so-called *Variante Generale al PRG del 2002* which was based on three different axes: the construction of the environmental system, the control of urban expansion and the re-qualification of the peripheries through the construction of public spaces.

In this sense, the new masterplan was relevant in that it made the problems that a lack of public spaces in neighbourhoods can cause, visible, both to citizens and to the administration. It is a fair plan, with regulations and opportunities that are equal for everyone. As recently stated by Edoardo Salzano (2010), in relation to the idea of public space as the presence of goods and services in the peripheries, "[...] the opposition between quantity and quality is contrived, and instead minimises the great conquest achieved on the ground of the 'right to the city'. A result that has had a positive impact where it has been applied as a tool to improve the living conditions in a regime of fairness and defence of the most vulnerable groups (Ibid, p. 248)".

The new plan had set out to make important improvements to the quality of public space, but this process finished due to the introduction of neoliberalism inspired urban practices, causing traditional models of public policy to be replaced with new modalities of public-private intervention for the regeneration of degraded urban districts. These tools defined new strategies of urban intervention whose processes caused complex physical urban transformations and had lasting effects. The case in Palermo is the example of a condition that has characterised different cities in Italy over the last twenty years.

Shopping malls in Palermo may be considered a late, yet complex example of economic globalisation processes. They have appeared suddenly, during an economically critical time, when the traditional State-funded control policies have been declined in favour of governance-based, private-funded strategies of development (Rossi et al., 2010). This critical moment has favoured 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. These issues will be the focus of the case study of the San Filippo Neri neighbourhood, in the next section.

3. Once upon a time this was the 'Conca d'Oro'...

Built in the second half of the 20th century, the Zen neighbourhood of Palermo is generally considered one of the clearest examples of those issues that characterise Southern Italian outskirts (Magatti, 2007). Physical, economic, social and cultural marginalities are the defining elements of the *Zen cliché* that serve to strengthen the sensation of exclusion for its citizens, due to social deprivation, lack of facilities and public spaces and precarious health conditions.

Therefore, retracing the genesis of this neighbourhood allows us to critically reinterpret the results of forty years of public urban policies in Palermo. The neighbourhood is situated in the formerly cultivated fields north of Palermo (the so-called 'Conca d'Oro'), and hosts two social housing areas that were built in the northern part of the city between 1958 and the second half of the Eighties. These areas were the product of an improper local declination of social housing policies, strategically conceived to legitimise the expansion of the marginal areas of Palermo. After all, this interpretation is also rooted in the events that followed the realisation of these social housing experiences:

conditioned by the economic opportunities and some subsequent variations (Sciascia, 2003), the number of houses and facilities to be built was significantly reduced.

The emblem of these long and complicated instances lies in the steps that led to the design and realisation of the 'Zen 2', with the unexplainable bankruptcies of several construction companies, the consequent invitations for competitive bids and the variants to a project that was already strict and 'alien' to the physical and social context of the area. All of this determined a shrinking of the available residential areas, the unsuccessful construction of facilities and public spaces, and a late completion, in the Nineties, of the primary urbanisation works.

The Resolution no. 176/2000 of the *Giunta Regionale Siciliana* gave way to the *Programma Integrato di Intervento* for San Filippo Neri (a.k.a. the Zen), as well as to a couple of *Programmi di Recupero Urbano* for two similar areas, Borgo Nuovo and Sperone. More than 47 million euros were allocated to promote the completion of the facilities in these areas, and to start urban renewal and socioeconomic improvement processes that could allow the inhabitants to get out of the deprived status they lived in. The three aforementioned areas (Zen, Borgo Nuovo and Sperone) presented similar issues: the lack of public and/or green spaces, the absence of facilities and the decontextualization of these districts from the rest of their urban system.

In the case of the Zen 2, the *Programma Integrato di Intervento* (PII) includes 22 public interventions that were grouped in 14 'renewal' projects, and 6 private interventions worth a total of 51.7 million euros, aimed at the creation of new infrastructures, facilities and public spaces for one of the most troublesome social housing areas of Palermo. This *Programma*, though apparently addressing the insufficient presence of basic facilities and the inertia of the ordinary praxis of urban policies, actually failed at improving the quality of life in the area. Although we have already discussed these issues in previous works (Giampino, Todaro, 2009; Lo Piccolo, Giampino, Todaro, 2014), it is now worth noticing how bureaucracy irreversibly slowed down the administrative procedures, so that the administration did not carry out several planned interventions, thus prolonging the story of unfulfilled promises, a story that characterises this area.

Even the most recent urban policies follow the same model. In fact, a new detailed plan for a municipality centre called 'Fondo Raffo' was approved in 2007 as a master plan variation. This plan authorised the construction of the Conca d'Oro[1] shopping mall by a Construction Company called 'Monte Mare S.p.A.', belonging to Maurizio Zamparini. The area hosting the shopping mall is close to the *insulae* of the Zen 2, and the whole process was considered a stratagem for finally building those facilities that the public administration never managed to build within the area. Several years after the opening of the shopping mall, however, the public facilities that were part of the agreement between Zamparini and the Municipality (a swimming pool, a public green area surrounding Villa Raffo, a sporting area, and so on) have never been constructed. Moreover, the municipality centre that Zamparini was supposed to build according to the agreement is now included in the *Programma Triennale Opere Pubbliche 2014-16* (a list of public works to be realised), as something that the Municipality will be responsible for taking care of, thus excluding any private intervention from Zamparini.

The construction of the shopping mall, which should have been the 'fee' for the building of the much needed facilities and public spaces that the Zen neighbourhood did not have,

actually involved a reduction of the available green areas and irreversibly compromised a part of the Conca d'Oro that the Master Plan marked as a 'historic green area'.

4. ... and now there is the *Conca d'Oro* shopping mall

On March the 14th, 2012, the day when the *Conca d'Oro* shopping mall was opened, a documentary crew led by director Ruggero Gabbai was shooting some sequences by the new mall. Gabbai had been working for a couple of years on a new film called *CityZen*[2], and had arranged some meetings with key people in charge of the mall. Unluckily, Maurizio Zamparini, the president of the local football team and owner of the mall, was not present. I was walking side by side with the crew, hoping to conduct some interviews with citizens on the topic of the new mall. I was also planning to exploit the two years I had spent as a teacher in the middle school of the Zen neighbourhood (see Picone, 2006; 2008; 2011; 2012a; 2012b). There is no point in hiding the reluctance and perplexity I bore towards the political and planning motives that had convinced the Municipality of Palermo to grant a construction permit for the mall. In fact, according to the 2004 Master Plan, the area where the mall had later been built was labelled as a 'historic green area' (Curioni, 2010). Moreover, most of the local intellectual elite was clearly against the construction of a new shopping mall in the city (actually the third), convinced that it would decrease job employment for the more traditional local stores and that it would do nothing but worsen the already troubled situation of the Zen. The predicament could be easily summed up in a sarcastic, rhetorical question: do we really think that a shopping mall, the symbol of the worst neoliberal trends (Rossi & Vanolo, 2010; Picone, 2012c), can solve the social and housing issues of the neighbourhood?

Therefore, try to picture the cognitive dissonance provoked by the answers I got to my questions. The most repeated sentence that I kept hearing from the Zen residents was:[3] "At last now they built us a place where we can spend the weekends with our kids!" There were also a few variants, like: "It took the president of Palermo [i.e. the football team] to finally do something for the Zen, the Municipality never did anything for us". And, in a sense, those answers were true, if we consider the point of view of the residents as *active listening* suggests (Sclavi, 2003; Guarrasi, 2011).

Despite my initial denial, there are some elements deserving consideration. The Zen has never sported any kind of urban facilities that so many other places generally have, even the most basic ones (green areas, meeting places, and the like). Although the criticisms were abundant, the original plan for the neighbourhood, designed by Vittorio Gregotti, actually foresaw the construction of facilities that were never built (Sciascia, 2003; 2012). The *Conca d'Oro* mall was designed close to this (in)famous neighbourhood, well known both in Italy and elsewhere for its very deprived conditions. But the story deserves a more thorough historic reconstruction.

5. 1 Zen-parini

The municipal resolution no. 365 (December 6th, 2006) approved a "piano particolareggiato" (detailed plan) for the use of the area of Fondo Raffo.

This plan envisioned a private commercial area, private facilities for public usage, public facilities for institutions, public services of various types, and so on[4]. The local edition of

the *La Repubblica* newspaper published this information in December 2006: «The Regional Assembly (with the favourable votes of the centre-right parties, the abstention of DS [a centre-left party] and the nays of Rifondazione Comunista and Primavera Siciliana [two leftist parties]) has approved a detailed "Use Plan for the centre of the municipality known as Fondo Raffo" and gave way to the relative concession agreement and to the zoning variance. The real estate company "Monte Mare spa", whose sole director is in actual fact Maurizio Zamparini, proposed the project. The total area is 288,000 square meters wide, of which 122,000 square meters will host the new shopping mall. The mall will be composed of a central hypermarket 13,788 square meters wide, two warehouses and a shopping gallery with a stained glass roof, which will accommodate a hundred stores, two commercial warehouses for retail and finally of two parking lots (consisting of an outdoor parking area 58,484 square meters wide and an underground parking area, 13,400 square meters wide). A public parking lot over 25,000 square meters wide is also foreseen. The eastern shopping gallery will end in a round plaza, suited to restaurants and bars; the western gallery will end in a space meant for home furnishing stores. At the same time, Zamparini will create a "municipality centre": a citadel that will host municipality bureaus, a clinic doctor facility, another medical clinic, and various sporting facilities, like a gym, an Olympic swimming pool, and four soccer fields. There will also be a public library with reading halls, a medical care facility for the blind and another for the elderly, a public garden, a piazza and a Steiner private school. Finally, the ancient *qanat*, which is composed of underground tunnels used by Arabs to collect water, will be renewed and taken care of»[5].

Maybe the general tone of a related article in another local newspaper, the *Giornale di Sicilia*, is even more interesting. These are the words used, a few years later, to describe the resumption of works on the shopping mall after a significant period of interruption: «The works for the construction of Zamparini's shopping mall in Fondo Raffo have been resumed. The project continued to be blocked due to a regional ordinance of the Assessorato Territorio e Ambiente [Department of Territory and Environment] which required the presentation of additional papers to give permission for the construction. The Consiglio Regionale dell'Urbanistica [CRU, Regional Urban Counsel] shed light on the procedural regularity. The municipal department of Urban Planning made several remarks against the misinterpretations of the ordinance. According to the Regional Government, the papers were incomplete. "We have made many remarks against the regional ordinance, says Milone, Chief of the Urban Planning Department, and pointed out the correctness and legitimacy of the process. We are glad to acknowledge the decision of the CRU, which complied with our requests and thus favoured an atmosphere of cooperation between our departments." After this step, the project is now in conversation with the Sportello Unico [Point of Single Contact], which is preparing a draft agreement between the Municipality and Zamparini's company. Afterwards, the Regional Service Conference will have to approve the commercial project and then finally all the permissions will be granted» (*Giornale di Sicilia*, July 23rd, 2008; see Curioni, 2010, pp. 26-27). The almost enthusiastic tone of the journalist provoked many equally cheerful replies on blogs and forums. Since 2006, most of the comments have repeated the "At last!" adagio, with a few rare exceptions (notably the observation of the Department of Architecture at the University of Palermo, together with Legambiente and INU Sicilia).

Right now, however, the mall has been active since 2012, while the "centre of municipality" has not yet been inaugurated. This fact alone could question the legitimacy of the whole shopping mall operation. And yet, Zamparini's ambitions went well beyond the mall. In an interview published in the *Giornale di Sicilia*, he would later claim that «The new football stadium will be built in the Zen district. We will demolish the Velodromo [cycle track stadium] and build this new structure in its place. This is the best solution, economically speaking» (*Giornale di Sicilia*, January 14th, 2009). The new football stadium was always a major concern for Zamparini, given the most recent privatisation of these stadiums in Italy: a well-known tradition in the Anglo-Saxon world, diffused in Italy by the Juventus Stadium in Turin. Who cares if the old but perfectly working 'Renzo Barbera' football stadium of Palermo—obviously, a public stadium—is abandoned as a consequence, or if the even more recent Velodromo 'Paolo Borsellino', inaugurated in 1991 close to the Zen limits, is smashed down to give space to the new stadium? The stadium and the shopping mall would have probably created a synergy of flows and means, by creating what we could definitely call, as *La Repubblica* suggests, the new "Zamparini city". Or, perhaps, a whole new neighborhood which could easily be labeled "Zen-parini", as a testimony to how today private initiatives overshadow—both in terms of sheer economic potential and political relevance—the actions of public institutions that should be managing planning issues, according to Italian law.

Anyway, so far the story of the football stadium has not had a happy ending for Zamparini. As the newspapers say, the process of approving the guidelines for the new master plan has frozen the beginning of some works: «The Town Council approves the guidelines for the master plan and stops some major works by postponing the discussion on them, starting with the new football stadium designed by Maurizio Zamparini. The latter declared: "These losses of time are an all Italian habit. But the stadium belongs to the people of Palermo, not to me. If they want it, I will help them build it." The Municipality will not open the door to projects included in the strategic plan and approved by the Cammarata administration in the last three years, but neither will it close that door entirely»[6].

The change in the administration has clearly hindered Zamparini's requests, but even the relegation of the football team to the lower series (serie B) in 2013 must have undermined the passion that moved so many people in Palermo (politicians included).

6. From panacea to delusion
The late arrival of shopping malls in Palermo (along with Southern Italy) has initially persuaded most social groups that the malls could be a viable solution for the deprived local economy. However, if we consider the real consequences of the opening of these malls, the truth seems quite different. As always, it is a matter of representations and propaganda, and deconstructing the imaginary linked to the shopping malls of Palermo reveals a more complex situation.

Long before the grand opening of the *Conca d'Oro*, shopping malls were demanded, almost faithfully and universally praised, with few discording voices. As soon as the first urban mall was opened (*Forum Palermo*, November 2009), the web site MobilitaPalermo described the situation with enthusiasm: «We are just back from the inauguration of Forum Palermo. There is a lot of fervour for the opening of the first real shopping mall in

our city. A long line of cars welcomed us before the entrance, as the extremely careful staff checked their permits. As soon as we entered, we immediately saw the Forum in all of its grandeur: the wonderful coloured lights play and the beacons aiming at the sky, pointing out the magnificent architecture of the structure. […] Overall, Forum Palermo is a really splendid mall, a gust of fresh air for Palermo and for the meaning of the word 'shopping'»[7].

Also in November 2009, another website presented an interview with the president of the company that built the mall: «'Forum Palermo expresses the values and extraordinary abilities that Multi exhibits in all its works in the region''- stated Paolo Tassi, president of Multi Development-C Italia, the Italian subsidiary company of the Dutch multinational corporation, European leader in big retail & leisure structures development. "It will be a meeting place to discover new trends, taste local and ethnic food, shop and have some nice times, being fully immersed in a solar and Mediterranean environment. It will also be a fundamental driving force for development of the city and its surrounding areas, thanks to a catchment area that encompasses over one million potential customers'»[8].

The «fundamental driving force for development» is a good definition to suit the neoliberal *topos* that turns shopping malls into the panacea for all urban ills. Not only, however, did the *Forum* let down all those who expected an increase in job possibilities for the residents of the nearby neighbourhoods; not only did it mine the system of the surrounding local stores and services, but it also endangered the urban and social identity of a very close 'historic borough' (Roccella). Neither the form nor the ideology that characterise the *Forum* share any common characteristics with Roccella. For those who visit it today, the *Forum* seems like a white suburban elephant, amongst the fringes of urban development.

The case of *Conca d'Oro* is quite different, as it lies not within a historic borough, but close to a much more recently built neighbourhood. Zamparini repeatedly asserted, even during some interviews with Gabbai during the making of *U' Zen*, that his shopping mall—together with his new stadium, of course—would turn the Zen from a deprived slum into a full "business centre" of the city. He also promised to hire only (or mostly) local employees, and obviously to provide the neighbourhood with facilities that would enhance the local quality of life, as aforementioned. On the contrary, the hiring of local residents was actually kept to a minimum, and the facilities are not operating yet. The general attitude of the population turned from enthusiasm to scepticism, as the shopping mall turned from panacea to delusion.

And yet, despite all we have said so far, one must not forget the words that the residents of the Zen kept repeating during the opening day of the *Conca d'Oro*. "At last they gave us a place to spend the weekends with our children": what does this sentence hide?

It clearly reveals a most serious political inability to consider public spaces as *the* places that can/must provide the residents with the facilities and meeting places they need. We live in the bleak panorama featuring an ever-worsening chronic lack of public spaces, and in a hyper-technologic society that considers a *forum* not as its etymological meaning would suggest (as the *agora*, the piazza: see Arendt, 1988; Bonafede & Picone, 2012), but as a virtual place over the internet, where one can chat while in the comfort of his/her own house. So much so that we have called the first shopping mall of Palermo *Forum,* with no respect for paradoxes. The mall is now the new form of pseudo-public (Davis, 1992) or post-public (Tulumello, 2012) space, and stands alone in its attempt to provide citizens

with things that politics cannot provide anymore. Seen from the perspective of a Zen resident, who always had to move away from his/her neighbourhood to enjoy the benefits of an urban lifestyle, and who always used the phrase "scendere a Palermo" (move down to Palermo) to reveal how the Zen *is not* part of Palermo, the construction of a shopping mall such as the *Conca d'Oro* may not mean keeping all the initial promises that Zamparini made, but at least it has proven, perhaps for the first time ever, that the Zen is actually at the vanguard of Palermo. It brought customers, nice stores and a diffused, yet misleading, sense of wellbeing. It somehow, perhaps absurdly, forced a few citizens who had never, ever, visited the Zen (and who would have never thought of visiting it) to consider this deprived neighbourhood and the "trip to hell" that is part of visiting it (Fava, 2008) under a new light.

Let us just clarify one thing: this text is not an apology for shopping malls, nor does it want to be. The authors of this paper still believe that the economic model of the mall should not be applied light-heartedly and with global replicas of the same structure. They still believe that the shopping mall is a terrible answer to the questions of contemporary social life. And yet, they grudgingly have to acknowledge that shopping malls are the most serious issue that Palermo, although it comes late, has to discuss today, leaving no space for aprioristic and snobbish stances. Because, unfortunately, shopping malls are the synonym of the last bits of public spaces in Palermo today, even if they are not clearly public at all: in other words, they deny the spirit of what should be public, but in doing so they mimic the public and disguise themselves as public. They rhetorically persuade the residents of the Zen, dejected by decades of indifference concerning possible strategies of politic change, that this is their only and last chance to get a seat on the train of social welfare. They create new types of social interaction: how many people gather at the *Conca d'Oro*, in the company of their families, during the long days of the summer heat wave or on stress filled weekends when there are no other places suited to meeting in public or enjoying attractions? They have changed the daily habits of the residents of the Zen and of the whole population of Palermo, from the choice in places where you can go shopping, to the election of new and unexpected meeting places. We have personally witnessed how young people in particular now spend their afternoons visiting the *Conca d'Oro*, rather than gathering in the empty square of the Zen 2, as they had done before. Therefore, is there a recipe to reduce the proliferation of new shopping malls? In these terms, the question may be too complex; however, it may probably be rephrased: what could be a viable alternative to the pseudo-sociality granted by a shopping mall? Which urban policies should Italian municipalities pursue so that shopping malls do not become the only remaining place for social interactions? And what do we lose if the *agora* model succumbs to the *mall* model?

7. Conclusion

As we have highlighted before, given the political indifference towards the social exclusion of the inhabitants of the Zen district, the weakening and absence of public space lead us to think that the pseudo-sociality that shopping malls offer is truly the new frontier of contemporary public space. With regards to this point, even accepting the difficulty of designing a space that aims to create some forms of sociality, we must acknowledge how the debate about the urban standards in Italy has led to significant results.

Private actors have taken care of the absence of public spaces by generating new mono-functional, hyper-specialised spaces that are managed and controlled with the typical dynamics of private property (i.e. by restricting the hours in which these can be accessed or limiting the category of users that can be accepted). The hyper-specialised shopping malls have generated a process of privatisation of public space (Mitchell, 1995; Smith, 1996; Low, 2000) based on policies that aim at maximising profit instead of caring about the common good. These private places of trade and business are meant to become the new post-metropolitan public spaces. In fact, building these 'consumerist temples' implies turning some traditional architectonical elements and spaces into the elements of a marketing strategy. In the ongoing sequence of piazzas, pseudo-urban façades, fountains and benches lies the misunderstanding of our own ephemeral consumerist society, unable to grasp the true essence of that *infra* (Arendt, 2001) which is the base of public space. Atopy, homogeneity, exclusion and control are the main features of these new spaces, and it is hard to believe that they will be able to generate new or alternative forms of public spaces, regardless of how many people use them or praise them.

Margaret Kohn (2004) has described the societal effects of these private public spaces, emphasising how the forms of control and exclusion exerted in these spaces regulate the exercise of freedom, which is the basis of both public space and democracy. Even admitting the existence of diverse and complex forms of public space, this, as a conceptual and spatial category, should nevertheless lean towards including as many citizens as possible.

The acclamation of shopping malls from local communities in Italy is rooted in the absence of facilities, especially in urban areas. When facing this deficit, the local administrations just activate new variant procedures that simply increase the privatisation of urban space. In this sense, we can consider the praises of these pseudo-public spaces coming from the citizens of a deprived neighbourhood as the catastrophic result of the lack of an institutional actor, of its inability to manage troublesome situations and to guarantee that public interest will be the main goal of urban policies.

The challenges that urban neoliberalism forces our society to face, in terms of democracy and social justice, press us to acknowledge the citizens' request to share and participate, to experience a recognition of their citizen status beyond the occasional reclaiming of a physical space. This leads us to reflect, from a disciplinary point of view, on the meaning of public space, by overcoming the 'physical vs. social' divide that the technical approach implies (Scandurra, 1999). Public space is both the greatest challenge of our contemporary times and a chance to recreate a dialogue among the several public and private actors operating in the city. The goal is to build up a shared projectuality, in which resorting to the private actors is no longer the only alternative to the absence of public policies.

Therefore, this game is not only played on the technical dimension of projectuality or on the ability to produce significant changes in administrative policies and praxis, but also on the ability of our scholarly discipline to contribute to an urban future in which all the social actors, be they strong or weak, public or private, work together to «define the common good and elaborate the rules of living together in the city» (Macchi, 2001, p. 51).

Notes

* Although the article should be considered a result of the common work and reflections of the three authors, Giampino takes primary responsibility for paragraphs 2 and 3, Picone takes primary responsibility for paragraphs 4 and 5; Schilleci takes primary responsibility for paragraphs 1 and 6.

(1) The name of the shopping mall to be built was clearly inspired by the geographical features of the area.

(2) *CityZen* is described as a "docu-fiction on the way young architects from Palermo reconsider the disputed Zen neighbourhood of the city" (http://www.zerocento.it/portfolio/u-zen/). The shootings for the film began in 2010, as the movie was directed by Ruggero Gabbai and produced by Daniele Manno and Rodolfo Drago. It includes interviews with local citizens, architects, politicians, entrepreneurs and scholars, including Rita Borsellino, Tiziano Di Cara, Marzia Messina, Marco Picone, Giuseppe Romano, Italo Rota, Bice Salatiello, Mario Vigneri and Maurizio Zamparini.

(3) The answers here were often pronounced in a strict local dialect, not in Italian, as a proof of the low social condition of the neighborhood.

(4) http://www.nadiaspallitta.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2341&Itemid=65 (accessed on May 7th, 2014).

(5) *La Repubblica*, December 8th, 2006; http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2006/12/08/via-libera-zamparini-city.html, (accessed on May 7th, 2014).

(6) *La Repubblica*, June 5th, 2013; http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/06/05/news/linee_guida_del_piano_regolatore_il_consiglio_d_il_via_libera-60445531/?ref=search (accessed on May 14th, 2014).

(7) http://www.mobilitapalermo.org/mobpa/2009/11/24/il-centro-commercialeforum-apre-a-palermo-foto-video-dell-inaugurazione-24-novembre-200-a-voi-lanteprima/ (accessed on May 14th, 2014).

(8) http://archivio.siciliainformazioni.com/cronaca-regionale/forum-palermo-domani-linaugurazione-del-centro-commerciale/ (accessed on May 14th, 2014).

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