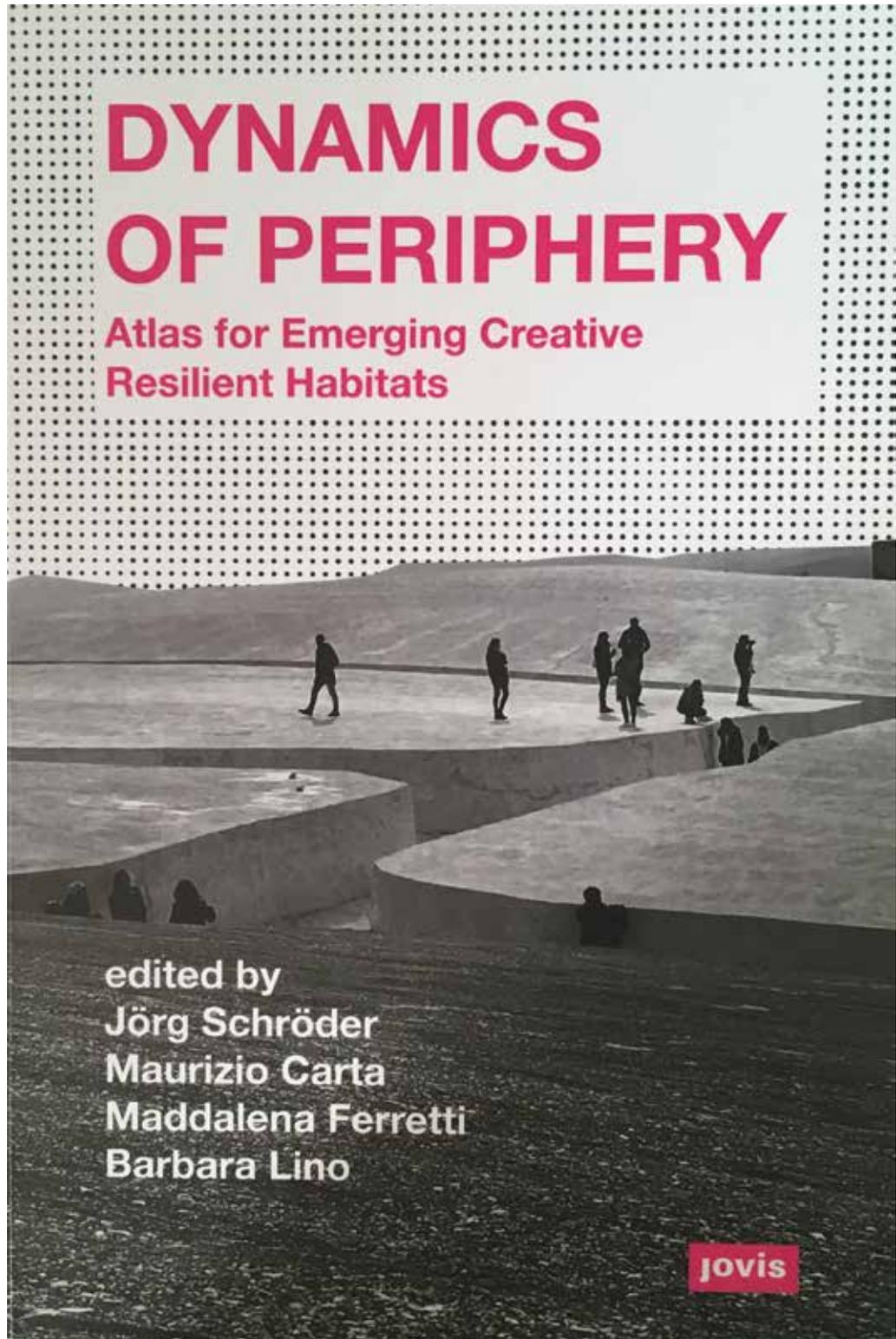


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Leibniz Universität Hannover
Abteilung Regionales Bauen und Siedlungsplanung
Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Jörg Schröder
www.staedtebau.uni-hannover.de

Università degli Studi di Palermo
Dipartimento di Architettura
Prof. Arch. Maurizio Carta
www.unipa.it/maurizio.carta

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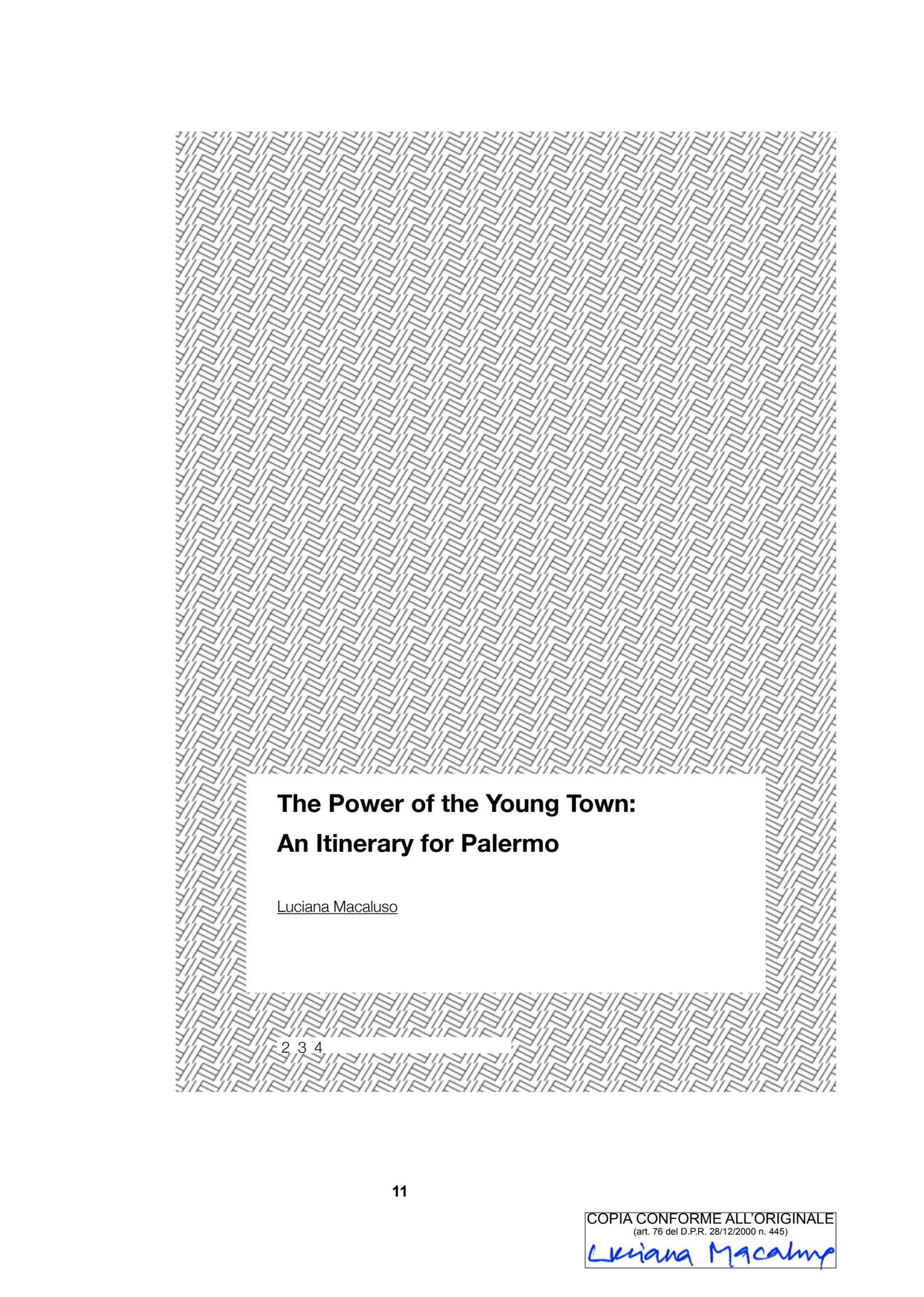
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The Power of the Young Town: An Itinerary for Palermo

Luciana Macaluso

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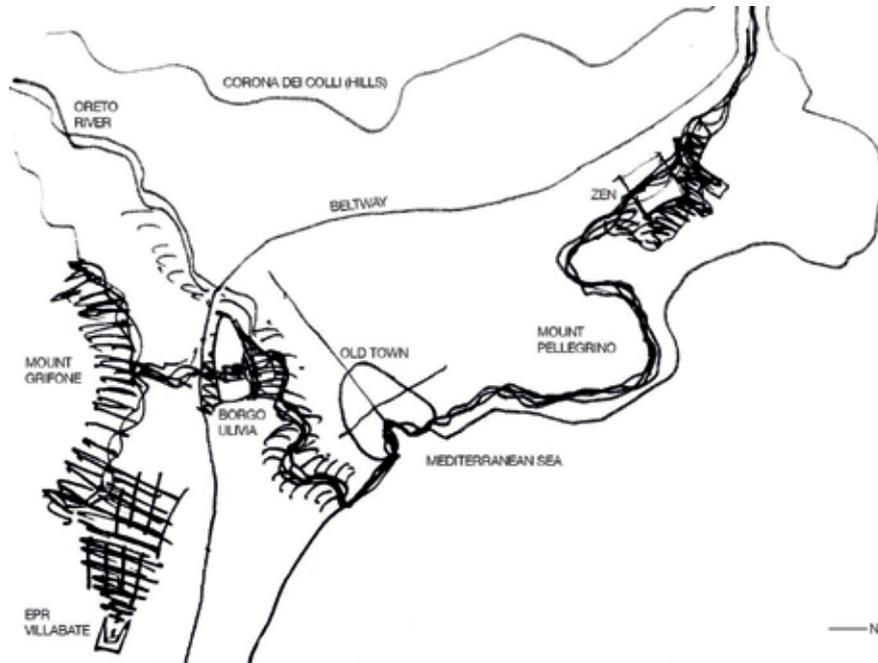


Figure 1. The power of the Young Town, map of Palermo. Graphic: Luciana Macaluso

Kids wanna be so hard.
 But in my dreams we're still screamin' and runnin' through the yard.
 And all of the walls that they built in the seventies finally fall.
Arcade Fire, The Suburbs 2010

Since the end of the Second World War, in Europe, an urban renewal has started gathering people's enthusiasm and the commitment of many entrepreneurs and public administrators. In Palermo (Sicily), the agricultural lands began to include new neighbourhoods that quickly merged with the historic and nineteenth-twentieth century centre. In the fifties, between the town and its geographic limits (Corona dei Colli), a beltway has been hypothesized and, in a few years, will become manifest as a founding board (Culotta 2005) for a "new town" made of peripheries. In the seventies, it was the spine of an expanding urban fabric that absorbed citrus and olive groves, vineyards, field of flowers, gardens, rural buildings, warehouses, villas, and historical villages in a complex and dynamic "rural-urban" fabric.

TERRITORIAL CREATIVITY

2 3 5



Figure 2. The power of the Young Town lies in its lymph-tissues and possible graft.
Graphic: Luciana Macaluso

Peripheries make the great part of our contemporary metropolis: hybrid and changing territories in which rural and urban traces are combined in a complex palimpsest of different times, identities, and stories. This town is more alive, more unfinished and younger than a historic centre. It needs flexible, adaptive programmes of transformation able to include the motion of heterogeneous factors in a higher order, not imposed top down but built starting from the same places, in accordance with their social and environmental peculiarities. The metaphor of the graft can clarify this process. Every plant can be combined only with some others. The plant continues its growth but it produces new flowers and fruits. In an urban transformation, the project of architecture and landscape can be a core of trans-disciplinary studies, in its multiple scales of representation and investigation. It is, by its own nature, an imperfect (it needs other disciplines, it does not immediately work except step by step) and optimistic instrument that helps us to trust in the potential of peripheries. From the small scale to the big scale, and vice versa, it makes us see and recognise “sleeping” values also in neglected or disadvantaged places; these values become the main ingredients whose “pertinent combination” can take new meanings. Within the experimental design the analysis develops and refines its results; analysis and proposal are not really divisible into different phases. On the contrary, the process continuously moves back and forth between reality and possibilities. This experimental design activity should be fed by seminars, visits, research, and collective parallel events following the more innovative method of participatory planning.

2 3 6 PROCESS

This continuous town is about fifty years old: it is very “young”, considering the ancient core of Palermo was founded in the fifth century BC. “Young” is intended as especially dynamic, heterogeneous, creative and, potentially, ecologic, unlike the compact city. Its inertia against physical changes is slighter, indeed human action is very powerful, and consequently also possibly dangerous. The risk is a cancellation of identities and human, historical traces: sometimes those are weak or hidden, but in Palermo always present.

In the sixties and seventies abstract plans often prevailed over the rural heritage. However a cultural change, in which the progressive awareness of pre-existing environmental condition had an important role, made architects and planners more and more sensitive to the marks of the territories (Rogers 1958). Two previous studies¹ focused on how some of these suburbs “tell stories” (Secchi 1992), about their origins and current state through sketches, technical drawings, and texts to thus propose their future development. Those studies are the starting point for emphasising the dynamism of three neighbourhoods in Palermo—Borgo Ulivia, and Zen—that include significant interpretations of the Modern Movement’s lesson in “Nucleo Sperimentale in Borgo Ulivia”, in the Zen 2, and the Public Housing of Villabate (ERP). Equally considering assumptions coming from those works, we could imagine an itinerary for Palermo from north (ZEN) to south (ERP) and vice versa, between “rural-urban” parks, along the seaside and the riverside, up to citrus groves and orchards from the plain to the hills.

The Zen 2 was born “among the rural and urban world” as a combination between a compact and modern town where the ground floors should have been permeable, opening paths towards the countryside and the geography (Gregotti, in Macaluso 2016). This plan has been partially constructed (without facilities); Palermo grew to the north, up to it, and the villages around it also expanded. This boom produced a lot of buildings independent from the streets and enclosed with fences step by step. Also the *insulae* (blocks) in the Zen 2 have been closed. Pedestrian crossing in the ground floor failed to effect a special domestic character of the courts that are an extension of the apartments according to the tradition of living in Palermo (Sciascia 2003). Inhabitants take care of these spaces by maintaining them, they clean and place plants, chairs, tables, and small religious *aedicule*. This is where the neighbourhood relationships and activities develop.

Referring to other texts for a complete description (Sciascia 2003), the attention can be focused on those parts of the Zen not built because of the protection of historical fragments, from south to north: villa Pensabene, Cortile Gnazziddi, Fondo Trapani, villa Mercadante, Case Buffa, and villa Raffo, comparable to what in the imagination of the child of Michelangelo were “abandoned house[s] that belonged to a duke, a count, a prince, or maybe, why not, an emir” surrounded by “lemon groves like baobab, conifers that seemed to come directly from the Tierra del Fuego, giant sequoia, strange plants with primitive roots and so much water!” (Sciascia 2012). After all, the Arabic aqueduct (*qanat*) crosses the underground of the Zen. In a narrative approach, quantitative data about these places also show their qualities. In the district (including Borgo Pallavicino, Zen 1, and Zen 2) there are about 22,000 inhabitants of which only 1,495 are more than sixty-five



Figure 3. The power of the Young Town is in its intersection with the rural areas, Zen, Borgo Ulivja, ERP Villabate in Palermo (Sicily). Graphic: Luciana Macaluso

In Palermo, in the surrounding of the beltway, the “peripheries” shape a continuous town hardly held back by its geographical limits (the sea and the mountains) and the historical centre. “Peripheries” include an area about seven times larger than the old town, pushing their living force towards small villages and rural fields, absorbing those and dominating, at the end, the whole urban system: the town is “peripheries”. We consider three neighbourhoods in different conditions:

- Surrounded by a prestigious sprawl area and important sport facilities: Zen 2 (Zona Espansione Nord) is situated in the northwest of the old town, in the core of the Piana dei Colli, between the villages of Mondello, Cardillo, Partanna and Pallavicino. F. Amoroso (head of the team), S. Bisogni, V. Gregotti, H. Matsui, and F. Purini planned it in 1970. It is a compact fabric made by *insulae* (blocks). As if a seed of the old town fell out its wall in the countryside (Tafuri 1982) growing with modern characters such as permeable ground floors and wide perspectives towards the territory.
- Between Oreto river and the beltway: Borgo Ulivja is located in the south of the old town, merged with the villages Barone della Scala, Santa Maria di Gesù, Villagrazia and Ponte Rotto. In 1959, G. Samonà (head of the team), A. Bonafede, R. Calandra, and E. Caracciolo designed the “Nucleo Sperimentale” where self-referential blocks were placed to shape a street and a square.
- Where the countryside is still luxuriant: Public Housing of Villabate (ERP) is in the southeast of Palermo, between the villages of Ciaculli and Villabate. A. Bonafede, R. Calandra, B. Colajanni, S. Incorpora, G. Pirrone, N. Vicari designed it in 1975. The core of the neighbourhood is a square “out of scale” compared to the housing.

2 3 8 PLACE

years old (Municipality of Palermo, Statistic Office). Therefore not just the town is “young” but also its inhabitants in comparison with the Italian average: the potential for participating in bottom-up activities and place-making is strong. On-going processes of inhabitants’ creativity (e.g., street art and other activities by the Comitato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo dei Popoli and by Zeninsieme), the dynamic of unfinished spaces, and the pre-existing historical conditions, lead to a new urban pedestrian continuity, which is not generally spread out but links existing important steps in a path that forms an almost oblique line crossing the neighbourhood from the southeast corner to the northwest corner, and which works at a different scale to also involve the surroundings (rich sprawl and villages) and beyond.²

Considering other studies carried out over the years at the University of Palermo on the urban design of Mount Pellegrino, the waterfront, and the Oreto River, our itinerary should reach the opposite side of the town, up to Borgo Ulivia, on the south border of Oreto River.³ It includes sixteen different allotments characterised by linear blocks placed in open groups (among which the Nucleo Sperimentale is an interesting exception) or forming, in the east part, closed courts on the model of Sicilian type of the *baglio*.⁴ A common character shared by these forms is the autonomy of their settlements from pre-existing elements of the place: via Villagrazia, a sinuous street along which a small village developed, the geometry of the rural fields, and the beltway.

The gap between the buildings, the streets, and the same different parts of the neighbourhood is fenced, private or privatised; if open, it quickly changes because of its mixed use (storage, parking, vegetable garden, football field, aggregation spaces with temporary pavilions). Sometimes, the functions have given almost a special identity to some interstitial areas, such as the weekly market in largo dell’Anitra. These spaces, apparently “void”, are rich in vocations and previous traces waiting to be experienced; they have a hierarchy, although it is still in progress. Within the wave of the original intentions of the designers who worked between architecture and geography, we can look beyond the strong border of the neighbourhood to consider a territorial dimension including the Mount Grifone and the Oreto River. From this perspective a residual rural area along via Ponte Rotto plays an important role in a cycle-pedestrian route crossing the neighbourhood (Sciascia 2012). It should become a green core pushing and inhaling its lymph-tissue towards and from interstitial spaces and the wide parks of the Oreto River and Mount Grifone.

From the slopes of Mount Grifone, the itinerary leads to the luxuriant citrus groves of Ciaculli and the Public Housing of Villabate (ERP) where a regular settlement is compared with the trapezoidal shape of the lot, open towards the countryside. The big square of the neighbourhood (43 per 115 metres) is purposely “out of scale” if we consider the dimensions of the housing (two to four levels, with very horizontal façades). It should have been a territorial attraction more in proportion to the rural fields than only to its perimeter buildings. Nevertheless, the latest urban expansion followed other criteria and the access to the facilities is from the opposite sides, so that the school and other services back to the square favour their carriage entrances. Public space is just partially used, almost abandoned, as are the gangways that link it with the housing. The designers proposed a



Figure 4. The power of the Young Town is in its unfinished state. Graphic: Luciana Macaluso

“From an anonymous apartment for rent in downtown we moved to the new: our home in Michelangelo [a neighbourhood of Palermo]. ... Just that home in Michelangelo was not there yet. There was the skeleton, the base ... a concrete space with the rebar appearing to underline its condition of work in progress. A kind of stump. But we were already there. ... We spent the days sweeping, organizing, cleaning a construction site. ... The Michelangelo was still to colonise. It was nothing, a virgin territory. If someone had taken a photo of us we were like founding fathers. ... How beautiful nature in Michelangelo neighbourhood there was. ... We cooked and ate in what would become our dining room. And also the children were bustling, we were the sons of the founding fathers of Michelangelo. We built huts ... with those things that the workers left unused. ... In the back of the construction site, behind the Islamic garden, there was an abandoned house that belonged to a duke, a count, a prince, or maybe, why not, an emir” (Vetri 2015, pp. 9).

The phantasy of a child, who shared the enthusiasm of his parents constructing their home, in the 70s, well describes the current potential of a town, just thirty years old, where much is still to be done. Architectural and landscape projects, like stories, tell new optimistic perspectives for the young town. The comparison of different proposals will reveal the main impulses of a new development.

2 4 0 **NARRATIVE**

separation between pedestrian and carriage paths through articulate cross-sections, but walkability is not at all common because of the distance of the main services and the inaccessibility of the green areas. The return to the countryside, out of need or choice, and the quality of the nearby traditional rural fields (which are rarely so wide and productive in the town) make ERP in Villabate a paradigmatic case for exploring new relations between territorial and architectural dimensions, innovative rural-urban social practices and spaces. The itinerary has crossed anisotropic and very different “peripheries” where dynamism persists in resilient pre-existing elements, in open and informal spaces, in inhabitants’ activities, to push against the fences: “all of the walls that they built ... finally [will] fall” (Arcade Fire 2010).

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- 2 See laboratory of master’s thesis *I frammenti della città in estensione*, Supervisor Prof. A. Sciascia, Tutor L. Macaluso.
- 3 Carried out since the end of seventies by the professors of the Department of Architecture of Palermo of Urbanism, Planning and Architectural and Industrial Design.
- 4 The buildings with courtyards were planned by A. Bonafede, R. Calandra, U. Di Cristina, S. Gelfo, P. Mazzacurati, M. Natoli, C. Scavuzzo, V. Ugo, L. Vagnetti, G. Verace, and V. Ziino in 1963.

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