How to save land through Regional Planning.
The Case of Southern Sicily

The Southern Sicily: the *resistant* context

Sicily presents itself as a country full of contradictions: on one hand it shows a sort of "slowness" in starting long-term development processes and an out-and-out opposition both to government and planning, while on the other hand it presents the consequences of the so called "modernity" and of capitalism that had more persistent and destructive effects than in other countries (Benigno, Giarrizzo, 1999). Even though this country was often politically and economically assisted to promote the initial steps of development, it showed a strong *resistance* to transformations promoted by State. This almost endemic condition was one of the reasons because some high value parts have been "frozen" and could now represent the resources for a change (Cassano, 1996).

In addition city sprawl, one of the main effects of the crisis of contemporary cities, doesn't' spare Sicily and drawn out a new geography of settlements and vacant spaces that contradicts the original separation between the outwards bounds and the well-defined urban centres (De Carlo, 1993). This phenomenon is sometimes the result of illegal building, a quite commune feature of urban expansions in the Southern part of Italy (Kreibich, 2000) that is not always connected with conditions of social and economical marginalization. At the same time urban diffusion is one of the most evident effect of the dichotomy between the traditional inefficacy of planning tools and the growing complexity of contemporary cities (Hall, 2002).

In many cases the local governments gradually allowed the waste of land and resources, in contrast not only with the environmental and social sustainability, but also with a mere strategic economical perspective. Vacant or underused urban spaces and rural areas, valued until now only in connection with building opportunities, have to turn back in shape of collective values and sources.

Today in Sicily, but also in all the regions of Mezzogiorno (the southern part of Italy, Sicily and Sardinia), low density areas could represent the groundwork for future development together with local human capabilities (Salzano, 2005).

Land waste phenomenon: main characters and reasons

In Southern Sicily the waste of land problem presents two main features. The first form regards the evident linear conurbation composed by a lot settlements (fig. 1), often developed without building consents, that have saturated the coastal areas from Catania to Syracuse since the first '70s (Brancati et alii, 1996). This phenomenon is more ancient, notorious and destructive than the second form and involves more or less great part of the coastal land all over Sicily. Moreover, a consistent part of this settlement pattern is composed by holiday houses: a suburban and underused estate made of detached and semi-detached houses or small tourist villages characterized by seasonal use (weekends or holydays). Today buildings density along the coasts shows alarming indicators: in a narrow part of land (far 150 m. from the coastline) there are about 360 built-up areas characterized by various textures and including a good 25.000 buildings (Trombino, 2005).

The second form regards the progressive spread of buildings and settlements in rural areas and inner parts of the country. Initially, this form was the consequence of the turn from agricultural activities to manufacturing and industrial ones. But in recent times the progressive statement of a new residential model based on detached and semi-detached housing reminds the *sprawl.* This settlement pattern refers to the English *new town* presenting a similar relation between built and vacant spaces, even though it is not the result

of a specific public policy (Ford, 1999). It's exemplifying that in Sicily the 42% of the urbanized land consists on low-density settlements.

Regional settlement pattern has been until now characterized by a dualism between coastal areas and inner parts since the second post-war period. In fact the main National welfare policies chose coastal areas as strategic sites to localize industrial settlements since the 1950s. As a consequence, internal parts, above all in the countryside, suffered abandon and economical weakness. Only in recent times this condition is partly turning into *sprawl*.

The speculative building activity, started approximately since the 1970s, produced a new urban and large-scale landscape that wiped out rural identity. Agricultural properties were divided into small plots and then occupied little by little by residential buildings or industrial warehouses. This transformation, that often was the result of private enterprise, was also allowed and facilitated by local poorly designed master plans (La Greca et alii, 2006). This tools, finalized to distribute building consents based on mere quantitative criteria, put attention only on urbanized parts ignoring the value of unbuilt areas. Today these diffuse settlements can be considered as peripheries derived by the Catania and Syracuse Metropolitan Area, according to the well-known phenomenon that characterizes contemporary richer city regions of western countries (Nigrelli, 2000).

The conurbation localized in the area north of the municipal boundaries of Catania is an exhaustive example of this urban dynamic (Dato, 1991; Dato e Martinico, 1991). The analysis of population data (national censuses in the period 1961-2001) shows the progressive tendency of inhabitants to leave the main city in favour of the other 26 municipalities that constitute the Metropolitan Area. In fact the Etna mount slopes were gradually occupied by residential and manufacturing settlements that compromised the ancient rural landscape (fig. 2). Therefore the too fast "welding" between the main city and the minor ones has generated urban unbalances and critical consequences such as: congestion, a dependence on the main city services and offices, limited amount of amenities and collective equipments in minor municipalities, a prevalent poor quality housing and diffuse tendency to self-building sometime combined with processes of marginalization, all the features of what Bourne defines "new social spaces of the urban fringe" (Bourne, 1996).

However, in all these cases neither the legislative system and planning tools nor regional government have demonstrated any interest and sensibility for the land waste question, in addiction to the inability to implement concrete actions to limit or end it (Nigrelli, 2005).

Fig. 1 – Coastal spontaneous settlements in the area south of the municipal boundaries of Catania

Fig. 2 – Illegal buildings on lava soil in the north part of Catania

Planning tools and legislation in Sicily: a "picture without frame"

The examination of the land waste phenomenon underlines as main causes the partial failure of planning approaches and their implementation and some well-known limits of the Sicilian social and cultural background.

The first reason depends on numerous factors including the lack of a set of well-structured and efficient planning tools and the anomaly of a regional legislation formed through continual addenda and amendments. At first sight regional laws and tools appear not only incapable of defining efficient welfare and development policies, but also of weighing up mere country transformations and socio-economical dynamics. Another cause can be found in the lack of a comprehensive and integrated approach of policies that concern with the same territory and on great part of traditional planning strategies limited on land use regulation (fig. 3), often obsolete in comparison with the growing complexity of contemporary reality (Hall, 2002).

The second aspect deals with the features of local *milieu*: absence of an appropriate promotion and management from relevant and pertinent institutions, exclusion of low-income social actors in decision processes and the concentration of power on an *elite* legitimated by technical know-how or economical power (Friedman, 1995); besides an historical mistrust and indifference towards State and planning itself, perceived as routine, unimaginative, bureaucratic regulatory activity and sometimes even reactive to the positive role played by private initiatives in starting development processes (Hall, 2002).

Understanding the specific phenomenon object of this analysis requires a brief description of the Sicilian legislative system formation and evolution. In relation to the first form of land consumption, the *sprawl* form, while a spontaneous tendency to build manufacturing settlements in agricultural soils was emerging, regional legislation declined ever more its responsibilities evolving towards deregulation (Martinico, 2005). It's just the situation of the regional planning law now in force (no. 71, 1978), lacking of tight and clear zoning regulations, that allowed the localization of industrial warehouses often independent by rural activities also in green belt.

More recently some innovative modalities introduced in the planning decision processes have emphasized this derogatory background: private interests that often prevail in the public-private partnership and the participatory issue frequently reduced to a label that lets projects to gain a superficial social consensus or European funds. For example, European or National Plan, Programmes and Projects, based on arrangements that provide the concentration of integrated actions and different funds in a strategic target area, granted building consents also in green belt after an opportune variation of local tools in force.

Regarding to the safeguard of coastal areas another regional law (no. 78, 1976) stated a restriction scheme for high-naturalistic value areas and zoning regulations for other specific contiguous parts. Afterwards a following national law (in 1985) provided a less stringent and rigorous restriction scheme characterized by more arbitrary criterions of inclusion/exclusion. However, this law was important because of the opportunity of penalize houses built without consents in restricted areas.

In the praxis all the next regional legislation has neutralized the power of this law: ever since no serious but necessary measures were taken to limit the spontaneous building in green belt, to demolish these buildings already plead as illegal and to monitor and manage the state of decay and waste of coasts (fig. 3). At the same time great part of the local narrow-minded master plans have more or less consciously legitimated and encouraged the interests and speculation of entrepreneurs or powerful minorities. An example of this capability of going around law boundaries is the possibility of assigning plots for subsidised housing projects in area zoned for rural activities, in contrast with the ordinary planning procedure (La Greca et alii, 2006). Another case is the inclusion of some fragile and high value parts, classified as low density areas (according to a law decree issued in 1968 that introduced urban *standards*), in areas provided for urban expansion.

Therefore looking at the legislative system it points out some of the most remarkable anomalies:
- the no. 76 law is lacking in effectiveness in absence of local tools. Probably this is the reason of the singular inertness to approve tools that until now have no covered the whole region area;

- the no. 71 law was transitory and provided the issuing of a following and definitive law that Sicily has waiting for about 30 years: finally in 1991 a regional law made compulsory the local governments to approve local master plans and seemed to inaugurate a new "season" for planning.

Something different seems to happen in 1999 when the Guide Lines of the Regional Landscape Plan were approved. This Plan is not a mere tool useful to establish a restriction scheme and to avoid building consents, but it aim to individuate development strategies and actions in coherence with environmental safeguard. But the unitary land vision was again endangered by the next Finance Acts, in 2000 and in 2003: they represented an evident regression towards the previous deregulatory tendency and the division of roles and tasks between sectorial and ordinary planning. In fact these laws extended building consents in green belt also for single initiatives of private entrepreneurs on condition that the funds would be not public.

Therefore it emerges an extremely critical regional legislation characterized by discontinuity and incoherence and excessively vulnerable to the appeal of private funds. Furthermore higher planning tools that would be reference points, instead are completely absent: so the Sicilian context can be defined as a "picture without frame".

Fig. 3 – Syracuse coasts: the coexistence of residential settlements, industrial poles and restricted areas

The strategic role of large-scale tools: the rebirth of collective interest

This report starting from the study of legislation and planning tools would analyze the capacity of regions to effectively manage their physical and socio-economic development and change (Gwyndaf, 1999). Especially it would inquire into the reasons of the Sicilian government inefficacy to limit land-waste, focusing on legislative original anomalies and responsibilities.

At this point we consider necessary to explain the meaning of city-region management, referring to P. Healey: …is not about ways of delivering local government services fairly, efficiently and effectively… (but) how people with shared interests in the relational webs and environmental qualities of urban areas can come together to identify common concerns, develop strategic ideas, and generate the momentum to bring forward investment in building links and constructing discourses (Healey, 1995). Pierre in fact defines as "ungovernability" the conflict over values and objectives, expressed also in a legislative system, within the institutions and regarding with contemporary social fragmentation that often turns into spatial stratification and social polarisation (Pierre, 1999). Therefore institutions and society follow a similar evolving process.

In Italy since the first '90s an increasing political tendency for devolution led effectively to the disintegration of the traditional national centralism. This decentralisation to urban/suburban centres involved an increasing interest in a local dimension of problems and identity. From planning standpoint the "bricolage" of local tools was deeply connected with the *sprawl* and the lost of an unitary and large-scale vision of land (fig. 4). Then planning has been frequently routinised into making development programmes or plans to distribute building permissions and, in more politically pressured parts of the country, to defend them against the innovative attempts of external developers (Hall, 2002).

So the *resistance* meaning of the Sicilian context is just a mixture of: social fragmentation and isolation and a life-style centred on private dimension, often connected with a "close the gates" mentality (Florida, 2003); bureaucratized and politicized institutions and planning, often results of a coercive and distorted power exercised by minorities (Stein, Harper, 2003). Sicily needs a sort of "earthquake", something creative and radical able to make a clean sweep to start again towards a new horizon.

Today large-scale planning seems to present the qualifications to affect on socio-economic dynamics and to solve environmental questions (Cappellin, 1996). Moreover, an efficient government is one of the many factors of competitiveness that permits the access to funds and resources and the starting for long-term development processes (Healey, 1995). At present the most popularly large-scale model of government adopted is based on a upper level consisting of a single unit that provides strategic direction and major infrastructural planning and lower levels made of local municipalities catering for specific needs (Pierre, 1999). Higher levels of government have to evolve more and more from such a consultative process, rather than being pre-established or imposed (Lefevre, 1998).

The rediscovered centrality of large-scale planning is also confirmed by some of the most advanced European experiences. For example the Netherlands Government issued the Fifth National Rapport about Physical Planning titled "National Spatial Strategy: Creating Space for Development" (VROM, 2004): it affirmed the primacy of strategic intermediate level of Provinces that have to implement the control of urban expansion in favour of high-density settlements (Gibelli, 2006).

In this perspective we can assert that a large scale planning process could be for Sicily a strategic opportunity to execute a radical change: the reorganization of regional planning tools set based on the principle of integration, the reform of institutional roles and tasks towards the co-planning approach and the reconstruction of social cohesion through the rediscover of shared values and interests. Indeed *land* could become one collective value and be protected from future consumption too.

Fig. 4 – Separation between ordinary and sectorial planning: high value environmental areas within the great industrial pole of Priolo (Syracuse)

Sardinian planning tools: the Regional Landscape Plan takes care of coastal areas

This report considers essential to recognize that may be a problem that has to be tackled to start a deeper reflection upon the Sicilian context. Then the comparison with another region, that becomes the case of study, permits firstly to individuate some virtuous features about planning or legislation and then to value the possibility of shifting and adapting some successful solutions to the Sicilian context or else the suggestion for a more radical reform. So we would briefly develop a "bending the trends" scenario, in which determined policy initiatives would remedy the problems (Hall, 2002).

Sardinia is been chosen because of it is similar than Sicily in geographical (it's an island too) and normative conditions. Some common characteristics are: physical separation and as consequence isolation from the rest of Italy, historical tendency to separatism, an high value environmental estate, traditional natural sources exploitation by exogenous actors (both public and private). Quite recently Sardinia has becoming one of the most attractive destinations of mass tourism and of high-incoming people that have often acquired coastal properties to build their luxurious houses.

Looking at the legislation, Sardinia as autonomous region enjoys more power in issuing planning laws rather than the other Italian regions. About ordinary tools Sardinia presents an analogous situation than Sicily: though the upper levels have been approved and are now in force, the role of intermediate tools that is the regional plans of Provinces is not well-defined yet. In fact Sardinia legislative system did not acknowledge the no. 142/1990 national law that provided the reorder of the administrative local roles and tasks and introduced the provincial tool. Therefore the normative point of reference until now remains a previous law (issued in 1985) that emphasized a sort of centralism empowering the Regional government to the detriment of the Province one.

Sardinia unlike Sicily has started a change: the Regional Landscape Plan making represented an interesting change to re-establish equality and mutual relations between government levels thanks to the shared aim to limit land consumption. Since 2005 Sardinian government has implemented an innovative land use policy, side by side legitimated by new legislative measures, founded on the equation of landscape and local identity.

The first step consisted on establishing a regional Committee finalized to the coastal safeguard named "Conservatoria" that can be intended as the English *National Trust* and the French *Conservatoire du littoral*. These institutions, even though presenting different promoters (private and public), for some time have engaged similar policies and so now they represent well-established and efficient experiences in protecting and managing fragile areas. The *National Trust* is a sort of not governmental organization, founded in 1895, finalized to the defence of natural and cultural landscapes from the threat of building speculation. Now it manages a significant estate made of about 600 miles of coastal areas that correspond to the 1,5% of the whole Great Britain territory. The *Conservatoire du littoral,* founded in France in 1975, instead is a national public institution with prevalent administrative functions. At the moment it establishes a sustainable use discipline of about 900 km of coastal areas and assigns the management to local governments, communities and ecologist associations.

The "Conservatoria", a public institution, declared same aims and tasks. First of all it had to obtain the complete coastal properties (1.850 km) by means of written agreements and property assignments with private actors or pre-existent public agencies; then it had to carry out coastal management plans and to monitor the environmental state, giving particular attention to landscape modifications; finally it had to promote ecological education and to control the tourist fruition guarantying adequate sustainability levels, also through the engagement of cooperatives, environmental associations, institutions, public-private agencies…

The next step needed a normative basis, better if not provisional and contingent, to legitimate the exercise of regional power in acquiring all the coastal properties and to put into practise this innovative measures (Stein, Harper, 2003).

Sardinian political and cultural approach: centrality of law and consensus building

The regional government political approach was deeply rooted to landscape value: its aim was the safeguard of the environment from any kind of threat, starting just from coastal areas that result as the most fragile and compromised parts. Sardinian Government intended to avoid the achievement of mass tourism models opting for a niche market tourism.

In this perspective the Regional Government provided a strategy that presented two aspects. The first reference point was the exertion of *law*. In fact a regional law just called "Save-Coasts" permitted to preserve a coastal belt extended 2 km and to suppress any building consent there: all the properties included became collective goods. Afterwards the regional "Piano Paesaggistico" (Landscape Plan) provided a restriction scheme regarding the pre-selected areas. This Plan was committed to a multi-disciplinary team composed by famous scientific and technical experts (for example the architect Alvaro Siza and some city and regional planners like Edoardo Salzano and Roberto Gambino). Moreover, it started the process of coastal management tools that were successively committed to local institutions or community representatives such as cooperatives, environmentalist associations and agencies that had the task of planning public access and regulating uses. After the Plan approval the only authorized actions in the coasts could be renewal and regeneration of settlements, buildings and public spaces.

It is evident that the "Piano Paesaggistico" approach is a combination of some specific "ingredients": development priority and building consents assigned to areas already urbanized that have to turn from *sprawl* into the more sustainable high-density form (Hall, 2002); public space primacy against "a privatopia or what are called private interest developments" where individual rights are valued over collective ones (Bourne, 1996) (fig. 5); finally participatory process as a double chance finalized to rebuild a "citizenship" founded on shared values and to empower institutions to progress to more dialogic and inclusive practises (Lanzara, 2004).

The second reference point was the constant and continual search for *consensus*. All the process was structured by a Planning Conference that consists of an intense series of meetings that had the aim to individuate shared renewal coastal projects and to apply the co-product between different government levels. The Conference was coordinated by the Regional Government that in a first phase seemed to assume somewhat a regulative and centralistic role and became a bit politically unpopular with lower governments. On the contrary little by little the process form and the dialogic rationality permitted the coordination across the plural authorities of government: the autonomy of governments levels was not overthrown and a new mutual order was gradually gained. So the recognition of possible alternatives, the attention to "subaltern" projects or "interstitial" opinions and interests, in a word the choice building rather than the *ex ante* solution possession seem essential to imagine a real social change in societies in which the ordinary power exertion is a privilege of a minority (Amin, Graham, 1997).

Fig. 5 – "Developments of private interest": a typical illegal house

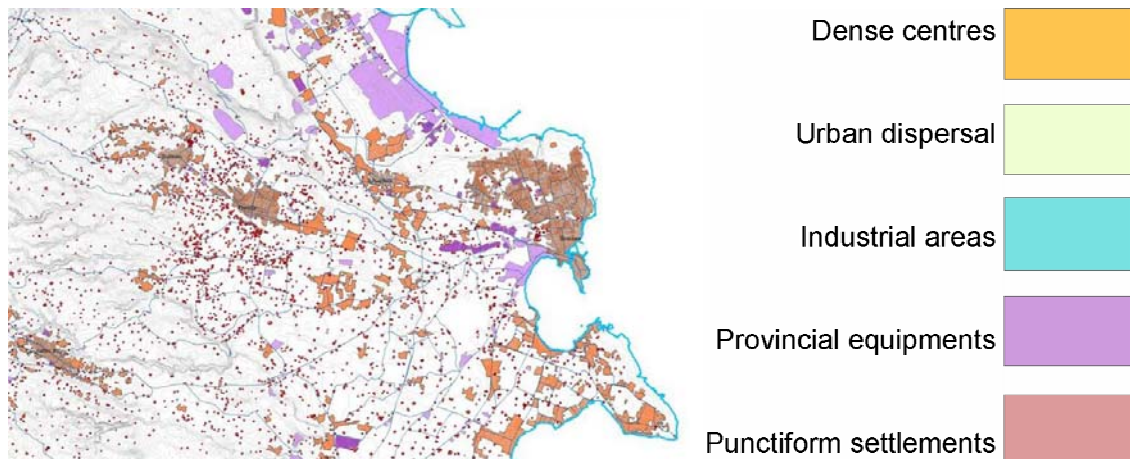**Initial "green" steps towards an unavoidable reform in Sicily**

The most remarkable anomalies pointed out from the Sicilian context regard with: the lack of a regional plan concerning with the structural level and the exiguity of Provincial Plans that is related to the strategic role (fig. 6). Moreover, these conditions represent the clear sign of an incomplete and less consolidate legislation and of a planning activity not ordinary and constant. Entering into details, at the moment there are only some written documents worked out by the regional scientific Committee, firstly founded in 1979, dissolved and reinstituted again in 1999. The most significant documents are: the report titled "Analysis, estimations and proposals for the Sicilian Regional Plan" (Ptur) that draws out the guide lines to start a development programme according to the conservation regime; the "Methodological Frame" that describes the Committee composition and its procedural approach. Besides the unique Provincial Plan until now approved (now in force and developed by a team guided by Bruno Gabrielli) regards Ragusa (started in 1993 and approved in 2003). The long-drawn-out process has made the plan inadequate to solve problems: now it is obsolete to face country conditions modified and needs already a "restyling".

The "Sicilian Regional Plan" deserves a specific observation because of its additional enacted task of delineating criterions and modalities to protect and consequently regenerate bounded areas. The absence of this plan prevents from making active a recent law proposal finalized to the coastal renewal and restructuring.

Comparing Sardinia and Sicily we can underline some commune features like: a *fuzzy* and incomplete regional legislation, the centrality of an anachronistic law and the incapability of well-defining mutual relations between planning tools and government levels. The only but substantial diversity lies in the antithetical political approach of regional governments. As Donolo said a plan process can be considered as a double learning opportunity both for institutions and planning and for local communities (Donolo, 1997). So we assure that the reform that Sicily needs has to be a combination of two politico-institutional shifts able to build the "frame for the picture": the purposeful action of institutions to meet basic needs and to encourage "dialogic" urban governance; secondly a participatory civic democracy centred around creating real opportunities for communities to develop voice and self-determination (Amin, Graham, 1997).

To obtain these purposes planners and politics that guide a large-scale process have to assume an optimistic perspective. Even though many problems certainly derive from distorted relations of power, in a Foucaultian point of view, but only the "social hope" expresses the planning essence and what have to be used effectively in a process (Stein, Harper, 2003).

Dense centres

Urban dispersal

Industrial areas

Provincial equipments

Punctiform settlements

**Fig. 6 – Provincial Plan of Syracuse (now in process):
city-region system of settlements**

Some suggestions to "mould" the *resistant* country

Some changes finally seemed to happen in 2003 thanks to the bill of a regional planning reform started by a team of city and regional planners (B. Gabrielli, G. Gangemi and G. Trombino). It expressed the clear will to create innovative planning tools able to govern and manage territorial dynamics and transformations. This legislative proposal confirmed three different levels of government: regional, provincial and local. Now the law issuing is stopped because of the government changes due to a series of consecutive regional elections. This report is in the "virtual" condition to suggest some legislative integrations to this law-bill.

Our first proposal relates to the idea that dense cities are more sustainable than loose, un-dense ones, because they could satisfy market logic and social logic as well as environmental logic (Hall, 2002). Consequently a law that gives attention to the contemporary city condition have to confirm, according to the tradition of European large-scale policies (The Netherlands, Germany, Great Britain…): the concentration of further and future building opportunities in metropolitan areas (*urban networks*); a sequential approach that provides first of all the distribution of building consents in the areas already urbanized and then, after having exhausted all the renewal and reconstruction opportunities, involves the areas not yet compromised.

The efficient implementation of this city-model requires also the relaunching of the large-scale planning that needs some innovations: more procedural flexibility, new restriction schemes finalized to guarantee more correct uses of land; more attention to provide compensations connected to negative externalities that depend on individual localization choices; more compensative supports in case of voluntary cooperation and associative forms between municipalities (Gibelli, 2006).

Moreover, the compensations could be services and collective equipments in accordance with the so called "péréquation" planning tool. For example in France there is a building prohibition for all the municipalities, that are less than 15th km far away from urban centres with at least 50.000 inhabitants or from the coast-line, lacking in the "Schéma de la Coherence Territoriale" (over municipal strategic scheme). Also the Catalan Law now in force provides some limitations for new urban expansions in some areas characterized by a fragile morphology.

The second suggestion regards the establishment of a committee that refers the "Sardinia Conservatoria" or the *National Trust* and the *Conservatoire du littoral,* with the aim to control and monitor all the areas subject to a restriction scheme and to involve local communities, that have the form of institutions, environmental associations and public-private agencies, in making management plans based on mere renewal and reconstruction actions.

From the social point of view we have seen that the progressive tendency to develop a private dimension of life is certainly the most remarkable reason of *sprawl*. Detached houses or buildings as well as dispersal settlements hold communities of exclusion, in which isolation, security and privacy are paramount, but they do not deal with social marginalization and "risk". However, this settlement pattern is certainly the antithesis of what we traditionally called "urban" and expresses a sort of opposition in finding regional, large-scale and collective solutions (Bourne, 1996). These dispersal settlements, even though already different from the form of "gated communities", often determine homogenous social groups that could emphasize the Sicilian close mentality.

That is the reason why planning and institution actions have to move towards the building of a *multiplex* and cosmopolitan city/country in which the dialectic of social interaction and cultural confrontation in shared spaces is a potential source of cultural innovation and creativity and where diversity and equality coexist (Amin, Graham, 1997; Beck, 2006). To start this process of civic empowerment it could be helpful the participatory practises and the communicative rationality: during planning processes could emerge some "interstitial social spaces" in which the reach of dominant ideologies is weak and which are potential spaces of resistance to dominant cultures (Mann, 1986).

Therefore the resistance against the narrow-minded mainstream could be considered as a potential key to "mould" the resistant Sicilian context. Planning for change, for planners and all the people that hold political liberal democratic values as potentials for innovation, is an incremental affair: "we start from where we are, start from the current conception of we, and expand it" (Stein, Harper, 2003).

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