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THE MULTI-SCALAR PRODUCTION OF INTERCULTURAL URBAN LANDSCAPES: INTER-CULTURAL NODES AS URBAN AND SOCIAL RE-ACTIVATORS

The case of Ballarò, Palermo

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Introduction

The recent migration crisis in Europe has exacerbated ongoing or latent local urban, social, and political issues, calling for effective strategies to manage the integration of migrants and refugees in the hosting context. The policies and practices of integration supporting the basic needs of the newcomers have placed additional strains on local resources, creating social and political tensions. The urban realm has a key role in the negotiation of these tensions as it is where the negotiation and the struggle for the control of the public space is an every-day practice between individuals of communities of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.[1]

This chapter investigates how the production of space could have a role in the production of intercultural environments that would allow for the inclusion and cohabitation of different cultures. Drawing from the definitions and proposed strategies for Intercultural Cities by the Council of Europe,[2] interculturality is defined as the simultaneous, non-hegemonic, coexistence of different cultures where each of these can be represented and contribute to the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of their cities.

The chapter focuses on the role that processes of intercultural place-making may have in mediating and facilitating the coexistence of cultural diversity, fostering the participation of local and migrant groups in the improvement of their social and urban environments. This paper makes the case about the need for an effective intercultural place-making to be part of a holistic approach at different spatial and temporal scales, including tactical urbanism, architectural interventions, and urban planning, engaging with existing intercultural networks

involving the participation of local communities and stakeholders. The complexity of such an approach requires a situated involvement of the architect, often as participant, facilitating the production of situated and adaptive interventions that could respond to the ongoing social, cultural, and spatial situations and processes.

Intercultural place-making and the production of social capital and differentiated citizenships

There is often an emphasis in the political discourse on promoting multiculturalism[3] that disregards the inherent risks of reinforcing existing social and cultural hegemonies that could hinder the participation of culturally diverse actors. Interculturalism, instead, emphasizes equal interactions and hybridity as dynamic processes that acknowledge and negotiate socio-cultural diversity.[4]

The inclusion of the difference is likely to collide with hegemonic conditions and practices from pre-established and dominant cultural settings, potentially exacerbating antagonistic and conflictual dynamics. The acknowledgment of such inherent antagonism and of the impossibility of a non-hegemonic consensus without exclusion,[5] which affects any pretension of a multicultural space, provides the basis for an 'agonistic pluralism'.[6] Hence, the antagonism between different cultural groups may be transformed in an agonistic recognition of the legitimacy of the otherness through the establishment of a 'common symbolic space'.[7]

The capacity of a common symbolic space to articulate the agonistic exchange of an intercultural citizenship[8] is conditioned by the complexity and heterogeneity of an intercultural civility, influencing how citizens accommodate diversity in their relations with concrete ethno-cultural others in daily, prosaic encounters.[9]

The intercultural interaction in the public realm could be articulated through acting upon shared concerns rather than through a discursive exchange that could be alienating.[10] In this sense, the engagement in place-making processes could facilitate the production of social capital as a connection that 'enables a community to resolve problems and fosters awareness of the ways in which their fates are interlinked and encourages them to be more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic'.[11]

According to the Council of Europe, 'Interculturalism expects a dynamic and constantly changing environment in which individuals and collective express multiple, hybrid and evolving identities and needs'.[12] Such conditions of interculturalism could be better nurtured in the spatial and temporal gaps of the hegemonic control and governance over the spatial, social, financial, and political organization of the territory, in interstitial situations of uncertainty.[13] These interstitial conditions could be related to what Lefebvre defined as 'differential space',[14] which is informed by its use and temporal appropriation from the inhabitants and, therefore, by the contingent production of the social space. In a similar manner to intercultural spaces, differential space is

created and dominated by its users from the basis of its given conditions. It remains largely unspecified … , thus allowing for a wide spectrum of use which is capable of integrating a high degree of diversity and stays open for change … a kind of 'urbanity' is produced in which the 'lived' and the contradictions that constitute urban life are nurtured.[15]

The production of intercultural place-making could also have political implications related to the construction of citizenship. Lefebvre[16] argues that 'the right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (*citadin*)'. In that sense, Purcell[17] relates Lefebvre's ideas with a 'pluralization of citizenships' and the 'politics of difference' that emphasizes the possibility and the value of a 'differentiated citizenship' that allows for multiple modes of political participation and the coexistence of different cultural identities.[18] Purcell proposes that the 'identity of each member of a political community should not be reduced to what all members share in common'.[19]

Some of the issues and potentials related to the role of place-making in the construction of an intercultural citizenship are acutely present in territories of liminality, such as border states or regions such as Sicily, where the exposure and contact with other different cultural conditions, like those from migration, are likely to be more intense.

Albergheria, Palermo: A complex multicultural context

From 2014 to the present day, Sicily has been the Italian region receiving the highest numbers of migrants by sea. In 2016, the peak was reached when a total of 123,706 immigrants disembarked at the island after having crossed the Mediterranean, leaving behind a dramatic number of 4,578 victims dead or missing at sea.[20] As a reaction to this tragedy, the local government and most of the civil society of Palermo, the capital of Sicily, have adopted an engaged empathetic approach towards migrants and refugees arriving in the city.

The Albergheria, the most deprived of the four districts forming the historic centre of Palermo, has suffered decades of severe issues of social exclusion and deprivation, urban degradation, and criminality.[21] Since the end of 1990s, it has also hosted a growing number of migrants and refugees attracted by low rents, informal networks of mutual help, and the presence of supportive organizations such as the Centre Astalli[22] and the Centre Santa Chiara.[23] However, their integration process has faced multiple difficulties, including frequent tensions with locals and public sector neglect.[24]

Ballarò, the neighbourhood at the heart of the Albergheria including the oldest food market of Palermo, hosts the most diverse population of the historical centre in terms of class and race, and accommodates several institutional and third-sector organizations addressing its urgent social issues.[25] The widespread

urban and architectural dereliction of the Albergheria holds a reciprocal cause-and-effect with its socio-economic marginalization and deprivation,[26,27] caused by years of institutional mismanagement, economic stagnation, and the influence of criminal organizations. Nevertheless, Ballarò Market is still regarded as the major economic and inclusive drive of the district, attracting both tourists and Palermitans. Ballarò Market and its neighbourhood could be considered as an incipient intercultural space aiming for socio-economic growth.[28] Here, the differences between Us and the Other, the local and the global, the past and the present are challenged and constantly negotiated.

Bottom-up place-making and civic assemblies in Albergheria, Palermo

In 2011, two activist groups, *Mediterraneo Antirazzista*[29] and *I Giardinieri di Santa Rosalia-Albergheria*,[30] cleared up a derelict interstitial space in Ballarò and turned it into a small informal public space named Piazza Mediterraneo, reflecting on the multicultural character of the neighbourhood.

The direct involvement of local activists and residents in the reactivation of Piazza Mediterraneo (see Figure 22.1) facilitated the production of social capital through the experience of interaction and collaboration around shared goals. Their hands-on participation in activities of tactical urbanism such as the reclamation of disused interstitial spaces as makeshift public spaces contributed to foster a collective sense of civic and urban agencies by those involved; an outcome and evidence of this was the foundation in 2015 of SOS Ballarò, a civic assembly of residents and stakeholders aiming for the urban regeneration of the district.

Besides Piazza Mediterraneo, SOS Ballarò and other local activists managed to reclaim other spaces through tactical urbanism, often activated by intercultural

FIGURE 22.1   Piazza Mediterraneo (2018).

events such as Ballarò Buskers. However, the capacity of their interventions to facilitate the development of intercultural spatial practices was hampered by interrelated issues with their inclusivity, resilience, and planning. The complexity and diversity of the social and cultural fabric at Ballarò is a challenge when promoting civic engagement, inclusion, and intercultural practices, requiring action beyond the tactical with a larger urban strategy.

> The ingrained informality by which public space is negotiated in Albergheria and the presence of territorial hegemonies from actors involved in activities that are frequently located outside the established legality, including organised crime, drug dealing and prostitution. These conditions often constrain the development of intercultural spatial practices of Ballarò's diverse communities, limiting their intercultural cohabitation of the public space.[31]

In this context, the 'tactical' urbanism actions of SOS Ballarò could have been more strategically planned in their articulation over the longer term within the pre-existing network of intercultural practices, such as Porco Rosso, Santa Chiara, and Moltivolti, thus being more interculturally inclusive and triggering long-standing urban and social transformation processes, developing a closer attachment to the migrants' needs and their everyday life (Forester, 2009), promoting their 'differentiated citizenship'. Therefore, the research has identified that there was scope for a strategic engagement in a more comprehensive, multi-scalar approach for the production of spatial practices for intercultural social inclusion.

EMUVE European research integrated into Ballarò 3.0 framework agreement

Between 2017 and 2018, a top-down/bottom-up synergy was created between SOS Ballarò and Palermo City Council for the social and urban reactivation of Ballarò, resulting in the Ballarò 3.0. framework agreement, formally approved by the City Council in March 2018.[32] After two years of intense debate, this constituted a promising initial step towards the urban regeneration masterplan of Palermo's historic city centre.

Ballarò 3.0. has been articulated under four strategic actions (Figure 22.2):

A. Reactivation of Ballarò historical market as the inclusive and economic drive for the district;
B. Improvement of mobility, accessibility, and the quality of public spaces;
C. Heritage preservation and its valorization for promoting the socio-economic development;
D. Addressing deprivation and social exclusion.

In 2017, Palermo City Council and SOS Ballarò requested the collaboration of the European research project Euro Mediterranean Urban Voids Ecology (EMUVE)
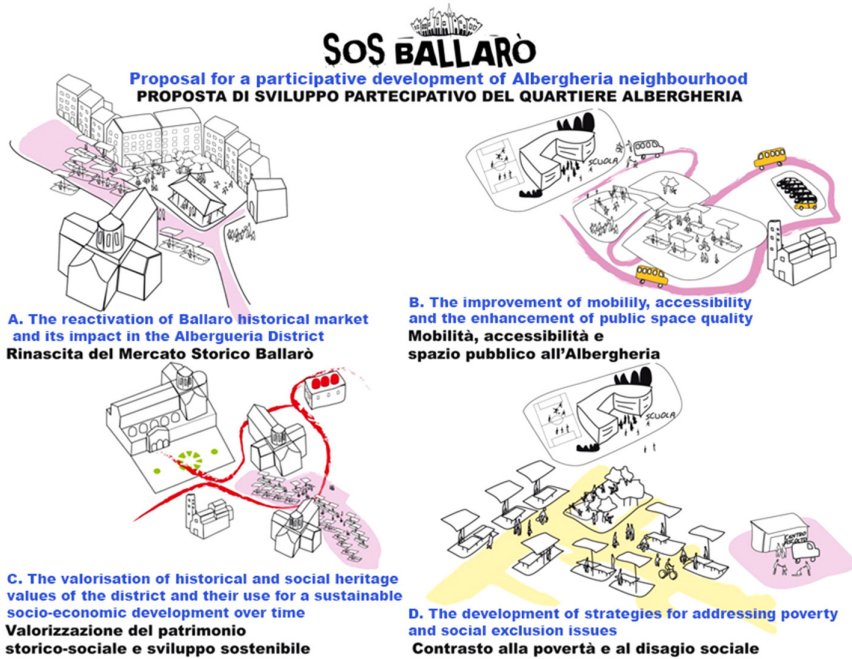
FIGURE 22.2   Ballarò 3.0 four strategic actions for the participatory development of Albergheria quarter (2018).

for the development of Ballarò 3.0,[33] based on its research experience on relationships between interculturality, migration, social inclusion, contemporary architecture, and urbanism.[34] Since 2013, EMUVE, funded by the European Commission, has worked on innovative multi-scalar design methodologies for the reactivation of degraded Euro-Mediterranean urban landscapes impacted by contemporary crises, from the 2008 economic downturn to the 2015–2022 migration crisis.[35]

The contribution of EMUVE to the development of Ballarò 3.0 was articulated under a triple multi-scalar approach, as follows:

1.) Architecture: conception, development and implementation of Inter-Cultural Nodes (ICNs) for promoting interculturality between locals and migrants, social inclusion and exchange, urban reactivation, and economic development;

2.) Public space: a second generation of tactical urbanism actions informed by intercultural place-making processes[36] and the negotiated production of space,[37] grounded on SOS Ballarò's previous experiences and on alternative, intercultural best practices across Italy and Europe;[38]

3.) Urban: short-, medium-, and longer-term urban and socio-economic impact of ICNs, including their articulation with pre-existing intercultural practices.

Spatial practices for intercultural social inclusion: The Inter-Cultural Nodes (ICNs)

According to Bhabha (1994) and Bloomfield (2007), an Inter-Cultural Node (ICN) may be identified with a 'third space', a pluralist in-between space that develops relational practices at multiple scales where the participants, including locals and culturally diverse migrants frequently subjected to exclusion, could collaborate together in creative expression and dialogue on joint projects within shared ethical bounds such as openness, cultural recognition, equality, anti-discrimination, and the sharing of knowledge.[39]

The ICNs foster an equal dialogue between migrants and locals, rather than the subjugation of migrants to a hosting hegemonic culture.[40] ICNs are envisioned as spaces of aggregation, bringing together people of diverse backgrounds for socializing and discussing issues and ideas, working as 'micro–public' spaces.[41] They are intended to proactively promote the production of a 'common symbolic space' where agonistic interactions take place,[42] rather than just providing distinct spaces for hosting culturally diverse groups.[43]

ICNs are conceived as urban and social connectors, simultaneously addressing social exclusion and spatial fragmentation at multiple scales, while exploring their mutual complex connotations. Their urban and social impact is intended to facilitate locals and migrants' mutual sense of wellbeing, safety, empowerment, and sense of belonging to the place they are inhabiting.[44]

In Palermo, the EMUVE research focused on the Santa Chiara Centre as a potential ICN, based on its scope and mission, the feasibility of its urban reconnection, and its multi-layered intercultural heritage values. *Mondinsieme Intercultural Centre,* located in a similar context in Reggio Emilia, Italy, was taken as a reference.[45] While *Mondinsieme* has been very successful at strategic and management levels, it did not produce associated intercultural urban and architectural connections and related spatial arrangements to express and enable its ethos at a larger scale. The focus of EMUVE research in Santa Chiara was to explore these urban and architectural gaps.

For over a century, Santa Chiara has been the most important local entity addressing deprivation in Palermo. For the last three decades, the centre has supported migrants and refugees arriving to the city.[46] It is part of the Catholic Church's outreach and is integrated in SOS Ballarò's assembly, frequently attended by the Mayor of Palermo and its Councillors. Santa Chiara offers migrants and refugees a reference point as a space where the acknowledgement of their civic rights have been valued and promoted.[47] Additionally, it collaborates with several third-sector organizations engaged in social support. Other religious activities are welcomed at the centre, such as the Senegalese Muslim community's Friday prayers.

Despite budget constraints, the centre has been successful in addressing urgent social needs but lacks a longer-term strategic vision for producing socially constructed 'third' spaces that would foster intercultural interactions between

culturally diverse communities and locals, thus contributing to the socio-economic transformation of the area.

Together with the Director of Santa Chiara, Don Enzo Volpe, and local communities and assemblies, EMUVE research collaboratively produced a master plan, including strategies and practices to promote and sustain intercultural interactions. The focus has been on strengthening the programmatic relationship of Santa Chiara with other pre-existing intercultural spaces nearby, such as *Moltivolti*, *Arci Porco Rosso*, and the Senegalese Association ASSO.[48]

A series of intercultural tactical urbanism actions have been conceived to activate the outdoor degraded spaces around Santa Chiara, with the intention of triggering wider processes of intercultural urban and social transformation as ways of exploring innovative participatory planning for locals and migrants, whilst providing opportunities to produce social capital. These foreseen actions may be summarized as:

1) Articulation of the indoor spaces of Santa Chiara to wider pre-existing urban structures, such as Ballarò Market and Via Casa Professa (see Figure 22.3);
2) Intercultural place-making strategies for enabling their 'third space' condition, attracting culturally diverse people and thus mitigating avoidance, apprehension, or rivalry;[49]
3) Fostering the participation of different cultural groups present in the area in the production and appropriation of those spaces.
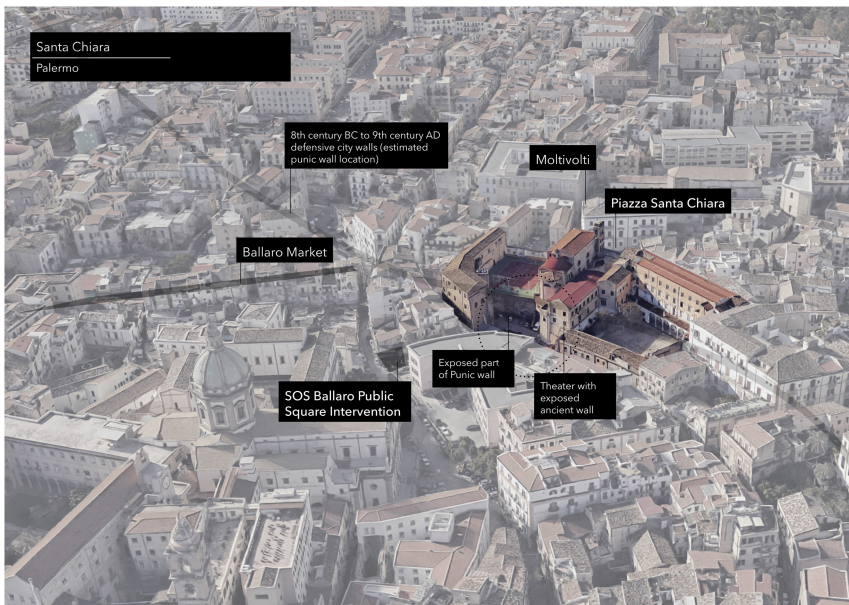
FIGURE 22.3 Articulation of Santa Chiara with wider surrounding urban and social structures (2018).

To achieve these ambitions, drawing on previous tactical urbanism actions in Albergheria and other successful experiences of intercultural centres in Italy, such as *Mondinsieme* Intercultural Centre in Reggio Emilia and Massimo Zonarelli Intercultural Centre in Bologna,[50] an active engagement of new and old citizens and pre-existing entities within and around the ICN will next be promoted for its spatial governance, funding, programming, and spatial production processes. The aim will be to achieve its medium-term economic independence from the public sector by implementing management and funding strategies based on social economy models.

Conclusion

The strategies herewith described conceive a superimposed programme of uses and activities aiming for the intercultural interaction between the different cultural groups using Santa Chiara as well as external visitors, neighbours, and others who are currently excluded. Santa Chiara, as a social engagement attractor, will act as a catalyst for further intercultural interactions. The aim is to overcome current intercultural practices that are mainly devoted to already highly engaged individuals and entities by proposing strategies that will attract and integrate other wider social groups not yet involved in these processes.

Considering the role of Santa Chiara within the urban and intercultural context of Albergheria, the reclamation and regeneration of the public and semi-public spaces around the centre for its articulation with other places of intercultural interactions is both a need and an opportunity. An essential aspect of the research has shown the urban and political impact, but also limitations, of the tactical urbanism actions implemented in the neighbourhood, such as those by SOS Ballarò. The implementation of a second generation of tactical urbanism actions, articulating an urban network between ICNs with the direct engagement of both locals and migrants in the material upgrading and the animation of the public spaces of the district, is specifically intended to foster and reinforce processes of intercultural production and hybridization, producing 'third' places that could trigger permanent processes of urban and social transformation.

The investigation described in this paper has explored the role of multi-scalar architectural, urban, and programmatic instruments and tactical actions for the urban and socio–economic reactivation of deprived districts with a high density of migrant population and a significant presence of locals. The proposed strategies, including the participatory regeneration of its adjacent public spaces and the subsequent consolidation of a wider urban network of intercultural nodes, are conceived as a prototype for an alternative reactivation of other European-deprived urban contexts where social exclusion and political radicalization is unfortunately the norm. The research has explored strategies that will trigger social, economic, and spatial processes to produce social capital, nurture the consolidation and enhancement of local and expanded networks, adapt to the emerging scenarios, and develop sustainability and resilience over time.

Notes

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