

# From the Paradigm of the Requalification of Urban Outskirts to the Construction of the Social Quality of Places. The Case Study of the District of St. Elia in Cagliari (Sardinia, Italy).

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The purpose of this paper is to identify the contradictions in the projects of regeneration of marginalized urban suburbs that do not take into account the real participation of the residents. The analysis is based on the case study of the district of St. Elia in the city of Cagliari, capital of the island of Sardinia (Italy).

The district shows many of the critical issues of modern suburban areas recurring in the literature. The area is physically excluded from the city, has a high proportion of social housing stock and a remarkable concentration of the economically and socially less privileged groups in society, as well as small-scale crime, neglected apartment buildings and lack of services.

The history of the district, marginalised since its foundation, gives a clear indication of the negative externalities that occur when the attempts to regenerate the suburban areas neglect the dialectical relationship between strategic top-down planning and the need for a bottom-up consensus, that can only be achieved thanks to inclusion and participation. It also allows to reflect on the gap between the time pressure under which the local administration works and the long timeframe needed for the transformation of socio-territorial units.

As a matter of fact, the current marginalisation of the district is the result of a long evolution. Over the last 60 years Cagliari has had an aggressive urban expansion. But didn't seem to be willing to integrate the district's potential in its urban fabric: S.Elia has been only sporadically mentioned in the political rhetoric, until short time ago. Its exclusion and physical isolation and the plan to control its social actors from afar was intended and even declared in the founding statutes of the district, in the aftermath of World War Two. Since then, there have been long periods of disregard by municipal and regional administration and sudden U-turns, sometimes aimed to transform the borough in an exclusive residential area. Against this background, the district has shaped its identity in reaction to the absence (or the purely instrumental presence) of the institutions of the city. An essential stage in the construction of the district's soul occurred in the '70s, when the initial aim of the demonstrations of the local movement of uprising for the rights of the residents, became a real fight to protect their homes. The fight had the purpose to deter the speculation on the area – ever more attractive for the private housing market – and to require institutional provisions to help the district break free from its isolation (AA.VV., 1973).

In order to explain the constant gap between residents' expectations and the imposition of new projects (still only on paper) by the public administration, emblematic is the reference, in the rhetoric of the institutions, to St. Elia as to a urban homogeneous "island". The misuse of the term is caused by the confusion of the complete isolation of the district from the city's fabric with the spirit of the district itself. Despite the fact that St. Elia is isolated, its identity is not confined and has many shades that are worth to be investigated. In the last 15 years, the collection of information in the field, at least in three occasions - the First District Contract (2001); the Master Plan created by Studio O.M.A for the requalification of the district, under the supervision of the famous architect Rem Koolhaas (2008); and the Italian National Plan of Cities (started in 2013 and still in progress) - has shown that the district is rather an archipelago. Its four distinct sub-divisions mirror four coexisting, and at times conflicting, socio-territorial units: a) *Borgo Vecchio*; b) the original estates in *Borgo Nuovo*, known as "*Casa del Favero*"; c) the intermediate zone in *Nuovo Borgo*, made up of several housing estates built by subsequent administrations and families relocated from within and outside the city (*le Lame, gli Anelli, le Torri*); d) *San Bartolomeo*, an "out-group"

area, with features that are different from the main ones of the district (especially from Nuovo Borgo St. Elia).

The social quality of the area has always suffered from this combination of social and physical contradictions. The residents were not able to participate effectively in the social and economic life of the community and could not take advantage of the potential development of the area, a promise often made by several municipal administrations but never fulfilled. The four domains of Social Quality proposed by Beck et al. (2001) are seriously compromised and the image of the "hyper-ghetto" drawn by Wacquant (2006) seems to apply to this case-study, with reference to: 1) Socio-Economic Security, as the minimum level of services, infrastructure and citizens' benefits intended to prevent the residents from experiencing poor living conditions; 2) Social Inclusion, which defines the degree to which people are able to access common resources and actively participate in the life of the community, without being excluded from the community of the city of reference; 3) Social Cohesion, a shared sense of belonging beyond the boundaries of the neighbourhood expressed through various forms of social activities (as in the case of spontaneous but organized collective management of common spaces); 4) Empowerment, the combination of the residents' expectations of improvement of the conditions in the district through the recognition of their capabilities and the institutional planning carried out by the municipality of Cagliari.

The last stages of the district's "suspended history", that led to the residents' lack of trust in the local administration, are linked to a new regeneration project that have been put in place from 2013 until the present day, with the declared intention of sewing and weaving new relationships and opportunities between S.Elia and the core of Cagliari, starting with the regeneration of the waterfront, as a promising connection.

But, again, its mid-term future is an unpredictable challenge.

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Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on "The transgressive city: Comparative perspectives on governance and the possibilities of everyday life in the emerging global city" Mexico City, 21-23 July 2016. <http://rc21-mexico16.colmex.mx/index.php>