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Questioning the Universality of Institutional Transformation Theories in Spatial Planning: Shopping Mall Developments in Palermo.

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Abstract

Theories about institutional transformation in spatial planning, although mainly based on the Anglo-Saxon context, have assumed a dominant role in planning research and theory as means to understand the transformations that have been restructuring planning systems in recent decades in the Western world and beyond. The article, looking at transformations of planning practice through the lenses of the concept of planning cultures, debates the utility of building ‘universal’ theories for spatial planning and advocates for the need for a de-provincialization of planning theories. This is done through a case-study approach applied to the history of the transformation of the retail system in a context characterized by the specificities of the Italian planning context and Southern European cities, namely: the planning processes for, and power relationships underlying, the first shopping malls opened in Palermo, Italy, since 2009 – some decades later than most of Western cities.

Introduction

Spatial planning systems [...] are changing fast

(Madanipour et al. 2001, 3).

The institutional practice of spatial planning has changed dramatically in Western countries during the last few decades, when the transition between a Fordist and a post-Fordist economic system was entrenched with enormous sociocultural and spatial transformations. In planning research and theory, big efforts have been done for making sense of these transformations. The concept of institutional transformation, mainly grounded on the study of the processes that restructured planning practices in the Anglo-Saxon and British contexts, has assumed a universal role for debating the changing policy-making in a (Western) political arena described as progressively ‘evolving’ towards decentralization and democratization.

Following the strands of postcolonial critiques of historicism (Chakrabarty 2000), a recent attention to comparative urban and planning studies (Robinson 2011; Janin Rivolin 2012) has resounded with debates about the utility of framing theories of universal value, highlighting the risk of the production of ‘a theory which derives from the experiences of North America and Western Europe but often exceeds its location and acquires universal scope, a theory that becomes *the* Theory’ (Roy 2009, 7, emphasis in the original). From this perspective, insights about (national) planning cultures as frames for understanding planning transformations (Sanyal 2005; Knieling and Othengrafen 2009) are especially meaningful: ‘planning culture refers to the role perceptions, values, interpretations, beliefs, attitudes and collective ethos of the actors involved in planning processes’ (Getimis 2012, 29). The approach of planning cultures, applied through in-depth case-study research, can help understanding how global processes are (or not) able to (re)shape national planning systems and local practices.

This article contributes to recent efforts for the de-provincialization of urban theories (Meagher 2010; Robinson 2011) by putting into debate theories of institutional transformation in planning

from the perspective of planning cultures, through case-study research. The theoretical objective, recalling Flyvbjerg's insights (2006) on how to generalize from case-study, is to falsify the idea that some theories are pertinent, or applicable without adaptation, to understand transformations of planning practice in the (Western) world as a whole – if they are not in one place, then they are not in every place –, and advocate for a theory building more attuned to local characterizations.

This will be done through the analysis of a specific object (shopping mall developments), in a specific planning system (the Italian one) and context (the city of Palermo), for three reasons. Firstly, although shopping malls have been widely debated by critical urban studies for the socio-spatial consequences of their success (see, amongst others, Crawford 1992; Goss 1993; Jackson 1996; Orillard 2008; Németh and Schmidt 2011), few studies have engaged with their role in restructuring planning practices (exceptions are: Filion and Hammond 2008; Barata Salgueiro and Erkip 2014). The article will show how shopping mall developments, because of their specificities, are powerful tools in this sense.

Secondly, the Italian planning system and cultures, although partially marginal to international debates – this also because of an especially lively national debate –, are 'worth studying' (Scattoni and Falco 2011) inasmuch as they show some specificities capable of putting into crisis the ambitions of universal theories towards generalization, even within a Western context.

Thirdly, Palermo, like most Southern European cities, is experiencing with peculiar trends characterized by its history and the critical aspects of a national planning system in transformation. The first shopping mall of Palermo only opened in 2009: the planning processes which led to the construction of three shopping malls and the failure of a fourth project will be analysed.

After a review of the debates on the 'evolution' of Western spatial planning paradigms, the article puts forward some arguments for the need to look beyond theories originated in specific places. Then, the specificities of the Italian planning system and cultures along with some common characterizations of Southern European cities are presented. The case of Palermo is debated before discussion and concluding remarks.

Institutional Transformation Theories and the ‘Evolution’ of Spatial Planning

Tewdwr-Jones (2012, 4) defines spatial planning (in the UK) as:

a professional and highly politically contentious process attempting to make sense of the drivers of change that have land-use effects geographically, against short-, medium- and long-term trends, within changing and changeable governing structures, and individual and collective expectations that have social, economic and environmental implications that change over time.

Spatial planning is inherent to the use of land and is an ‘institutionally embedded practice’ (Friedmann 2005, 29) that involves a multiplicity of actors. Historically, it has been a competence of the State: it ‘has been determined, for most of its life, by statute, by the conferment of legal rights and responsibilities and by their application’ (Tewdwr-Jones 2012, 3). Salzano’s definition (1998), grounded on the Italian experience, adds that planning (should) act for the public good in opposition to the interest of the individual. I therefore refer to ‘(spatial) planning’ as an institutional practice that: involves a plurality of actors governed by the public ones; is expected to consider as its priority the public good.

The modernist paradigm in spatial planning emerged as an answer to such expectations: it is rooted in the ‘belief in the perfectibility of the social order’ (Sandercock 2003, 29) and considers the planning of human settlements as an instrument for the State to perfect individuals and society. Modernist planning is a top-down process, technically driven and led by institutional and economic actors (Talvitie 2009): through scientific plans, protected by the authority of the State, the planner produces the ‘necessary’ transformations (Scandurra and Krumholz 1999), in a rational approach that establishes order through norms.

In the 1970s the *grande trasformazione* began (Martinotti 1993), a period, apparently still

ongoing, of great transformations for the Western world, the transition towards a post-Fordist economy being intertwined with enormous social and spatial effects in cities (Soja 2000; Scott 2011). Deindustrialization processes and the consequent fiscal stress put the public sectors in crisis, making concepts like the decline of nation states, fragmentation of decision-making processes, and prevalence of multinational private sector necessary for the understanding of contemporary policy-making (Filion 1996; Shaktin 2002).

The discipline of planning experienced radical re-framing and new approaches to, and paradigms for, planning practice flourished. Talvitie (2009) enlists four main ideas that supplemented planning: the communicative model; the New Urbanism, which fosters an urban design inspired by Jane Jacobs; the Just City, which builds on the relationships between spatialities and justice (cf. Fainstein 2010); the non-Euclidean approach, based on a normative, proactive, and political approach (Friedmann [1993] 2000). The new paradigms share an understanding of planning as a social process in the involvement of a plurality of actors in addition to the formal institution of government (Healey 1997), hence in the search for spaces of consensus-building. This brought about a renewal of planning instruments and approaches: from regulatory towards strategic planning; from technical guidance towards mediation; from formal presentations towards informal meetings; from 'public interest' towards 'stakeholders'; from conforming towards performing approaches to planning regulations (see Janin Rivolin 2008, 169, for a concise debate of conforming/performing approaches).

Within this context, theories about institutional transformation in social sciences have furnished some keys to understanding the transformations for justification processes for planning policies, put under stress by emerging interactions between the pressures of private sectors and democratization requests. The concept of 'evolution' from government towards governance has been used to sum up these processes and the growing complexities for planning practice (Healey 1997; Tewdwr-Jones 2012). The phrase 'spatial planning' itself was used to refer to the alleged evolution of 'land-use planning' towards comprehensive, integrated, and strategic approaches (Vigar 2009). According to

Vigar et al. (2000, 47), nowadays decisions cannot be taken 'in a linear fashion from intent to choice, but in a complex, socially structured interaction' between private stakeholders and local civil societies, mediated by institutional actors. This approach emphasizes the continuous (re)construction of relationships of power (Healey 1999), this intended, in actor-network theories, as the ability to create networks, to 'enrol, convince, and enlist others' (Murdoch 1995, 748). Forester (1989; cf. Innes, 1998), bridging Habermas's model of deliberative democracy to planning theory, puts the role of information at the core of the debate. Within this perspective, democratic decisions are (to be) pursued by rationally acting actors who freely argue in an environment ruled by agreed communicative norms – hence the need of creating instruments and spaces for debate in planning practice.

Placing Institutional Transformation Theories

Although they have shown very little impact on actual practice (Gunder 2003), theories about institutional transformation, together with the deliberative and communicative model, have assumed a dominant role in academic debate, becoming 'universal' theories for understanding the 'evolution' of spatial planning in the Western world and beyond – cf. Beauregard (2005) introducing a *Planning Theory* special issue.

Critiques of the deliberative model stress that it advocates for a democratic environment where power gets less and less constitutive of social relations: 'but if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question of democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values' (Mouffe 1999, 753). From this perspective, power relationships cannot be understood as the horizontal field described by deliberative accounts and actor-network theories where information is key. On the contrary, 'knowledge and power, truth and power, rationality and power are analytically inseparable from each other; power produces knowledge and knowledge produces power' (Flyvbjerg 2004,

293). On these premises, claims for putting asymmetrical power relationships at the core of planning research and theory have been put forward (Hillier 2002; Flyvbjerg 2004; Moulaert and Cabaret 2006).

I shall debate how, beyond the neglect to grasp these dimensions of power, institutional transformation theories are limited, in their capacity of generalization, by the fact that they are grounded on the experiences of the Anglo-Saxon and, especially, British context. Hence, some characterizations of the British planning system and cultures are capable of ‘placing’ institutional transformation theories.

British planning cultures are historically grounded on concepts such as ‘flexibility’ and supremacy of the ‘appropriate decision’ on the purely legal one (Booth 2005). Moreover, transformations of the UK political arena since 1980s have been shaped by neoliberal agendas (Prior 2005; Tewdwr-Jones 2012; Allmendinger and Haughton 2013), which brought about specific governmentalities: (rhetorical) calls for evidence-based policy-making (Campbell 2002; Sanderson 2011); localism along with discursive emphasis on partnerships and networks, participation and empowerment (Jessop 2002; Davoudi and Madanipour 2013). Put in other words, neoliberal governmentalities have been working towards the construction of a political arena in which (hegemonic) power is pursued through a (perceived) structure of inclusive governance (Deas 2013; cf. Miraftab 2004). The ‘evolution’ of the decisional processes described by theorists of institutional transformation for spatial planning can thus be interpreted, from a critical perspective, as the construction of a post-political kind of consensus, which is specific of contexts at the core of neoliberal transformations, like the British one.

Although neoliberalization is widely recognized as a force that boosted restructuring of states and urbanization worldwide (Theodore and Peck 2011; Brenner et al. 2013), Baptista (2013) debates how, in places at the borderlands of urban theory – namely Portugal, Southern Europe –, critiques of neoliberal ideas can hardly grasp trends in planning policy. From the perspective of planning cultures, this is to be explained with the fact that global processes be differently able to

restructure different local institutional and planning systems (Sanyal 2005). As to be debated in the next section, the Italian planning system and cultures, being at the borderlands of planning theory, represent a useful space for the exploration of some dimensions of the ‘evolution’ of planning practice outside the Anglo-Saxon world.

Southern European and Italian Planning Systems and Cultures

Southern European cities, nowadays, are a field in complex transformation. Historically, they show disordered urban patterns, on the one hand, and low levels of spatial segregation, on the other hand (Malheiros 2002). In recent times, Southern European urban territories are being hybridized by late and turbulent trends of metropolization and suburbanization, fragmentation and polarization (Arbaci and Malheiros 2010; Seixas and Albet 2012).

As far as planning systems are concerned, Southern European countries show a predominance of the ‘urbanism’ tradition, in which ‘planning regulation is mainly undertaken through rigid zoning and statutory plans, while laws at the regulatory level are numerous, substantive and detailed’ (Giannakourou 2005, 320; cf. CEC 1997). This is a key difference with Anglo-Saxon and British planning systems, inasmuch as aforementioned trends towards decentralization, privatization, strategic planning have often clashed with planning cultures more oriented towards the prevalence of the legal decision, on the one hand, and the design of urban form, on the other hand. As a result, relatively low level of formal public participation to decision-making are found (Bonafede and Lo Piccolo 2010; Seixas and Albet 2012). Unsurprisingly, comparative studies hardly find an agreement when assessing Southern European planning systems: some refer to them as ‘immature’ when compared to Central European traditions (CEC 1997; Nadin and Stead 2013), whereas others refer to the urbanism tradition as the ‘missing piece’ in the ‘puzzle’ of European planning (Janin Rivolin and Faludi 2005).

The Italian case is especially complex and multi-faceted.

We can observe, differently located in space and time, significant gaps between planners' intentions and planning outcomes, exemplary and ordinary planning practices, and planners' cognitive frames and political and administrative cultures and practices. Thus, the field of planning cultures in Italy appears multifaceted and highly problematic (Vettoretto 2009, 189).

The Italian planning system is still framed by a 1942 law (n. 1150), which defines the town plan (PRG, Piano Regolatore Generale) as a statutory masterplan based on land-use zoning. Subsequent amendments and supplements have articulated the zoning, making of PRG a tool for orienting urban growth in order to attain economic and social development (Mazza 1997). Since the end of the 1970s, the cessation of population growth and the transition towards a post-Fordist economic system put the PRG into crisis, inasmuch as a planning system intended for the design of consistent urban expansions guided by the public hand became less and less effective. Therefore, 'an incremental approach to the town plan was developed aiming to a modification by parts of the city, according to the needs and priorities of the moment' (Verones et al. 2012, 74). Since the 1990s, new tools were introduced in order to operate in a more flexible way on the basis of public-private agreements in derogation of existing PRGs. Further innovations were generated by the implementation of complex European programmes. The operative aim of innovations was that of introducing performing approaches to planning regulations but a general reform has never been achieved (Scattoni and Falco 2011): a cohabitation between a conforming system and developing performing approaches describes the current Italian planning model (Janin Rivolin 2008).

A further peculiarity is the role of land revenue in the real-estate market. After the Second World War the practice of planning was substantially abandoned for a decade in the name of reconstruction (Scattoni and Falco 2011), and the growth of the building sector became essential to the economic development of the country: as fast as investors found it more profitable to build new developments instead of recovering the bombarded city centres, so the value of building land grew exponentially (Indovina 1972). As a consequence, land-use changes were able to produce disproportionately high

revenues, fostering the use of land-use variances to town plans for speculative means (Salzano 1998) – it is worth stressing that, in a mainly conforming planning system, variances should be exceptions motivated by exceptional conditions rather than ordinary planning tools.

Palermo's 'Shopping Epoch': Mall Developments, Planning Processes, Media Discourses, and Power Relationships.

Palermo is the fifth Italian city – home to around 700,000 citizens in the central municipality and 1,100,000 in the metropolitan area. Palermo's urban evolution since the end of the Second World War was extremely complex. All the depicted Southern European characteristics are found: the long-term weakness of institutional arrangements, an extremely disorganized growth, the emergence of innovative planning practices during 1990s (Cannarozzo 2000; 2004), late suburbanization processes (Casanicchia et al. 2006). In such a context, the planning processes necessary for the advent of shopping malls, together with the power relationships underlying, will offer evidences of the limits of institutional transformations theories in grasping the specificities of the Italian, and more generally Southern European, planning systems and cultures. The empirical analysis will: analyse the reasons for the late transformation of the retail system; describe the planning processes that led to the realization of three malls and the failure of a fourth project; outline the local political and media context with a focus on the local perceptions of the Conca d'Oro shopping mall.

Methodological Notes

The case-study has been identified as the most appropriate approach for its suitability for pursuing in-depth analyses and the deconstruction of complex processes (Yin [1994] 2003; Tellis 1997; Flyvbjerg 2006), namely the need to unveil the interlinks between planning processes and power

relationships. Data and evidences have been collected from three types of sources.

Firstly, analysis of documents (plans, projects, municipal deliberations) and several meetings with a city councillor, former president of the council commission for Urban Planning (2007-2012), for the reconstruction of formal planning procedures.

Secondly, some semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Table 1) for an understanding of specific issues from different viewpoints, with focus on the Conca d'Oro shopping mall and the Zen district.

Thirdly, exploration of media discourses and common opinions through a qualitative, in-depth analysis of news, posts, and readers' comments from:

- The local edition of newspaper La Repubblica, second highest-selling newspaper in Italy. From the web edition, I analysed the articles (N=147) that mention the three shopping malls, divided into three categories: 'opportunities' or 'threats' coming from the presence of the malls; articles mentioning shows or charity events organized in the malls; other mentions such as news, opening/closing days. From the printed edition, the following periods coincident with as many relevant events have been analysed: November–December 2006 and April–June 2007 (approval of the detailed plans, N=4); January–May 2008 (protests against the gallery in Viale Campania, N=11); November–December 2009 (opening of Forum Palermo, N=6).
- The blog MobilitaPalermo (www.mobilitapalermo.org), founded in 2008, was the first media specializing in giving news about public works and real-estate developments in Palermo, and the most frequented website for debates on such issues (around 2,000 unique visitors per day, more than 30,000 total comments, Google Analytics data). I have analysed the relevant posts (with comments) published since 2008 up to May 2011 (N=88). Although the activity of the authors and commentators does not represent a statistical sample of the citizens of Palermo, the visibility of the blog make it a good source for a qualitative understanding of some common senses existing in a, mainly young, local audience.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The (Late) Advent of the Shopping Epoch

If, up to the year 2009, Palermo may well have been the only medium-sized European city without a shopping mall and one of the least attractive for large-scale retail business, today the situation is completely overturned. During the last few years, eight shopping mall developments – for more than 300 thousand square metres of retail surface – have been carried out in the metropolitan area: four have been completed, three are in project or planning phase, one has been blocked (Table 2). Similarly, very recent is the interest of national and global firms. Despite the economic crisis, which struck Palermo and Sicily harshly (see CongiunturaRes bulletins, Fondazione Res, www.resricerche.it), Palermo continues to be a fruitful market for large-scale retail: the ‘shopping epoch’ (MobilitaPalermo, 04.04.2008) began around the year 2008. According to the association of retailers (Confcommercio) of Palermo (La Repubblica, 28.01.2013), the combination of economic crisis and success of malls and large surfaces are driving the collapse of the traditional retail market – between 2008 and 2012, the metropolitan GVA in ‘retail and wholesale’ fell by 5,95% (data LSE European Metromonitor, <http://labs.lsecities.net/eumm/home/>).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In order to understand why it took that much time for the first malls to be opened in Palermo, it is necessary to stress some peculiarities of Palermo’s recent history. The power of criminality and corrupted political elites in Palermo up until the 1980s is well known (Cannarozzo 2000; 2004): this decisively influenced the economic system and labour market, which were powerfully influenced by the nepotist use of public jobs for creation of political consensus and social acquiescence. The poor economic development, the absence of a strong industrial business (cf. Trigilia 1994), together with the presence of criminality in the economic system, made an unattractive city for investments of Palermo. The 1990s were the ‘spring’ of the city: the violent escalation of the Mafia in late 1980s

was followed by a popular reaction that led to a decade of centre-left uncorrupted government. In those years a new town plan, complex programmes, and communitarian initiatives launched the regeneration of the historical centre and other areas (Lo Piccolo 1996; Azzolina 2009). It was in those years that the earliest national and multinational investments arrived, the first hypermarkets and mono-brand shops appeared.

The transformation of the retail system was consolidated in the new millennium, but several issues made this process peculiar. The year 2001 saw a new reversal in the political equilibrium, bringing about a decade of centre-right government. A deregulation season for spatial planning began, made of complex programmes used to justify speculation and public action directed towards ‘big interventions’, which often failed (Azzolina 2009; Lotta et al. 2010). This was decisive for the advent of shopping malls, inasmuch as the town plan did not identify areas for large retail facilities because of the lack of building land – a consequence of the uncontrolled growth the city suffered since 1950s. A renewed presence in the politico-economic arena of the Mafia influenced the mall developments as well (Bianchi and Nerazzini 2005): some bosses were interested in the realization of a mall in Villabate in the early 2000s, and there are some shadows hanging over the realization of Forum Palermo.

Shopping Mall Developments in Palermo

In this section the processes which led to the realization of three shopping malls and the abandonment of the project for a subterranean gallery in the municipality of Palermo (Table 1) are analysed around two arguments: location and local context; planning procedures.

The malls built are located next to Brancaccio (Forum Palermo), Borgo Nuovo (La Torre), and Zen (Conca d’Oro), three council housing districts built during 1970s and 1980s (Image 1): three ‘peripheral’ neighbourhoods characterized by poverty and weakness of the social fabric. The Zen is the most well-known, for its utopian modernist design and its controversial history characterized by

the failure of the original planning intentions, the occupation of most housing units, the role of politics in the creation of social acquiescence (Bonafede and Lo Piccolo 2010; Lo Bocchiaro and Tulumello 2014). All three neighbourhoods have been suffering of strong rhetoric about social and spatial degradation, about the domination of the Mafia on the social fabric (Masini 1985; Stella 1989; Pinzello and Quartarone 2005). Conversely, the project for the subterranean gallery was located in viale Campania, in an affluent residential area within the urban core.

IMAGE 1 ABOUT HERE

As far as planning procedures are concerned, the Forum, La Torre and Conca d'Oro malls required three *piani particolareggiati* (detailed land-use plans) promoted by real-estate companies in variance with town plan regulations. Details of the planning processes are given in Table 3. The variances have transformed land parcels characterized by historical and, in two cases (La Torre and Conca d'Oro), landscape heritages. Especially critical is the variance for Conca d'Oro, in a parcel previously appointed to host a *centro di municipalità* (municipal centre). This land-use regulation was not only justified by the need for providing services and a park to an area urbanized through the juxtaposition of private developments and largely ignored by effective planning and public services. Moreover, the historic Fondo Raffo constituted the last significant parcel of land for the preservation of the so-called Piana dei Colli (the Hills' Plain), northern territory of Palermo, until some decades ago characterized by its great natural and landscape qualities, with a unique heritage of historic villas.

In the three cases, variances and agreements present anomalies, listed in Table 3. In synthesis, in two cases (Forum Palermo, La Torre) the critical aspects concern the non-abidance of formal agreements and amendments, and the presence of historical heritages and/or environmental risks which would have suggested drastic modifications to the projects. In the third case (Conca d'Oro) the relevance of critical issues – overturning of the public destination of the area, opaque

procedures, discarding without debate of objections submitted – should have brought about a rejection of the detailed plan. In all the cases, the variances were able to increase, or create, value in three kinds of land parcels: public properties, industrial development zones – of small value in a less industrialized city in crisis –, and agricultural lands. Moreover, the municipal retail plan was not abided by, and modified after the approval of, the three detailed plans.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Conversely, the municipal government rather than private promoters took on the failed project for an underground mall in viale Campania. In January 2008, when media announced the project, local residents and retailers, concerned with the increase in traffic and dangers for local retail predictably to be led by the mall, formed a committee with the purpose of blocking the project, and organized a protest which received the support of some city councillors from the majority party. The project was soon suspended, until January 2011, when MobilitaPalermo gave the news that some negotiations were underway. The local committee again started the protests and, in July 2011, the president of the council commission for Urban Planning announced the definitive abandonment of the project. In this case, given the subterranean location of the facility under a street and a garden, the urbanization would not have affected the public use of the ground floor and would not have needed land-use variances, therefore being able to produce no surplus revenue value.

The Shopping Mall 'Mission': Discourses and Power Relationships

A debate of the media and political context is necessary in order to understand the power relationships underlying the planning processes and the success of the shopping malls despite the arrival of the economic crisis.

We cannot hide our enthusiasm in visiting the first big shopping mall of Palermo (MobilitaPalermo, 05.11.2009; my translation).

Does such an ‘enthusiasm’ appropriately describe the general feeling towards the arrival of malls in Palermo? It does for the editors and commentators of MobilitaPalermo, as evident in each of the 88 posts about the malls, the most read and commented of the blog. The greatest ‘enthusiasm’ is to be reported simultaneously with the grand opening of Forum Palermo: the post published on 24.11.2009 received 328 comments in 2 months – an exceptional thread duration. The approach of La Repubblica, a more traditional media, was slightly different:

- the planning processes with their critical issues received a minimum covering (e.g., in the web edition, no article was published before the beginning of the building works), whereas great attention was given to protests against the subterranean gallery in viale Campania (11 articles in the printed version, of which 4 on front page);
- big coverage was given to the openings of the malls, highlighting the ‘good news’ (new job opportunities, opportunities for consumers to find affordable products, the malls as places for social meeting, general positive opinions about malls as important for ‘a city such as Palermo’);
- the general approach to the issue was slightly more oriented to ‘opportunities’ (employment, economic development, affordable goods, social meeting, modernization, shows and charity events) than to ‘threats’ (risks for local commerce, quality of jobs, traffic increase) related to the presence of the malls – this stems from the analysis of 44 articles mentioning relevant issues.

I shall now focus on the perceptions of Conca d’Oro, making use of data from qualitative interviews. A divergent perception exists between residents in the Zen and people active in social practices. A teacher of the local school and two representatives of grass-root associations described the mall as a threat: they criticized the alienation of public land, stressed that no jobs in the mall have been found by residents, and were concerned with the potential effects on the already weak retail fabric of the district. Conversely, the residents interviewed see the presence of the mall as an opportunity of development for the district, because of job opportunities and new ‘public spaces’ –

this vision being generalized in the district, according to the activists interviewed. Two reasons may explain the favourable opinion of the residents. Firstly, the shopping mall and its open spaces are perceived as the only liveable and well-finished collective spaces of the district because of the poor conditions of actual public spaces (Lo Bocchiaro and Tulumello 2014; Giampino et al. 2014). Secondly, it is worth looking at the *aura* existing around the person of Maurizio Zamparini, owner of Montemare Spa and promoter of Conca d'Oro. Zamparini is a Northern Italian real-estate and construction entrepreneur, since 2002 owner and president of Palermo Calcio football team. Zamparini is very popular in the city because the team, after decades in minor divisions, reached the first national division in 2004 and, there, has achieved good results. In the *MobilitaPalermo* blog, in newspapers, in the words of residents interviewed, Zamparini is described as the entrepreneur who 'offers' public services to the city: for example, an article in *La Repubblica* (08.12.2006), about the preliminary approval of the detailed plan, states that Zamparini will 'make the municipal centre a reality', forgetting to note that it will be of public use for ten years only. As a matter of fact, Zamparini has been developing an effective communication over the years, with special regards to the Zen where he continuously promises the realization of facilities – nothing has been done up to now – and makes regular visits with the 'stars' of the football team.

To sum up, the understanding of shopping malls as places for social meeting and instruments of 'modernization' and 'development' – of the city in general and of the deprived districts – prevail: places which will make 'us feel more European, more akin to the rich and developed North' (*MobilitaPalermo*, 18.04.2008, comment; my translation). The approach of local politicians mirrors such generalized perceptions and, in the city council, the detailed plans were voted for unanimously (*Forum Palermo*) or by large majorities. Only two councillors (out of 50), from *Italia dei Valori* and *Rifondazione Comunista* minority parties, voted against the Conca d'Oro and La Torre variances. Interviewed, a city councillor asserted that the main minority party, *Democratici di Sinistra*, supported the operations because one out of three malls, La Torre, had been built by lobbies historically supporting the party. The councillor stated that the shopping malls were the 'mission' of

the centre-right government which led the city between 2002 and 2007: as a matter of fact, the three plans had been approved in the last few months before the 2007 elections.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The article has put into debate theories of institutional transformation in spatial planning from the perspective of planning cultures, with the aim to critique the idea that these theories are pertinent, or applicable without adaptation, to understand transformations of planning practice in the (Western) world as a whole. This has been done through the analysis of the planning processes for four shopping mall developments recently carried out in Palermo, a city characterized by a peculiar history and the turbulent framework of the Italian planning system. The first shopping malls arrived in Palermo some decades later than in most Western cities because the conditions for large investments from (multi)national promoters have only been achieved in the 2000s. Since they were achieved, the retail system is being completely overturned in a few years and not even the economic crisis seems to be stopping the process. A discussion of empirical data is set out around two layers: formal planning procedures and power relationships underlying.

Firstly, as far as formal planning procedures are concerned, the three mall developments required detailed plans in land-use variance characterized by significant degrees of anomalies. These anomalies should be understood within the framework of a national planning system whose recent changes have brought about the coexistence of conforming and performing models. In such a framework, the local government has been systematically breaking regulatory planning as a way to pursue the political – although never officially declared – goal of reshaping the municipal retail system towards the predominance of shopping malls. This has implications. On the one hand, the case has shown the existence of a ‘bargaining’ political attitude towards planning – see, e.g., the agreement found between majority and minority party.

On the other hand, the emphasis the article has been giving to critical dimensions of land-use

variances may sound disproportionate to a non-Italian (or non Southern European) audience. Still, this emphasis shall be understood in relation to the specific cultures of Italian planning, namely around the centrality of regulatory dimensions to them. The binding assignment of development rights by town plans is able to significantly decrease or increase the value of land, hence boosting the capacity of variances to create profits through the change of land-use *per se* – unsurprisingly, the failed project was the only one that would have not created value through land-use change. The disproportionate role that land value has in the Italian real-estate market (Indovina 1972; Salzano 1998) would not be possible, not to this scale, in more flexible and performing planning systems, characterized by an absence of binding regulations at the municipal scale. This suggests to critically rethinking at the role of public-private partnerships, especially in conforming planning systems, and confirms how unbearable is the coexistence of conforming and performing models, ‘since it determines contradictory results, playing against the common interest of good territorial governance’ (Janin Rivolin 2008, 182).

Secondly, the analysis of power relationships showed that the approval of the variances relied on the absent or reduced media coverage of the anomalous processes and the spatial allocation in ‘weak’ contexts where local residents have no involvement in the processes because of a lack of information and power. On the one hand, this confirms Bonafede and Lo Piccolo’s (2010) insights about the risk that, in a context of little or no civic participation, open and democratic decision-making is hardly achievable. But, on the other hand, the story is more complex and the promoters had to face the public exposition of their projects to some degree. The possibility of influencing the local government (especially in times of crisis) builds on the opportunity to delegate to private investors the realization of some public services and spaces, and on the presentation of malls as tools for the ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ of the city – this being an understanding of malls way different from well-known discourses about ‘pseudo-public spaces’ (Davis [1990] 2006). The localization of the operations in the proximity to deprived districts allowed promoters and politicians to present the malls as regeneration tools. From this perspective, shopping mall

developments appeared as extremely powerful tools for reshaping planning practice, ‘catalysts’ capable of accelerating processes, concentrating powerful actors, resources, and instrumental discourses in order to break planning rules and shape discursive practices and political debate. Unsurprisingly, the operation failed where a strong local context was capable of gathering information in time, understanding the risks for the local context, and finding political support – i.e., enlisting actors and building networks (cf. Murdoch 1995).

In conclusion, I shall use evidences from Palermo for putting under a ‘stress test’ the debated theories about institutional transformation in spatial planning. From a superficial perspective, in fact, one may be tempted to label the critical issues of the planning processes described as foreseeable outputs of a context characterized by petty politics and poor institutional arrangements. Still, when looking at outputs of planning practice from a critical perspective, no big differences are found between what was described in this article or in contexts characterized by neoliberal trends in planning, that is, a prevalence of developers’ and real-estate interests over the common interest of good territorial governance (see, amongst others, Swingedouw et al. 2002; Gualini and Majoor 2007; Sager 2011; Deas 2013). Similar outputs along with different processes suggest going beyond a simple understanding of the case of Palermo as ‘extreme’.

I debated how institutional transformation theories for spatial planning are understandable in relation to contexts (especially the UK) where planning is historically characterized by the prevalence of flexible decision-making, and has been restructured by neoliberal political agendas – which have driven towards the reduction of political agency in planning and the building of formally inclusive governmentalities. Two orders of limits of these theories can be stressed. On the one hand, evidences from Palermo support the calls for the need to put power at the core of planning research again. On the other hand, given the specific characterizations of the local case, of the Italian planning system, of Southern European planning cultures, institutional transformation theories are able to grasp just some of the specificities of depicted planning processes: for example, an actor-network approach helps understanding how the wealthy neighbourhood was capable of

contrasting an undesired project, whereas it fails to explain why residents of the Zen have been supporting a mall that may be compromising the already weak economic fabric of their district.

This suggests that there is a need for a ‘process of theory building more fragile and uncertain, and theory itself more unstable and less secure in its claims’ (Robinson 2011, 17). More nuanced theories, rather than placing the stress on the ‘evolution’ – i.e. from top-down justification towards mediation, from conforming towards performing models, from technical guidance towards partnerships and networks –, would more properly understand ongoing transformations in terms of the hybridization of practices in the conflictual coexistence of change and permanence patterns.

The article opened with the acknowledgement that planning systems and planning paradigms are changing fast. This is evident all around the (Western) world but the analysis of planning processes in a peculiar, still Western, context have shown how hard is to find universal understandings of these transformations. From this perspective, the concept of planning cultures has been shown as especially meaningful because it helped understanding how some global processes – global urban transformations, the ascendancy of neoliberal ideas – have been differently capable of restructuring different local institutional and planning systems. Put in other words, the article has been opened by a debate about evolving planning *paradigms* but – coming to the point that the ‘evolution’ is not the most appropriate key to understand recent shifts – it has furnished some evidences that:

there is a need to understand the new role of Spatial Planning in the social production of space, enhancing the theoretical debate and avoiding the absolute dominance of ‘paradigms’ (Getimis 2012, 35).

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Table 1. Interviews and focus groups

<i>How</i>	<i>When</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>What</i>
Interview	02.2011	Resident in the Zen and president of a local grass-root	Public knowledge of the planning processes and effects expected from the opening of Conca d'Oro mall, from the viewpoint of an activist founder of a grass-root committed to the socio-cultural development of the district
Interview	03.2011	City councillor (1992-2012)	Planning and deliberative processes: the councillor has actively participated to the debates and votes for the approval of the detailed plans in variance
Interview	03.2011	Editors, blog MobilitaPalermo	Public communication about the mall developments in the MobilitaPalermo blog
Interview	03.2011	Middle-class woman resident in a gated community near the Zen	Public knowledge of the planning processes and effects expected from the opening of Conca d'Oro mall
Focus group	06.2012	Teacher and responsible for a dance-therapy programme addressed to young women in the Zen Three housewives resident in the Zen	Public knowledge of the planning processes and effects expected/coming from the opening of Conca d'Oro mall, from the diverging viewpoints of a middle-class activist and three worker-class housewives
Interview	06.2012	President of a grass-root active in the Zen	Public knowledge of the planning processes and effects expected/coming from the realization of Conca d'Oro mall, from the viewpoint of an activist resident outside the Zen

Table 2. Shopping mall developments in the metropolitan area of Palermo (case studies highlighted)

<i>Municipality</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Typology</i>	<i>GLA (m²)</i>	<i>State (as for 06.2014)</i>
Palermo	Forum Palermo	Shopping mall	65,000	Open (11.2009)
	La Torre	Shopping mall	23,700	Open (11.2010)
	No name (located in viale Campania)	Underground shopping mall	13,000	Project blocked (07.2011)
	Conca d'Oro	Shopping mall	55,000	Open (03.2012)
Carini	Poseidon	Shopping mall	40,000	Open (06.2010)
Cinisi	No name	Shopping mall	32,400	Detailed plan approved (12.2013)
Partinico	Partynico	Shopping mall + outlet	68,000	In planning phase (expected to open 11.2015)
Termini Imerese	Hymera	Shopping mall + outlet	52,500	Pending approval of detailed plan

Table 3. *Shopping mall development in Palermo: detail of the planning processes (detailed plans in variance of land-use regulations)*

Forum Palermo	
<i>Procedures</i>	<i>Anomalies</i>
Parcel assigned (1994 town plan) to industrial development. A detailed plan, approved in 2000, split the parcel in an industrial and an agricultural zone. When Carrefour expressed interest in building a mall, a proposal to locate it in the agricultural zone was approved. A formal agreement (<i>conferenza di servizi</i>) approved the preliminary project in 2002, despite judicial inquiries about criminal infiltrations into Collegno 2000, partner of Carrefour (Cannarozzo 2004). However, Carrefour abandoned the operation in 2003. The 2004 town plan, overlooking the presence of two historic buildings, assigned the whole parcel to industrial development. Collegno 2000 and Alfa Spa presented a proposal for a new detailed plan, still at variance to town plan, unanimously approved by the city council in 2006.	The building works did not comply with the order, by the 2005 <i>conferenza di servizi</i> , of leaving 10% of the parcel for tree planting. An amendment approved had prescribed the preservation and restoration of the historical buildings but they have been radically altered.
La Torre	
<i>Procedures</i>	<i>Anomalies</i>
Parcel divided into three zoning regulations (2004 town plan): industrial development, agricultural land, the historical Torre Ingastone. The detailed plan, approved in 2006, cut the agricultural zone by half and reduced the park of the Torre to a thin buffer zone.	Two restrictions put by the town plan – the northern area of the parcel landmarked, the whole classified as a flood risk area – have not been abided by.
Conca D'oro	
<i>Procedures</i>	<i>Anomalies</i>
Parcel destined (1994 and 2004 town plans) to be one of the eight municipal centres of Palermo. In 2007, the city council approved a detailed plan presented by Montemare Spa. The plan fragments the land: in the southern area, the Villa Raffo; in the eastern area, three facilities; a small garden on the western side next to the building appointed to be the municipal centre; half of the land is occupied by the shopping mall and parking lots. The land parcel was owned by two public historical institutes committed to the assistance of poor and invalid people, which exchanged it for the building of the facilities.	Overturning of the public destination prescribed: the park has disappeared – 70% of land is built – and the municipal centre is a minute part of the area. The urbanization fees were exchanged for the building of the municipal centre, which will be of public use for ten years only. Afterwards, the municipality may maintain the use by paying a rent. An amendment approved by the city council had extended the free-of-charge public-use period to 20 years but the final agreement discarded that decision. The municipal centre has not been completed so far, more than three years after the opening of the mall. Two objections submitted pinpointed: the environmental value of the area, doubts about the fate of the public building, environmental impacts, the breaking up of statutory planning, absence of benefits for the local community. The objections were rejected by the city council without neither debate nor motivations