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Urban Form and Urban Security: Insights from a Southern Italian Neighbourhood

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1 ABSTRACT

Contemporary cities are affected by several challenges. Rapid urbanisation processes combined with unstable economic conditions, uncontrolled physical development and social exclusion, political instability make difficult the understanding of “security and safety” dynamics, often interconnected with a combination of factors. A mix of social, economic and physical decay often contribute to create appealing conditions for criminal activities. This paper discusses how urban safety and security dynamics are related with urban planning and its implementation, by drawing insights from an urban area belonging to a Southern Italian city, Reggio Calabria. More in general, it will be emphasized the relationships between urban planning and related implementation and urban security in blighted neighbourhoods. Evidences from the case study show that the status of decay of the urban environment, often consequence of implementation gaps in urban policies and lack of management capabilities, contribute to enhance the isolation from the rest of the city. The researchers conclude that integrated urban regeneration initiatives, aimed by nature at improving both people and places, might improve urban safety conditions in this kind of neighborhoods. The case study has been developed within a wider research project granted under the 7th European Research Framework.

2 URBAN SAFETY AND SECURITY: A RISING CHALLENGE FOR CITIES

Contemporary cities are affected by several challenges in the social, economic, institutional, political and environmental spheres. Rapid urbanisation processes combined with unstable economic conditions, uncontrolled physical development and social exclusion, political instability make difficult the understanding of “security and safety” dynamics, affecting planning and governance effectiveness. The problem of crime and violence in cities is considered a growing and serious challenge worldwide. Social, economic and physical decays are often combined and contribute to create appealing conditions for criminal activities (UN-Habitat, 2007). The literature recognises that urban planning and design play a significant role in managing urban safety and security issues. In planning theory, over the years several authors approached this topic under very different perspectives. The body of knowledge was grounded between the 1960s and 1970s, when Jane Jacobs published the seminal book “The death and life of great American cities” (1961) and Oscar Newman set the basis for relating physical environment and criminal behaviour in his work “Defensible space” (1972).

Since then, the way of considering “secure” and “safe” a city encompassed several changes. Indeed, recent socio-economic changes deeply influenced this topic, by modifying the perception of safety and security in the cities and adding further factors of complexity related with multiculturalism and global dynamics (Bauman, 2003; Amendola, 2003). Moreover, nowadays urban safety and security are severely challenged also by physical factors, particularly in the last years, because of the climate change. Extreme weather conditions are enhancing the vulnerability of cities, as underlined by the report published by the United Nations- UN-Habitat “Enhancing urban safety and security: Global Report on Human Settlements 2007”. Ensuring citizens’ safety and security remains a major societal contemporary challenge. To sum up, as suggested by Bonss (2011), the meaning of security changes according with specific contexts and can refer to all forms of stable social conditions at city or neighbourhood level (Bonss, 2011).

As anticipated, the concept of safe and secure environment in planning theory evolved over the years. Jacobs (1961) emphasized the positive aspects of organically developed neighborhoods. In her view, “dense population and mixed commercial and residential land use serve to promote ongoing and spatially distributed street activity” (Browning and Jackson, 2013, p.1010). This approach highlights the close link between urban form and security. A milestone in the understanding of the relationship between physical environment and security is represented by the so called CPTED approach, acronym from “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design”. This concept was both coined by a criminologist and an architect, this latter already mentioned above (Oscar Newman).

Although the link between poorly designed urban spaces and criminal behaviour was clearly stated in these and numerous subsequent studies, still monofunctional high rise buildings built in isolation were the rule for many years, particularly in the construction of Western public estates for social housing. Between the 1970s and 1980s the link between economic crisis, social problems (also crime) and urban blighted areas dramatically emerged. In the early 1980s, the 1970s crisis of the industrial cities translated in a social, physical and environmental decay that in many cases brought to the increase of crime activities in some isolated areas and the raise of the urban security problems. The nexus between physical environment and antisocial behaviour became central in the famous “Theory of broken windows” coined in 1982. As summarized by Macdonald et al.(2013, p.628), “Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) broken windows theory explains that physical signs of decay and disorder, like graffiti and loitering, send a signal that people do not care about neighborhood”. According to Hypp and Yates (2011, pp.956), “William Julius Wilson (1987) argued in one of the more influential ecological theories of the twentieth century that a recent emergence of extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods containing concentrated poverty are vulnerable to a spike in levels of crime and disorder resulting from the breakdown in social norms prescribing delinquent behaviour”.

As Burgess and others have shown in the case of the American city, it has always been the fate of poor recent immigrants to occupy the most marginal spaces of the city, while radical urbanists such as Harvey, Castells and Sassen share the view that globalisation is creating a great deal of suffering and exploitation, increasingly concentrated in the marginal spaces of cities around the world (Parker, 2004). Cities cannot aim at being socially sustainable without considering their citizens’ security concerns seriously. It means that a set of public policies oriented to the social inclusion of marginalised groups in isolated neighborhoods have to be implemented. Particularly, at local level, social policies should be combined with urban policies in order to mitigate the negative effects of the past ineffective public choices (Ceccato, 2012).

As briefly highlighted by the literature review, a major contemporary societal challenge is to enhance in policy makers and planners the level of understanding in tackling safety and security issues in cities. As noticed by Kreager et al. (2011, p. 615) “Although productive, urban studies continue to offer little help in understanding changes in crime and shifts in city landscape”. The paper aims at contributing to fill this gap in the knowledge, by discussing urban safety and security dynamics of a blighted urban area in a Southern Italian city, Reggio Calabria. After a brief introduction on the socio-economic features of the area, an analysis of the urban plans implemented will be discussed in order to understand how urban form and urban security are related and to suggest what strategy might reduce problems affecting this and similar marginalised areas.

3 SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR A FIELD INVESTIGATION IN A SOUTHERN ITALIAN NEIGHBORHOOD: ARGHILLA’, REGGIO CALABRIA

Despite its beautiful location as a terrace on the Strait of Messina, Reggio Calabria is affected by several problems that hinder the quality of life. Organized crime and corruption generate negative effects on public services provisions and land use control, thus determining a widespread status of illegality and antisocial behaviors. Arghillà is one of the neighbourhoods of the city where these socio-economic and environmental dynamics are particularly visible. This complex neighbourhood captured the researchers’ attention, thus becoming a real and proper case study, because of its socio-economic poor indicators and the state of decay of the physical environment, coupled by the citizens’ perception of a low level of safety and security confirmed by criminal activities’ indicators.

Arghillà is a recent urban settlement. The first building built on the plans of Arghillà dates back to the late 1980s. The district is inhabited by families from different backgrounds; the social structure is characterised by weakness and fragility. A preliminary investigation on micro-crime rates corroborated this perception and confirmed the correct selection of Arghillà as interesting case to investigate the link between physical environment and urban safety. The following table provides readers with a snapshot on the principal indicators and related local and national benchmarks, thus setting the general context for the case study of Arghillà.

	Italy	Calabria	Reggio Calabria
Unemployment (2014)	12,70 %	23,40 %	19,20 %
Micro Criminality Index (2011)	12,41 %	9,98 %	14,84 %

Table 1: Principal socio- economic and criminality indicators (Source: Istat.it)

According to the last Census (ISTAT 2011), residents in Arghillà are 2.281. However, this number increases up to 4.000 by considering the further population illegally living in the occupied buildings. Until the 1980s the area was mainly used for agriculture and production of wine. It is located up 160 mt, in a strategic position both for its location, well connected to the urban core by the highway and for the stunning and breath-taking view on the strait that represent a high potential for tourism. Data in Table 2 show a the gender inequality in the area of Arghillà. In some sub areas of the neighborhood the level of employment for male is close the 100% while in the same areas the female employment is up to the 6-8%.

	Employed	Unemployed	Retired	Housewives
Male	68 %	17 %	15 %	-
Female	21,3 %	6,6 %	9 %	63%

Table 2: Employment status per sex in Arghillà 2012(Source: CEFCOM, 2012)

Table 3 shows the educational level in Arghillà. The percentage of graduated people is low.

	Elementary School	Second Grade	High School	Graduate
Arghillà	13%	26,6 %	52 %	8,3%

Table 3: Educational attainment in Arghillà 2012 (Source: CEFCOM, 2012)

Arghillà is geographically divided into two main parts: Southern and Northern Arghillà (Fig 1). Although built 30 years ago by a private cooperative, the former has been provided by the city with services only in 2008, and is still lacking schools and health services, while the latter is a public estate built for social housing purposes, planned according to a functionalist approach and still missing the majority of the public spaces and services originally designed.



Fig. 1: Arghillà, City of Reggio Calabria – Northern and Southern areas of the neighbourhood

The two areas are very different from each other. In the Southern part most of the Italian families that were originally given public social housies by the municipality decided to leave away because of the social issues and low level of safety if the neighbourhood. The Northern part is mostly occupied by Roma minorities and low-income families, often dealing with micro-crime or illegal activities. The state of physical abandonment and decay both affects and aggravates the socio-economic condition of the neighborhood. Social deprivation is widespread, due to the presence of Roma immigrants and people living below poverty threshold. The researchers gathered about hundreds local newspapers articles and e-magazines, that in the last years reported acts of micro-criminality, violence towards minors, prostitution, drug dealing. Such a small area, both because its ethnic composition and the social pressure, has become a “ghetto”. All these phenomena further enhanced the isolation of the area from the city. By in depth field work, the researchers found that the status of decay of the urban environment is partly consequence of: 1) a mismatch between urban planning and design and its implementation due to a lack of management capabilities; 2) uncorrect approach in the implementation of public policites aimed at tackling immigration issues. A gap in the implementation of the planned public facilities that should have been coupled the residential estates has determined the creation of a spatially fragmented urban form, characterised by huge and anonymous empty spaces. This fragile context was not the best precondition to successfully absorbe the massive introduction of a close- knitted Roma community, decided in the late 1990s by the city of Arghillà to “solve” the issue of their segregation in unhealthy and squalid camps. The spatial isolation of Arghillà, jointly with strong social exclusion dynamics, mostly due to the presence of Roma minorities, characterizes the neighborhood as a “ghetto”. The socio-economic isolation indeed, boosted by the physical detachment and the visible decay of the built environment, contributed to increase the feelings of insecurity in the area.

4 URBAN PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE PROCESS: A BROKEN NEXUS?

As any other Italian city, during the 1960s, Reggio Calabria experienced an economic and demographic boom. Common phenomenon was that the post II World War general plans did not allow local governments to cope with the dramatic increase in the so called “urban expansion” age, thus leading to uncontrolled urban growth. The original General Urban Plan for the city of Reggio Calabria, drawn up by Prof. Ludovico Quaroni at the end of 1960s, provided a northward residential expansion for the city -that included Arghillà- and an industrial southward expansion driven by the presence of the airport. According to the Quaroni’s general plan, both expansions counted on a sufficient provision in related services. The analysis of the general plan’s implementation shows that the plan’s prescriptions were disregarded and ignored, while at the same time informal settlements were let spreading out without any rule nor logic. The city scatterly expanded towards the hills, without any long-term strategy for its economic development. The national minimum thresholds for services established by law have been respected only in few areas situated in the Southern part of the city. Paradoxically, at present the updating phase for the general plan-in the future, “Plan of the urban structure”- is happening under the general provisions of the never effectively implemented Quaroni’s general plan. The neighbourhood of Arghillà reflects this general mismatch between planning and implementation. More in details, in Arghillà the general plan is far to have been implemented as designed. As a matter of fact, “too many plans are not realistic, do not take enough consideration of limited possibilities for implementation, lack of financial resources, weak institutional support, or the low steering power of the plane” (Larsson 2010: 52). As stated by Haywood (1979) “in a society where a plan cannot simply be imposed, if the plan does not consider the process and problems of implementation, if there is no feedback from implementation to plan-making, then the plan can be too rigid, too detailed to respond to the social and economic situation of the real world”. Within the Arghillà neighbourhood, a specific site design for public housing was also produced by the city; however, public facilities were built with a serious delay. Arghillà was originally conceived as a residential expansion located in the Northern part of Reggio Calabria, mid-way between the city centre and Villa San Giovanni, that is a strategic hub for Sicily, as showed by Fig. 2.

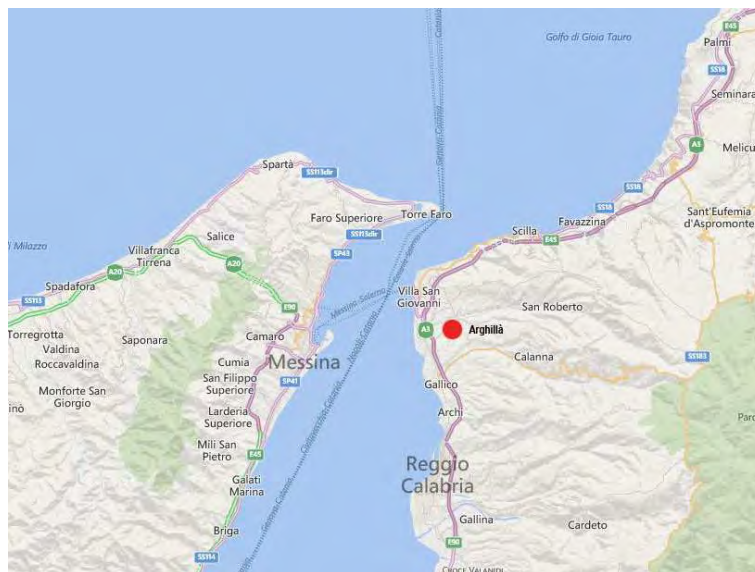


Fig. 2: The geographical context of Arghillà (Source: google map)

Following the general plan’s provisions¹, in the early 1970s the city of Reggio Calabria came up with a site design according to the 1972 national law n.167, on public housing and planning (Fig. 3). According to this latter and related regulations, designated areas were selected in order to host public housing estates coupled by public services and facilities for the community.

¹ Specific Urban Tool to implement the general prescriptions of the General Plan of the City of Reggio Calabria – “Relazione al Consiglio Comunale sullo stato di attuazione del P.R.G. 21.aprile.2006 –Comune di Reggio Calabria - Settore Urbanistica e Pianificazione Territoriale”

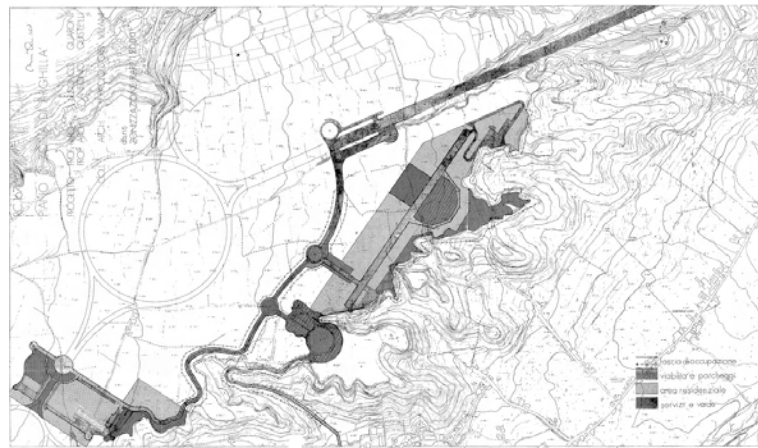


Fig. 3: Arghillà Site Plan (Law no. 167/1972) – Site design for the area including residential estates, public facilities and roads (Source: City of Reggio Calabria, Dept. of Planning)

This first site plan ex Law no. 167/1972 (Fig. 4) relates to the Southern part of the neighborhood, characterised by the presence of residential units originally intended for hosting the local middle-income class. This initiative was mainly public, while in other cases, such as in the neighborhood of Catona, a few kilometers far from Arghillà, residential developments were built also thanks to private investors.

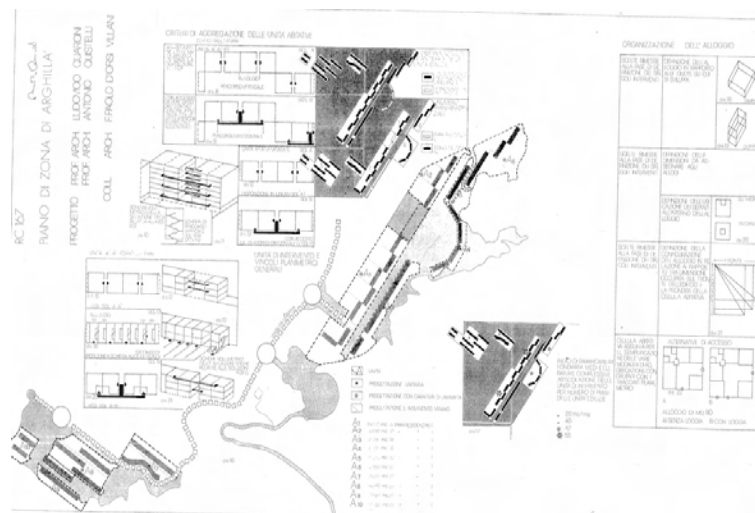


Fig. 4: Arghillà Specific Plan (Law no. 167/1972) – Residential units' site design. (Source: City of Reggio Calabria, Dept. of Planning)

As shown in Fig. 4, the site plan pays great attention to the design of residential typologies and units. A series of horizontal and vertical pathways were provided in order to increase the relationship between units and related social network. Within the above detailed project is possible to notice the presence of generous public spaces and buildings dedicated to the community. Although the plan has not been entirely built as designed because of financial constraints and some parts of it are still incomplete, the public spaces originally designed for this area generally match what is nowadays on site.

Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, another site plan was approved for the development of the Northern part of the neighborhood. It was aimed at connecting the existing urban environment with the new one, by giving the public space a central role in the urban design process. Following this concept, the highest buildings have been designed around the main plaza. To increase the centrality of the role of the “public”, a net of interconnected public spaces was organised, including a square, pedestrian pathways, commercial areas, spaces for handcraft production and community services. The purpose of the urban designers' team was to enhance the social cohesion within the city by realizing a well connected spatial system in which activities tend to be integrated, thus avoiding the “ghetto” effect. A further key-element in this plan was the connection between the neighborhood and the city. The relevance of this connection was conceived as strategic in order to empower the metropolitan conception of the city of Reggio Calabria. Arghillà was supposed to be a residential neighborhood with a high presence of public spaces and community services, very far from what it has become today. The mismatch between planning and

implementation phase is responsible for many contemporary problems in Arghillà. The following pictures (Fig. 6 a, b, c) show the state and abandonment of the public spaces and the physical decay of the buildings.

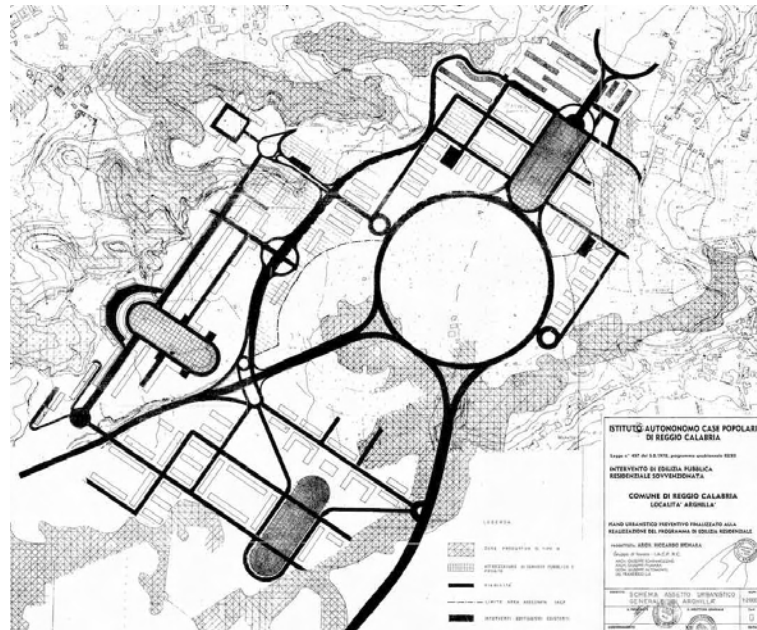


Fig. 5: Arghillà site plan ex Law n. 457/1978: design of the area, Institute for Public Housing. (Source: City of Reggio Calabria, Dept. of Planning)



Fig. 6: Arghillà public spaces in decay (a), (b) and buildings (c) (Source: authors' photographs)

This findings are supported by an in depth analysis of the planning history and the current situation of the neighbourhood. In order to investigate the reasons of the actual state of marginalisation and insecurity of the area of Arghillà, the researchers analysed the development of the area in a time perspective both by discussing secondary data such as planning documents and reports and by interviewing key informants on the current social issues (five semi-structured interviews with city planners and people involved in local development projects). The planning documents (land use plan, site design, planning reports...) were tested against the actual developments, in order to assess how far the expected results have been hindered by planning implementation mismatches. An in depth field work supported the analysis. This latter was both conducted through a site reconnaissance technique, by walking in the area and recording notes and taking photographs, and by informally talking with local people. The researchers focused on the following major features of the area: 1) accessibility, both in terms of physical connection to the city center and in terms of public transport services, and 2) public facilities and spaces, particularly on the differences between planning and implementation phases. These analysis were supported by the development of technical maps, following field data gathering on: land use, use of the ground level of the buildings, security devices in the area (CCTV).

The following maps are elaborated by the researchers on the basis of both technical maps and field records. Fig. 7 shows the spatial fragmentation of the neighbourhood determined by the massive presence of empty spaces, following the gap in the completion of the planned buildings. The Fig. 8 focuses on the usage of the ground level, putting in evidence the monofunctional character of the area, that should have been provided with a backbone of community spaces for productive and commercial uses. The Fig. 9 reports the existing public facilities and the presence of CCTV.

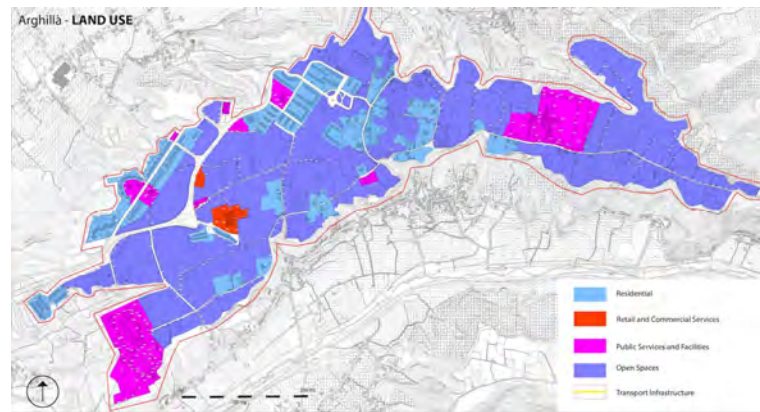


Fig. 7: Land use map (Source: authors' elaboration)

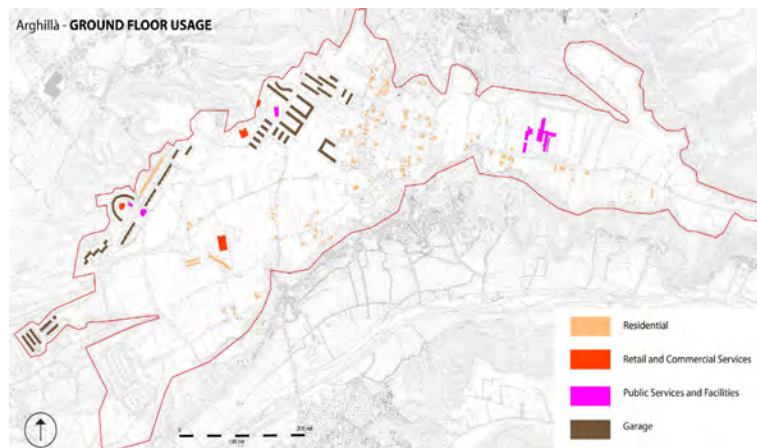


Fig. 8: Ground floor usages (Source: authors' elaboration)

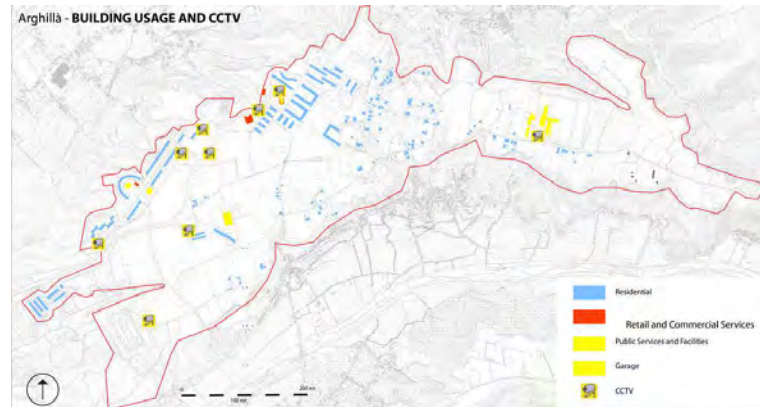


Fig. 9: Building Use and presence of CCTV (Source: authors' elaboration)

5 TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED AND NEIGHBOURHOOD- BASED APPROACH

As discussed in the previous section, the planning and design provisions have been only partially turned in real spaces. During the 1980s, the area was developed mainly focusing on the development of residential units and not on public facilities. This mismatch between planning and implementation phase happened because the need for financial resources for the development of the entire area was underestimated (interview with the technical staff of the City of Reggio Calabria, December the 10th 2014). At the end of the 1990s, urban unsafety and insecurity furtherly worsened when the city relocated to Arghillà a huge part of the Roma community living in squalid and unhealthy camps in the city centre. The spatial isolation of the area, together with the lack of public facilities and the concentration of low-income families and ethnic minorities in the public estates, created the conditions for attracting criminal activities. Some Roma families became involved in criminal activities and the fact to be isolated from the rest of the city, the lack of control from the State, the high level of social exclusion and the decay of the built environment has contributed to make Arghillà their fortress.

The two specific plans implemented in the area of Arghillà aimed to develop a new residential areas with an high level of public spaces and services. However, during the last three decades the percentage of open spaces in the area remained really high (54,80 % of the total) due to the gap in the construction of the planned public facilities and public spaces. Nowadays the area is well- equipped in terms of transportation facilities (22%, although the public transport offers only a a low frequency service with one single line) but not in terms of public facilities (9,20 %). As shown in the Fig. 10, many residential units are empty, not finished or underused and in bad status of maintenance. In this situation it is easy for deviated subjects to use these apartments for criminal activities or for their illegal occupation.



Fig. 10: Arghillà – A public facilities still to be finished (a) and a blighted affordable housing unit (b)

The gaps in the construction of public spaces and facilities were mainly due the lack of economical resources for the implementation of the site plan. Unfortunately this was one of the big issue related to the implementation of specific plans all around Southern Italy, where the presence of private developers is more rare than the Northern Italy. Furthermore, the lack of connection between urban planning tools and economic development measures to implement at local level, combined with a weak urban governance, brought to the failure of the original purposes of the plan with the consequent increase of spatial marginalisation of the area and the increase of the urban environment decay and micro crime.

Despite these problems, a significant initiative has been put forward successfully: “Ecolandia”, a leisure infrastructure managed by a Consortium composed by Profit and Non Profit associations. This park for kids is located on the rest of ancient fortress built between the I and II World War to control the Strait of Messina. Actually it is used for exhibitions, shows, kids entertainment and educational activities aimed to increase the sensitiveness of the population on sustainability and local environment care. During the last years several art festivals and theatral pieces have been organised with a series of temporary exhibitions thanks to the exploitation of the renovated ancient fortress spaces (Fig. 11). Thanks to the natural characteristics of the area, the Park is visited not only by schools for educational visits but also by citizens that have the possibility to enjoy a natural area of almost 20 ha. The Park has also a positive effect in terms of local community involvement. Many of the associations of the Consortium are located in Arghillà and are involved according to the type of activity to organize. A further positive impact stems from the potential in terms of job creation. Part of the employed people are direct employees of the Consortium, the others are employed by the associations involved and part of them belong to the local community of Arghillà (interview with the technical staff of the Ecolandia Park, March the 1st 2015).



Fig. 11 Arghillà – Ecolandia Park: a) Strait of Messina from Ecolandia ; b) The inside of the Ancient Fortress; c) The Theatre of the Park.

6 URBAN REGENERATION AND URBAN SAFETY: A FRUITFUL NEXUS

As shown in the discussion of the case of Arghillà, failures in effectively deliver a planning process can severely affect the urban safety of a neighbourhood. It is therefore paramount: 1) to pay great attention to the planning governance, in order to ensure effective management throughout the whole planning process, as demonstrated by the problems derived by a mismatch between planning and implementation in Arghillà; 2) to carefully manage planning policies through a comprehensive perception of all the factors affecting the context, including spatial fragility, as shown by the issues related to the massive presence of Roma minorities in a socially and spatially weak context; 3) to activate a virtuous process of urban regeneration by including in blighted areas catalyst for urban regeneration, such as the Ecolandia park above illustrated.

The researchers suggest that integrated urban regeneration initiatives, aimed by nature at improving both people and places can improve urban safety conditions in these neighbourhoods. An integrated approach should work on the causes for crime attraction and settlement, by acting on: the built- environment amelioration, the improvement in the quality of public spaces as enhancers of “sense of place”, the community participation, the build-up of aggregation centres, symbols of positive civic behaviors, the job creation and local economy enhancement. Urban regeneration, that is neighborhood based in its essence and stems from an integrated approach, holds the potential of contributing to the reduction of crime in blighted areas. As stated by Couch and Fraser (2003, p. 2), “Urban “Regeneration is concerned with the regrowth of economic activity where it has been lost; the restoration of social function where there has been dysfunction, or social inclusion where there has been exclusion; and the restoration of environmental quality or ecological balance where it has been lost. Thus urban regeneration is an aspect of the management and planning of existing urban areas rather than the planning and development of new urbanisation”. Further research could focus on the exploitation of urban regeneration initiatives in areas challenged by safety and security issues, in order to unveil the potential of specific urban regeneration tools with respects to antisocial behaviour indicators, thus sharpening the effectiveness of integrated and locally- based urban policies.

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