"Empty" Territory:
Diversity as a Perspective for New Territorial
and Local Dimensions of the Project

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The changes in contemporary cities, marked by the processes of globalization and the decreases in forms of planning and control which are no longer able to register and comprehend elements of resistance, territorial diversity, anomalies and deviations, is drawing increased attention to the weight of marginal, "empty" territories and local systems. Paradoxically, while territories and spaces appear to be characterized by widespread generic and homogeneous forms, the quality and the specificity of individual contexts constitute strong elements of attraction and recognition in the contemporary view.

On the basis of this framework, territory, understood as a complex construct, can play a central role in activating "new forms of planning" for places, new economies, capacities to generate alternative configurations of local development, and new forms of inhabiting low-density territories through the recognition of differences and the involvement of local people and actors.

Characteristics of an "Empty" Territory: Upper Gallura in a Silent Region

There exist a variety of diverse descriptions of Sardegna that exalt the characteristics and differences of the region. Ilario Principe maintains that Sardegna is an island because its history is an island, because its geographic reality is structurally different than anything that can be found elsewhere; because its social evolution has followed a path that is completely different from the norm; because various attempts at "unification", from the introduction of the metric system to spatial legislation of the South, have had peculiar and unpredictable outcomes. It is a silent region that has never taken on the crossroads function of the Mediterranean that was so spontaneous in nearby Sicily (Principe, 1985; p. 563). If, therefore, the process of constructing the identity, history, culture and economy of the region cannot be separated from an interpretation of the relations that this territory has had with the world, it is equally true that the very character of its physicality has played a determinative role in defining the "diverse" character of this land.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is an island, and therefore has a close relationship with the sea, Sardegna is a region containing a variety of levels, and this double identity has constructed the history of the territory and its environment. The mountains and the sea have represented two poles around which profiles and structures of territorial organization have taken shape: settlements, economies, forms of inhabitation, knowledge, occupations, music, stories and legends, imaginary and symbolic worlds, and figures of empty and silent territories.

In fact, when observing a map of Sardegna within this framework, and particularly when observing the Upper Gallura region, one is immediately impressed by the "emptiness" of the territory, which seems slow, dominated by its condition of substantial marginality, isolation and fragmentation as compared with the fast-paced dynamics of complex urban territories. However, upon closer inspection one realizes that the emptiness is only an illusion, and that the determinative element that has structured the territory is the environment.

Figure 1 | Calangianus, Upper Gallura Territory: a seeming "emptiness", photo by Leonardo Lutzoni, 2010

Nature in these places manifests in many forms, and the morphological structure gives rise to landscapes of enormous fascination and great solitude; vast expanses of empty territory, granite masses that have been perforated and shaped by the wind, great valleys marked by the flow of rivers that lead to the sea, tracing deep coastal creeks known as *rias*, the Monte Limbara massif, whose sharp protrusions are a dominant element and the focus of the territorial structure. It is with these elements that man has had to reckon over time when constructing his settlements. The environmental context, formed by highly diversified realities, has in fact been interpreted in an original way by the societies that have inhabited this land throughout its history of near total complicity; the populations that have lived here have woven a relationship of inextricable cohesion with their environment. Nevertheless, that relationship has never been expressed in unanimous terms or according to deterministic forms, rather it has undergone a variety of phases of organization and territorial balance, often involving conflict.

In fact, in the second half of the 19ᵗʰ century the Gallura territory appeared to be "empty" along the coast,

and more inhabited towards the inland, where the dominant geographical element was the Monte Limbara massif, encircled by a compact network of inhabited nuclei connected by a spider's web of roads. By contrast, the external territory surrounding these urban centres was characterized by *stazzi* connected by rough and minute roadways. These *stazzi*, an architectural typology specific to the area, structured the territory of open spaces, interacted with the environmental dimension and laid the foundations for a model of settlement and production that is widespread within the territory, which involves a subsistence economy based on self-production.

This territorial structure remained until the mid 1970s, when traditional dynamics were overturned. The coastal territory, previously uninhabited, began to attract people and economic activities linked to the supra-local and global dimension, transforming into true "linear cities". The internal territory "emptied", especially in the countryside, which lost its traditional dynamism and complexity.

Nevertheless, the Upper Gallura territory is not as empty and marginal as it might seem today. In reality, a number of emergent phenomena, new forms of planning and new uses of the territory are evolving: trades related to agricultural activity and land use are being rediscovered; sectors such as viticulture, the production of wine, and the breeding of rare cattle are being developed; a requalification of the *stazzi* settlement heritage aimed at eliciting a return to the land and reclamation of the landscape is underway, though still in early stages; the potential of the environmental dimension and landscape in terms of tourism is being discovered, and abandoned railway tracks and routes on Monte Limbara are being restored. This territory is therefore characterized by diverse dynamics, a mix of urban, rural and industrial uses and new and emergent phenomena, all of which must be taken into account in order to conceive of an alternative form of development and a new implicit planning dimension. It is from the "emptiness" and individuality of these places that different processes must be developed, because they are a precious resource that must be exploited with great care and attention.

The importance of the "emptiness"

The contemporary urban landscape is in a state of constant transformation. These changes affect the spaces in a city as much as the manner in which they are inhabited. "Central living spaces" are changing, as well as how they are used and the relationships between various parts. This evolution also extends to values, to the sense of belonging and identity, and to interpersonal relationships. The instability of the contemporary city as a territory of flows and spaces governed by movement, transformation, transience, and the coexistence and overlapping of different situations, creates a continuous destruction and reconstruction of values that produces disorientation. Today, high-speed networks devour, cover, obscure, suffocate, and deafen the city. They lacerate, crack and fragment the countryside. The territorial distinction between city and countryside no longer exists, and is giving way to the urban. Next to mines, around ports and along railway tracks urban growth is accelerating to the point of metastasis. Crisscrossed by streets and highways, bored by subways, scored by busses and trams, flown over by airplanes, a junction of streets, circuits and channels, a repository abandoned to all manner of flows, urban areas are fast cities whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere (Lévy, 1996; p. 178).

In many parts of country, however, particularly where the networks of flows and infrastructure, the market and global economy that alter the local physiognomy of cities and the territories begin to dissipate, there are hidden territories of open space, slower rhythms, silence and darkness, where nature and agriculture and survive, and there is still resistance to the linear and senseless growth of urbanization (Lanzani, 2011; p. 20). These are the seemingly "empty" territories, characterized by interesting and slow development that consists of cues and ongoing planning, where agricultural activities, sometimes new, mix with other forms of productive activity, tourism, cultural practices, new uses and, in some cases, even sustainable management of the landscape.

As Lanzani asserts, it is principally in these open and seemingly uninhabited spaces that the potential for silence and darkness, the possibility to slow down and disconnect still exist (in a hyper-noisy, fast, illumi-

nated and connected space), where one can experience a "different" temporality linked to the rhythms of nature and the body (Lanzani, 2011; p. 31). The concept of emptiness in these contexts evokes not delay, backwardness or underdevelopment, but a different kind of movement and another kind of planning. This emptiness is a "positive emptiness" (Dorfles, 2005; p. 27); it is the place, as Paolillo has stated, "where the transformation of what is full (shi) and that which has a manifest existence occurs: only by identifying with the emptiness through a 'return to one's roots' can man master the laws of change. […] Formlessness is the ancestor of being; noteless is the ancestor of resonance" (Paolillo, 1996, p. 181).

In the emptiness there is time, history, memory, and the essential. The contemporary dilation of the concept of the city within the territory is the search for the emptiness in which to discover the history, the drama and the story to connect to other stories, in which to discover the relationships between people, where every action is directed at opening one's eyes, senses and mind. The attention to open spaces, the collocation of emptiness to the territory at the centre of the city project, expresses a renewal of the interest in differences, in the differential quality of territory, suggesting that empty spaces emblematically represent in the urban tide (Maciocco, 2007, p. 154). As Decandia has asserted, we cannot therefore be content to see only that which is viewed with a fixed gaze and at a distance (that which apparently gives us the impression of emptiness); we must draw closer. We must enter the territory, rediscovering its dense variety, populated by multiplicity. It is a density that cannot be understood from afar while remaining in those towers from which we thought we could know the world, but one that can be embraced only by immersing oneself in the live body of its flesh (Decandia, 2008; p. 162). This attitude obliges us to overcome the superficial and approximate image with which urban planners tend to represent cities and territories, in favour of a slower, more attentive and accurate approach, which means, as Franco Cassano has stated, "to give names to the trees, the corners, the street lights; to find a bench, to get lost in one's thoughts and let them wander depending on the street one is walking, like bubbles that surface and burst and mix with the sky. It is to provoke spontaneous thoughts that do not plan ahead, that are not the result of goals or will, but necessary thoughts, those that come up on their own, that arise from an agreement between the mind and the world" (Cassano, 1996, p. 13). To choose to slow down, to pay more attention, means to change paradigm: it is not a process of going backwards; rather it is the experimentation of a new and implicit territorial project.

"Empty" Territories as an Innovative Perspective on Planning

"Empty" territories are expressions of a different kind of planning, but also of a different kind of niche culture that distinguishes itself from the conformity of networks. This dimension of planning is never excessively deterministic, rather it is implicit, and is not defined from above at the drawing table, even though it is often incapable of intercepting diversity and territorial cues because it has become somehow contaminated by global requirements.

The time has therefore come for territorial and urban planners to work in the margins of the strong and consolidated systems of our cities, to aspire to be like the butcher of the prince *Wen-hui*, who never remade the blade of his knife because, as he said, "I know the natural composition of the ox and I only cut the interstices. I never even scratch the veins or the arteries, nor the muscles and the nerves, and certainly not the bones!" (Dematteis in Lancerini, 2005; p. 15). A slow form of urban planning must be put into effect, one that is capable of bringing out the true potential of territories and the relevance that empty areas have assumed in the contemporary city, because the future of urban planning, as Maciocco has said, cannot be constructed exclusively through simplistic processes of confinement and repression of the marginal areas of our urban consciousness (Maciocco, 2007, p. 155). Corzani (in Decandia, 2008; p. 171) maintains that this means developing a new composite fabric in which constructed hubs of old cities become the components of a much broader system. This is similar to a musical score, in which it is contraction and dilation in space, the alternating of fullness and emptiness, of density and pauses, of fugues and choruses, of fast and slow, of deserted places and highly built-up areas, that create the rhythms of the piece. It is a score in which even the silences take on the "contours of a wedge […] until they lose some characteristics and assume other sur-

prisingly new features (including the urgency of being heard)", in which, as Decandia has stated, the areas with the densest naturalness, the passages that have been emptied of all modernity, can become precious resources, the counter-spaces of a new urban geography (Decandia, 2008; p. 171).

According to Dematteis, "above all, territorial planning therefore means representing diversity in terms of possible local responses and global changes, and this means pushing the limits of universal language in order to render them capable of accepting (understanding) and transmitting local thoughts and values" (Dematteis, 1995; p. 42). This means adopting a positive interpretation that focuses on the territory, together with its specificity, its transformative energy and the movement of the subjects and/or collectives that define its character.

Using these criteria of interpretation, one can therefore affirm that "empty" territories, equipped with specific territorial resources that define their characters, can, thanks to their implicit planning strength, also become hubs of advanced activity, inserted in transnational and global networks through the appeal of the unique qualities of the environment, the landscape and the territoriality that renders them diverse and different. A process of territorial modernization is thus favoured through the relationships between history and memory, the present and the future, local and global.

However, developing projects for these places does not mean limiting oneself to passive conservation of the territorial and environmental elements by which they have been structured, nor does it mean exposing those elements to the speed of global transformation that renders them flat and invisible. Rather, it means beginning a more complex process of revitalization capable of reconstructing the fabric of relationships between diverse parts of the territory; inducing new forms of territoriality; beginning cycles of resource production; activating new economic circuits that involve broad and widespread social participation, which are necessary if the project is going to be shared; creating forms of management and appropriation that are able to continue producing nature and landscape, that are able to spark new cues from which to start again. It means a project of re-conversion that is able to recompose the fragmentary nature of the territory on the basis of its diversity.

In order to develop a project, one must begin by exploring needs, expectations, and latent and invisible signals that can only be perceived through slow and accurate investigation. As Decandia has asserted, the profound gaze of the territory can help us to spot glimmers to which we can give form. It can indicate the presence of latent virtuality and unexpressed potential that need to be expressed, reservoirs in which to plant roots and from which to draw nourishment, suppressed hums that merit being listened to in order to grow and go far, dark sides, shadows, conflicts and contradictions that should be cared for (Decandia, 2008; p. 166).

As Dematteis has asserted, since places should not be understood as defined or even definable geographic areas, nor as passive supports for relationships between subjects, but rather as a combination of diverse points of view, the territorial project should not represent objects, but subjects, and should bring together various points of view, thus bringing contradictions and conflicts to the fore rather than excluding them. Its strong point is the conservation of complexity (Dematteis, 1995, p. 41). This requires one to keep in mind both the "necessity" embedded in global dynamics, as well as those which regulate the reproduction of local territoriality, reintroducing people at the centre of the project, with their differing points of view, their convergences and their conflicts.

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