The neo-feudal landscape

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During a research field trip in Milan suburbs it is was possible to find out how different groups of people are looking different ways of live. The necessity of not being seen (or even of not seeing), of not being touched (or even of not touching), of not being disturbed by people of a different social, economic condition or of a foreign cultural background begets a new kind of landscape in these territories. The key point is that an increasing amount of citizen does not feel comfortable or sure if their bodies, lives, homes are not separated from the others. Between the main city and the rural country the continuity of urbanized or agricultural surface is in fact broken down in a lot of cluster settlements as in a sort of patchwork that tend to be self-referenced. Increasing groups of citizens seem so to look for their own land cut (its own feud) preserved by external influences and to isolate other groups perceived as barbarians in a revival of medieval ghettos so that physic (both active and passive) segregation preludes to new spatial fragmented textures of the suburban scenery.

The in-between territories

The importance of the in-between territories in nowadays landscape and planning is widely well accepted (Sieverts, 2003; Frijters & Ruimtelijk Planbureau, 2004; Viganò, 2001).

We can briefly describe the characteristics of these places that are emerging to the attention of the scholars and could offer some good opportunities to inquire new forms of living and new urban tissues. The space between the city and the country has always been the place of evolution and possibilities since the industrial revolution but nowadays the complexity of relationships that link them with outer and inner space can non more be named as simple suburbs. These lands are so heterogeneously full of different urban materials: large infrastructures, social housing quarters, private residential areas, trading centres, office buildings, important public services, "trash spaces" and spatial residues of all these settlements.

This complex process was evident since the seventies when these territories were the places of the growth and now in a period of economic crisis they can still be the places of the redefinition of the contemporary development. Precious resources such as free spaces, environmental qualities, accessibility to the main city, agricultural estates can attract various economic, social and cultural phenomena.

But there is also another key point that must be evaluated analyzing the new and old areas in these lands. Different processes and different players are self intersecting on the space and they involve the populations and the practices that can be found in this context (Pasqui, 2008).

The lack of zoning regulations around large and mature cities such as Milan due to the split of government policy among different political townships seems in fact to be fitting to a new dimension of the citizenship which is the search of safety, security and identity.

The request of safety and security

Zygmunt Bauman (Baumann, 2005) claims that with the end of the XX century the globalization process has transformed the city into the place of insecurity and general decay. Baumann reports the emerging necessity of people to take care about themselves and to do on their own as an individual duty more than as a specific way to express solidarity. Baumann makes reference to the studies by Rober Castel about the sense of (un)safety (Castel, 2011) that some populations feel about their capability to take control over the future. But the outcome of this attitude is the production of fear, loneliness, separation and, which is more important here, new urban or not-urban conglomerations that support and create isolation more than dialogue. Many examples can be quoted from Sao Paulo to Copenhagen about this strict relationship between space and this segregated way of living that testify an ancient fight for survival. Baumann speaks about the contrast between the "mixophobia" (the fear and the refusal of the difference in social life) and the "mixophlia" (the interest and attraction for different people) that can both exist not only in the same population but in the same person too. Such a tendency can work at different levels anyway and one of them is the level of proximity which is just the body level.

The refusal of body proximity

A form of the so called "mixophobia" can be therefore clearly found in the sense of fear for the contact with foreign people and in the uneasiness for the overlapping of practice and the use of the territory. Cardia found that the request of safety can be split into several levels of intolerance (Cardia, 2005). At the very first level we can find the fear of being victim of intimidation or threat, violence, assault. This is a level that affects directly the physic person and the body of the citizen. It is just through this point of view that it is possible to monitor the presence and the conflict between the local population and the new immigrant in nowadays urban and suburban scene.

The conflict and the sense of fear is clearly testified by the numerous evidences of political support that rightist parties and political movements are devoting to popular riots against new immigrant in many places of the Italian panorama (Hammarberg, 2011).

The effect of fear is anyway the attempt to provide the original community with a separated environment

cut out in the normal space in order to preserve safety, sureness and sometimes wealth and life condition from the invasions of new citizens: the immigrants. Besides this form of self-segregation it is easy to re-cognize also the opposite and complementary action which is the strong wish to isolate and to restrict in short areas the unwelcome newcomers. These two ways to design the residential space (passive and active segregation) have precise shape in the settlements found in the in-between territories.

The two spatial models are the so called "gated communities" and the Rom settlements. During the research process it was possible to outline general tendencies in background and possible developments.

First of all it is interesting to report that the "gated communities" (enclosed residential settlements for upper class owners with high level services) are the most clear spatial device organized to keep out not-stakeholders.

This is a pretty north-American solution that was imported in our country several years ago and adapted for local situations. Some of the typical characteristics of a gated community are in fact the homogeneous com-position of settlers and a set of legal rules valid only inside the enclosure for every person. The first element is acceptable in our legal system but the second one is obviously impracticable. Several cases with more or less gated features can be found in the in-between territories around Milan: San Felice and Malaspina quarter in Segrate, Milano 2. Milano 3 etc…(Figure 1)

Figure 1 | San Felice quarter around Milan

But what is important to notice is the request of self-exclusion from the surrounding that involves services, space and most of all relationships and physical contact. On the other side new immigrant but especially the Rom people are considered as un-integrable in our society. The process of expulsion from the centre of the

city is well known in modern urban history (Raffestin, 1981). But in this case it is also true that in the same way as in the recent past the in-between territories have accepted trash-spaces that the city could not allow to grown in its ambit so now these lands must host what we can call "trash-people". People that in most of cases are considered source of criminality but also of social and physical disease according to an idea of contamination that requires necessarily exclusion, segregation, separation not appealable (Dal Lago, 1999).

Land survey

The corporal dimension of the refusal of the foreigner intended as a threat has emerged very clearly in such a context. According with volunteers working with Rom people in formal or informal (shantytown) settlements a great problem is represented by health condition of both adults and children. The range of morbidity and mortality id definitely higher than common population. In many families a sick person is present and one of the main territorial service required by the Rom people is just the first aid station (Tosi, 2007). This behaviour originated from the discovery that, although their condition of illegal immigrants, they would have not been denounced to the authorities. This was so intended as a way to obtain free medicines. The great problem with Rom people is anyway the necessity to keep sick subjects under therapy without interruption especially in case of "A" hepatitis. With this background conditions it is clear than the process of acceptance and integration is problematic if we focus on the body relationship. In a period of crisis in fact one of the resources that the resident population wants to preserve for itself is health and so the presence on the territory of sick or contagious people can be seen as a threat to its life condition and to a safe environment.

It is so not a surprise that many disputes about new settlements of Rom people in recent past concern the hygienic condition of the residential shantytown. As said before so trash-people and trash-places seem to overlap. It is neither by chance that these two kinds of spaces sometimes get together. For example in Milan one of the last Rom slums found its location just by the main city incinerator: the only urban function (already rejected by the city) that can stand its presence.

This process runs side with what could be called a sort of hiding precautionary dimension of the shantytown in nowadays urban relations. In the survey around the main city in fact it is not rare that what could look like nothing more than a rural hut for maintenance or a depot displayed afterwards an informal home for one or more families of homeless or gipsies. One of the most important features of shantytown is to hide, to disguise, to keep secret in order not to be noticed by authorities. Even organic waste must be hidden because it can attract the attention of authorities or citizens. At the same time people living there usually tend not to show much outside their social or physical activities.

But also stable settlements such as simple detached houses built by Rom people can be reached only through a disguised path behind industrial buildings that hide the route to the visitors: no lights, no street name, no civic numbers (for legal problem too of course) make these buildings invisible.

If we can focus on this issue we can find the paradox of this situation: old residents claim there is an invasion of their space but on the other side they could rarely say where the invaders live actually. We can so speak about hidden bodies, hidden lives, hidden people which, like ghosts and incorporeal presences, try not to mark the territory. (Picture 2)

Another paradox that can be reported about the appearing and disappearing of these "contaminated" bodies concern the public answers to manage the problem of informal settlements.

Usually local politics tend not to take care of the problem neither to favour nor to hamper the presence of Rom people in order not to clash with angry citizens or volunteers but, especially in recent days, when rightist movements or caucuses ask for a strong intervention the outcome is the evacuation of these areas. This is a typical answer for these situations: for a long time everybody ignore the events (the hiding process is comfortable from a lot of points of view) but when it is too difficult to ignore the reaction is the removal. The media so report frequently the news of periodic evacuations of slums around the main city of Milan. But actually, according to the volunteers that assist Rom people, there is not a lot of groups settled surroun-

ding the cities. It is in fact all the times the same little group of people who is evacuated from a camp to another one in different moments. So we can say there is a sort of strange periodic migration of unidentified bodies, families, kids, women and men with no names playing the role of wanderers around the city just in order to testify the action of public power.

The Rom camp both legal or illegal is anyway the top problem in this process of segregation. The hidden settlement removed away from the city is very comfortable for the citizenship. To segregate Rom people in a limited space satisfies the anxieties of society: To hide the physical bodies behind a gate means that every social, hygienic, problem is invisible: all the undesirable people stay there and there everything can happen provided it does not invade the rest of the civil life territory.
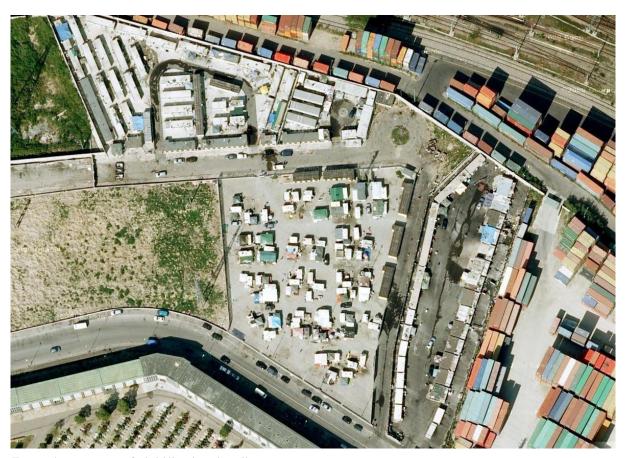

Figure 2 | Rom camp of via Triboniano in Milan

School contact

From an historic point of view the typical place of meeting among cultures in our country has always been the school system. This was just the way to monitor the reactions and the way of refusing or accepting the contact between the different social classes or population in the present days of economic crisis. Therefore during the survey to collect materials for the present research it was possible to interview teachers, educators, volunteers, functionaries.

The theme of physical contamination and of corporeal promiscuity as a threat is enforced when in some situations the two different populations are compelled to share space and services. Besides the first aid station the Rom people looks for a second basic territorial feature which is just the school. This is a quite long time process previously due to legal issue. Many families in fact used to send their sons to school just in order to have an easier way to obtain the Italian green card ("permesso di soggiorno"). As time went by

even Rom families realized that a good education level could help young generation to accept the challenge of a contemporary technologic world. It is useful here to report that the traditional jobs of Rom people got into crisis since the seventies as long as modern economy started rejecting obsolete lifestyles (Cuomo, 1997). A good education starts to be considered as an essential tool for surviving in western civilization.

School (especially compulsory education) is still so a good indicator of social and territorial phenomena. Most of Italian families send their sons to public school and school is one of the territorial services which is equally widespread all over the country with a quite good level service.

A noticeable case study was about the primary school of Rubattino quarter. In this situation some volunteers of Padri Somaschi and Communità di S. Egidio joined their effort to bring Rom children to school. At the very first new that some kids from the shantytown could share the school space with their own sons some Italian parents wrote an indignant letter to the ministry of public education asking how it was possible that an Italian school could accept children with lice.

The Rom kids had no lice at all but it is indicative that the attempt to segregate Rom people started from a body condition and a health situation. When the Italian parents referred to lice pointed out the most upsetting and disturbing experience that can rouse the fear for an intimate threat towards their own children involving once more a bodily dimension. So the request for a segregation and separation of the bodies of people was used to harm civil rights.

Fortunately the answer of the school was firm and steady and guided its action just towards the body protection and safety of the newcomer Rom students. The school in fact prepared itself with a project of acceptance and integration named "Water and soap" (progetto "Acqua e sapone") by providing the possibilities for Rom children to have a bath in the school building. This effort was useful both to help children get out of a condition of unhealthy segregation and Italian parents be reassured about the general hygienic conditions of the educational environment.

Moreover the body not acceptance of the context outside the camp and the Rom community seems to be interiorized by the Rom people itself. Through the interview with the teachers it was amazing to discover that often Rom families peroxide their children hair probably in order to mingle them in some way with other people realizing that the physical appearance is a key point in social relationship nowadays.

Positive developments

All these elements could drive to think that social segregation is deeply rooted in our society at the time of the crisis so that a neo-feudal landscape of segregation among classes (with aristocracy closed in its castles having no relationship with serfdom and even less with gipsies out of caste in their camp) can not be changed. But there are interesting evidences that just a body relation can break this social stiffness up. Just in the first days of school the closeness of Italian and Rom kids could demolish the mutual mistrust and this changing started to pour into the families. First the eye contact outside the school building among parents then the first mother-to-mother talks started changing the situation. This new dimension became strongly evident on the occasion of the evacuation of the Rom camp of Rubattino quarter. During the police force action the Rom families came to the school just because they had not ant other place where to go and just the school could organize the support action with the Italian families. In front of an evacuation a Rom mother with a kid appeared nothing more than a mother like any other. So the solidarity process could take off from a tangible and concrete contact. Italian families incredibly hosted in their home gipsies families with kids and a firm opposition blew up against the public intention to go on with the evacuation. What strategies can be deducted from this experience? Basically we can say that supporting closeness and proximity inside public services it is possible to drive to integration. In few words the central point is that just the corporeal proximity can dissolve prejudice. In the same way as popular racism bases its action on separation, division, invisibility (so that it is possible to build a "black legend" up) so the contact among people can operate in the opposite way: developing new relations, encouraging the acquaintance, favouring the trust.

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