

Forms and Flows in the Contemporary Transformations of Palermo's City Centre

Ola Söderström

INTRODUCTION¹

Cities are transformed under variable historical and social conditions. One way of characterising this phenomenon is to talk about regimes defined as systems of local governance. My hypothesis is that the processes analysed by authors dealing with contemporary situations in this volume, including the case study on which my contribution is based, may be understood as instances of a cosmopolitan city-building regime.² In other words, they are related to forms of governance in which translocal flows play a crucial role. This type of regime, which relies on a series of actors' competence to navigate between different cultural references, allows or disallows certain types of flows and plays a central role in shaping urban forms that increasingly mingle different aesthetics and typological solutions. Most often, analyses of urban regime change are based on general diagnoses of governance change in terms of political economic theory (Harvey 1989; Hall and Hubbard 1998; Brenner 2004) or political histories of local governance (Stone 1989, 2005). In this chapter, I follow a slightly different route by focusing on changes in urban forms. Although I will not therefore develop a classical urban regime analysis, I will use it to frame the analysis of these forms. It will allow me to locate them within a historically shaped system of action, comparable to other systems of action elsewhere, instead of considering them as free-floating, idiosyncratic urban features.

The case I study is Palermo in Sicily that has a peculiar urban history with a recent and quite dramatic regime change. The study deals with the nexus between forms and flows in the recent transformations of the city.³ By forms, I will refer to built form, but also to the interior design of places and to that of urban public spaces. By flows I will refer to the mobility of persons, ideas and capital. Different research questions have oriented the study on which this text is based: how does an urban regime affect the openness of the city to translocal influences, and what happens when the local governmental regime changes? How do ideas about urban space and form circulate across space to finally 'land' in a city such as Palermo? How do the translocal influences translate into the creation of actual urban and architectural form and to what extent do these forms

shape new urban practices and identities in the city? The focus is on the first two questions but the second two are considered as well.

This chapter will, first, discuss the concepts and approach framing the research: urban regime theory, the idea of a cosmopolitan city-building regime along with the form and flows nexus. I will then move on to introduce the case of Palermo and the changes in local governance over the past 15 years and focus on a series of 'biographies of artefacts' exploring the mediations through which these forms were imported in Palermo and how they have been (or not) adapted to suit local needs, practices or representations of urban life. In my conclusion I will return to my heuristic hypothesis and discuss in what ways the change in urban form is involved with cosmopolitan city-building regime.

A COSMOPOLITAN CITY-BUILDING REGIME

Over two decades ago, the geographer David Ley wrote about the material imprint in Vancouver's urban landscape of two successive local governments between 1968 and 1986. Their different political orientations – one liberal, the other neo-conservative – were, he showed, legible in the urban fabric: each government had created its coalition, agenda and style (Ley 1987). What Ley described is how different concepts and approaches may be used to define and understand such coalitions and programmes, all with their advantages and drawbacks. The approach most suited for the purpose at hand here is urban regime theory. First formulated by Clarence Stone in his study of urban politics in the city of Atlanta between 1946 and 1988, this theory 'centers on the question of how local communities are governed. How do they establish and pursue problem-solving priorities' (Stone 2005: 328–329). Urban regimes are defined as an 'informal arrangement by which public bodies and private interests function together to make and carry out governing decisions' (Stone 1989: 179). Their study is twofold: the first aspect involves historical investigation into 'how an agenda came to be framed in a particular way, what brought coalition partners together [...] the other, more abstract side of regime analysis, centres on a model of how governing arrangements operate' (Stone 2005: 331). Stone's theory is not a grand theory of urban change, but a middle-range theory which 'concerns how local agency fits into the play of larger forces' (Stone 2005: 324) and insists on the necessity of historical depth.

Stone's theory has been criticised for being too dependent on the context in which it was developed (the US) and therefore not sensitive to the logics of urban governance in other regions and countries of the world (Pierre 2005). The private sector and public-private partnerships carry, it has been argued, less weight in European cities. However, the US governance model has tended to spread in many countries during the two decades following Stone's study of Atlanta, thus increasing the geographical scope of his theory and weakening the efficacy of that critique.

Political economic analyses of urban regime change have insisted on the impact of the neo-liberal turn in the late 1970s on urban governance. 'Privatism'

(Barnekov *et al.*, 1989), 'Entrepreneurialism' (Harvey 1989; Hall and Hubbard 1998) and 'Schumpeterian Workfare Postnational Regime' (Jessop 2002) are different terms used to designate, within this approach to urban change, a shift away from a social welfare approach to an approach centred on economic growth.⁴ I do not contest the role of this shift. I wish rather to highlight less documented aspects of contemporary urban governance. I argue that one of the general features of urban regime change across the worldwide city network in the past three decades is the cosmopolitanisation of local governance. Urban regime analysis focuses on local arrangements and political-economic approaches on how local actors try to capture global flows of capital. They thus both privilege, but to a different extent, an 'internalist' approach to urban governance. By referring to cosmopolitan city-building regimes I wish to better understand, first, the role of non-local actors and translocal flows, second, the competence of local actors to move between different cultural references,⁵ and third, how the two former elements generate new urban forms.

This phenomenon is by no means a new one: cities have always been to a certain extent informed by such flows and, as a consequence, 'artefactual zoos' containing quite different species of buildings. The CIAM movement, but also long before that, the principles of urban form developed by the *trattatisti* of the Renaissance or the layout of Hellenistic new towns have travelled across space and left their imprint in different places. What is more recent however is the intensity of these translocal exchanges and therefore the multiplication of displacements and hybrids visible in contemporary urban landscapes. In that sense, the increasing polyphony of urban artefacts is a distinctive feature of contemporary cityscapes.

Local governance is in this contribution, as mentioned in the introduction, an *explanans* much more than an *explanandum*. In other words, what I want to understand is not local government *per se*, but to explore the interplay between flows and forms, and more specifically how local government moulds the latter in a period of increasing mobility and interconnectedness. This requires a brief discussion of what I mean by the forms and flows nexus.

The forms and flows nexus: The relation between forms and flows is not a new question in social and cultural theory. In macro-anthropological theory, for instance, cultural forms, in the guise of ideas, practices or objects, are seen, since the late 1980s, as the product of an often complex intersection of different types of flows (images, capital, people) (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996). To pick up an example from Hannerz: hiphop music in Stockholm, performed by musicians from an immigrant background, is, he argues, a cultural form that can only be accounted for by following the threads and flows relating these young artists to other places, other social groups, and to specific networks of information and communication.

Geographer Doreen Massey's redefinition of *place* as an intersection of networks: a horizontal, open phenomenon versus place as a vertical (historically shaped), bounded and homogeneous entity has moved our conceptions of that

specific geographical form in the same direction (Massey 1994, 2005, 2007). In both her account and in those of macro-anthropological theory, places are rather undefined as built forms. The shape of cities and their architecture is a quite marginal dimension of their analysis as it is in most contemporary urban studies.⁶ How built form is shaped by globally circulating models has in particular, as mentioned in the introduction to this volume, rarely been investigated, with the important exception of Tony King's work (King 1984, 1990, 2004).⁷

The forms and flows nexus may be analysed in different ways: focusing on the forms themselves, on the actors of their production, on the vectors of their circulation and on the conditions of their local translation. While King pays a lot of attention to the two former ones, I will focus here more on the two latter ones. In order to do that, the research on which this text is based has used a series of methods, materials and data: first, existing work on local and especially urban politics in Palermo and interviews with figures and observers of local politics; second, data concerning incoming flows in order to relate qualitative changes in built form to changes in the economic and social base of the city;⁸ and third, a series of 'artefact biographies' where we studied, at the level of individual built forms, the role of specific flows (subsidies, ideas, travels).

Forms and flows coalesce under local circumstances according to historically situated power struggles. So, let us first look at these local political arrangements in Palermo, which are critical mediators between global flows and local forms.

REGIME CHANGE IN PALERMO

Changes in the urban landscape have been spectacular in Palermo. From a bomb-wounded, parochial, apparently marginal city it has been transformed in the past 15 years into a place displaying the trendy features of most Central and North European large cities. More than in most other European cities, these transformations are directly related to political circumstances and to the end of a long-standing hegemony of one political coalition. This hegemony had its roots in the reconfiguration both of the Italian political landscape and of organised crime in Sicily in the late 1940s.

Phase 1

Following World War II, Palermo has been characterised by two central features: its role as the capital of an autonomous Italian region (Sicily) and as the international capital of the mafia (Cannarozzo 2000). In 1947, Palermo became the administrative centre of the Sicilian Region. As a result, the city began to attract important flows of migrants⁹ from the rest of the island and saw the development of a regional bureaucracy recruiting its employees generally in the function of their belonging to a political party or to a mafia family (Maccaglia 2005). During those same years, the mafia, formerly mainly active in the smuggling of cigarettes, began to move into the more profitable sector of the building indus-

try. The best way to illegally make money in that sector was to take control of certain parts of the local administration, and especially public works. With the election of two members of the mafia, Vito Ciancimino and Salvo Lima, to the city council in 1956, Palermo saw the establishment of a 'mafian city-building regime' that would be hegemonous for nearly 40 years.¹⁰ Elected then as Mayor in 1958, Lima, together with Ciancimino as Officer for Public Works, created a system that turned the city into a very profitable cash machine for the mafia.

The two major mechanisms of this machine were the attribution of building permits and the use of information about re-zoning schemes. First, out of the 4,200 building permits issued by Ciancimino during his political mandate, between 67 per cent (Maccaglia 2005) and 80 per cent (Dickie 2004; 281) of them, depending on the sources, were granted to five persons who were all straw-men for Ciancimino himself. The permits were then given to mafia-related building firms. Then, agricultural land in the periphery was massively bought up by *mafiosi*, informed beforehand by the office of public works that these areas would become constructible plots. These areas were generally sold some time later with huge profits. The system led to what is known as "il sacco di Palermo" (the sack of Palermo) consisting in uncontrolled urban sprawl, cementification of the coast line, destruction of architectural heritage, and abandonment and decay of the historic centre which lost 90,000 inhabitants between 1945 and 1980.¹¹ Parts of the system still function nowadays, as is shown by the fact that the cost of construction is higher in Palermo than in other Italian cities, due to the persistence of racketeering in the building industry.¹² The enduring role of the mafia is both the consequence and the cause of economic depression in the area.

Phase 2

Two tragic events in 1992 marked the end of this period and led, if not to a complete regime change, to a radical change in local politics.

On 23 May 1992, the anti-mafia judge Giovanni Falcone was murdered by the mafia in Capaci on his way back to Palermo from the airport. Less than two months later, on 19 July 1992, another anti-mafia judge, Falcone's close collaborator Paolo Borsellino, was murdered in Palermo while he was going to visit his mother. These events led to a civic and political reaction in Sicily and in the whole country.¹³ The following year the presumed boss of Cosa Nostra, Totò Riina, was arrested. The same year, Leoluca Orlando, a centre-left charismatic figure of local and regional politics, was elected as mayor with 70 per cent of the votes at the municipal elections. Orlando was the founder of an anti-mafia political movement *La Rete* (the network) and had already been mayor between 1985 and 1990 under the banner of the now defunct *Democrazia Cristiana* (the Christian Democratic party). Orlando was then re-elected in 1997 and resigned in 2000 in order to run, unsuccessfully, to become Governor of the Sicilian Region.

This period between 1993 and 2000 saw the advent of a new coalition of public and private actors establishing a new programme for local development. As part of this agenda, a new planning regulation was developed in 1993 by

Pierluigi Cervellati, famous for his preservationist plan in Bologna in the late 1970s, the historian of architecture Leonardo Benevolo and the architect Italo Insolera. To commission these renowned specialists was a very significant move. Orlando had chosen three outsiders while all plans in the previous decades had been drawn up by members of the local administration. While the mafian coalition needed secrecy and closure, the new regime sought external actors, capital and ideas.

The new government's plan had three main objectives: rehabilitating the built environment and the architectural heritage of the city, improving living conditions for the inhabitants and developing the economic activities in the historic centre. After years of urban sprawl and abandonment, the centre became, according to Orlando's expression, the city's 'new area of expansion'. Tourism, in the absence of an industrial base, was to be the driving economic force, and Palermo's main tourist attraction was its monuments and its decayed but architecturally very rich historic core.

In the following years, a new urban landscape emerged in the city centre, comprising restored monuments, rehabilitated housing, places of culture, designer bars and hotels, and new or redesigned public spaces, such as a waterfront park. This landscape was the product of a much more intense commerce of models, ideas, capital and persons between Palermo and other cities in Italy and abroad. From being a very closed circuit, the local economy became a more open one: efforts were made to capture subsidies and investments from different levels of the national administration and from the EU for urban development.¹⁴ High-profile cultural events were organised in newly created culture places with figures such as Pina Bausch, Bob Wilson, Philip Glass, Alessandro Baricco, Jean Nouvel and Harold Pinter. Finally, foreign visitors, attracted by the picturesque city centre and the buzz around the renaissance of the city, increased in numbers.¹⁵

Three places in the city are iconic of this phase of urban politics in Palermo: Palermo's opera, the *Teatro Massimo*, which had for obscure reasons remained closed for 23 years and had reopened in 1997; *Santa Maria dello Spasimo*, a rehabilitated monumental complex turned into a space for music, theatre and exhibitions in 1995, and the *Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa*, a huge brownfield site turned into a working space for cultural creation in 1997. As these leading projects show, regeneration through culture was the motto during those years.¹⁶

Phase 3

For many intellectuals in Palermo, this process of urban policy renewal came to an end with Orlando's defeat in 2000 and the election of the centre-right mayor Diego Cammarata, who has been re-elected since and in 2009 is still mayor of the city.¹⁷ Figures of the former administration in particular tend to consider the present situation as a return to the obscure times of the past. The situation is more nuanced, however. The city has not returned to its insular former self. Although investments in rehabilitation and state-sponsored cultural activities proceed at a slower pace, the present local government pursues efforts to attract

capital and ideas from abroad. New projects have been launched, for instance, to improve the traffic scheme (with the choice of the French architect Dominique Perrault) and to develop waterfront amenities.

The main difference between the 1990s and the 2000s lies in the regulation of urban change. While the former government sought to rehabilitate the entire city centre and, at the same time, to avoid the eviction of the poor, the present government is developing an active pro-gentrification policy, focusing its action on the economically most promising parts of the centre, the Kalsa neighbourhood.¹⁸

In brief, looking back at the postwar urban policy in Palermo, the picture is the following: a long period dominated by mafia interests, a regime change in the early 1990s and then two distinct cosmopolitan public-private coalitions.

In the second part of this chapter, I will look at the material fabric of the city and focus on a series of places created or transformed in central Palermo since 1992. The aim will be to see how flows and forms actually intersect in the transformation of its urban landscape and to identify the mechanisms at work.¹⁹

COSMOPOLITAN PALERMO

Urban forms in Palermo have become more cosmopolitan than they were before the regime change in the 1990s. New architectural and urban types as well as new forms of interior design have made their appearance in the urban landscape, especially since the late 1990s. As a result, this landscape 'speaks' the material language of globalisation much more than it did before 2000. There is no existing lexicon of urban globalisation however that would allow us to relate very systematically changes in Palermo to more generic changes in the contemporary urban fabric. In the early 1990s, Paul Knox established a repertoire which approaches such an ambition. It contains seven elements: postmodern architecture, historic preservation, gentrification, master-planned communities, mixed-use and multi-use developments, festival settings and high-tech corridors (Knox 1991). Knox's repertoire is based on an analysis of the transformations of Washington, DC and is (probably) relevant for the comprehension of changes in US cities. It does not apply to an Italian city like Palermo with a weak private sector and a very rich architectural heritage. There are common elements such as gentrification and new forms of historic preservation produced by the private sector, but, due to its anaemic economy, there is little related to Knox's other urban landscape forms.

In Palermo, changes over the past 15 years may be grouped within five categories: the reuse of urban wasteland, the rehabilitation of heritage buildings, the creation or transformation of public spaces, bars and restaurants catering for tourists and yuppies, and culture places (e.g. museums, galleries).²⁰ The regime change described above is one of the mechanisms explaining these transformations, because it brought more investments from foreign sources and involved

more persons, firms and institutions from other parts of the country or from abroad. Two other mechanisms have contributed to opening up the city to foreign flows: the arrival of trendsetters from abroad and the enhanced mobility of Sicilian students.

The renaissance of Palermo brought more media attention to the city. The image that Palermo was not only about the mafia, economic depression and unemployment began to make its way through media and the accounts of travellers in the 1990s. As we know from the literature on gentrification, artists and persons active in the so-called creative professions are classical forerunners of urban change (Ley 2003). Seeing in Palermo an artistically inspiring milieu, a place of good cuisine and cheap housing, more artists, graphic designers and architects came to visit the city and some rented or bought an apartment in the historic centre.²¹ Closely following these forerunners came a wave of visitors²² and with them a demand for new places: trendy bars and restaurants, exhibition spaces, designer hotels and B&Bs. These places in turn developed a taste and a demand within the city for non-traditional bars, restaurants and culture places. They have also been publicised in travel, design and architecture magazines, and have thereby increased the appeal of the city for a certain type of clientele.

Palermo has not only been the passive recipient of ideas, types and designs coming from elsewhere. In the large majority of the 20 places we analysed, the owner or the architect has wide-ranging experience abroad. The owner of the *Kursaal Kalhesa*, a pioneering multi-use place which opened in 2001 in the Kalsa neighbourhood, is, for example, a local entrepreneur who has worked in Singapore, Sydney and Tokyo: 'I've used' he says, 'my experience as a traveller and had certainly seen more than 200 places akin to the *Kalhesa* when we planned it.'

A particular group of Sicilian students has been very active in these changes: the first Erasmus and Leonardo generation.²³ During the past 20 years (the programme was launched in 1987), hundreds of students from Palermo have visited another European city for six months or a year and gained new ideas from that experience:²⁴ 'I did my Leonardo in Barcelona by the Miralles architecture studio and that experience gave me the possibility to see things that I hadn't seen here: art galleries, artists, exhibitions', said one architect whom we interviewed. Generally speaking, the impact of this new generation of architects on Italian architecture is such that different commentators have talked about an 'Erasmus generation' or 'Erasmus effect' (Prestinzenza Puglisi 2007).

These mechanisms are better understood when looking at the conception of three different recently created places: the *Foro Italico*, which is part of the new waterfront, the *Coso Café*, a small privately owned bar, and the *Teatro Montevergine*, a theatre and bar in a former church and cloister. These places have been selected here out of the 20 analysed during the research because they give access to translocal connections at different scales and performed by different actors.

THREE PLACE BIOGRAPHIES

Foro Italico: *Practice Follows Form*

The globalisation of urban form is produced by the worldwide circulation of architectural types, but also of solutions regarding specific functions or areas of a city, what we call here *urban* types. Waterfront developments are one of them. They are not characterised by a specific built form, but by a re-functionalisation of areas bordering rivers, lakes and seas. Creating recreational waterfronts is one of the signatures of entrepreneurial cities (Hoyle *et al.* 1988). The harbour area has of course been an important point of contact between the city and the sea for centuries, but since World War II Palermo has been turning its back to the Mediterranean. After the war, the waterfront became an area where the ruins of the houses destroyed by the bombings were unloaded, a large highway separating the city centre from the water was created and a funfair was regularly organised.

The project for its redevelopment was launched in 1999 by Leoluca Orlando with subsidies from the Italian state, related to the organisation the same year in Palermo of a United Nations conference on transnational crime.²⁵ The project was designed by the internationally known Milanese architect Italo Rota for whom the new waterfront is a means to 'reconcile the population of Palermo with contemporary form, which is generally associated with social pathologies and ugliness'.²⁶ It was finished and re-inaugurated by the new mayor in 2005. The area was turned into a 33,000m² public park with a series of paths for walking, cycling or running and a few trees (Figure 10.1). The street furniture is made of colourful benches, design lamp-posts, a series of 1,400 small ceramic elements dividing the area from the highway, and 17 sculptures²⁷ (Figure 10.2). The global result is a new public area resembling the waterfronts of Venice (in California, not Italy) or Barcelona.

Figure 10.1
Aerial view of the *Foro Italico* with the Kalsa neighbourhood on the left and the old harbour in the top left corner. Google Earth.



Figure 10.2
Poles and sculptures
(top), benches, lampposts
and the inevitable
scooter (below) in the
Foro Italico.



These resemblances do not escape the users whom we interviewed: 'It reminds me of San Diego Bay or some American movies with people jogging along the sea.' The presence of joggers, a banal feature of city life in other cities, is in Palermo a clear sign of cosmopolitanisation. Jogging in the city centre is a completely new practice, as is lying on the grass in the city or having a picnic area close to the sea. These practices, are decoded by many users interviewed in the *Foro* as 'American' and as a typical world city feature: 'I'm thinking of images

of big cities, world metropolises, where people come to run and rest. These are cities that I don't know, but images I've seen in movies. Here it's not that big, it's a smaller version of that.' The *Foro* is also cosmopolitan in another sense: it has been used since its opening in 2005 as a place where members of the Srilankan and Bangladeshi communities, living nearby in the historic centre, come together.²⁸ Before the creation of the new waterfront, there was no space in the city centre other than the markets that offered an opportunity for 'ethnic co-presence'. Finally, users describe the *Foro* as a 'break' in a bustling city, one of the very few calm places in Palermo. In other words, the *Foro*, pertaining to a category of global urban types, is also a vector of the globalisation of urban practices. It offers opportunities for jogging, lying in the grass or simply using a quiet place in the city for reading or eating a sandwich.

Global ideas about the development of the waterfront have also followed other routes to the Sicilian capital. In 2006, Palermo organised an exhibition entitled *City-port*, a decentralised event of the Venice Architecture Biennale (Bruttomesso 2006). The exhibition was dedicated to a panorama of plans and projects for 15 waterfronts on different continents,²⁹ as well as ten projects in Southern Italy. In July 2008, a project inspired by the exhibition and by the Barcelona waterfront was aired to the media by the port authorities of Palermo. The principle of the plan is to work on the refunctionalisation of the waterfront considering it as what the former head of the urban planning in Barcelona Joan Busquets calls a 'zone of transition' between the port activities and the city centre (Busquets 2006). This zone comprises three distinct areas: one for cultural services and leisure which includes the *Foro Italico*, a second dedicated to shipbuilding, maintenance and freight, and a third to passenger ships (Figure 10.3). The plan implies the demolition of the walls separating the port infrastructures from

Figure 10.3
Palermo's harbour area.
Photograph by Maurizio
Giambalvo.



the rest of the city. The realisation of this plan in the years to come, inspired by international experiences in waterfront redevelopments, would be a further step in the local translation of this urban type in Palermo.

Finally, in May 2008, press releases announced that Limitless, a real estate company of the *Dubai* World group, famous for having realised the artificial palm-tree-shaped island in Dubai, was going to invest two billion dollars in the rehabilitation of the historic centre, the waterfront and luxury hotels. This proved to be a very optimistic and imprudent announcement, but is symptomatic of the present fervour in the local planning milieu for the modernisation of the waterfront and the capture of global capital flows.

The Coso Café: 'Copy-paste' Logics in the Private Sector

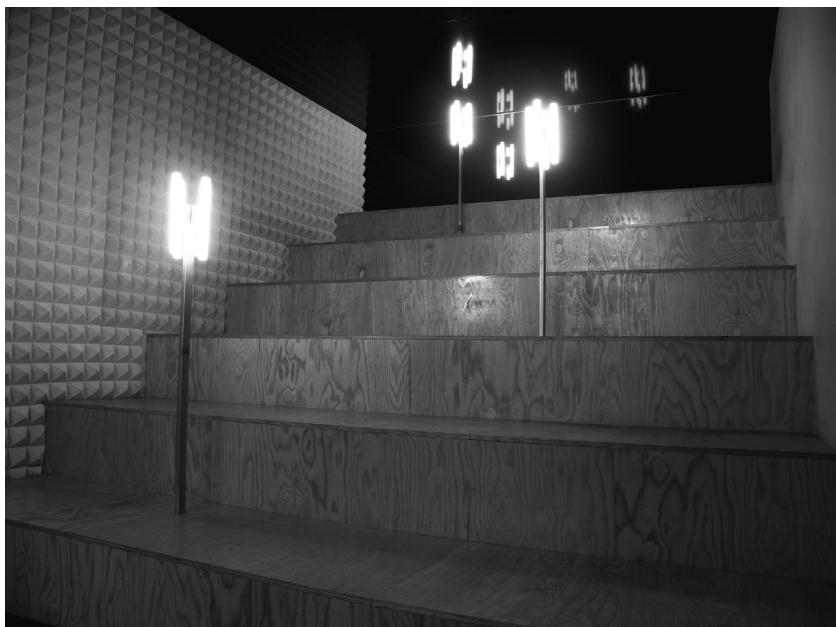
The flow/form nexus is observable at different scales: in large architectural or urban redevelopment projects involving the public sector, as we have just seen, as well as in small-scale private initiatives. The creation of a series of designer bars and restaurants is a striking feature of the globalisation of Palermo in recent years. Studying the development of such places means observing processes of transformation endowed with distinct temporalities. Creating a bar or changing its interior design can be done in a few months, whereas the waterfront redevelopment will take many years (if it is ever done). Capturing trends in terms of activities and architectural style, being ready to temporarily renew the offer, is central for many bar owners, because their economic success often depends on the capacity to create an atmosphere, notably through design. These commercial strategies are increasingly conceived at a global scale. Bar owners try to offer something specific in relation not only to other places in town but worldwide, or, on the contrary, they try to mimic successful places elsewhere. To achieve that goal, the most affluent bar, restaurant or hotel owners hire the services of global designers, such as the British Terence Conran Group or the French Jacques Garcia. Their function may consist either in creating means of social distinction through an original design, or a 'sense of home' through the reproduction of design features used in other cities. They may also combine the two.

The *Coso Café*³⁰ is one of those places in Palermo. It is situated in a square of the historic centre, which until recently was a non-illuminated, nearly abandoned area where drug-dealing was taking place. Created in 2006, the *Coso Café* is part of the gentrification process of the area. The *Coso* is their first business for its three young owners who received financial help in the form of low interest rates from the state organisation for the economic development of Southern Italy: *Sviluppo Italia Spa* (Development Italy). They had been seduced by the design of a restaurant on the same square and asked the same architect and designer to create something that did not yet exist in Palermo. Inspired by bars in London and Barcelona and having in mind temporary bars in Berlin, the designers used rough materials to create a bar with three zones: the bar itself; a corridor-like space with iron tables and benches covered with rubber and bare light bulbs;

and finally a space with wide wooden stairs to sit and drink, as young people often do in front of the many churches in the city (Figure 10.4).

Rough, cheap but sophisticated, the design gives an industrial atmosphere to the bar, which was completely unknown until then in Palermo. According to the architect, a 30-year-old Sicilian living in Barcelona since 2006: 'For a foreign

Figure 10.4
The industrial aesthetics
(top) and the wooden
stairs (below) of the Coso
Cafe. Photographs by
Luciana Campione.



visitor, Palermo is an old place, completely deprived of signs of contemporaneity.' The ambition of the project was therefore to create one of those contemporary signs, avoiding, as the designer insists, any kind of relation to traditional Sicilian forms and in particular the 'sempiternal yellow walls and terracotta floors'. It was conceived via regular video conferences between the designer in Palermo and the architect in Barcelona. It ended up being a quasi copy of a bar in London known by the Barcelona-based architect. Not only is the *Coso Café* an import from abroad, it also contributes to the circulation of new images of the city. It received first prize in a competition for architects residing in Spain: *Valencia crea*, and has since then featured in several international architecture and design journals.

Like the *Foro Italico*, the *Coso Café* is a new artefact that shapes new urban practices. A traditional bar or an *enoteca* (Italian wine bar) in Palermo is a place where customers stand or sit around small wooden tables. The industrial design and the 'stair-room' are therefore puzzling for newcomers: 'The stair has nothing to do here: it's beautiful and they wanted to do something futuristic, but it's not usable', 'There are not enough tables and it's too packed on the stairs' are common comments made by the users. With time, though, going to the *Coso* seems to have become part of a social distinction strategy. When asked about the other places they visit, customers mention a series of similar places also recently created in the centre. The *Coso* has thus quickly become part of a network of places where one should go to be identified as belonging to an emerging cosmopolitan class in the city.

These different places have brought upper-middle-class city users and commercial gentrification to the historic centre following decades of social downgrading.³¹ In one of Europe's world cities, like Paris, Frankfurt or Zurich, such strategies and relations between forms and practices would today be banal and barely visible in the maze of trendy design places. In Palermo it stands out as a striking manifestation of a new urban regime.

Teatro Montevergini: Heritage as Friction

Since the early 1990s, and it is true for both successive political majorities, Palermo's architectural heritage has been considered as its main resource and as an element of attractiveness for foreign visitors. Improving public lighting in the historic centre was Orlando's first tangible intervention. It had a clear symbolic meaning: the message – sent to a population highly qualified in the interpretation of political semiotics! – was threefold, first, it meant 'we are acting under the spotlights after years of darkness and opaque governance', second, 'the historic centre is the new area of urban development' and, third, 'pay attention to the hidden and run-down beauties of the city'. The rehabilitation of monuments and the redesign of public spaces undertaken subsequently had pedagogic value. The reopening of the *Teatro Massimo*, Palermo's most iconic building, and of the *Spasimo* were ways of showing how these resources could be used for a cultural renaissance, while the rehabilitation of Piazza Magione, a parking lot turned into

a green park in the middle of the historic centre, showed how heritage could be used to renew social life after decades of life 'underground'.³² The Orlando government also launched in 1995 a successful initiative aiming at enhancing the young generation's awareness of the value of heritage. It consisted in the symbolic adoption of historic buildings by pupils of secondary school classes, as part of a reclaiming of the city by its residents, under the slogan: '*Palermo è nostra e non di Cosa Nostra*' (Palermo belongs to us and not to Cosa Nostra). Finally, the city council has subsidised the rehabilitation of the historic centre with five successive bids³³ between 1993 and 2006 for a total of 82 million euros.

These different aspects of a well-articulated heritage politics resulted if not in a general appreciation of architectural heritage at least in the growing awareness among the inhabitants of the city of its potential economic value. Since then, residential rehabilitation and gentrification has been constantly increasing. Recent interventions combining reuse, redesign and heritage preservation are part of this process. One of them is the creation in 2005 of the *Teatro Montevergini* in the baroque church of *Santa Maria di Montevergini* and in its adjacent fifteenth-century convent buildings. The church was built in 1687 and contains stuccoes of the Sicilian master Giacomo Serpotta.

The theatre comprises three parts: the workshop, with a bar and rooms for cultural events (exhibitions, lectures), the theatre itself situated within the church, and spaces for artists in residence (apartments, rehearsal rooms) in the former convent. Before the transformation, it was, like so many other religious buildings in the centre of the city, a decaying, abandoned structure which had become a *centro sociale*.³⁴ The *Montevergini* is symbolic of the second phase of a cosmopolitan city-building regime in Palermo. It is owned by the city of Palermo and managed by the association *Palermo Teatro Festival*, which received the direct support of the present mayor, Diego Cammarata.

Culture in the Orlando years was conceived of as high-profile events (with figures such as Bob Wilson, Pina Bausch and Philip Glass). The cultural politics of the Cammarata era is quantitatively less developed and qualitatively less ambitious (or less highbrow, depending on one's views). The *Montevergini* is characteristic of this shift both in terms of content and form. In terms of content, it is part of a series of places created by young cultural entrepreneurs mixing culture with clubbing. In terms of form, it treats both activities equally: whereas, as the architect of the project explains,

the culture places of the 90's made a clear distinction between the commercial part and the one dedicated to artistic events, we decided to refurbish the workshop and the theatre in the same way, with the idea that the functions they support are increasingly enmeshed [...] it was a kind of easy design that the city needed [...] because the true ritual that is consumed here is not the theatre plays but social interaction.

In other words, with this second generation of culture places,³⁵ Palermo has seen the development in the past few years of mixed-use buildings, with fluid transitions between activities akin to those found in most world cities.

The presence and interaction of this tendency in Palermo with its monumental heritage gives it however a quite distinctive local twist. In the *Montevergini*, the architect had to compose with the weight of heritage:

I had to build a place which would be neutral enough, a form that would not be hostile to the surrounding monument, but that would at the same time not distract the spectators from the show. Because there was too much stucco in here, too much Serpotta. I had to illuminate these statues, these *putti*, accept their presence but also manage their entrance on stage.

His solution was to create a 'Chinese box': a self-supporting framework with black curtains, working the opposite way to which they normally work in a theatre: it is open when the spectators come in, to allow the audience to admire the building, and closed when the play begins (Figure 10.5).

In other places, heritage is used differently. The bad shape of many historic buildings is not just a sign of poor governance and abandonment. For many visitors it is part of Palermo's distinctive charm. Compared to the perfectly preserved historic centres of northern Italy, for instance, its decayed, half-destroyed buildings (due to the bombings of World War II, various earthquakes and a long-standing absence of maintenance) have become, at least for some visitors, of added value. For tourists attracted by the poetics of the ruin and a Ruskinian conception of heritage, Palermo is the place to visit. Several young entrepreneurs are very aware of this comparative advantage and have played self-consciously with a confrontation between contemporary design and barely restored heritage.

Finally, this conception of heritage has also become an integral part of users' discourse concerning such places. They tend to value this form of heritage: it is described as 'fascinating', 'beautiful', 'powerful' and, more interestingly, they consider it as typical of the city, as its unmistakable signature: it is 'characteris-

Figure 10.5
The 'Chinese box' (open)
of the theatre in the
former church of Santa
Maria di Montevergini.



tic', 'peculiar', 'specific' to Palermo. As a consequence these new places are characterised as 'unique': 'there are no other places like this elsewhere'. In other words, we have here both an import of design and functional solutions developed elsewhere, and a form of creolisation in which a distinct staging of heritage plays a central role. Heritage is here the friction which counters and locally adapts cultural flows.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have attempted to explain urban change holding together macro-, meso- and micro-scale phenomena: global flows, local governance, built form and spatial practices. I have thus tried to provide a framework for the analysis of the cosmopolitanisation of cities and to use it to elucidate recent changes in the capital of Sicily. I will conclude by briefly discussing this approach and by returning to my initial questions.

Palermo's urban landscape has undeniably become morphologically and aesthetically more diverse in recent years. Foreign influences have also increased in the functioning of urban governance. The City Council now compares Palermo to other European cities, and tries to import so-called 'good practices', whereas it had looked very little for resources and inspiration abroad in the preceding decades. This could be accounted for by invoking globalisation and the oft-rehearsed transition from managerialism to entrepreneurialism (Harvey 1989). In this chapter, I have however qualified this shift as a cosmopolitanisation of the urban landscape and described the constitution of a related city-building regime. What is the added value of this terminology and approach?

The lexicon used in urban studies tends to be borrowed from political science (governance) or economics (entrepreneurialism) as it often focuses on the economic and political dimensions of urban change. Using the terms proposed here embeds these dimensions in processes related to mobility and cultural diversity. Every city of a certain size today is cosmopolitan, at least to a certain extent,³⁶ and certain cities were arguably more so in the past, during the colonial period, for instance. There is therefore nothing revolutionary in the processes described in this chapter, but the approach adopted here displaces our attention to aspects of urban dynamics that are usually considered as peripheral. More generally, focusing on cosmopolitanisation shows that urban change today is related to resources that are geographically widely distributed and to local capacities of adapting and combining them.

More precisely, and in relation to my three introductory questions, I have, first, shown how strong the relation between regime change and openness of the city to translocal influences has been in Palermo. Up until the 1990s, local governance was carefully maintaining a closed political and economic circuit in order to perpetuate mafia rule. Although the years since 2000 have been characterised by a backlash, with the return of a right-wing party in the City Council, a large part of these translocal connections seem to be irreversible. Second,

concerning the vectors of these connections, I have shown the role of a series of human and non-human elements such as tourism, students' mobility, EU subsidies, foreign experts, and architectural and urban types in the recent transformation of the city. Third, and finally, I have pointed to how these vectors intersect with both a (depressed) economic situation and other contextual features, such as the importance of heritage, to produce a new urban landscape. I have also shown that these new elements of built form are used as expressive means and stages for changes in the identity politics of the population.

NOTES

- 1 Many thanks to Michael Guggenheim and Lynda Schneekloth for their helpful comments on the first draft of this chapter.
- 2 I talk about a *city building* regime instead of an *urban* regime to point to specific ~~aspects~~ of local government related to transformations of the urban fabric. I do not mean that this regime is today a universal feature of urban centres, nor that it has no historical precedent, but that it is an important feature of contemporary processes of urban change.
- 3 The research on which this case study is based was funded by a grant from the *Fondazione Banco di Sicilia* and was realised with a group of researchers established in Palermo: *Nuove Energie per il Territorio* (NEXT). See Söderström and NEXT for a complete presentation of the research (Söderström, and NEXT 2009). See also: www.nuovenergie.org/materiali/Cosmopolitan_Palermo.pdf.
- 4 For other discussions of urban governance, see Keil (1998) who combines regime theory, regulation theory and discourse theory and Brenner (2004) who insists on the interplay different scales of governance.
- 5 This ability corresponds to the anthropological definition of cosmopolitanism. For a semantic discussion of the term, see Vertovec and Cohen 2002.
- 6 But see some developments in Harvey 1989: ch. 4) and Castells (1996: ch. 6) in globalisation theory; Dovey (1999: part III) in architecture theory and work on the mobility/moorings dialectic (Urry 2003), and especially on airports (Cresswell 2006: ch. 9), in the field of mobility studies.
- 7 But see also Nasr and Volait 2003.
- 8 It is well known that statistics of flows, especially at the urban scale, are underdeveloped (Taylor 2004). Statistics concerning flows of capital, through figures of Foreign Direct Investments, for instance, are poor at his scale and it is still difficult to produce reliable measures concerning information and especially knowledge flows. As a consequence, this case study uses a series of indicators concerning demographic and economic change.
- 9 Between 1951 and 1961 the population increased by 20 per cent to 600,000 inhabitants.
- 10 Ciancimino was arrested in 1984 and convicted in 1992 for his activities as a member of the mafia. Lima was shot the same year. It is largely considered that he was closely related to the mafia but there is no legal judgment confirming that he was a 'man of honour'.

- 11 From 120,000 to 30,000.
- 12 The same is true about shops: it is estimated that approximately 90 per cent of them are today racketeered by the mafia for an annual income of some one billion euros per year.
- 13 The Italian state sent 7,000 soldiers to Sicily in order to secure the island and let the regional police chase the murderers.
- 14 For example, the city successfully managed to obtain money from the EU urban programme between 1994 and 1999.
- 15 The number of tourist arrivals in the Province of Palermo increased by 35 per cent between 1996 and 2000.
- 16 For an account of cultural politics in Palermo in the 1990s by the person in charge, see Giambone 2006. Concerning the cultural turn in urban policy in general, see Cochrane 2007: ch. 7.
- 17 For an analysis of Orlando's eventual failure to change local politics in Palermo, see Azzolina 2009.
- 18 'Recent policies of the City Council administration have been oriented in the very opposite direction, being extremely supportive of private investors and neglecting social and housing public policies' (Lo Piccolo and Leone 2008).
- 19 These elements are based on the analysis of 20 'artifact-biographies', elaborated through 20 in-depth interviews with architects or owners as well as 88 shorter ones with users of these places. Systematic photographic coverage was also realised.
- 20 Discussions with planners in Palermo have confirmed these categories as being the most important.
- 21 This comes out of a focus group with a series of foreigners established in Palermo in recent years. Its decayed heritage and the peculiar charm of its urban chaos were mentioned as factors of attractiveness.
- 22 The number of tourists arriving in the Province of Palermo increased by 40 per cent between 1996 and 2000, while the number of passengers arriving at the airport of Palermo increased by 87 per cent between 1997 and 2006.
- 23 Erasmus and Leonardo are the programmes of the European Union aiming at increasing the international mobility of university students and those following a vocational training within Europe.
- 24 Between 1997 and 2007 3,000 students from Palermo went abroad for one year or six months.
- 25 This is one of several examples in recent years of funding from the state for international events channelled by the city council for urban developments, in a situation of scarce local financial resources.
- 26 Interview in 'La storia siamo noi', documentary by RAI television in 2007.
- 27 These sculptures, made in ceramics by local craftsmen, are a global feature of the park.
- 28 They have become the two largest immigrant communities in the city during the past decade.
- 29 Oslo, Helsinki, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Rotterdam, Rosario (Argentina), Valparaiso (Chile), Rio de Janeiro, San Francisco, Cape Town, Incheon (Korea), Yokohama, Sydney, Genoa and Venice. A special space was dedicated to the city-ports of Spain.

- 30 Coso is one way of saying 'thing' and is a kind of joke: when you don't remember the name of a place you say 'andiamo li, al coso' (let's go to that place there, whatever its name is).
- 31 On the notion and processes of commercial gentrification, see Van Criekingen and Fleury 2006.
- 32 When describing urban life under the mafia regime, different interviewees used the expression: 'it was like living underground', and explained how the Orlando years meant coming out to the daylight and up to the surface again.
- 33 Four were launched by the Orlando government, one by the new mayor. The first bids were only for landlords in order to keep the mafia out. The fifth was also open to building firms.
- 34 The *centri sociali* (social centres) in Italy are (generally) squatting buildings transformed by left-wing activists in cultural centres and/or places accommodating or supplying services to poor migrant communities, homeless or unemployed people of the neighbourhood.
- 35 *Expa* and *Palab* are two other such places created in the same years in Palermo.
- 36 Even cities in the lowest levels of the hierarchy of the world-city network show today an important degree of connectivity (Taylor 2004: 76–79).

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