

# Community Development as a Way-Out from Crisis. Guidelines from New York City's Experience\*

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, Milano is a complex and fragmented reality, which in the last fifteen years has shown a great dynamism in private initiative, made of great urban transformation projects which, however, do not seem to be included within a clear and shared policy-vision capable of providing a pathway and a public reference framework to the urban development process<sup>1</sup>. Many of these projects, indeed, can be the example of a season of interventions upon the city promoted and lead by private operators, where real estate companies gave more importance to the financial performance of the assets rather than to the building phase of the development<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the conditions for the implementation of projects have been most of the times dictated by developers and constructors, which left to the community and to the public sector only residual interventions<sup>3</sup>. Because of this it seems that the new under-construction parts of the city will be exclusively reserved to wealthy elites rather than to the whole urban community. Beside these projects, however, there is the growing need to refurbish many blighted neighborhoods of

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<sup>1</sup> S. Balducci, *Quale rinascimento per Milano?*, in *Milano Incompiuta. Interpretazioni Urbanistiche del Mutamento*, M. Bolocan Goldstein e B. Bonfantini (edited by), Milano, Franco Angeli- DiAP, 2007, pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> L. Gaeta, *Urbanistica contrattuale. Prassi e legittimità nelle scelte di piano*, in *Milano Incompiuta. Interpretazioni Urbanistiche del Mutamento*, M. Bolocan Goldstein e B. Bonfantini (edited by), Milano, Franco Angeli- DiAP, 2007, pp. 113-128.

<sup>3</sup> P.C. Palermo, *I Limiti del Possibile*, Roma, Donzelli, 2009.

the urban peripheries, where no private investor is concerned to intervene. And so here begun a season of area-based initiative aimed at the start-up of sustainable-development projects for social housing neighborhoods, financed with either European, national and/or regional funding. Nevertheless these programs were able to refurbish only a limited number of public social-housing blocks, while a great part of deprived but private-owned neighborhoods are left behind. Hence, it seems that the most recent trajectories of urban planning in Milano are polarized between highly speculative real estate developments in abandoned or former industrial areas, and public interventions for the refurbishment of social housing neighborhoods, whereas a large majority of problematic areas is excluded by any kind of development or regeneration process and thus is going through a phase of high uncertainty with no clear future perspectives.

Once these neighborhoods- typically located in the first outskirts of urban agglomerates, characterized by a low-moderate income people with high rate of both elderly and immigrants, with a commercial fabric mainly made of small stores and family-owned businesses and a housing heritage extremely fragmented among individual home-owners- are left behind by urban policies, they have to cope with two possible- and opposite- future scenarios, each of them highly undesirable.

On the one hand, a progressive decline of building conditions combined with a growing rate of (often stigmatized) immigrant people and a widespread perception of insecurity may not only lower the neighborhood's attractiveness but also induce the ones who can afford it to relocate elsewhere, therefore producing relegation territories where only who has no other choice lives, thus opening to a de-gentrification scenario. On the other hand, whether low income people, mainly due to foreclosure or to unaffordable raise of rents, are forced to move out from the neighborhood, or whether real estate operators would take advantage of a growing rent gap<sup>4</sup> to develop new high-income/luxury projects in substitution of the existing middle-low income housing, a gentrification process may begin.

The research is aimed at identifying possible tools capable at the same time to trigger development processes within these areas and to hold to Susan Fainstein's Just City principles: *equity* in terms of redistribution of resources and accessibility to places and services, *democracy* to enhance popular participation, and *diversity* to be valorized in order to guarantee more tolerance<sup>5</sup>. More specifically two will be the key challenges of this work. First pinpointing a strategy to enable local communities to directly promote low-income housing and economic growth within their neighborhood. Second trying to set up tools aimed, on the one hand, at guarantying that

<sup>4</sup> N. Smith, *Toward a Theory of Gentrification A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People*, in «Journal of the American Planning Association», 45/4 (1979), pp. 538-48.

<sup>5</sup> S. Fainstein, *The Just City*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2010.

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communities can gain the most of benefits from a local development process, and, on the other, both at preserving long-term affordability of the housing stock and protecting historical low-income residents from eventual gentrification processes.

The answers to these questions will be mainly sought through the analysis of two community development experiences in New York City on the grounds that, in the last fifty years, through the direct involvement of local communities the Big Apple has been able to bounce back from the same issues and problems that many Italian neighborhoods are actually experiencing. NYC's legacy hence can suggest policy models and strategies that might be insightful for the current debate around an Italian Urban Agenda.

To the purpose, the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 will argue why New York City's history and experience can be comparable to and are of interest for the case of Italian metropolitan areas; Section 3 and 4 will present the two case studies of the Fifth Avenue Committee in Brooklyn and the Cooper Square Committee in the Lower East Side; while in Section 5 I will try to suggest some guidelines to enhance community development in Italy.

## 2. Why to Look at New York City

The dominant image of New York coming out of the 1960s was that of an “asphalt jungle” and the “ungovernable city”, a crime-ridden city with a bloated and corrupt public sector, dangerously militant unions and social movements, and an unruly black, Latino, and white ethnic population<sup>6</sup>. Even if these were at most stereotypes, full of racial and class prejudices coming from a spreading rightwing and anti-urban culture, New York's negative image fed a deep crisis phase made evident by the exodus of corporations from Manhattan, the flight of middle-class residents, a rapid drop-off in tourism, and a tumbling municipal bonding rate<sup>7</sup>. Then, as a consequence, the image crisis was also exacerbating the city's economic decline, and it was particularly an issue for place-based, image-sensitive industries like real estate, tourism, and financial services. So elites in the affected industries began to coordinate their efforts and place increasing pressure on government in order to elaborate a redevelopment strategy able to reinstate the city's attractiveness through a *urban branding* approach. This approach allowed to implement a dual strategy, both visual and material, combining a strong territorial marketing campaign with neoliberal policies and economic restructuring actions: on

<sup>6</sup> M. Greenberg, *Branding New York. How a City in Crisis was Sold to the World*, New York, Routledge, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the marketing side a “cleaned up” and charming image of the city was built; while, on the restructuring side, City and State officials undertook far-reaching, pro-business economic reforms that privileged certain social classes, economic sectors, and geographic regions over others<sup>8</sup>. Such modifications included tax cuts for corporations to build new office towers in Manhattan alongside harsh austerity measures and mass lay-offs of municipal workers. They entailed the enhancing of services and security in central financial districts alongside the elimination of services in poorer, “blighted areas” of the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn<sup>9</sup>. Although contributed to the global revamp of New York, the consequence of these measures was a strong and growing polarization between wealthy and constantly developing areas on the one side, and increasingly marginal and blighted peripheral areas on the other. In the lack of a unique masterplan—that the city never wished to adopt—the promotion of urban development projects was, like in the Milanese case, mainly related to the interests of private-sector operators and concentrated only in the areas with the higher profit potential. By the local communities point of view, however, on the one hand low-income neighborhoods located in strategic urban areas, becoming the first target for real estate investors, had to cope with eventual gentrification issues, while on the other hand the areas where public services and social spending were reduced, suffered a fast abandonment by wealthier residents with a consequent socio-economic decline that brought to de-gentrification processes.

As the two experiences that will be further analyzed can demonstrate, in many cases these issues have been solved through the direct involvement of the grassroots which implemented tools and strategies to enable successful community development processes. Hence, given that issues of polarization between rich and blighted areas, as well as gentrification and de-gentrification processes are nowadays challenging several Italian metropolitan areas, New York City seems to be the appropriate “laboratory” where to identify possible models to trigger *just*<sup>10</sup> regeneration and development processes in left-behind neighborhoods.

### **3. Starting Over from Abandonment: the Fifth Avenue Committee Experience**

As a consequence of the aforementioned fiscal crisis, and along with the retrenchment of public spending and services in the area, also all real estate and development projects in South Brooklyn were suspended. This opened to a progressive

<sup>8</sup> M. Greenberg, *Branding New York*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> S. Fainstein, *The Just City*, cit., p. 3.

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physical decay and middle-class exodus phase that in 1977 had left more than 200 empty buildings and 159 abandoned lots. Hence a group of local residents and businessmen joined together in order to invert this process and to foster the re-development of these relinquished areas, and funded the Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC). So, after the first conversions of abandoned lots in community gardens, the FAC begun to grow during the years until it became one of the most dynamic community development corporations of the city, whose activities include a heterogeneous mix of services, housing and local business development, and capacity building, alongside with a great emphasis on community organizing and socio-economic justice principles<sup>11</sup>. Nowadays, indeed, FAC's activity is organized in four different programs (Organizing & Advocacy, Adult Education, Workforce Development, and Affordable Housing) which are led by a 15-members board, made by local residents with different professional backgrounds but a common history of social commitment, together with a 50-experts executive staff each of them in charge to manage specific tasks. This allows the committee both a wide range of different expertise and a widespread network along the city, which – according to Gitter and Wilder<sup>12</sup> – is a key factor for the success of a community development organization. Furthermore, people's participation is enhanced by the institution of the FAC Activists, who contribute to the organization of the activities and, above all, to strengthen the ties between the Committee and the community.

Although since the 1990s Brooklyn begun attracting young middle-class newyorkers, according to NYC census data, South Brooklyn is still an ethnically and socially diverse community, with high unemployment and poverty rates (more than 22% lives under poverty threshold, with a peak of 30% in the most disadvantaged areas), and low levels of instruction. Hence FAC capacity building and affordable housing programs are a fundamental welfare device for the whole South Brooklyn community, and affordable housing management and development activities are especially relevant. The FAC manages more than 600 residential units and in the last six years has promoted the development of two brand new housing projects. The first, Red Hook Homes is a \$17 million worth, 60-units home-ownership affordable housing project divided in two separated buildings within Red Hook neighborhood: a formerly port-dependending community that is now experiencing a deep transformation phase which, beside one of the biggest social housing developments of New York City, sees the settlement of new immigrant people, small local craft businesses, and young middle class individuals.

<sup>11</sup> J. De Filippis, R. Fisher and E. Shragge, *Contesting Communities: The Limits and Potential of Local Organizing*, Piscataway, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> R. Gitter and M. Wilder, *Community Development Corporations (CDCs): Critical Factors That Influence Success* in «Journal of Urban Affairs», 21/3 (1999), pp. 341-62.

The project was made possible through a partnership built within an eleven-different-actors *trading zone*<sup>13</sup>, among which the City of New York and above all Citibank Group (which funded \$10 millions) had a major role. This development indeed has been able to match local low-middle income housing demand with the favor of public institutions as well as with the interests of private investors in whose opinion, as stated by Marc Jahr<sup>14</sup>, participating in the development of more sustainable and more livable communities allows to manage business within a better environment with a direct benefit for the company itself.

The second, Atlantic Terrace, is a mixed use building developed on a lot that has been abandoned for more than 40 years in Fort Green, and is included within the broader Atlantic Terminal Urban Renewal Area (ATURA) which in the 2000s has been affected by one of the most important and ambitious development plans in Brooklyn: the redevelopment of the subway and railway Atlantic Terminal on the one hand and Atlantic Yards project on the other. When it was presented in 2003, Atlantic Yards project would have included a new recreational venue (Barclays Arena) and 16 luxury towers with commercial spaces at ground-floor, however, due the fiscal crisis of 2008 the residential portion of the project was blocked-although thousands of low-income residents and local businesses were already forced out- and eventually only the Arena was inaugurated in late 2012.

Atlantic Terrace is constituted by 1,100 square meters of commercial spaces and 80 residential units, 20 sold at market rate, while 60 are home-ownership affordable housing units. Within an area strongly affected by a gentrification process, Atlantic Terrace seems to be able to allow at least a part of long term low-income residents to continue living in their neighborhood, and because of this it could benefit of significative public subsidies. Indeed, the project, worth \$38 million, was built on a public lot made over by the City and was funded as follows: 45% from the sale of market rate units; 25% from the sale of affordable housing units; 30% from different public funding sources. Moreover first homebuyers of affordable housing units have been facilitated in their purchase by low-cost fix-rate mortgages issued by the State of New York Mortgage Agency (SONYMA).

Except for housing development projects that have autonomous budgets, fundraising activities are crucial for the life of FAC's programs, indeed only 39% of the Committee's revenues (a total of \$8,6 million in 2010) come from their activity, while the remaining 61% is provided by external funding and subsidies both from public institution and private foundations and contributors. Moreover, concern-

<sup>13</sup> R. Mantysalo, A. Balducci and J. Kangasoja, *Planning as Agonistic Negotiation in a Trading Zone, Re-examining Lindblom's Partisan Mutual Adjustment*, in «Planning Theory», 10/3 (2011), pp. 257-72.

<sup>14</sup> Market Director of Citibank Community Development in the New York Metropolitan Area.

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ing private contributions, a primary role is also played by LISC which, though its nationwide network, is able to catalyze and distribute funding among its partner CDCs for the implementation of their projects.

FAC is then an extremely dynamic organization that, acting on diverse fields, obtaining substantial funding and building strategic partnerships, is capable of providing concrete benefits and fundamental welfare devices to its local community, and because of this it might be considered a successful model for the creation of community development organizations also in Italy.

### **4. Protecting Local Community: the Cooper Square Committee Experience**

As in 1941 Robert Moses proposed to demolish a consistent part of Manhattan Lower East Side in order to give room to the development of 2,900 middle-class residential units alongside with the realization of the Lower Manhattan Expressway, a group of local low-income long term residents and businessmen, concerned to be displaced, raised up in opposition to this project and funded the Cooper Square Community Development and Businessmen Association (CSC). In addition to the organization of rallies and demonstrations, the CSC decided to contrast the project through a strategy that was never experimented before: the development of an Alternate Plan, directly designed by community members with the collaboration of urban planner Walter Thabit. The founding philosophy of the Alternate Plan was that local residents should have been beneficiaries rather than victims of the regeneration process<sup>15</sup>, therefore the main goals of the plan were the refurbishment of existing affordable housing units and the development of new ones on the many abandoned lots, and the improvement of local businesses and cultural activities. With a massive support from the grassroots the Alternate Plan was then submitted to the institutions and public authorities and, after more than a decade of negotiations, it was approved in 1971. A lack of funding however enabled the implementation of only two housing projects so that a Revised Plan was consequently issued by the CSC and after other years of negotiation, especially with the Department for Housing Preservation and Development, an agreement was finally signed in the early 1990s. Thus, thanks to a \$20 million funding from Section-8 federal program, all the 21 city-owned unused residential buildings of the area were refurbished and assigned to the new CSC's affiliate-but-autonomous Mutual Housing Association (MHA) through the development of a long-term property constrain

<sup>15</sup> T. Angotti, *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate*, Boston, MIT Press, 2008.

capable of permanently guarantying the affordability of the housing stock to actual and future low-income residents. Hence, from this point CSC and MHA would start operating independently, each with their specific governance framework and tasks.

On the one hand, the CSC – an open-membership no-profit corporation managed by a 5 experts executive staff, and funded through a combination of subsidies and activity revenues (a yearly budget of \$300.000/\$360.000 funded as follows: 48% public subsidies; 18% contributions from foundations; 34% activity revenues) – provides community organizing and tenant's advocacy services, plays a crucial role in local decision-making processes, and is active in identifying and building partnerships to trigger new affordable-housing development projects. Political capital and networking capabilities are the main resources of CSC, indeed thanks to its relevance in local decision making processes, in 2012 it has been able to play a major role in determining that 50% of new dwellings of the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area would permanently be designated to affordable housing. Furthermore, concerning its networking and partnership-building capabilities the CSC was able to negotiate with the HPD and the City Council in order to achieve property rights and additional funding for the development of the Bea Arthur Residence, an housing project for homeless LGBT promoted by Ali Forney Center and CSC in the Lower East Side.

On the other hand, the MHA gathers all the 21 refurbished buildings within a unique self-managed cooperative, where residents instead of owning the apartments they live in, are shareholders of the cooperative itself, and pool management services and all buildings-related incomes and expenses. Hence, this mechanism at the same time allows extremely low and under-market rents for residents (paid in form of monthly membership fees between \$345 for a studio and \$660 for a 2-bedroom apartment) and is capable of generating a scale-economy through which keeping at the minimum both management and maintenance expenses. Therefore, despite the low to very-low average income of tenants, the mutual housing model constantly guarantees efficiency and quality of buildings and housing units, avoiding that crucial maintenance interventions might be neglected due a lack of economic means of individuals. Furthermore, and especially in a phase when the most of public-subsidy programs are not able to prevent an eventual re-sale of the apartments at market rate<sup>16</sup>, the lots where MHA buildings are built are owned by a Community Land Trust (CLT) which has the power to revoke the MHA board<sup>17</sup> and gain the property of buildings whether an illegal or against the association's bylaws act is committed, so that long-term affordability

<sup>16</sup> T. Angotti, *Community land trusts and low-income multifamily rental housing: The case of Cooper Square, New York City*, Working Paper WPO7TA1, Cambridge (USA), Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> MHA's board members are for 2/3 shareholders and for 1/3 appointed by the CLT.

of housing is permanently guaranteed. Thanks to their open and collective governance framework, and to a high capability to gain public funding both CSC and MHA are a fundamental service provider for the Lower East Side community. Furthermore, through its history and a tight binding with the grassroots, during the years the CSC developed a strong political capital, that allows the Committee to act as a community institution, building strategic partnerships, powerfully negotiating with authorities and stakeholders, and influencing local decision-making processes. Then, adopting the same strategies for community involvement in local decision making processes, as well as the same bottom-up approach to the design and implementation of projects, might lead to successful results also in Italian low income and left-behind neighborhoods. This is especially relevant to the purpose of rising local issues to the attention of public institutions, and triggering debates among public and private actors on potential regeneration processes.

## 5. Conclusions

The two case-studies just analyzed are rich of prompts that might provide insightful hints for the development of strategies, policies, and devices at local, regional or national level also in Italy. Specifically, I recognized some crucial issues around which further research might be of interest to enhance Italian community development processes, also in light of the ongoing debate for an Italian Urban Agenda.

First, especially in a phase of financial crisis and lack of credit availability from banks, public aids played a major role in the success community projects, particularly concerning affordable housing development. To this end, project-based or goal-based contributions like Section-8 federal vouchers program<sup>18</sup> or the bond-financed low-cost mortgages by SONYMA<sup>19</sup>, might be of inspiration. They indeed allow individuals and communities a protected access to either start-up resources or credit avoiding the risk of repossession from banks. An Italian Urban Agenda, therefore, could draw upon these models to frame a new policy of aids to localities.

Second, as the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association is the demonstration, gathering together unused public buildings, and managing them through mutualistic models allows, at the same time, to avoid leaving public built heritage abandoned, as well as to make available cheap, efficient, and quality housing for low-income people. Thus, given the high number of unused public properties in

<sup>18</sup> A Federal Program that allows free grants for the development or refurbishment of affordable housing units, as long as they are not put on the free housing market.

<sup>19</sup> Through which is possible to facilitate the access to home-ownership for middle-low income people unable to take out a mortgage from a private bank.

Italy<sup>20</sup>, and the high demand for affordable housing units in the city, the implementation of a policy in this sense may be an effective solution for both problems. Moreover, a mutual housing model might also be introduced for the facility-management of low-income private housing: under the same principle of leveling to the minimum individual expenses by sharing costs and revenues of multiple buildings, this might allow to avoid unaffordable financial exposition of individuals towards utility providers as i.e. what happened in Via Padova, Milano<sup>21</sup>.

Third, resource-searching and grant-writing are challenging processes for local communities. Funding sources are extremely fragmented and span from public institutions at different levels (i.e. municipal, regional, national, and European programs) to private bodies and organizations (i.e. charities and bank foundations); programs have often very sharp requirements; and applying to them requires specific skills that communities do not always hold. Hence, an institution outlined on the model of LISC may have the capacity to develop a comprehensive database of sources, as well as to help communities in finding the appropriate program, and drafting projects capable of winning competitive bids.

Fourth, despite the substantial unlikelihood that local committees may trigger and successfully implement development processes by themselves, their wish for the recovery of their blighted neighborhoods might be capitalized through the involvement of expert practitioners or specialized organizations. These could be either private professionals or dedicated offices within cities' administrations aimed at empowering and actively engaging residents, to promote development processes and guide the design process, to build strategic partnerships, fundraise, and manage all those activities necessary for the implementation of community plans and projects.

Moreover, as stated by Gitter and Wilder<sup>22</sup>, political capital is a key element in successfully influence decision-making processes in benefit of a local community, hence it is crucial to strengthen this capital through the direct involvement of the grassroots. On the one hand funneling communities' claims towards a more project-oriented approach would enable them to advocate for concrete proposals instead of general advocacies or complaints; on the other enhancing community empowerment activities might be a way of raising political capital, that is communities' strength during negotiation processes.

Finally- as we have seen so far- it is often the case that despite its willingness a local committee on the one hand do not hold the whole bundle of necessary

<sup>20</sup> A. Lanzani, C. Merlini, and F. Zanfi, *Quando un nuovo ciclo di vita non si dà. Fenomenologia dello spazio abbandonato e prospettive per il progetto urbanistico oltre i paradigma del riuso*, in «Archivio di Studi Urbani e Regionali», 109 (2014).

<sup>21</sup> P.L. Verga, *Rigenerare via Padova. Da un vuoto di politiche alla proposta di una politica collaborativa*, MS Thesis in Urban Planning and Policy Design, Milano, Politecnico di Milano, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> R. Gitter and M. Wilder, *Community Development Corporations*, cit., p. 6.

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resources (i.e. political, economic, of knowledge, etc.) to implement a project; and on the other it may have to cope with other actors with their own interests for the same area. The challenge therefore is how to foster an incremental process that might be satisfactory for all (or the most part of) the stakeholders involved. Assuming that a situation of conflict would be damaging for all the stakeholders and limit their ability to act, the concept of trading zones recently introduced to planning theory might be of interest. According to the theory, a multiplicity of stakeholders carrying different interests and values can «generate conditions for coordinated mutual interaction despite the limited ability of each group»<sup>23</sup>. In fact, «[withi]n the trading zone [...] there are knots, local and dense sets of connections that can be identified with partially autonomous clusters of actions and beliefs»<sup>24</sup>. Therefore combining a number of actors with different goals and values within a trading zone may enable to reach a shared development vision, to gather up resources, and eventually to implement a project in a positive-sum game.

«Agonistic planning and the generation of a local trading zone of planning both require long- standing cooperation between different groups and stakeholders, in the effort to establish both the conditions of political tolerance, mutual trust and respect between the adversaries, and the practical- conceptual tools for their mutual “out-talk” on planning issues»<sup>25</sup>. Consequently, whether an Italian Urban Agenda would work towards the development of a formalized strategy to favor the creation of trading zones for the regeneration of left-behind neighborhoods, this might ultimately set the conditions to help localities bouncing back from the crisis they are actually experiencing.

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<sup>23</sup> R. Mantysalo, A. Balducci, and J.K. Kangasoja, *Planning as Agonistic Negotiation in a Trading Zone*, cit., p. 7; R. Mantysalo and A. Balducci, *Urban Planning As a Trading Zone*, London, Springer Ltd, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> P. Galison, *Trading zone: Coordinating action and belief*, in *The Science Studies Reader*, edited by M. Biagioli, New York and London, Routledge, 1999, p. 146.

<sup>25</sup> R. Mantysalo, A. Balducci, and J.K. Kangasoja, *Planning as Agonistic Negotiation in a Trading Zone*, p. 16, cit., p. 7.

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