Sicily, a journey between the ruins

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Abstract

We figure out the territory as a palimpsest in which it is possible to discover signs of its history. In this walk between the ruins, we ask to ourself a question: what happens to a region where a tragic event of considerable magnitude becomes the main attraction of the place?

We will try to understand the processes and dynamics that were generated in this territory, how they were caused or catalyzed by the events of the past, and why they became the historical memory of the place. Memory as a new cultural and tourist resource

Keywords: identity, landscape, memory, monument, past.

Introduction

"The interest and the aesthetic pleasure of disasters assumes great importance for the ability to destroy, by the power that triggers in the transformation of a territory, for the disorder that occurs at a psychological leve.". Milani, R, The Art of Landscape.

There are such intense places that, when facing with them, nobody can be indifferent by the wealth and variety that they represent. All we can do is to slow down our trip and stop to take a new rhythm and begin to travel by discovering.

Sicily has been historically a crossing site and a conquerors’ land because of its geographic context in the Mediterranean region. A land which is simultaneously isolated and a union bond. That duality has coferred to Sicily its own time. Sicily has always been within the international touristic circuits because of its cultural, historical and naturalistic heritage, even if that has not ever generated an important economic development.
In Sicily, because of the geodynamics of the territory, volcanism and earthquakes are part of the identity of the island which is one of the richest areas in environmental and archaeological heritage of Europe.

The inland valleys, out of the usual tourist circuit, are known for their traditional agricultural landscape. The productive landscapes of Sicily are related to small settlements located between rolling hills, mostly of feudal origin, and some of Arab or Greco-Roman origin, whose legacy can still be read in its tortuous streets, location of settlements and geographic relationships between them and the territory.

Among them, an isolated valley from the 80's became part of the main destinations of the island due to the interventions carried out after the environmental catastrophe; the valley of Belice is named after the river that runs north to south in the western part of the island, dividing the valley into two units, Right Belice and Left Belice, and watering their lands culture. In that secluded place, the indivisibility of the relationship between city and agriculture has been an historical reality, a depository of the economic driving force of the enclave. In the 60's it was characterized by the presence of large estate of wheat and pastures, but lacking of proposals for activation and enhancement of its resources. Therefore, within the context of the global economy of the Mediterranean, a rural exodus towards a promised modernity gradually took place, encouraging the abandonment of the countryside in an area, Sicily, lacking any type of infrastructure.

On january 14, 1968, an earthquake forever changed the dynamics of the Belice Valley, of its inhabitants and landscape, marking the beginning of a new historical memory. It was a sudden, dramatic an traumatic event and we can still recognize its features of stregth and action in the territory of the western Sicily.

Earthquakes, as tectonic movements, are able to leave an impact on the territory within a very few seconds, making it a "tabula rasa". Their effects are directly related to the population but their actions, compared to other environmental disasters, are not important when population is absent. Thus, consequences are not only proportional to the magnitude, but also to the economic development of the area in which an earthquake happens and therefore, to the capability to respond to the trauma.

Even if the reconstruction is the main target at the beginning, it is not possible to give a prompt response to the problem, so, after the disaster, tempo of interventions' planning, according to all their aspects, is considered of primary importance.

Since that instant (time zero), it is possible to identify new spatial and territorial boundaries beyond geographical configurations. The limit of the damaged areas and their different destruction grades establish new relationships to define a new territorial unit.

The earthquake has bound cities tightly: despite of different backgrounds, those villages will be identified as the cities of the Belice earthquake. It wrote the first episode of a common story (or history) and it probably hastened the territorial decay process. The reconstruction of this valley and its collective memory is still in process. 43 years later, this area, its high environmental value and heritage, are a laboratory of artistic and urban experimentation in wich we can figure out social and political processes, dynamics, landscape and environmental consequences of that so big disaster. And, of course, the attraction that it still generates.
Policies of memory

The earthquake caused 351 dead people, 582 wounded people and about 100,000 persons lost their habitation. A bigger and uncertain number of houses were strongly damaged and during the days after the earthquake were demolished due to the important and less important damages. The Italy of the post-world war period was unprepared to face such a tectonic trauma.

The influence of the political activity in relation to the reconstruction of the territory affected by the tragedy is nowadays a tangible and provable fact. It is indeed the result of the tensions of powers among the involved subjects: central government, local administrations and social organised associations.

Supporting a fast and political powerful answer to the traumatic event represented the main strategy of the intervention instead of the development of a judicial trial. A fast answer which developed in the time.

The purposes of the reconstruction of Belice are mainly based on the local policies of the ‘Mezzogiorno’ drafted from the Italian State in the 50’s. They were development policies directed to the less industrialised areas of the county: South of Italy and islands. The proposals started from hypothesis a national level (grounded on a model of North of Italy) with the premises of developing the road-infrastructures and other public structures intended as stimulus for progress and tourist development. Despite all this, just a part of the entire project which has been very ambitious, even if quite far from the territory and from the agricultural and social reality of the rural districts of Sicily, has been realised in relation to the road-infrastructures and the replacement of the new areas.

The sociologists Danilo Dolci and Lorenzo Barbera directed from the 60’s social activities which postulated the territorial sovereignty of Belice in contrast with those central issues which shaped the development of territorial planning grounded on a deep knowledge of the physical and social background. The aim of such activities was to promote and stimulate the development of rural communities and agricultural transformation.

In such a context happened the earthquake which stimulated the acceleration of those global processes of development started in the territory.

The earthquake represented an opportunity for the development of the medium municipalities to the detriment of the smaller ones and the introduction of new replacements as medium urbanizations where new proposals of development have been contemplated with the intention of rationalising the number of infrastructures and services. At the same time has been developed an important tourist and industrial planning with no link with the tradition, culture and local lifestyle of Sicily. A model of urbanization of the territory without limits.

This model could hardly meet the municipal expectations of a more local point of views which had to accept the planning of the rebuilding based on general guidelines.
The interventions of the memory

Even if every village developed its own dynamics, the work focuses on the territory of the municipality of Gibellina. Its reconstruction represents nowadays the emblem of the recent history of Belice and the main tourist attraction of the Belice valley.

When before the earthquake the indivisibility of the country-city relationship constituted the timeless structure of the place, after the event there were significant changes in spatial relations in the valley, and a series of tensions emerged and changed the previous balances reshaping a new urban effective dimension.

Although it is most evident in the case of Gibellina, it is quite easy to interpretate the other municipalities in the same way, whose dilated reconstruction processes in time are still visible today as new ruins in the landscape.

This old city of Arab origin and located on a hill, 378 meters above sea level, was the town that most suffered during the catastrophe of 1968 quake, being totally devastated as located close to the epicenter.

The choice of the new location reflects the personal interests of few people; facing with several alternatives of reconstruction, it was decided to build a new city in a plain, 18 km away from the devastated city. The past city and the future city were so distant, not only because of their territorial location. In fact the lack of connections and continuity to the city history brought to a full eradication of its past.

The new Gibellina was designed in order to achieve the aim of providing a new identity to the inhabitants (in order to erase the wounds of the earthquake), basing on the art and architecture as identity signs. The urban program was founded on relevant architectures designed by several important firms, counting on obtaining notoriety by taking advantage from the disaster.

The natural disaster and the territory laid down on a secondary level while auto-referred individuality was preferred, in which architecture and facilities build the space of the new nerve centre of the whole valley. Art and aesthetic, as the leit motiv of the new town, developed a different approach; an hermetic dialog based on a mutual distrust between architecture and town, repeating the distrust between city and territory. Alberto Burri must have felt all the energy of the earthquake and the tension, when he visited for the first time in 1981 the new Gibellina which was relocated at a distance of 18 km from the original town where the mayor of the town Ludovico Corrao (1927-2011) wanted to pose a commemorative monument in memory of the damaged citizens of the Gibellina. On this idea Alberto Burri decided to revise this proposal focusing his attention on the small mountain, (gebel: mountain, height; zghir: small) and searching among the ruins of the old town a suitable space for his particular tribute. Memory would be the formal and ideological basis for his Grande Cretto.

The Grande Cretto, a memorial that through the experience of the absence, allows the people of Gibellina to walk through its streets until eternity. The memorial consists of 101 white concrete blocks approximately of 1.60 m in height that form an irregular rectangle of 280m x 310m on the south-southeast slope of the mountain which represents the location of the ancient city of Gibellina. The monument occupies about 80 percent of the surface of the ancient settlement. The initial proposal by the artist Alberto Burri, which was not built entirely (122 blocks), provided at the beginning a dimension of approximately 300 m x 400 m which covers a surface of 12 ha. The sculptural memory which was used to
create this particular monument consists not only of the ruins, represented within the white concrete blocks, but also of the relationship of people with their landscape. The material is the memory, as well as the work that has been produced.

Through his large-scale project, he does not merely want to show us a work in the open air, but a work that has been made with the earth (earth art). His Grande Cretto reveals the place to us without interfering with its morphology, and making it clear that the way to work with landscape is also to work with processes.

We are, then, looking at the first stone of a new Gibellina, a “città nuova in forma di catastrophes”, as Giuliano Serafini described it, whose creative power has served as a catalyst for new projects in the towns and villages of the Belice valley. Through Burri’s intervention, the world can once again see the old Gibellina, tourist emblem of this forgotten area of Sicily.

Despite all attempts, tourism for the masses didn’t reach the new planned sites of the memory. Only the intervention of Burri managed to capture the attention of tourism, which included it in the traditional tourist routes of the ancient historic ruins.

In-between the ruins / Inside the ruins

"specchiati in quei cristalli e nell'istessa magnificenza sincolar, contempla di fralezza mortal l'imago espressa"

In other words, "look in the mirror and see your weakness in the magnificence of the palace".

These words appear in a fresco in the main hall of Villa Palagonia, located in Bagheria (Palermo), where the magnificence and ostentation express the value of the ephemeral. These words invite us back upon
ourselves to reflect on our present as it was our future, because we also are victims of the time which will waste the buildings we now inhabit.

In the 18th century, ruins interested and starred any kind of works and paintings. The pleasure of contemplation dictated by the beauty of the ruins date back to the Renaissance where the ruin is purely aesthetic reference, while ethics, of a wonderful past.

This is the aesthetic of the ruin: the past comes back to the future and transform an image in a show in which we can imagine and preview our current place in a realm of solitude and silence.

By this point of view the ruins of "Magna Grecia" take such importance ever since. Witness of the history, as well as research tools, express the value of the fragility and allow us to reflect on the ephemeral, on the transience of human life.

The time acts as the prime mover but not the only one; historical disasters and the sublimity of what they left in the passage from barbarism to civilization, are presented on stage.

At the same time, natural disasters produce results as the human tragedies do, especially the same aesthetic pleasure. In the eighteenth century scientific knowledge open minded to the psychological and aesthetic description of the great natural phenomena. Thus, they became a strong subject.

Ruin emphasizes the potential nature, communicates indirectly all its forces and abilities. Nature shapes the territory, as well as it dominates human works and leaves obvious signs of its action. In this regard ruins are a product of nature: disintegration, erosion, landslides, and densifications of vegetation act on human works as they do on topography. The same natural forces act drive them back to the homeland, to nature.

Our particular tour through Belice's memory must slow down the speed and intensity of the words, staring at the fascination that ruins cause. They are such as an evidence of continuity; it is such as the reality that can be clearly read. We talk about a matter of representation.

Through this contemporary view, we discover the sublime in Poggioreale, a waste city frozen in time, in Gibellina, a timeless artistic monument and in Montevago, where ruins were urbanized.
Tourism in the island nowadays

Landscape as only a background, a ruined scene raised to monumental status

The territories beyond the cities navigated their own independent transformation processes. In addition to it, the ruins give a timeless rhythm to the landscape. Finally, memory and identity are potential resources and main attraction to the landscape.

The ancient ruin, evidence of the magnificence of another age, is the superposition of layers of different times. Now we consider also the new ruin of the last 50 years, planned as the memory of the absence and a new element of local culture. This kind of ruin has role of memorization and testing of the recent history of the territory.

In fact, the development of the coastal tourism is not just based on the beaches, but exactly on the tourist attraction generated by unplanned places of this area made by substrates of different civilizations. Consequently, its popular lifestyle and subsistence economy evolved to a traditional and local commerce. Now, the local culture also attracts tourists who want to discover historic, ethnological and natural resources over there.

Planning of the memory sites as a strategy

The emergency was the only response to the traumatic event and the planning just considered the territory as a pretext, a simple board to write. There was no reading of the context or the existing city, there was no design of territory, there was no reading of the site but only of the moment. The search for the re-creation of identity, as a planning tool of the formal memory, mirrors political attempts to endow the inhabitants with a new social identity, which they considered had to be rebuilt, produced anonymous places.

The city, center of revival, was the powerful instrument of institutional propaganda. The agricultural landscape was the originary keeper of identity but it was deprived of its heritage in favor of an artificial memory, and so every relationship with history was broken.

Solitary thoughts of architects, artists, politicians and sociologists led to proposals uninterested to society and territory. Those proposals establish the urban shape and architecture as strong response and contextual abstraction. Despite the quality sometimes extraordinary, these projects are often uninterested to the place and express an anachronistic view. New city, such as a catharsis, tries to play a role, unfortunately producing conflicting situations.

This kind of memory-based planning that mainly drove to aesthetic and artistic visions, improved some places in the valley. Nowadays the ruins of the old Gibellina, by its own aesthetic appeal for tourists from outside the catastrophe, are included within the main tourist circuits of the island by the authenticity and uniqueness of this example. On the contrary, other globalizing architectures have not satisfied the interests of cultural tourism, due to not achieve a different result in Sicily. He looks for destinations where
local and different values prevail. Nevertheless, the attraction by these interventions allowed the valley to become more present compared to other areas of the island. In the best cases, other places imagine to save their identity by the landscape of their fields, because abandonment does not further enhance its oblivion.

**Strategies of the future**

*The landscape as a reference and the tourist of the memory*

Its history attracted the travelling aristocracy, the pre-tourist of the XVIII century, and it has not changed so much if we compare it with the new tourist supply of other countries and their fast evolution during the last decades.

The ruin, that sustains the weight of the past, of history, has been the argument of the journey of all the tourist who got to Sicily. On one hand the old ruin, as overlapping of different layers and times, as material testimony of life, and on the other hand, the new ruin as the cemetery of a natural phenomenon (as the earthquakes at Noto valley 1693, Messina in 1908, Belice valley in 1968 and the eruption of the volcan Etna in 1669), forgotten places within the tourist circuit, but suddenly put in evidence by tragical events. Ruins give to the territory another rhythm that demonstrates and emphasizes, moreover, the natural potential of the Island. The resources of the region, its landscape and its heritage, are eternal opportunities. Memory and identity are values of a difference showing that the main feature for the tourism in Sicily is not simply based on its patrimony, but on an new discover.

Nowadays who plans a journey to Sicily is not simply a tourist but a traveller, whose motivation is to discover, to investigate, to think.... a cultural traveller who prefers to discover instead of simply following what the tourist marke for the masses has to offer. From a tourism management point of view, since all the most common destinations are all already exploited, all we have to do is to understand what the tourist-traveller is looking for in Sicily. Looking back to the origins let us recover the curious glance of the traveller and find the way to answer to the new traveller's requests. The matter is finding what the territory itself wants to reveal.

In the 60's, the social demands understood that landscape was the starting point to develop (agricultural) territories. Today, it is still relevant. It is not necessary to define external reference models, landscape is the reference itself. De-territorializing, in other words considering just administrative boundaries without any geographic or symbolic memory, led to losing control and to alienation of the place itself. Some of those interventions in Belice valley increased a kind of de-territorialization and led to the breakdown of the bond with the territory, even more than the earthquake itself. It also drove the tourist to focus on actual places and sites instead of the whole territory.

The latest tourism policy are based on economic investments and soil occupation as symbol of progress. We can say that the future of the Island is based, first, on investments on the cultural policy inviting to
discover the landscape from an ethical point of view; second, saving the heritage to offer the opportunity to explore without wasting resources. The challenge now is trying not to be superficial creating banal theme parks and pastoral landscape.

Consequently, we trust some overall guidelines to combine history and the future territorial model, joining rural and urban areas in a holistic vision, and rejecting the purely economic interpretation of the territory.

Finally, considering landscape design as an evolution of the project of the site by observing this intangible space made by layers and full of meanings.

To write or draw the history of a territory, we will work with the layer of memory as an element of the landscape design. Territorial memory tells us about the roots of the place, about identity and its origins. Throughout a methodology for achieve the topographic representation of the memory, the territory of the memory and the space of life can merge into a graphical representation where the vital relationships become space diagram; mapping as a powerful tool to draw the memory of Belice.

If the earthquake had an impact on those sites, if interpretation of facts influences the cartography of the city, a new tourist approach will reveal the paths of memory in the territory. Mapping to highlight and make them visible so they can be remembered: origin and meaning of toponymies, relationships and location of settlements, monuments' density, forgotten places, elevation... interpretations that will condition the memory in the future and will reveal new sites to design for future landscape interventions, not forgetting to capture the spirit that makes it unique.

The cultural tourist looks for places of memory; historical as well as more recent sites, where important events happened to be worthy of re-lived. So, wars, famous biographies, environmental disasters and so on, now capture the attention of tourism of (recent) memory. This combination of landscape and ruin (old and new ones) is the field which future tourism policies of the island should be based on; memory as a cultural resource embodied in the monumental ruin. The planned monumentalization has contributed to strengthening the local identity and it has attracted cultural tourists. Finally, he comes close to that places to visit with the attitude of a traveler of the living memory, fleeing from mass tourism.

References


