

## LEARNING TO BECOME A COMMUNITY: MAFIA LANDSCAPES LAB

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### INTRODUCTION

Various cases of engaged scholarship are currently emerging in Southern Italy, with the aim of fulfilling the institutional role of Universities' Third Mission (TM) (Boffo & Gagliardi, 2015). Engaged scholarship is a relatively new approach (Boyer, 1990; Barker, 2004; Saltmarsh *et al.* 2009; Cuthill, 2010; Inman & Schütze, 2010; Benneworth, 2013) that integrates education, research and service through the practical development of interdisciplinary applied knowledge.

In this framework, learning communities emerge as mixed groups where "... individuals could come to know and respect each other and could share their common interests and different perspectives about problems and topics. They could push one another to appreciate issues in ways that are richer and more penetrating than we understood before ..." (Swanson & Holton, 2005).

Although engaged scholarship is recently gaining ground more and more, in Southern Italy it is rooted in an older and more entrenched issue: how to transfer knowledge and skills generated by universities in order to support local communities in developing at socio-economic levels (Bencardino & Napolitano, 2011). As a matter of fact, in places like Sicily, the issue is how to relate the practice of engaged scholarship, the institutional role of universities' Third Mission and the creation of learning communities with the broader challenge of proposing alternative spaces to the ones affected by the control of the Mafia.

We present a practical experiment of TM and engaged scholarship, which has generated a learning community aimed at reflecting how to react in communities where the mafia has a strong control over the territory. This article discusses the primary results of this project - called *Mafia Landscapes Lab* - that involves students, researchers (mostly from the field of urban planning and educational science) together with local actors (such as local inhabitants, volunteers, administrators) to the development of actionable interdisciplinary knowledge, in a context where the Mafia has a strong control on local social-economic dynamics.

We highlight how the *Mafia Landscapes Lab* is an attempt of experimenting an active, non-violent, anti-mafia practice through service learning and action research within a long-term university-community partnership. We argue that this is crucial for Universities in Southern Italy, although more applications are needed in order to establish such approach not only as experimental cases of TM, but also within core curricula for the benefit of the whole Higher Education system.

### THE NEED TO PRACTICE ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE IN LANDSCAPES AFFECTED BY THE MAFIA

Mafia has been defined in several ways. The first definition, given by Franchetti in 1876, states that "the term mafia found a class of violent criminals ready and waiting for a name to define them, and, given their special character and importance in Sicilian society, they had the right to a different name from that defining vulgar criminals in other countries". More recently authors, such as Dickie (2004), have given various insights on the characteristics

and history of "Cosa Nostra", describing how the mafia rooted in Sicily and spread internationally (Saviano, 2006).

There exists a mutual influence between the mafia and the society where it is rooted (Sanfilippo & Abbagnato, 2005). Besides, the mafia needs a specific geographic area in order to establish, feed and reproduce itself, a "territory of mafia" or "mafio-genic" social system, characterized by intertwined relations between physical, human, social, cultural, political aspects of a social-ecological system (Gravagno, 2008).

Undermining the "mafio-genic" dynamics requires an interdisciplinary approach for the nature of the discourse and a specific understanding of the educational processes inside communities. Schermi (2010) gives some insights about the apparatus of principles, rules and activities which determine how the mafia *educates* the youth and the people of its realm. It is then necessary to show alternative patterns of lifelong education through tangible examples of different practices of design and care of places. The design and management processes are then intended as a means of subtracting space from the mafia's detrimental apparatuses.

These specific landscapes in Catania's suburbs are easily observed. In these suburbs lack of services, of activities, of public and vibrant places worsen the neighbourhoods; some public spaces are vandalized and abandoned, becoming a fertile ground where criminal activities may easily take roots. Inhabitants that live in these areas have mostly a low social status and a weak cultural background, and are more likely to be controlled by the mafia. Most of them perceive their landscape as uncomfortable, threatening and dangerous, spending most of their time at home, drifting away from each other, losing any sense of community and the will to take care of common spaces.

In the landscapes where the presence of the mafia is powerful, we argue that Universities can play a key institutional role in undermining the "mafio-genic" dynamics through action research (Saija & Gravagno, 2009) and the practice of engagement. Long-term university-community partnerships allow students and faculties to develop action research (Whyte, 1984; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and service learning (Reardon, 2006; Clifford, 2017), working tightly with the most disadvantaged communities that live within mafia landscapes. These partnerships can be fruitful opportunities for imagining and building alternative scenarios through sound examples of civic engagement. In this sense, these partnerships may be framed as active, non-violent, anti-mafia practices (Sanfilippo, 2005).

Since 2014 LabPEAT (Laboratory for Environmental and Ecological Planning Design) and CUrE (Community University Research Centre), which are both University research centres, have promoted and conducted the *Mafia Landscapes Lab*.

The *Mafia Landscapes Lab* has been an opportunity for conducting action research and service learning within a long-term university-community partnership aimed at experimenting with active non-violent anti-mafia, in the light of Freire's perspective (1970). The *Mafia Landscapes Lab* has also been an attempt to show how a laboratory for students may become an opportunity for the University of Catania to develop its TM, and support local communities in having an active role in changing and developing processes.

## **MAFIA LANDSCAPES LAB - AN OVERVIEW**

*Mafia Landscapes Lab* is an interdisciplinary course focused on urban planning and community development. The learning process is inspired by the paradigms of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and it is based on the approach of service learning.

The overall goal is to explore landscapes affected by mafia dynamics, studying the mutual interactions between human activities and their visible effects on public spaces. Also, students, young academics, faculties, inhabitants and key-actors from NGOs and governmental agencies become part of a broad Learning Community.

The aim of the Lab is two-fold. On the one hand, the Lab promotes practices of active anti-mafia and community development in derelict neighbourhoods in the metropolitan area of Catania. On the other hand, the Lab aims at raising students' and researchers' awareness regarding policies, strategies, actions and projects to ensure sustainability of active anti-mafia practices in the long run. Specifically, students are called to participate by:

- a) acquiring adequate knowledge and skills for approaching planning and other disciplines taking into account the mafia and "mafio-genic" dynamics;
- b) exploring literature and cases related to "mafio-genic" landscapes;
- c) experiencing the design of a collaborative planning process with local NGOs, communities and institutions;
- d) nurturing self-organization within the Learning Community that we have formed.

The Lab lasts two academic semesters. At the beginning of the first semester, students are introduced to institutional and grassroots key-actors. After a phase of seminars with invited speakers who are mostly key-actors in anti-mafia practices, students are encouraged to conduct desk research, in order to become more aware of the topic. Case studies are discussed before starting the collaborative design process in the field. Case studies are a means of generating questions that then lead the exploration in the field, which is the core of the experience.

In the second semester, students take part in a community-university engagement process, working closely with an Italian NGO called "Libera, Associazioni, Nomi e Numeri contro le mafie" (an anti-mafia organisation) and an international NGO called "Save the Children". Since 2014, "Save the Children" manages a community centre in the district of San Giovanni Galermo. In this district, the criminal power controls some spaces and some legal and illegal economic activities, with a presence of drug dealers along its main streets. The community centre is one of 23 "Light Points" (Punto Luce) of "Save the Children" across Italy, aimed at targetting educational poverty, which is one of the main targets of "Save the Children". The "Light Points" gather children as well as their parents through various learning activities (638 people have been involved in the activities of the "Light Point" of San Giovanni Galermo so far).

Students and community members of the "Light Point", mostly mothers, formed a Research Group (RG). Initial phases of the research activity have been focused on discussing how to work on a common project in order to create a space for social inclusion and change. As a Learning Community, the RG decided to design and implement a new urban landscape, where a community garden has been framed as an opportunity for creating and regenerating social-ecological relationships. The community garden has been co-designed together by students, researchers and the participants from the "Light Point", sharing a variety of expertise and valuing the differences. In this phase, the accomplishment of a scale model has been a device for stimulating a process of co-creativity. Finally, in 2017 the RG started constructing the garden, and in 2018 continued improving it and discussing management strategies.

In the entire process, all the participants shared their competences through the act of designing and taking care of a community space. In this respect, participants have experienced and reflected upon the importance of varieties of different types of knowledge. Students and community members have been asked to prepare several assignments, including the final one, as a collective work of the entire course; this has required the

students to cooperate and to self-organize as a group that gives a specific and informed contribution to a Learning Community.

## **CHARACTERISTICS, CURRENT CONFIGURATION AND PRIMARY OUTCOMES**

### **Features of our Learning Community**

Although we have worked closely in order to form a Learning Community, we believe that it is important to share the specific composition of each sub-group that has contributed to the formation of the whole community.

1. Students. These were mostly Masters students with an architectural/engineering and urban planning background (on average 10 people per year) and undergraduates with an educational science background (on average 10 people per year).
2. Teaching group. Two professors (one in the field of Urban Planning; one in the field of Educational Science / Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education) together with two postdoctoral research fellows at University of Catania - LabPEAT (urban planning).
3. NGOs. Coordinators and activists from Save the Children (3 people) and "Libera, Associazioni, Nomi e Numeri contro le mafie" (2 people) have been fully involved in the project. One person from the service club "Rotaract Catania Est" has been engaged in organizing and coordinating fundraising in 2016-2017.
4. Mothers and fathers from San Giovanni Galermo (20 people on average), together with a group of children (5 people on average) and teenagers (5 people on average) have taken part in the focus groups, in the various initiatives and in the collective design experience of the community garden, as well as in the process of building and managing the garden.
5. Representatives from the Municipality have also participated in some meetings and public events, but they have been the most disengaged group within the Learning Community because of lack of continuity in their involvement.
6. Additionally, 10 students from the Department of Civil Engineering and Architecture, members of the class of 2016-2017, have decided to form an association called "Whole Urban Regeneration" after having taken part in the Lab. They have been taking an active part in the learning community during the 2017-2018 session, working closely with the faculties and the young researchers who are accompanying the new students.

Such a composition has allowed a variety of competences and skills to collaborate where none has dominated the others. Sharing responsibilities, as well as assignments and practical duties, has been the key for creating a group that has worked with horizontal relationships.

### **What we have learned**

As a result of the activities, all learners have acquired the capacity of listening to each other and participating in and conducting focus groups. The RG has acquired and improved skills related to the organisation of public meetings and to the implementation and management of co-design processes. Also, the RG has learned how to self-organise and how to create a Learning Community. Hierarchies have been questioned and learners have been asked to assume an active role in organising, conducting and managing the process.

Focusing on the students, they have been asked to create collective work. The type of collective work, such as reports, presentations, videos, website contents and so forth, has

been decided during the course depending on the input received by students themselves. However, it has been mandatory for each individual student to complete a personal journal with notes and reflections, and with the synthesis of the explored literature, of the case studies and the fieldwork. These journals have demonstrated the individual level of involvement of each student.

Still focusing on the students, we have witnessed an improvement in their public speaking and in their ability to managing collective debates. Students have trained themselves and then have helped the group of involved local inhabitants to do the same. Moreover, students have gained practical skills in collective design and the construction of a common space. Again, they have trained themselves and worked closely with the involved locals who have gained the same practical skills as well.

Participants from the "Light Point" of San Giovanni Galermo have improved their ability to self-organise, and developed a strong sense of ownership for the garden. For example, they have started proposing their own ideas and designing without waiting for the support of the University, while still acknowledging the importance of such collaboration.

Focusing on NGOs and institutions, a Memorandum of Understanding is in the process of being signed between the Municipality of Catania, the involved NGOs and the University of Catania. The relevance of the Memorandum of Understanding is related to the fact that Municipalities are still not familiar with instituting collaborative processes in Sicily: this experience can be an opportunity for learning in this direction as well, both from the governmental and the non-governmental sides.

The most significant result is the acquired awareness and empowerment among the involved local inhabitants; the sense of being able to take action and to make changes. The garden has only been an opportunity to implement their ability to work collectively. Inhabitants have learned that the reality of places, such as San Giovanni Galermo, can be changed thanks to collective conscious action.

## CONCLUSIONS

The experiences undertaken at the "Light Point" in San Giovanni Galermo, and presented here, show that Learning Communities are opportunities for demonstrating options that break the *educational* schemes perpetuated by the mafia. Learning Communities are spaces for raising awareness about alternative paths related to the use and care of places, and meanwhile to the improvement of healthy societal relationships. The Learning Community, which we all (students as the future professionals; researchers; local inhabitants; volunteers; some administrators) have started experiencing, has been an opportunity for "... pushing one another to appreciate issues in ways that are richer and more penetrating than we understood before ...".

We argue that the institutional role of Universities is to keep these new ways on track, guaranteeing the sustainability of such processes in the long run. In this respect, the writing and implementation of a Memorandum of Understanding has been proposed as a means for governing such processes, as they tend to become more complex, year after year, and cannot rely only on the experimental trial of a voluntary class or on the voluntary forces inside NGOs.

"Engaged scholars" and those promoting the institutional role of the Third Mission of Universities in South Italy have then the responsibility to catalyse an evolutionary path for our society that aims to bring about a progressive change of the "mafio-genic" system.

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