

PERIPHERIES AND PRACTICES OF CONSUMPTION IN THE NAPLES METROPOLITAN AREA

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the impact of the new attractors of shopping and leisure in the suburbs of the Metropolitan Area of Naples. After an introduction on the different features of today's suburbs, the focus shifts on the transformations in the area to the north of Naples along an important axial highway (the Circumvallazione, officially the SP1). This axial road, as well as the so-called "median axis" (Asse Mediano), are analyzed as retail and consumption spaces. This case study demonstrates the complex reality of a suburb too hastily considered as uniform and anonymous: although in this area there is chaos, decay and forms of illegality, it is also characterized by a relative centrality thanks to new retail and consumption spaces which represent key-places for their users, places where the rhythm of life is slowed down and socialisation is somewhat recovered.

KEY WORD: Metropolitan areas – outskirts – suburban consumption – retail and leisure places

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Although the paper is the result of a strict collaboration between the two authors, F. Amato wrote the sections 1, 2 and 3 and R. Sommella wrote the sections 3.1 and 4. A previous version of this research has been proposed in Amato and Sommella, 2013.

PERIFERIAS Y PRÁCTICAS DE CONSUMO EN EL ÁREA METROPOLITANA DE NÁPOLES

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza el impacto de los nuevos atractores de shopping y de ocio en los suburbios de la área metropolitana de Nápoles. Después de una introducción sobre los diferentes tipos y caracteres que definen los suburbios hoy, la atención se desplaza sobre las transformaciones en el área al norte de Nápoles, a lo largo de una importante carretera axial (la Circumvallazione, oficialmente el SP1). Esta carretera axial, así como el llamado "eje mediano" (Asse Mediano), se analizan como espacios comerciales y de consumo. Este estudio de caso demuestra la compleja realidad de un suburbio demasiado considerado como uniforme y anónimo: aunque en esta área hay aspectos de caos, decadencia y algunas manifestaciones de ilegalidad, esta se caracteriza también por una centralidad relativa debida a los nuevos espacios de venta y consumo, que representan lugares-clave por sus usuarios, lugares donde el ritmo de vida es más lento y donde se recupera una cierta dimensión de la socialización.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Áreas metropolitanas – suburbios – consumo suburbano – lugares comerciales y de ocio

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, urban studies have abandoned the notion that cities are separated from their surrounding territories, as a consequence of the contemporary emergence of societies which are not constituted and structured according to the principles of Fordist societies: the incorporation, and in some cases the confusion, between the central nucleus and its territory demands new interpretations (DEMATTEIS et al., 1999; SOJA, 1999; AMIN and THRIFT, 2005).

Peripheral areas cannot be interpreted as an undistinguishable mixture: they are characterized by different features and typologies, which are not

necessarily those of deprivation and degradation, since they are sometimes the propellers of virtuous transformations (BELLICINI and INGERSOLL, 2001; FREGOLENT, 2008).

In Italy the debates about the structuring of spaces for consumption and leisure have principally been concentrated, except for some exceptions, on the central districts of urban areas. If discussions refer to peripheral spaces, they mainly concern the construction of major retail and leisure attractions, which are often seen to represent built forms that are disconnected from the history of places. In such cases, the attention of researchers is prevalently focused on the characteristics of these attractions as artificial spaces and far less upon the forms of socio-spatial changes which regard the urban geography of peripheral areas.

Peripheries were first created as a housing compensation for the saturation of centers and as support areas for industrial development. The image of a working class periphery closely linked to the localization of industrial production has been rendered obsolete by the current evolution of the global economy in countries where industrialization is mature. Thus, although they may appear as unsolved spaces which lack an identity, peripheries are inhabited by populations and “consumed” by users who have an identity and are capable of multiple transformative actions. They are places which deserve to be seen with different eyes and to be interpreted according to manifold parameters.

The idea of studying peripheral places arises above all from the need to understand these spaces beyond the common clichés which describe them as formless, ugly and identical citadels. As Bellicini reminds us, «the periphery with its origins in the post-war period, which we have been used to contemplating, has now grown old. It has become historical (CRESME, 2000, p. 4). Moreover, perhaps the periphery has changed its socio-cultural features, and in doing so triggered new identities and new processes that merit attention.

The “historicization” of peripheries allows us to abandon the idea of a mono-functional residential space usually employed to describe such places, and

instead encourages us to rethink the idea of urban as something made up of pieces which, at different scales, “entrusts its organization and the recognition and readability of its form to a variety of structures, that, in a sort of popular syncretism, involve a diversity of principles and prototypes» (SECCHI, 1999, p.79).

Even the scientific literature on consumption – and retail related themes – in Italy (especially in Southern Italy) has mainly focused on the neighbourhoods of historic centres. It is perhaps appropriate to start turning our attention also towards peripheral places where urban transformations have taken place in a more marked manner. One specific point is enough to underline the relevance of peripheries, which is: the majority of the urban population passes its time in such spaces, either as a resident or as a temporary user. This seems all the more evident in the case of the Mediterranean peripheries, which have long been characterized by spontaneous lower-class suburbs and unplanned and illegal sprawl.

Therefore, while the recent periphery may still appear unresolved, shell-like and devoid of identity, it is lived in by a population that possesses diverse identities and is capable of multiple acts that transform the built environment.

THE OUTSKIRTS OF NAPLES

The idea of a space lacking any autonomous identity would appear to be epitomised by the urban area of Naples: an urban agglomeration marked by a widespread marginality and segregation that is at the same time discontinuous and whose boundaries are blurred. When one leaves the administrative borders of the city of Naples, there is only a timid street sign reminding us that a limit actually exists, while the disordered urban continuum leaves no space for any clear, different identities. The sensation of an indistinct built environment made up of objects thrown together is the first perception that one receives.

Such a sensation is reinforced if one travels along the multi-lane “axial” roads, which, like the layers of an onion, are situated along the East-West route to the north of Naples: the Tangenziale (the inner ring road), the Circumvallazione

(outer bypass, and object of this contribution) and the Asse Mediano (the so-called “median axis”). The idea of an indistinct “total periphery” has therefore started to make tracks.

This said, the peripheries of the Naples area can also be read as constituting different types, and be observed and described according to different perspectives. We can imagine at least two ways to read the Neapolitan outskirts: topographical-spatial and socio-territorial. The well-being or hardship can be measured, but it is the direct observation which enables us to describe and better understand the places with different eyes and subject to interpretations that are not necessarily unique.

It is impossible to reconstruct such a transformation which today makes this area a large, apparently undifferentiated, urban space with dense road networks, by precise localization of small businesses, from large-scale distribution of invasive settlements and pieces of land still cultivated, especially in the greenhouse.

In order to consider the periphery not as an indistinguishable object, it should at least be distinguished four main typologies: the suburbs of quality wards of the bourgeoisie who emigrated from the centre; the old rural centres incorporated into the general degradation; zoning of public housing; the areas of public housing recently built and completely degraded (AMATO, 2008).

THE CASE STUDY OF AN AXIAL HIGHWAY

The attention of our contribution is hence directed at peripheries as areas of transition towards broader metropolitan spaces. It is for this reason that we have decided to undertake a synthetic and initial survey of the transformations in the area to the north of Naples along the axial highway, the “outer bypass” or Circumvallazione (officially the SP1), which connects a group of urban settlements in the inner periphery which are located next to and almost overlap, especially in the eastern part, the outer suburbs of Naples itself (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 – The Circumvallazione and the other “axial roads” along the East-West route to the north of Naples - **Source:** googlemaps

These towns have become increasingly involved in the process of urban densification in the metropolitan area of Naples (COPPOLA, 1991; COPPOLA and VIGANONI, 1997).

In these new urban areas we find most clearly the co-presence, on one hand, of urban decay, over-building, illegality and unauthorized construction and, on the other, significant attractions in terms of accessibility and productive sites. These sites sit, side by side, in a space that is highly interconnected in extra-regional terms and which, in prospect, could represent a fundamental node of the Euro-Mediterranean frontier.

The Circumvallazione was the first east-west bypass to be built and today is situated in an imposing and dense road system that criss-crosses the Neapolitan hinterland.

During its history, the Circumvallazione has been subject, as often occurs in Naples, to a series of popular toponyms: in fact, it is often referred to as the “road of the Americans” or simply as the “two-way” (“doppio senso”).

The reference to the United States is a result of the installation of radars of the NATO base near Lago Patria during the immediate post-war period. The US army decided to asphalt an old track to the town of Qualiano, so as to allow for rapid access to the bases. This was the first section of the future bypass built by the Province of Naples, starting in 1955 and completed in 1970, which would connect Lago Patria with Naples’s eastern periphery (the town of Volla). This was a complex operation that traversed various municipalities, although the construction was solely focused on the road, «remaining essentially indifferent to the nature and signs of the surrounding territory» (IPPOLITO and MAISTO, 2000, p. 9). This was the start of the major high-speed road network that would subsequently condition the configuration of the Naples area. The creation of a dual carriageway – particularly wide for its time – and separated by a central reservation, inspired the popular denomination “two-way” and also reinforced in the collective imagination the idea of an Americanized road, because of its similarity to cinematic representations arriving from Hollywood.

Today the Circumvallazione traverses a territory that is generally characterized by poor housing and urban decay, together with a sort of spontaneous zoning made up of distinct, multi-functional poles (AMATO and SOMMELLA, 2013).

Along the route it is possible to detect a succession of different urban landscapes:

- The industrial area centred around Casoria, which, although increasingly weak, is still present today;
- The section with clearer urban and residential functions which skirts the historic centre of Villaricca, where urban features (such as pine trees and lighting) gives a greater sense of a residential area;

- The segment with greater extra-urban characteristics is concentrated around Giugliano and includes clearer traces of agricultural functions as well as private detached houses that preannounce the seaside resorts on the Domitian coast. In this last section, travelling eastwards, the number of hotels increases exponentially: as well as their traditional “pay-by-the-hour” role, these establishments are used for conferences and are reference points for clients who do not need to reach the centre of Naples.

The current situation of chaotic urban sprawl is the result of piecemeal construction and not of a project with a precise idea of city. Consequently, it is no longer possible to read the development according to traditional administrative partitions but through individual attractions and aggregative elements such as large retail centres that line the route. Despite numerous elements that lack any sense of value, this route nevertheless now represents a component integrated into the urban and territorial system.

THE “ROAD OF AMERICANS” AS RETAIL AND CONSUMPTION SPACE

Along the “Road of the Americans”, it is possible to observe a stratification of everyday life that revolves around a densely woven and chaotic car-based mobility. The principal driving force of this mobility by car is represented by shopping centres, which vary notably in terms of their retail structure. The journey along the route is less straightforward than it would seem; but while the street signs themselves are often misleading, the communication strategies of the jungle of commercial activities are clear and visible.

These activities, which have developed along the described axial highways, have quite recently colonized the urban landscape of the metropolitan area, especially if compared not only to the older similar formats localized in other parts of the world, but also to those which have colonized Northern Italy. Even in the outlined suburbs of Naples, these retail spaces have attracted a growing number of consumers or simply users. Especially the few ones which have

succeeded in combining shopping and leisure have contributed to build new “suburban utopias” (WRIGLEY and LOWE, 2002) in a chaotic, often informal and sometimes illegal, metropolitan space. More than on the contrast between scholars who have labelled these new spaces as places and those who have referred to them as non-places, today the attention has to be paid on the complexity of these sites. On one hand, they have taken a leading role in the forms of urban socialization, especially for young people; on the other, this does not prevent the recurrence of exclusion or conflicts ². In spite of the dispute on the inherent nature of these retail sites, on which we can not dwell over, it seems unquestionable that they play a growing role in structuring the urban space of the investigated suburbs. In these last ones, the “enclosed malls” are able to provide “centrality, public dimension and human density” (AMENDOLA, 2006), all factors which seem no longer identifiable with the historical centres of the chaotic and (seemingly) undifferentiated whole of this part of Naples metropolitan area.

For understanding the attractive force of the axes “out of Naples” as retail and consumption spaces, it is interesting to specify that even the aforementioned median axis is marked by the presence of many retail formats. On the outskirts of Naples, along the seventh kilometre and at the exit-Casalnuovo Acerra, the median axis has been characterized by some of the first retail formats located in the province of Naples (DI COSTANZO, 2013, p. 44). An area of about 250.000 square metres occupied by shopping malls, new structures of leisure, cinemas, bowling, megastores and brand stores.

The record, however, is up to the “Roads of Americans”² back to this axis, we find that the first major shopping mall in the region of Campania (Euromercato di Casoria) was established on the east end of the bypass in the 1980s. This first commercial section of the Circumvallazione is today marked by the presence of

² The studies on shopping malls as appropriate sites for young people (VANDERBECK and JOHNSON, 2000) are interesting, in this sense, especially at the Mediterranean scale. Among the others, see the article on shopping *mall* as emergent public space in Turkey (ERKIP, 2003).

leading international (Auchan, Decathlon) and national retail firms (such as Emmelunga and MD) but, at the same time, it remains influenced by the nearby presence of Naples. Thus, for instance, we also find in this section the local headquarters of a major delivery company (DHL).

The journey along the “two-way” lends itself to multiple interpretations of great interest, but here we want to concentrate on the pervasive commercial function that has existed for many years: and on the many practices which contribute to characterize its landscape of consumption. A more recent phenomenon is instead the combination of shopping and leisure. The “recreationalization of shopping” (MILES, 2010) has been particularly successful in these suburbs, where the attention of consumers has switched from spaces of shopping to places of entertainment.

In the studied area, leisure activities are mainly associated with cinemas (in particular UciCinemas, the first experiment in suburban multiplex in the Neapolitan area) and with many restaurants and fast foods (with a wide number of options, although none above standard quality) (Photo 1).



Photo 1 – Shopping and leisure formats in the external space of the UciCinemas
(Casoria)

Overall, the offer is very low compared to the various forms of leisure in North America and the rest of Europe. Nevertheless, for the labyrinthine spaces that do not possess distinct features are able to generate forms of attraction (the shopping streets and small markets themselves do not satisfy an increasingly complex demand for leisure), the shopping malls represent poles of attraction that generate new centres in the periphery. In the more established hubs and residential clusters, the centres of the Neapolitan hinterland sometimes seem to display an interesting network of shopping streets and spaces for leisure, which, in the latter case, have increased due to a number of urban renewal programmes. It is the very nature of these built forms and settlements – tied more to flows rather than rootedness – that constitutes the basis of the current success of the malls. Nevertheless, the over-supply which has characterized the area in recent years makes it difficult to hypothesize the future of these retail and consumption formats.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The co-presence of different commercial forms highlighted by the study of the SP1 corridor – from the more traditional retail activities of small dimensions to the more modern structures – testifies to the fact that, in urban-commercial terms, the metropolitan area of Campania which once revolved around the hierarchical functional role played by Naples, is today characterized by a new commercial landscape. According to what Barata Salgueiro (1996) has defined as a “mixture of hierarchical and post-hierarchical logics”, even this area reveals new and unexpected centralities and marginalities (D’ALESSANDRO and SOMMELLA, 2008). As such the Neapolitan malls, although more geared to shopping than leisure, appear to reflect the model of mall as a place that aims to separate the spaces of consumption from the rest of the city, in other words transform them into places that are segregated from the rest of the built environment (PAOLUCCI, 2006). The cited “suburban utopias” have sought to construct through the

proliferation of such places, both in their most complex forms but also in their less articulate versions such as those just described, it is the creation of new spaces, closed in on themselves, controlled and, as a consequence, secure, privatized, and far removed from the disordered and crowded street (JAYNE, 2006).

Another readable element in this streetscape is what we could call “the sidewalk effect”, parts of an urban puzzle that are pieced together through activities such as bars and small businesses that are also visible from the bypass (Photo2). These elements of the cityscape appear disconnected and distant from the logic of the large malls, but nevertheless function as strong catalysts for those, both inhabitants and users in transit, who gravitate to this highway. But the retail sector is also represented by a notable presence of the informal sector (or what in Italian is called “abusivismo”), which is concentrated primarily on roundabouts where it is possible to buy almost anything – fruit and vegetables, furniture, clothes and plants – from street vendors who have more or less permanently occupied niches of space.

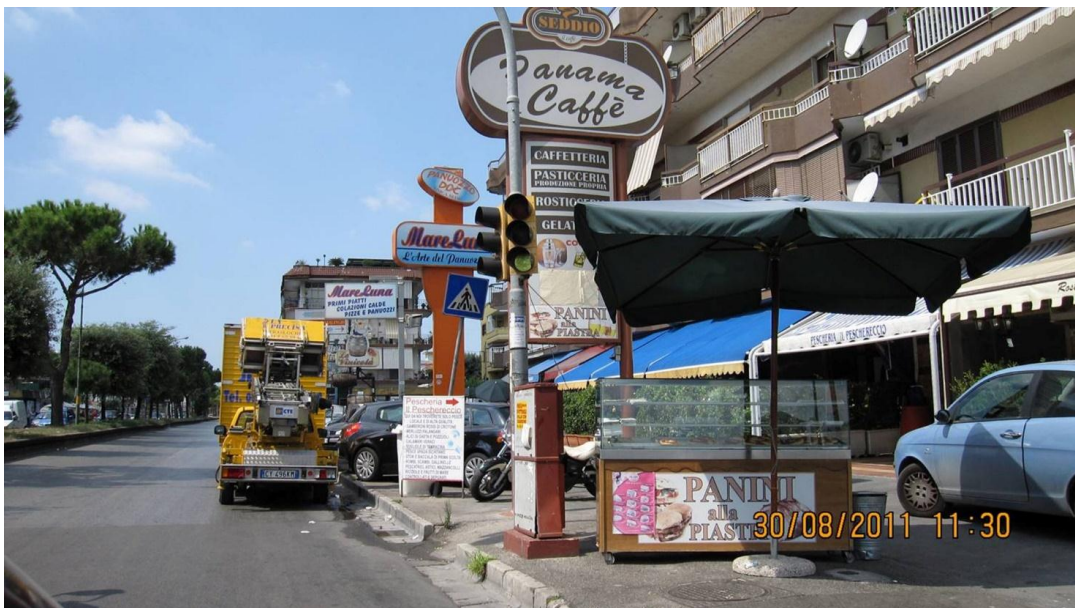


Photo 2 – The “sidewalk effect” along a road of the investigated area

A fast-flowing (at least according to the initial intentions) and run-down highway in the Neapolitan hinterland is therefore also host to commercial activities, that are the basis of a sense of belonging to a hypermodern space characterized by changes in consumption and lifestyles and where new forms of urbanity are shaped.

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates the complex reality of a suburb too hastily considered as uniform and anonymous. Although in this area there are aspects of chaos and decay and manifestations of some illegality, it should be noted a relative centrality taken by these new retail and consumption spaces. Also in the case of the Circumvallazione, the various malls and retail activities not only represent spaces of consumption, but also leisure places that serve mainly young people from a very wide catchment area. On one hand, these shopping malls may represent glaring expressions of consumerism, depersonalization, hustle and bustle and of our general incapacity to plan a line of action, aspects described so well by Zygmunt Bauman (2010); but on the other hand, they also represent key-places for the consumption of their users, places where the rhythm of life is slowed down and a private dimension of socialization is recovered.

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ENVIADO EM: 11/10/2014

ACEITO EM: 24/11/2014