



# Urban planning and criminal powers: Theoretical and practical implications

Daniela De Leo

Department of Planning, Design and Technology of Architecture, Sapienza University, via Flaminia 72, 00194 Roma, Italy



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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the results of long and extensive research based on Italian cases-studies that argued the need for a systematic investigation of the relationship between urban planning and criminal powers in the control of space and in local governmental processes. The research assumption was the general condition of knowledge it would be profitable to explore and develop in order to understand and redirect a relationship that has been generally underestimated in our field, both theoretically and practically, in order to highlight specific implications for and responsibilities of urban planners. The awareness and knowledge which emerged from the research was considered relevant to improving urban planning practices and underscoring full commitment as both practitioners and educators in those areas of urban planning where strong and illicit powers are present.

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## 1. Introduction

The paper aims to discuss the links between urban planning and organised crime in urban areas, paying particular attention to the need to develop specific disciplinary knowledge on the subject. It proposes a reflection on the theoretical and practical implications of the issue drawing on a number of research projects on the subject carried out by the author over more than a decade (2005).<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, urban planning theories and literature have generally neglected the spatial impact of organised crime, delegating other fields of knowledge in shaping possible strategies of action. An examination of the available planning literature confirms that the links between urban planning practices and the power of criminal organisations in urban and regional planning have been considerably underestimated, despite the emergence of evidence of the role played by so-called 'criminal entrenchment' (Sciarrone, 1998) in planning processes, at least as far as regional governments are concerned. Numbers of different case-studies in Southern Italy confirmed the fact that there are many ways<sup>2</sup> in which criminal phenomena manifest themselves in physical space and

constitute an obstacle to the elaboration and application of urban planning decisions, acting as an impediment to the kind of change planning is (and must be) responsible for.

In particular, past empirical investigations have highlighted a certain level of inadequacy in urban planning processes when facing contexts where regulatory systems are 'under the pressure' of tackling irregularities and unofficial or illicit practices.

In this perspective, the article uses Southern Italy as an representative framework to stimulate a conversation as to the need to produce more research inspired by *hope* or simply by the lack of resigned acceptance of the 'given conditions' that seem to be set in stone. The aim is to overcome the habit of irreversibly distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' areas: areas that work and areas that are illicit, cities that are 'smart' to a greater or lesser extent, that learn and change, and others that are destined to remain 'black holes' forever. The need is to stop conceptualizing certain places as if unalterable, their unacceptable living standards characterizing both the built environment and their daily life. Since much of planning research is underpinned by the ambition to '*make the world a better place*', as Greed very directly puts it (1994, p.8) – which is, after all, what justifies and makes it *socially beneficial* – the goal here is to underline the main research outcomes regarding the relationship between urban planning and criminal powers in controlling space in order to learn how we as planners should deal with them.

## 2. Relationship between Mafia and urban planning

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'Mafia' as "an organised international body of criminals, operating originally in Sicily and now especially in Italy and the US and having a complex and ruthless behavioural code".

<sup>1</sup> Including also the research that helped to frame the specific research questions about the relationship between Mafia and urban planning, the main observations proposed here come from cases-study in Napoli, Afragola, Palermo, Gela, Bagheria, and Villabate. Special attention has been devoted to those Municipalities placed under the administration of external commissioners due to mafia infiltration in public affairs: see note #4 and De Leo, 2013; De Leo and Lo Piccolo, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The research tried to define systematically these "many different ways" (see De Leo, 2016) but certainly in the 4 Italian regions where organized crime is historically present, there are lower performances in the urban planning practices, compared with the rest of the country.

In the common perception it is ‘the bad’ as opposed to ‘the good side’ of *normal society*: a perception challenged by the publication of the bestseller *Gomorra* (Saviano, 2006), translated into several languages worldwide, in which Saviano’s first-person account and his detailed description of the places he examines support the theory of ‘*the System’s supremacy*’, shedding light on the pervasiveness of this power over managing and controlling urban areas, allied to the general state of weakness or collusion of public institutions. However, the slightly “tabloid” style of Saviano’s investigations led to the accusation of fuelling the dichotomy – which for years has appeared as inexorable – between *exaggerated and novelesque*<sup>3</sup> accounts of supposedly invincible and pervasive *mafia-type organisations* on the one hand and more measured interpretations that, conversely, depict them as a *residual* part of society that can be handled by investigators and magistrates.

In the face of such a debate, which is still very much open, this article draws inspiration from those rejecting the idea that the Mafia is an isolated problem that can be addressed only by special prosecutors, and underlining that it has to become the concern of various fields of knowledge and action, including urban planning.

So far, it has only occasionally occurred to those advancing the theories and practices of our field that urban designers and planners could bring specific *competence* to the study of organised crime. The possibility that planners might have a proactive role in *interfering* and fighting this significant power, which demonstrably extends a tight fist over the very objects of our field – spaces, people, rules and institutions – has occurred to them even less.

It is these points the present article aims to raise, starting from the evidence that:

- a) many city councils in Italy are frequently temporarily suspended due to the suspicion of organised crime infiltration<sup>4</sup> for reasons that are explicitly linked to urban planning processes (master planning, development planning, preparation of redevelopment projects, etc.);
- b) urban areas where organised crime has long been entrenched in society and in large-scale initiatives, policies, development projects, etc. show a stronger resistance to social and physical change;
- c) in different cities in the South of Italy, the use of public spaces seems to be controlled and influenced by organised crime, limiting any positive possibility of improving them.

In Italy urban planning theories and practices have only occasionally treated such issues (Belli, 1979, 1986; Cremaschi, 2007; Saija and Gravagno 2009; Lanzani, 2012), mainly focusing on the problem of illegal/informal construction (Coppo and Cremaschi, 1994; Cremaschi, 2007). In particular, scholars have studied anomalies and shortcomings described in a somewhat unsystematic way (Donolo, 2000; Cremaschi, 2007) while a longstanding planning approach to the interpretation of the phenomenon of illegal building is more well-established, interpreting it as ‘*spontaneismo*’ (unofficial, unplanned “spontaneous” activity) and *individualism* (Zanfi, 2008, 2013), and not, interestingly, as *irregularity*. More recently, international planning literature has indirectly touched organised crime-related issues in the context of urban studies by focusing more broadly on *crime* on the neighbourhood scale. In this case, the inspiration comes from the Chicago School and then, to some extent, from Jane Jacobs (2000), following in the wake of what we could call the *urban design against crime* movement (Newman, 1973; Wilson and Kelling, 1982). Unfortunately, this

<sup>3</sup> Exaggerated and novelesque accounts that are not completely uninfluenced by the interests of publishers have constructed an aura of legendary, superhuman invincibility around mafia-type organisations which is more useful to those concerned than the general good’, Aitala (2013), p.151.

<sup>4</sup> The law against mafia infiltration in public institutions was introduced into Italian legislation in 1991 and until now it affected 206 Italian Municipalities. It envisages the suspension of local administrators subject to investigation and legal proceedings for the crime of mafia abetment or if suspected of belonging to a criminal organization: it produces Municipalities placed under the administration of external commissioners that have been frequently selected as cases-study for the research.

approach can lead to a physically/concretely deterministic simplification (whereby certain types of architecture are considered to encourage illicit behaviour), which neglects the implications of latent and influential networks of power operating from different positions (Body-Gendrot, 2012). Such a simplification can be explained by observing that it is much easier for politicians to ‘handle’ common crime than organised crime by using architectural and *urban design* instruments.

The present article proposes a different premise: that it is crucial to dedicate part of planning scholars’ professional energy to study the relationship between organised crime and planning, with the purpose of enhancing our disciplinary ability to undermine it. This is true for cities and places that have traditionally been affected by the Mafia, but it is also an issue of international relevance: the Mafia is not just an international phenomenon, but is also one of the many manifestations of power, not necessarily driven by sustainability and social justice, that influence planning.

In this perspective, the present article builds on reflections and research carried out in Southern Italy, but equally offers an occasion to reflect on what planners ought generally to do in the face of strong and illicit powers.

### 3. Origins and approaches, beyond marginality and insecurity

In Southern Italy, researchers have had frequent occasion to observe evidence of the Mafia’s ability to construct a specific *social system of rules* able to directly interfere with planning processes, not least since it uses spatial control as a tool for controlling social behaviour. In particular, cases analysed can be divided into three categories: 1) controlled areas in historical city centres; 2) deprived neighbourhoods in peripheral areas; 3) informal settlements directly designed and managed by organised crime (De Leo, 2008d, 2008e, De Leo, 2009, De Leo, 2010d, De Leo, 2011a, De Leo, 2016).

The outlying district of Scampia, located north of Naples, in Southern Italy – the focus of one of Saviano’s accounts in his book – from 2003 to 2006 was one of the cases studied within an EU-funded research project aimed at discussing residential policies for public housing districts.<sup>5</sup> While not the focus of the project, the undeniable presence of widespread clan-controlled drug-trafficking had to be faced by researchers in Scampia. In other words, even if the specific research project was intended to study public housing conditions and urban-renewal policies, it was impossible to explain social and physical urban conditions without understanding the rules of space control and management by strong criminal organisations linked to illicit and illegal territorially based activities (De Leo, 2005).

Again, in 2007, during another research project (funded by PUCAPlan Urbanisme Construction Architecture) looking at the efficacy of urban security policies in the same district (see Bricocoli and Savoldi 2008; De Leo, 2008c), the empirical evidence suggested new lines of investigation: what clearly emerged in the field was the inability of millions in public investment to improve the physical and social status quo of the neighbourhood resulting from the role played by organised crime’s control over the urban space for the preservation of their own businesses, profits, and networks: all part of the general impossibility for the Institutions to be in any way a force for change. In the face of such persistence of spatial degradation and social dependency and the ongoing ineffectiveness of public institutions, organised crime was able to increase its own legitimacy and power.

Moreover, the research in Scampia suggested the need to question the usual causal interpretation between social deprivation and crime which has almost monopolised the debate. After analysing criminal organisations in urban areas, critical voices have pointed out that ‘both poverty and wealth can lead to criminal behaviour’ (Sutherland, 1983; Ruggiero, 1998). It is a mistake to think that mafia-type organisations

<sup>5</sup> NeHoM-Neighbourhood Housing Model research project under the V Framework Program, coordinated by G. Pinson and J. Allen.

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