

‘CONTENTIOUS’ POLITICS AND THE PRODUCTION OF PLACE – THE CASE OF COTTONERA

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This paper critiques top-down, investment-led approaches which seek to re-use and re-habilitate cities but do little to tackle the social problems found in these areas. Urban regeneration projects rarely involve local people, and if they do, these are only engaged when the project has already been formulated. This paper departs from the premise that the community has the experience, knowledge and understanding of the place, and hence can come up with ideas which will benefit both the developers and the residents. Institutional ethnography was used to study how two organisations in a socially deprived area in Malta adopted public participation to come up with two types of political actions – one promoting the politics of demand, the other the politics of act. The paper explores whether and to what extent these types of political actions bring about social change that ameliorates the standard of living of the communities involved.

Introduction

Our research will start by questioning the underlying assumption permeating the bid for Valletta European Capital of Culture 2018. This bid departs from the premise that cultural and urban regeneration will lead to social and economic regeneration (European Communities 2009). The Capital of Culture award has been linked with a number of urban development projects undertaken in cities such as Liverpool, Portsmouth, Manchester, Marseilles and London. The main objective was to boost the stagnant economies of once industrial hubs.

Urban regeneration projects seek to re-use and re-habilitate cities but do not tackle the social problems since these are supposed to solve themselves (Avery 2007: 152). Instead of investing in the necessary and salient foundational economy linked with the place in question, political elites tend to opt for ‘highly visible economic additions which make money for developers and produce look-alike cities that fit a generic template’ (Engelen, Johal, Salento and Williams 2014: n.p.).

The focus of this article will be on two organisations in Malta – Integrated Resource Management (IRMCo. Ltd.) and *Ċentru Tbexbix* – which came up with ideas and projects on how to address the needs and interests of the residents. The focus will be on Bormla and L-Isla, two of the Three Cities within the Cottonera area (Cottonera consists of an area known as the ‘Three Cities’ – Birgu (also known as Vittoriosa); Bormla (also known as Cospicua) and Isla (also referred to as Senglea). Cottonera is a socially deprived area which is going through a transition period as regeneration and revitalisation projects are being undertaken. For centuries, this area, situated on the south side of the Grand Harbour was considered as the scion of industrialisation and trade unionism in the Maltese Islands. Cottonera underwent drastic economic and social deterioration after World War II, as a result of the rampant destruction which took place during the war and subsequent de-militarisation and de-industrialisation

(Boswell 1994). The residents in Bormla and L-Isla want regeneration and revitalisation projects to take place. They also want to be involved in deciding which projects are viable, how these should be undertaken, where and who should benefit. The residents are outspoken and are somewhat perceived to be 'contentious' by 'outsiders' (Caruana 2011; Borg 2012).

Locality, Place and Neighbourhood

Action is contingent on people's consciousness of themselves, their subject location within the nation state and the world in general; it is also contingent on their social relations to others and their relation to the means of production and reproduction (Sharma 2001). This paper sets out to explore how differently socially-positioned residents defined place and how their interpretation of place led to different types of action.

Place has a huge impact on the type of action enacted because action is usually a reaction to the type of practices and institutions found within it. Places are the object of collective action by agents, whether these involve individuals, groups and/or corporate actors at the local, national and/or international level (Gieryn 2000). This renders places contingent, temporary, and achieved through cultural systems of signification (Hubbard & Kitchin 2011).

Different individuals tend to have their own syncretic interpretation of a place. This means that when decisions are taken and then implemented, the actions and decisions which emerge derive from the multiple interpretations and readings of a contested issue. The same place means different things to different people, even for the same person across time (Gieryn 2000). This is because spatial thought is affected by how individuals are situated at particular points in time with regard to their own personal and political beliefs, institutional and social structures. Yi-Fu Tuan (2011) observes that place is created and maintained through people's emotional attachment to a particular space. This emotional attachment usually consists of topophilia (desires) and topophobia (fears) (Rodaway 2011). The fears and desires of the participants involved in the two political projects had an impact on the type of political action they eventually opted for.

Policy makers and developers are more concerned with gentrifying urban areas. Residents look forward to regeneration projects, but are often let down when the projects in question undermine the quality of life for residents in the area (Cutajar 2008). The needs and interests of the socially disenfranchised residents are less likely to be taken into consideration. Gentrification might sometimes be used to cleanse the area of 'undesirable' human elements (Cutajar 2008). The slum-clearing projects which took place in the 1980s in Valletta and the recent regeneration projects in Birgu and L-Isla, saw the forced geographical displacement of so-called 'problem families' to Bormla. Now that Bormla, L-Isla and Birgu are all being earmarked for regeneration projects, the question of what will happen to these disenfranchised social groups needs to be raised, given that the focus seems to be on embellishing localities for the benefit of those who are already privileged.

Gieryn (2000) is of the opinion that stigmatized places tend to dampen the motivation for public protest and mobilization. In this paper we will show that this was not the case where IRMCo. and *Ċentru Tbebxix* were concerned. The collective action opted for by the two organizations took different forms. Those participating in the two projects felt that the regeneration projects envisaged for the locality did not address the specific needs and interests of the people living there, and they felt that they had to do something about it. Social groups tend to look to the state for protection and provision, however not every group can access the

state. Organizational configurations and patterns of state activity encourage some political actors to the detriment of others (Everett, Staudt & Charlton 1989). When social groups feel that their voices are not being heard, some may resort to political action which might be deemed 'contentious', but is often the only action they can resort to at that particular time, and in that particular space. The action taken by these two organisations are 'contentious' because they challenge the actions and policies undertaken by business and political elites in Malta as a whole. People's political participation in civic fora tends to vary according to the party in power and on whether or not the state is deemed to be responsive.

People unite when political and economic systems fail to meet their interests. Structural inconsistencies push people into coming up with 'political' projects, with alternative plans to re-create places physically and symbolically. Political action helps to create a place, but place itself has an impact on the type of political action that can be undertaken. Place and political action are dialectically constitutive, as shall be discussed later on (Risager 2012: 3).

Contentious politics involves collective interaction between claimants and the intended recipient of their claim, mainly government, among others. Claimants place a claim because they believe it will improve their life chances. Two different approaches to political action will be discussed in this paper. The project led by IRMCo. Ltd made demands on authority figures at the international, national and local levels. *Ċentru Tbexbix* founded by the Women's Welfare Department of Ananda Marga¹ Malta showed that social agents themselves have power to bring about change. Repeated efforts to promote the residents' cause at local and national levels fell on deaf ears. Cumulative and piecemeal attempts to deal with the needs of the socially disenfranchised in the area taught some residents that the only change that could happen would be the one instigated by themselves. The presence of *Ċentru Tbexbix* in their midst helped to propel them into action.

Day (2004) differentiates between the politics of demand, where political action is directed at the state, and the politics of the act, where action taken by political agents helps to resist the power of the state and the market. The actions taken by the IRMCo.-led group can be categorized as politics of demand. Those spearheaded by *Ċentru Tbexbix* can be taken as an example of politics of action, although the persons who run this organisation might not have consciously been enacting this type of politics.

Why Cottonera?

The Valletta 2018 Foundation (2011) bid book promoted Valletta as a European Capital of Culture on the premise that any cultural renaissance undertaken there would serve to boost the economy of the surrounding area (Valletta 2018 Foundation 2011: 36), including Cottonera. The Foundation could not promote Valletta on its own. Malta is too small to fit the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) designed by EUROSTAT to provide the European Union with a descriptive and analytical tool (Cutajar & Magro 2009). In its bid, the Valletta 2018 Foundation (2011) underlined the fact that although it was bidding for Valletta as a European Capital of Culture, the bid incorporated the Grand Harbour and the rest of the nation. The bid book stressed the fact that Valletta shared a lot in common with Birgu, Bormla and L-Isla (Valletta 2018 Foundation 2011: 36). The bid book drew attention to the web of interaction, synergies and collaboration among these communities; it also maintained that each city retains its singularity. The synergies and collaboration emerge from the fact that the cities in question lie in close proximity to each other, and each city is very much dependent

on the maritime economic activities taking place within the Grand Harbour. The harbour was a thriving hub of activity when Malta was servicing the needs of a fortress economy during the British era (Borg & Mayo 2006); this activity has drastically diminished.

Our research starts by questioning the underlying assumption permeating the Valletta 2018 Foundation bid. This bid departs from the premise that cultural and urban regeneration will bring about social and economic regeneration in the area. Florida (2013) and Zukin (2013) are of the opinion that the creative or symbolic industry, as a vector of economic growth, can have a trickledown effect (Massey 2005) on those who are socially deprived. The effectiveness of this trickledown economy has been put into question with regard to urban development among the disenfranchised (Bowman *et al.* 2014). In this era, cities are competing for investment on a national and global level to help in the regeneration and revitalisation of derelict urban areas. This is also the case in Malta.

In contrast to what has often been implied by the homogenous-sounding term ‘Cottonera’, there is in fact a lot of ‘bad blood’ between the three localities, since one of the cities has managed to attract more public and private investment than the other two (Cutajar 2014a). Birgu and Valletta have both experienced what some believe to be a cultural renaissance thanks to the number of grand projects undertaken in the area. Here, as in the European Capitals of Culture mentioned above, developer-led ostentatious ‘grand projects of regeneration which are the same everywhere for competitive cities’ materialised in buildings ‘with no sense of place and history’ without addressing the infrastructural deficiencies of the cities in question (Engelen *et al.* 2014: 10). The ‘developer-led spectacle of ambition and competition’ (Engelen *et al.* 2014: 10) – financed mostly through public sponsorship and private profit – has not improved the welfare, material well-being, cultural and political participation of a sizeable portion of the people who live there. Valletta, Bormla, l-Isla and Birgu still have a high level of unemployment when compared to the rest of Malta (National Statistics Office 2014). Valletta and Cottonera have an ageing population, lower birth rates, and a higher proportion of single-parent families when compared to the national average (Valletta 2018 Foundation 2011: 39) in spite of the urban regeneration projects which have already been undertaken.

A high proportion of the people who reside in the areas in question also tend to live in privately rented units or social housing rather than own their property (Cutajar 2014a: 77–78; National Statistics Office 2014: xxvii). People living in this area are also more likely to live in substandard housing since a good proportion of the dwellings are old, and/or are not in a good state of repair (National Statistics Office 2014: 166).

One-size-fits-all projects being undertaken in different cities around the world are giving a more homogenous look to these, without taking into consideration the local and specific. Each city consists of ‘a bundle of specific needs, resources and opportunities’ (Engelen *et al.* 2014: 11). Their idea is that urban development should be grounded on the specific needs of a city rather than on projects designed to attract the cosmopolitan ‘creative class’ to set up residence there, while pandering to the cultural tastes of the upper middle class. These are what projects like the Canary Wharf developments in East London, Marseille Republique regeneration in France, Clyde Waterfront in Glasgow, the Waterfront in Valletta and Cottonera have done. These once-derelict industrial areas and harbour fronts have been handed over to private developers who have profited from servicing the creative and moneyed classes, but neglected the needs of the rest of the population.

This type of urban development has another concomitant effect. Prior to the 1980s, the Cottonera area was the stronghold of the organized working class and the location of the Malta Drydocks. The Drydocks was Malta's largest employer, and the birthplace of trade-unionism (Zammit 1984). The economic decline of the Three Cities had deleterious consequences, especially for the industrial working class. The demise of the dockyards and the manufacturing industry led to the promotion of post-industrial policies. This had a disempowering effect on the organized working class which up to the late 1980s provided the Malta Labour Party (PL) with a power base in the area.

The legacy of the industrial era could still be felt in the sound and air pollution emanating from a privatised dockyard which is now employing workers coming from Eastern Europe (Vella 2014). Although there are often spontaneous protests against the issues raised above, some residents feel that nobody is ready to promote their needs and interests.

Place and Social Action

In this paper we are focusing on 'direct [...] localized, collective actions, which set out to achieve change through organization, mobilization and negotiation' (Blackshaw 2012: 127).

As underlined above, place has an effect on what type of 'contentious' political action takes place on a local level, while the action opted for by the community affects the production of place. As Lefebvre (1991) underlines, place precedes and conditions the actors, while the actors' action affects the space. Place is therefore both the medium and outcome of social action.

Action is also spearheaded by culture. Cultural actors share a collective identity and hence emotions, whether they are symbolic allies or enemies. Jasper (2007) refers to this as 'shared mental worlds' generating 'metaphors of meaning'. Actors refer to pre-existing meanings of a place, and through their resistance and choices, help to re-create or transform it. These metaphors of meaning derive from and define lifestyle choices, people or events, as well as rituals which arouse emotions, solidarities and beliefs.

Agents involved in social transformation may take, as one point of departure, the symbolic meaning they give to a place. The act of transformation can take different forms – it might entail holding a meeting, addressing a press conference, meeting political elites, taking part in a protest, or holding a social, educational, or cultural activity. All these can be referred to as performances. MacAloon (1984) subscribes to the idea that performances give social actors the time and space to analyse collective myths and history, and come up with alternatives. In the sections below we will take a look at which collective myths were addressed by the two organisations under observation, while assessing whether this led to change, or helped retain the status quo.

Alexander (2011) notes that any form of social drama needs a stage or space. In contentious politics, there are two types of space involved – lived space and counterspace (Soja 1996). Lived space is the strategic location from where actors come to understand what needs to be transformed. It can be regarded as the script that unfolds as people come together to scrutinise the issues which need to be tackled (Alexander 2011). Counter space is the space from where resistance is enacted. Newman (2011) refers to this counterspace as the insurrectional space emanating from the cracks actors identify within the dominant social, political and economic structures.

Performances need a script and a stage (Alexander 2011). The script in this case is the social actors' interpretation of a given situation in a particular location, at a particular moment in time. Lefebvre (1991) affirms that the script which gives rise to social transformation derives from the social actors' resistance to hegemonic structures. Place derives from the interpretation of a lived space which is being changed through the agents' actions. This is the space where the system of authority is challenged and 'ruptured by the imagining and enactment of something new' (Risager 2013: 48).

Stage and script are open-ended and contingent since they involve a number of actors coming together, each with their own idiosyncratic interpretation of the situation and what needs to be done (Klovholt, Drangland and Holgersen 2008: 162). In these types of performances, nobody is certain which actors will turn up, who will remain, which events will unfold, how they will unfold, which side will win, or the effect this will have on the audience, and who will turn out to be the audience (Alexander 2011).

These performances help create new alliances which contribute to the formation of knowledge that can generate new ideas for an alternative future. Through them, a disparate group of actors succeed through imagination and enactment in coming up with a collective vision to bring about change.

Methodology

A historical materialist understanding of experience enables researchers steeped in the local particularities of everyday experience to explicate the actual social relations in which people's lives are embedded. As subjects, we are situated within a broader socio-historical and cultural framework which shapes and contains our lives (Bannerji 1991). Institutional ethnography (Smith 1998) was used by the author to conduct a study in Bormla (Cutajar 2014a). This study helped identify how the subjects were implicated in relations of objectification and the impact these relations had on their local experience.

The main purpose of this paper is to focus on the reaction to these ruling relations. Our concern here is to trace how experience is turned into knowledge, and how this knowledge is used to transform inequitable social organisations which produce alienation and domination. Experience is where the personal and the public are implicated.

Both researchers took an active part in a number of activities, events, and meetings which took place between 2013 and 2015. Interviews were also conducted with the cultural intermediaries of the two organisations, namely Anna Spiteri who manages IRMCo. Ltd. and Katherine Azzopardi who is in charge of *Ċentru Tbexbix*. Their actions encouraged individuals and communities to become more aware of their own circumstances. Other interviews were conducted with residents, and this paper will attempt to give them voice.

Secondary data was also used to substantiate some of the results from the primary data or to help us acquire information about the setting as well as the two organisations involved. For this purpose, newspaper articles, websites, reports and minutes of meetings attended were analysed.

The researchers focused on the Cottonera area because they live there. Both of us have at some time or other participated in some of the political and social activities organised by the two organisations. Our social and political positioning brought us into contact with the two intermediaries. Experience and knowledge lead to political agency for both subjects and researchers (Smith 1998). Researchers who choose to focus on communities of their own

enculturation are motivated by their desire to address social issues critical for the people they study, and also for themselves (Williamson Nelson 1996).

Embeddedness in the field has its advantages and disadvantages. In our case it provided us with easy access to key informants with whom we were already working outside the context of this research. Although friendship helped the researchers attain closeness, we were also careful about maintaining a respectful distance because in a shared social environment, there are multiple social ties between participants and researchers. Consequently, the latter have to be more careful what they report since this will affect their relationship with the participants. Researchers are more likely to work with participants whose work they respect, and who in turn reciprocate this respect (Reinharz 1992: 62–67).

The way researchers describe and define political action can also affect other people's attitude towards it. Research can have both a legitimating and a tactical function. When researchers speak about community organisations, they can help to promote them and their cause. However, when a phenomenon is still unfolding, research may affect its progress (Risager 2012: 12) so we have had to be cautious not to undermine the credibility of such endeavours.

Anna Spiteri and Katherine Azzopardi were mainly the catalysts, the radical intellectual and charismatic individuals who helped mobilize and organize a group of people to agitate and/or bring about social change. These two women played an important role in facilitating this process, but on their own, this change would not have taken place. This is why we chose to focus on the political actions undertaken, rather than on the protagonists.

The objective of this paper is to delineate what type of change was accomplished, whether it was effective and for whom. In this context we have limited ourselves to the role of interpreters, since at the end of the day, even when there are attempts to be less exploitative, the text is still narrated and authored from the situated location of the researchers (Stacey 1997). The researcher's social and political position, determine his or her view of the social phenomenon being studied. At the end of the day, it is still the interpreter's voice which emerges during the translation, editing and presentation of data.

Women and Urban Regeneration

As Smith (2008) notes, local people are the experts on the issues they face in a given location, therefore they should be considered as the regeneration professionals. In Bormla, regeneration was driven primarily by women. Katherine Azzopardi and Anna Spiteri were not the only women who were involved in bringing about social change in Cottonera in 2014–2015. Other female agitators for change included Dr Yana Mintoff Bland who managed the *Forum tal-Komunità Bormliża*; Dr Claudia Zimmerman, director of the Three Cities Foundation together with Miriam Fiorini and Caroline S. Lawrence who co-ordinate the Friends of Cottonera Forum.

The reason why this research focused on political projects led by women, and some women and not others, was not incidental. It emanated from the inter-subjective understanding between researchers and the persons who ran the organisations under study. Both researchers and participants were interested in transformative, shared struggle in the area. We chose to focus on women as instigators of change because research demonstrates that there is a dearth of women involved in politics in Malta (Cutajar 2014b). This research will however underline that women are very active when it comes to community-based action for transformation.

Gutman and Goldfarb (2012) regard community development projects such as those undertaken by Spiteri and Azzopardi as ‘the politics of small things’. These projects ‘often emerge from cracks in the order, but they create places where people meet and discuss, appear, and reveal who they are and how they can act together’ (2012: 498).

Anna Spiteri and the Open Spaces Project

At the time of the study Anna Spiteri was the managing director of Integrated Resource Management (IRM) Co. Ltd., a company which was established in 1994 (OPTIMA n.d.). This company consisted of Anna, her husband Dirk de Ketelaere and a number of research assistants (IRMCo. 2015). This company conducted environmental impact assessments, projects concerned with water resources and irrigation together with coastal zone management by bidding for EU funds. They have worked on projects in Malta, North Africa, Middle East and South America. The project we will be dealing with in this paper will be the EU funded Mare Nostrum Integrated Coastal Zone project entitled ‘Bridging the policy-implementation gap in Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) across the Mediterranean Sea Basin’ (IRMCo. 2015).

In the past Spiteri used her scientific expertise in a bid to improve the quality of life of the locality in which she was born, raised and lived in, namely L-Isla. In 2011–2012 Spiteri helped spearhead the protest against the uprooting of *Ficus Nitida* trees found along the Bormla and L-Isla waterfronts as part of the €1.8 million ‘embellishment’ project conducted by the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation (*Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar* 2012). With the help of *Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar* (n.d.) and concerned residents from the Cottonera area, they ensured that this officially sanctioned vandalism did not take place.

We chose to analyse in more detail the ‘political’ action organised by Anna Spiteri in 2014–2015. For this purpose we participated in a good number of meetings and social events organized by IRMCo. Ltd. in the project entitled ‘Safeguarding our green open spaces in the Grand Harbour’. The objective of this project was to identify ‘institutional-legal implementation gaps in coastal planning and management in the Maltese Islands, with a focus on the Grand Harbour area’ (IRMCo. 2015).

On the 26th March 2014 we received a recruiting letter which was sent to key individuals residing or working in the localities around the Grand Harbour stating that ‘the Grand Harbour area is continuously under pressure from competing outside private entities and interests, many times ignoring the intrinsic heritage value of the area, and the social and cultural needs of the local communities’ (Anna Spiteri, 26th March 2014, private correspondence). This letter called for the protection and enhancement of the resources found in the Grand Harbour; it helped to mobilize a number of residents with a close attachment to the locality. Others joined because they were interested in the protection of environmental or historical heritage even if they did not live there. The group was made up of foreign and Maltese residents, local council representatives, as well as environmental and experts with no other ties to the locality and culture.

Blackshaw (2012) notes that in today’s society, neighbourhood and geographical place are not as significant for the formation of communities to promote causes. He believes that this is due to the fact that temporality and mobility linked with contemporary life has weakened social ties in modern societies. This might not be the case in Malta, especially when it comes to analysing the behaviour of people who were born or raised in Cottonera. The political identity of the neighbourhood is still an important tool for defining people’s identity here.

The IRMCo. project was based on the premise that local people are experts where revitalisation and regeneration of localities are involved. This bottom-up approach is not common in Malta since policy makers and/or developers have the propensity of contacting communities affected after projects have already been designed. This means that the urban renewal or regeneration projects in Malta rarely fit in with the needs and aspirations of the community.

The participants during the Open Spaces meetings decried the fact that projects were often designed by people who were not acquainted with the characteristics and needs of the area. They mentioned the Cottonera Waterfront project as a case in point. The participants felt that developers had invested in giving the area a pretty front, but neglected the backstage, 'leaving the social problems that lie behind the mask unseen and uncared for' (Harvey 1989: 21). The participants insisted that regeneration projects in the area needed to improve the residents' quality of life, while finding ways of increasing work and employment opportunities for the residents.

Borg and Mayo (2006: 81) speak about the inter- and intra-local council rivalry which exists in the Cottonera area. This still exists, so does the suspicion, mistrust, together with the 'internalized oppression' which prevents groups/individuals from different local councils to work together. However, Spiteri managed to bring together 'Sixty-five local community members from the inner Grand Harbour area, representing seven different local councils, five NGOs, three historical societies, three government authorities and three different academic institutions, as well as legal experts, teachers, researchers and local residents' took part in these seminars (Spiteri 2015). This project was effective insofar as it managed to bring together people from the Three Cities, Maltese and non-Maltese residents as well as those with different political leanings. As one can notice, the majority of those who took part in this project were middle class. Blackshaw (2012: 162) notes that middle class communities have the necessary political know-how and organizational base to come up with effective action. We however question this premise.

Individuals from different spheres of life came together to tackle fissures in the material basis of the local society. Those present helped to map out an eco-heritage trail. This exercise was conducted with the hope that it might help attract tourists and/or investment, thus increasing employment and leisure opportunities in the area. The 'Local Communities Charter for liveable cultural landscapes in our Grand Harbour: A Plan for our Children' (Anon 2014) was drawn by two of the members – Catherine Polidano and Reuben Grima. The Charter describes principles of best practice on safeguarding and sharing built heritage as well as green and open spaces. Six local councils endorsed this Charter when it was launched in September 2014.

The overall objective of the project was to use the data derived from the research to delineate gaps in Maltese environmental policies. The methodology used to carry out this project was promoted among the other countries which participated in the Mare Nostrum project, namely Spain, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Italy and Turkey. This project was also conducted to show authorities 'how public participation can be effectively carried out and used as an important tool to advance local environmental planning processes' in Malta and beyond (Spiteri 2014 minutes, plus pers. comm.).

When Anna Spiteri was asked whether the project had led to any social change, she replied that it was still too early to find out what fruit would emerge from the consultancy process

(Anna Spiteri, 8th December 2014, pers. comm.). One however needs to point out that this was an experiment in social development undertaken with EU funds. Experiments tend to fizzle out once the necessary funding is no longer available. The benefits of such experiments tend to emerge five to eight years down the line, according to Tania Scopazzi, a community worker who led a number of community projects in Bormla (interviewed in 2010).

Both the public and private sectors need to invest more in such experiments. Blackshaw (2012: 168) however notes that we are living in an era which is risk averse. Policy makers are very reluctant to invest money in projects which might bear fruit in the long rather than the short term. They need to be persuaded that regeneration with the people and not for the people bears fruit eventually, and tends to be more sustainable for the locality in the long run.

IRMCo. Ltd. did not achieve the ‘radical change’ it had originally envisaged. The heritage trails attracted interest and public participation, which was a considerable achievement in itself. However, this did not mean that policy makers consulted the residents, and in the few instances when they did the residents’ suggestions were not always taken on board.

Ċentru Tbexbix – A Catalyst in the Community

Ċentru Tbexbix is located in a section of Bormla that was a medieval area (Anon 2014). This Centre was set up by the Maltese chapter of Ananda Marga, an international organisation disseminating ‘Neohumanism’ (Ananda Marga Gurukula). At the time of the interviews, the Centre was run by Katherine Azzopardi with the help of a number of local and international volunteers (Anon 2014b).

At the time research for this paper was conducted, the Centre catered mainly for children coming from low income families. Programmes in English, drama, arts, crafts, sports, yoga and healthier ways of living were conducted. The children who attended the centre came from the surrounding area, Church homes and/or the Hal Far Immigration Reception Centre. Some of the programmes were designed to help students who felt alienated in mainstream educational structures, find their potential and build their confidence through practical and hands-on learning experiences. There were also programmes designed to promote multiculturalism and integration. From the feedback given by teachers and heads of state schools in the Cottonera area, the children and young people who attend the Centre’s after-school and summer school programmes tended to do academically better than their counterparts, especially where English, geography and creativity were concerned.

This Centre also provided psychological support services for women, especially single mothers, those affected by substance abuse, and others (*Ċentru Tbexbix* 2014). Attempts were also made to encourage inactive women, especially those dependent on social benefits, to become financially independent. One of the services introduced by Katherine Azzopardi during the time of the research, was *Daqqa t’Id* (Helping Hand) (interview with Katherine Azzopardi), a service intended to provide help and company to homebound elderly people.

The Centre also promoted the tangible heritage found in the Cottonera area. The students and teachers who visited the Centre often had preconceived ideas about Bormla, which were dispelled once they visited the Centre to learn about the varied history of the locality.

The Centre is found in St. Lazarus Street, one of the poverty and crime hot spots in Bormla (Cutajar 2014a). Katherine Azzopardi and Didi Rasamayii (one of the initial project directors) said that the people in the neighbourhood were initially suspicious about the fact that anybody would want to buy a derelict ruin in that part of Bormla. The house they bought in this

traditionally working-class community had been empty for ages, and the neighbours could not understand what had attracted ‘outsiders’ to invest in a stigmatized area full of ruined, abandoned, and dilapidated old houses.

This state of abandonment was not limited to this neighbourhood. As one of the participants underlined – *‘Bormla naħseb li hu l-iktar post li huwa minsi, mitluq u jissemma biss fil-ħażin’* (I think that Bormla is the most forgotten, neglected locality, only described in negative terms); *‘Bormla sabiħa iżda traskurata sia minn xi nies u mill-gvern u mill-kunsill’* (Bormla is beautiful but has been neglected by the authorities, local council and residents). Another resident living in social housing added, *‘Id-djar għandhom bżonn jirrangawhom għax veru qegħdin fi stat ħażin u ta’ periklu li lanqas l-animali ma jgħixu fihom.[...] nixtieq li jiġi xi ħadd jara f’liema stat qed ngħix’* (The houses need to be fixed because they are in a terrible and dangerous state and are not fit for animals to live in. I wish somebody would come to see the conditions I live in). As one of the residents pointed out, *‘Ilhom jgħidu li ħa jsir xi ħaġa, iżda qatt ma jsir xejn’* (We are constantly being promised that something will be done [about the situation], but nothing ever happens).

Although a number of projects have been undertaken in the five years prior to this research, these have not helped improve the quality of life of a good portion of the residents who live there, especially those badly hit by the dismantling of the dockyard and manufacturing industries. The Prime Minister of Malta on the 21st August 2015 assured the residents that the setting up of the American University of Malta in Bormla will ‘lead to industrial and economic development, but even social development in the area’ (Borg 2015). Similar promises had been made when the Cottonera Waterfront and Grand Harbour Marina were being promoted among the residents of the Three Cities, but few residents found employment with the entities that set up business there. Other projects which did not provide the residents with much-needed employment opportunities included the renovation of Verdala and St. Nicholas housing estates, and the renovation of the Bormla side of the Cottonera Waterfront.

The residents expressed even greater disappointment when they compared the few restoration projects being undertaken in Bormla with the millions of euros invested in restoration projects undertaken in Valletta and nearby Birgu. The lack of investment in Bormla made them feel that their community was overlooked and irrelevant. Blackshaw (2012: 151) notes that when communities feel that they have been excluded from the resources made available to others, this can result in hostility and sometimes violence.

Visitors to the Centre appreciated the cultural heritage of the house and the surrounding area and this made the neighbours realise that their own houses could also be used to attract more people. The residents are aware of the potential of their locality and demand that the spaces covered by any future heritage rehabilitation projects remain accessible to all. This has not been the case with areas such as Fort St. Angelo in Birgu, and Fort St. Elmo in Valletta.

The residents were adamant that somebody needed to come up with creative ways of using this heritage to attract tourists and other investment to the area. Their hope was that such projects might create employment opportunities for the younger generation – something which the Cottonera Waterfront had promised, but never effected (see Cutajar 2008). *‘Għandna bżonn aktar xogħol għax iż-żgħażaġh kollha qed jitolqu ’l barra minn Bormla għax m’hawnx xogħol’* (We need more employment opportunities in the area for the younger generation because they are all leaving), added another resident. A young graduate explained why she wanted to leave

Bormla. As she underlined, '*ġieli ltqajt ma' problem biex insib xogħol għax jien minn Bormla – għalhekk nixtieq nitlaq*' (Sometimes the fact that I come from Bormla prevents me from finding employment – that's why I want to leave).

These residents felt that the social fabric in Bormla was being undermined, and that something needed to be done quickly to stop this from further unravelling. They looked with envy at the regeneration projects taking place in Birgu and Valletta, thinking that similar projects in Bormla might be the answer to their problems. They were, however, not always aware that these initiatives were contributing to the displacement of people, including some who had worked to attract this investment in the first place (Cutajar 2008).

The same thing had happened when the Marseille Republique regeneration project took place in France (Ruffin 2007). The working class population had been driven out. In Marseille they had been driven out by the non-renewal of leases and growing rents. These and other means had been used in Birgu (Cutajar 2008). The Marseille Republique regeneration project which, like Valletta 2018, was intended to create a European Capital of Culture ended up privileging the middle-classes and displacing the already marginalised. The same is happening in Malta – Birgu being a case in point. This is what happens when, according to Blackshaw, regeneration is something 'done to communities, rather than with and for them' (2012: 182). Pierson and Smith (2001) maintain that the most successful efforts to revitalise deprived urban areas derive from the communities in question, or are done with them. The fear is that when this happens, regeneration leads to the displacement of those people who helped to revitalise the area in the first place.

Up until some time ago one could describe Bormla as a traditional working class community, a community where a high degree of social solidarity – at least among Bormla residents – was still in place (see the 2009–2010 needs assessment survey in Cutajar 2014a). Social solidarity helped individuals survive, especially those in need of social, emotional and financial support. This high sense of solidarity was in a way facilitated by the social exclusion faced by the community on a national level. The people realized that the only way to survive in a hostile environment was through helping each other. Blackshaw (2012: 102) however feels that these strong communal ties are sometimes detrimental since they might constrain the upward mobility of those with the resources and skill to do so.

Two types of residents took part in the survey mentioned above. First, there were those who limited themselves to blaming the authorities for the detrimental state Bormla was in. Then there were also those who acknowledged that *somebody* needed to do something about this, and suggested a possible plan of action. One demanded that '*il-popli tal-Kottonera jingħaqdu u jsemmgħu lehenhom*' (the Cottonera people should unite and make themselves heard). Others realized that they could not depend on others and needed to do something themselves. Even though a number of consultation meetings with the residents took place between 2013 and 2015 the residents were not sure their voices would be heard.

The people living in the area around *Ċentru Thexbix* were some of the few who realized that they needed to do something themselves if they wanted something to be done. They started renovating the houses they lived in. They started cleaning the areas near their houses and buying plants to embellish the area. Some stopped watering their plants when there was a hike in water bills. One of these residents took extreme measures to ensure that his little street garden was not targeted by vandals. He used to guard over his plants for long hours to ensure that these were not destroyed or stolen.

Those who could afford to do so bought dilapidated houses in the area and renovated them. Some invested in this property so that their children would remain in Bormla once they got married. Lorries, cranes or other engines cannot access these narrow, stepped, historic streets so this often meant hard work for those concerned since they had to carry material by hand up and down long flights of steps.

The renovation of the old houses and the greening of the streets started attracting tourists who took photos and posted them online. These photos attracted the attention of property developers, and the value of property in the area started rising. Their invested effort bore fruit as more people started buying decrepit houses, renovating them, and in so doing, prevented drug abusers from using these buildings for criminal purposes.

We do not know whether Blackshaw would categorise this communal effort as community development. For us this proved to be an example where the neighbourhood worked together in a productive manner 'to improve their collective conditions and existence' (Blackshaw 2012: 164). Katherine Azzopardi and her team of volunteers, coming from all over Europe, were the persons who directly and indirectly helped facilitate this improvement.

Centru Tbexbix helped encourage self-help and self-determination – through the courses they organise and by their presence in the community. Blackshaw (2012: 166, 168) is however afraid that when institutions promote self-help and social responsibility, they are only helping in the maintenance of existing social inequalities, and not addressing the global causes of social and economic disintegration. Such community endeavours might entice governments to invest less in services whose remit is to dismantle pockets of deprivation, and leave it up to communities to find localised solutions for their problems. However, if the community does not act on their own behalf, no institution will.

Conclusion

Both Katherine Azzopardi and Anna Spiteri promoted community development 'through egalitarian and participative relationships by starting where the community is' (Blackshaw 2012: 165). Both enabled the community they worked with to define their own needs, and they helped foster creative and co-operative networks of people.

Top-down, investment-led approaches are packing waterfronts with luxury accommodation, offices, leisure facilities and catering outlets aimed at attracting tourists and the upper middle class, and in the process destroying the distinctive spirit of place (Rodwell 2011) which initially attracted investment. Measures might also be taken to move disenfranchised groups out of the area, dispersing them in the process and depriving them from the social and emotional networks which had helped them previously survive.

Sensitive community engagement needs to include the active participation of the poorest members of that locality in order to change existing inequitable social processes and structures. Not all social groups may be in a position to find effective solutions to their problems. However, when community development projects use the 'felt needs' of the community these might neglect those needs which the communities might not be aware of, or even prefer to ignore (Glen 1993).

Community regeneration needs 'to be returned to its proper function: as providing people with decent cities to live, work and leisure in' (Blackshaw 2012: 185). This should be the main objective behind capital cities of culture – using culture to invest in people, whatever their socio-cultural background.

Note

1. Ananda Marga is a controversial movement founded in 1955 by the Bengali Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar. It designates both an organisation of people engaged in spiritual and humanitarian practices, as well as the doctrine on which these practices are based. It involves tens of thousands of disciplines in different parts of the world, but the greatest number is in India. (cf. Vox 2008)

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