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Dipartimento Interateneo di Scienze, Progetto e Politiche del Territorio
Eccellenza MIUR 2018-2022

Doctoral Dissertation
Doctoral Program in Urban and Regional Development (34th Cycle)

Participatory dynamics and public values in World Heritage sites:

The case of the World Heritage serial site *Arab-Norman Palermo and the
Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and the Monreale* (Italy).

By

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Politecnico di Torino
2022



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Summary

This thesis investigates the issue of participatory dynamics and public values in the UNESCO World Heritage (WH) serial site *Palermo Arab-Norman and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale* (Italy), with a specific focus on Palermo urban context. The notion of public values is closely related to participatory dynamics. Moreover, it refers to the wide range of benefits that the participation of citizens in public sector decisions may bring to society at large.

Considering the concept of 'heritage' as an evolving social construct, this thesis explores the intertwined and fragmented facets of participatory processes applied both during the creation and development of WH sites. The research stems from a divergence between WH policies and practices. To be more specific, WH Operational Guidelines and related programs, increasingly emphasize public participation in WH sites' decision making, considering it a precondition of inclusive and sustainable development. Instead WH case studies highlight the challenge in making decisional arenas more accessible to civil society. From this, the growing relevance of participatory enhancement initiatives in influencing decisions emerges.

To address this divergence, this research reflects upon relevant study fields, considering political and social sciences and discussing the theme of heritage. From this multidisciplinary framework the *Heritage Participation Matrix* is conceived, allowing to reconstruct the unfolding of participatory processes within three different units of analysis of the World Heritage (WH) serial site *Palermo Arab-Norman and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale* (Italy): the WH site governance, the *Cassaro Alto* and *Danisinni* districts in the historic city center of Palermo.

The exhaustive case study investigation proves that, although the governance of WH sites may lack in participation, created spaces for participation uncover a vibrant scene. In these spaces, public values are continuously recreated through participatory interactions between representatives of civil society, local institutions, and additional stakeholders.

Through a qualitative micro-level analysis of participatory processes before and after the WH nomination, this thesis yields diverse empirical findings and insights for future research.

Firstly, the investigation argues that participation in WH sites' governance unfolds as a gradual process, whereby both participatory mechanisms and generated public values vary mutually.

Secondly the research calls for a *polycentric participatory governance* structure of WH sites. This type of structure is endowed with multiple decisional units, which gather several representatives of civil society with a fair degree of decisional autonomy. A shared interest in contributing to the care and development of WH site brings together unit members, consequently facilitating the achievement



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and implementation of common decisions. Decisional units may vary over time and work synergistically under a central coordination.

Thirdly, the research delves into the spatial nature of participation, elaborating the concept of *WH relational buffer zones*. The existing literature depicts WH buffer zones as mere technical areas with the role of preserving WH sites through the establishment of fixed boundaries. Also, the WH relational buffer zones are conceived as social spaces, generated by the articulated participatory processes related to WH sites. The proximity of Buffer zones to WH sites makes them the ideal sites to study participatory dynamics.

By thoroughly exploring the WH serial site of *Palermo Arab-Norman and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale*, this research encourages a greater engagement of heritage scholars in the analysis of participatory mechanisms concerning WH sites. This would help deconstruct the idealistic perception of public participation in WH decisions. At the same time, further investigations may provide pragmatic suggestions for policy makers on how to strengthen participation in WH sites' governance, in order to benefit society as a whole.