



**Citation:** S. De Falco, S. Cerutti, G. Fiorentino (2022). The Iconographic Exploitation of the Urban Space for the Amplification of the Symbols of the Camorra. The Case of Spanish Quarters, Naples, Italy. *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* serie 14, 5(2): 79-93. doi: 10.36253/bsgi-1717

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

**For Italian evaluation purposes:** The paper was conceived jointly by the authors. For Italian evaluation purposes, Stefano De Falco takes responsibility for sections 3, Giulia Fiorentino for section 1 and Stefania Cerutti for section 5. Furthermore, Stefano De Falco and Giulia Fiorentino take responsibility for sections 2 and Stefano De Falco and Stefania Cerutti take responsibility for section 4. All the cartographies and figures have been elaborated by Stefano De Falco.

## The Iconographic Exploitation of the Urban Space for the Amplification of the Symbols of the Camorra. The Case of Spanish Quarters, Naples, Italy

### La strumentalizzazione iconografica dello spazio urbano per il rafforzamento dei simboli della camorra. Il caso dei Quartieri Spagnoli di Napoli

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**Abstract.** This contribution is inspired by a current scenario regarding the city of Naples, Italy, where a strong popular uprising is underway against local institutions that are destroying the Camorra murals celebrating its “heroes” died in “war”. These events are very interesting to analyse the theme of the iconographic exploitation of urban space by the criminal part of society in order to amplify the identity symbols of a tribal structure such as the Camorra. While on the one hand the analysis aims to show the positive response of civil society and institutions in eradicating these celebratory icons of evil, on the other hand the research intends to emphasise the profound and worrying systemic modification of public space according to subjective and negative canons that, however, are also shared by some intellectuals and even an administrative court.

**Keywords:** murals, Naples, camorra, space.

**Riassunto.** Il presente contributo prende spunto da uno scenario di cronaca attuale che riguarda la città di Napoli, dove è in corso una forte rivolta popolare contro le istituzioni locali che stanno distruggendo i murales della camorra celebrativi dei loro “eroi” morti in “guerra”. Lo spunto è molto interessante per analizzare il tema della strumentalizzazione iconografica dello spazio urbano ad opera della parte criminale della società al fine di amplificare i simboli identitari di una struttura tribale quale è la camorra. Se da un lato l’analisi vuole mostrare la positiva risposta della società civile e delle istituzioni nello sradicamento di tali icone celebrative del male, dall’altro la ricerca intende sottolineare la profonda e preoccupante sistemica attività di modifica dello spazio pubblico secondo canoni soggettivi e negativi che tuttavia risultano perfino condivisi da una parte degli intellettuali e da un tribunale amministrativo.

**Parole chiave:** murales, Napoli, camorra, spazio.

## 1. Introduction

Art and space, two paradigmatic elements that together are capable of developing a representative force of an enormous semantic power. Both with reference to positive and negative content.

Street art, as a territorialized and territorializing artistic practice, has a specific interest in geography (Amato 2015, Tissino Di Giulio 2019) and more generally in all those disciplines that focus on the territory and the processes of territorialisation, de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation that shape our living environment.

An intrinsically urban form of expression, street art comes traditionally from and for the suburbs. It represents the evolution of writing or *graffiti* that became established in the 1960s in the ghettos of New York (Baudrillard 1976) and later spread to Europe as a practice of rebellion against the pre-established order and the conquest of urban space by suburban gangs (Iovino 2019).

The particular case dealt with here instead concerns the central districts of the city of Naples, not the suburbs, where there is a strong popular revolt against local institutions that are destroying Camorra murals celebrating its “heroes” who died in “war”. A war intended as a fight against the police and institutions. These thought-provoking recent events allow to analyse the theme of the iconographic exploitation of urban space by the criminal part of society in order to amplify the identity symbols of a tribal structure such as the Camorra. It is indeed “images rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements which determine most of our philosophical beliefs” (Rorty 1979, 12). Metaphors lead to the heart of the epistemological problem par excellence: the gap between reality and representation (Giaccaria 2017). In a negative reverse perspective to that of the Camorra, the concept highlighted by Prince (2016) applies to young people: the vision of self in the future is inextricably bound with place.

While the analysis aims to show the positive response of civil society and institutions in the eradication of these celebratory icons of evil, the research also intends to emphasise the profound and worrying systemic modification of public space according to subjective and negative canons, which are also shared by some intellectuals and even an administrative court.

A science based on the unknowability, and therefore on the removal, of reality external to thought, however, seems to be a solution to the problem that entails more difficulties than it solves. An initial response was therefore that, formulated by critical realism, of attempting to combine realist metaphysics with criticism – recovering from thought, accepting certain immanentist positions

at first and then attempting to overcome them – but this seems to have yielded no lasting results (Vanni Rovighi 1980). Another response, put forward by some philosophers, above all with a Jewish-Christian background, has been to dare a return to classical metaphysics as a solution for 21st century gnoseology. For them, to a knowledge of truth understood as “that which, by provoking a rupture, awakens, brings into the world and liberates”, it seems that all too often, precisely in order to avoid the pain of rupture, they prefer a knowledge of truth that arises from a “de-realising mediation” (Hadjadj, Midal 2011, 21 and 74). This supposed truth apparently satisfies the individual but actually alienates him or her, so that the only solution to this state of things is, according to these authors, to accept what one insists on rejecting, namely the priority of being over thought, an approach typical of classical metaphysics (Bagnoli 2018).

But there is also another important aspect that drives the scientific investigation of these phenomena of spatial sociality, even if in a negative logic as in this case where space is exploited, and it is the importance of the intangible aspects that arise from this scenario. The occupation of a public space by means of icons and symbols of crime generates mental maps in the individuals of that place. Mental mapping (*cognitive mapping*) is a process consisting of a series of psychological transformations through which an individual acquires, encodes, stores, retrieves and decodes information relating to the location and attributes of a phenomenon in his or her everyday environment (Down, Stea 1973a; 1973b; 1973c).

Although the theory of possible selves considers the role of social contexts in identity development, the potential influence of the physical environment is understudied (Prince 2016).

Within this framework, geographical research can make a useful contribution in the study of the relationship between individuals/spaces and the processes through which the manifestation of this relationship makes organisational changes, both physical and non-physical, evident, moving from the perception to the reality level. Geography has the privilege of being able to take an interest in any aspect of the material and immaterial anthropic landscapes, precisely because everything has its own spatial dimension and ends up taking place on the earth’s surface (Koutsopoulos 2011, Blomley 2016, Macchia 2019). “Geographers share with other earth scientists an interest in a common scenario, the earth’s surface, rather than abstract space, but they look at this scenario from the point of view of the social scientist” (Haggett 1988, 532). Paul Claval states that “les géographes s’attachaient hier aux aspect matériels, au hardware de l’activité des groupes humains. La géographie

culturelle leur fait découvrir de leurs logiciel, de leur software” (Claval 1992, 32). It is precisely the study of software, of the “logic of functioning” of human peoples and groups, thus ends up becoming an essential step in understanding what happens at a concrete level on the earth’s surface, since it is from these logics that choices, types of approach, responses to challenges arise. It is the software, the “programs installed” in each human group, that create the specificity of the hardware, that is the complex of material actions that this specific human group opposes to the stresses of what surrounds it.

The contribution is organized as follows. In the next paragraph the theme of the relationship between physical space and symbolism is explored. In the first place, the reflection is developed according to an ethically neutral perspective that also historically traces man’s need to use symbols and to identify them, in particular, in the physical space in which he is immersed. Secondly, this theme is declined to the phenomenon of the criminal organization known as the Camorra. In the following paragraphs, the focus is on the case of a particular neighbourhood in the historic centre of the city of Naples, called “Quartieri Spagnoli”, where a strong popular uprising is underway against the local institutions that are destroying the murals of the “heroes” of the Camorra: after providing a contextualization of the neighbourhood and its socio-cultural background, the current specific case is critically described. Reflections and final remarks close the work.

## 2. The Instrumental Importance of Physical Space as an Amplifier of Symbols

According to the geographical approach, absolute space reflects the concepts introduced by Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Descartes and is associated with the metaphor of the container, in which a decoupling between “space” and “physical objects” is conceivable. Relative space, on the other hand, can “be understood as a relationship between objects that exists only because objects exist and relate to each other” (Harvey 1973, 13). Relative space is concatenated with non-Euclidean geometry. In this conception, space does not maintain independence, but arises from the structure of the relative position of objects among themselves; thus, they become symbols of great value. When the concept of relative space is used, it only becomes a dominant and symbolically charged element if an observer ascribes meaning to it. Objects are no longer confined within the absolute space of a Euclidean coordinate system, but can be interpreted as symbols, depending

on objective and contingent purposes. Perspectives and purposes that can be adopted for the study of spatial phenomena, which are also applicable to particular cases such as the places where the Camorra lives and operates.

Strabo offers a fundamental clue for understanding the idea of the so-called *chora*: it is land as the basis, *ground*, of human actions along the history (Mangani 2007, Bonfiglioli 2016). And the *chora* can become a geographical reference insofar as it allows to observe the streaks and changes in terms of the physicality of the images produced of/in a given context and the symbols that go with them (Bonfiglioli 2020). This triggers among geographers the need for an interpretation of various landscapes, territories or places, which is not only “objective” but also has a deeply cultural, subjective, psychological content (Lando 2012)<sup>1</sup>.

Looking at the rock paintings of the Upper Palaeolithic, one can see that their bodies were tattooed. In the Italian Alps, examples of tattoos have been found on the frozen body of a man found in 1991, who lived over 5300 years ago. These and many other examples demonstrate how primitive this practice of using symbols is. Many ancient civilizations used to tattoo the body with designs to which they even attributed magical powers. Among these are the Maori, the Samoans, the Egyptians, the Aztecs, the Celts, the Scythians, the Filipinos, the natives of America, the Eskimos, the Hawaiians, and Tahitians and many others. It can also be pointed out that ancestral and tribal rock engravings have been found on the walls of caves usually found in grazing pastures areas, near springs and lakes. They represent both realities of everyday pastoral and agricultural life, as well as symbolic and fantastic figures. This is so-called “prehistoric art” that, in the Palaeolithic period, has mainly magical and propitiatory purposes, while it later acquires sacred and ornamental purposes in the Neolithic period.

It may seem strange, combining geographically and historically very distant examples, but the tribal sense of the “families” of the criminal organization, called the Camorra, in Naples reproduces, also if according to negative ideals, the dynamics of peoples historically linked to a cultural identity made of symbols, as in the case of African peoples. For example, in his article *Cameroon: A country united by ethnic ambition and difference* Francis Nyamnjoh uses, in fact, socio-political arguments to support the point that “the only thing that unites Cam-

<sup>1</sup> For an interpretation of the landscapes of organised crime in the Italian mainland south, the territorial, economic, social, criminal and ‘narrational’ peculiarities of these particular geographical scenarios must therefore be analysed (Pascolini 2006; Simeone 2012).

eroon is a common sense of ethnic ambition and difference, and the need to pursue this under the patronage of the godfather state” (Nyamnjoh 1999, 118). The thrust of Nyamnjoh argument is that the politics of regional and ethnic balance, the chronic lack of vision as a country, the lack of real commitment to democracy, the propensity to vacillate on most issues of collective interest, together with an infinite ability to develop survival strategies, have acted to counter all meaningful attempts to pursue common interests and aspirations. A scenario that although related to a totally different place, well reproduces the situation of the city of Naples.

The understanding of tribal dynamics, especially in this case study relating to urban tribes, is very complex and the scientific approaches to the subject have generated over time a specific discipline known as “geography of perception”. It constitutes a line of thought, or rather a disciplinary matrix developed in the North American geographical context since the 1960s. Its starting point was the observation that the “extreme polysemy of the territory” is the element that makes it difficult both to interpret the relationship between man and the environment and to evaluate its meanings and values. Originally defined as the behavioural revolution, it is based on some key concepts: the actions of individuals in the environment can only be understood and interpreted if the cognitive processes that lead to action are analysed; there is no “objective external” environment, but as many “behavioural environments” as there are groups or categories of people acting; the social or physical environment is not important, but what matters is the image that the individual or the group makes of it (Bianchi 1987, 345).

The sealing through symbols of a tribal belonging can be read in an oxymoronic key as an action capable of giving form of realization in the space (urban in this case) to a metaphor. A metaphor that interprets the root in a mere meaning of identity risks becoming complicit in a dangerous reduction of complexity: one’s own identity is set against, threatening or threatened, to that of the other, tracing insurmountable boundaries, preventing recognition of the other, first and foremost of its own existence. The anthropological need for anchorage may today find an answer, perhaps, not so much in the rediscovery of variously declined community affiliations, but in a rediscovery of cosmopolitanism as form of rooting of the individual in “*politeia*” (πολιτεία). Roots remain an anthropological need that the human being satisfy, in continuity with their past, by taking root in small organizations such as the family, social and spatial communities with physical and even virtual anchors.

Precisely the concept of family and belonging to the family with blood is the fulcrum at the hearth of

the code of life of the Camorra, Mafia and ‘Ndrangheta, criminal organizations defined as “mafia”.

A person belonging to the Camorra family is celebrated as a baptism. The set of symbols and rituals that characterize these celebrations of belonging present endowments, logic and syntax almost analogous to all criminal family structures in the world. Whether it is the initiation into the Cosa Nostra, the Camorra, the ‘Ndrangheta, the Sacred Crown United, or the Japanese yakuza, the Chinese triads, the “structural form” underlying the affiliation rites remains the same everywhere.

There are essentially three constituent elements of the Camorra initiation ceremonial: the recitation of verbal formulas pronounced by the initiation master and the postulant, often resorting to a cryptic language aimed at giving an aura of mystery to the context and producing an emotional intensification between the presents; the display and manipulation of the sacred which is entrusted with the task of conferring symbolic efficacy and the value of constitutionality to the rite; the solemn oath of adherence to the values and rules of conduct of the Camorra family.

In these practices, space assumes a central dimension, as in life so after death. It is a necessary strategy to highlight the tribal and ritual power of the physical space in which one operates outside the family. In recent years, this occupation through identity symbols of belonging to the Camorra family has also affected the digital space to a considerable extent, as the profiles of Camorra family members display photographs on social platforms that blatantly display all the Camorra symbolism. In the wake of a certain filmography, this social ostentation on the part of the affiliates leads to emulation even by young people who are strangers to the Camorra world.

The rites of the Camorra generally begin with a formula of sacralization of space, a sort of consecration that, at the end of the rite, determines a functional transformation of that space, even if this is a public place: if it was previously a place of transit and passage from the moment of the celebration onwards, it becomes a sacred, holy and inviolable place. This process of sacralization, in addition to the verbal formula pronounced by the initiation master, is guaranteed by the evocation of mythological or religious figures that vary – from the archangel Michael to the Madonna del Soccorso, from Osso, Mastrosso and Calcagnosso, to Gaspare, Melchiorre and Baldassarre, including the Italian national heroes of the historical phenomenon of the *Risorgimento*, Mazzini, Garibaldi and La Marmora – depending on the contexts or degrees of initiation envisaged by the criminal organization. As Walter

Benjamin (1980) pointed out, for several decades now, these dynamics based on the value of space have taken on greater importance in Naples than in other places. One of the first cities the author visited during his investigations was precisely Naples, which rises between rocky tides. It is precisely from this characteristic that Benjamin introduces the concept of ‘porosity’, which extends to the elements of public and private space. For the author, the concept of public and private no longer exists, as does the dichotomy of inside-outside, since life and architecture merge and coexist, one inseparable from the other. The concept of space, in Benjamin’s philosophy, should therefore not be understood as mere physical space, but as a place within which activities, relationships and actions take place.

The highlighted dynamics and practices contribute to generating a semantic and meaning landscape made possible precisely by the socio-cultural meaning attributed to individuals, communities and their feeling and experiencing of places (Bozzato 2018; De Falco 2018). It takes on here the specific contours and contents of the territorial and organisational complexity induced by mafia crime: transdisciplinary perspectives are therefore needed in order to study and understand them in their broader social and anthropological dimensions. It is in this direction that geography assumes an important role, combining the analysis of the material expressions of mafia power with those relating to the intangible and value capital produced, and hypothesising not only analytical motivations but also interpretative/predictive scenarios.

The reference to the rite of baptism, perhaps the most symbolic of all for Christianity, is also significant. It is also reflected in the presence of godparents who play a fundamental role both in the recruitment of the novice, and in the rite of affiliation that introduces a member into the honoured society and in all his subsequent conduct of life, for which the godfather himself is held responsible and guarantor.

Another recurring *topos* in the rites of affiliation is blood. It is made to come out through a cut of the forearm or through the prick of a finger and is dropped on a votive image subsequently burned in the palm of the neophyte’s hand who is asked to pronounce a short promissory formula. As to why blood plays such a decisive role in initiation rituals, it can be useful to recall the considerations that Luigi Lombardi Satriani sets out in his introduction to *Fratelli di Sangue* (brothers of blood), the book by Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso (2019) on the ‘Ndrangheta. According to the Calabrian anthropologist, understanding the role of blood in the criminal initiation ceremony means first of all recognizing the profound meaning that the same blood has in the

southern folklore culture, therefore it means considering what, in an intercultural and diachronic perspective, blood represents in the light of a universal symbolic thought. Blood is an element charged with intense symbolic value and can be declined both as *principium vitae* and *principium mortis*. In other words, it stands as an element capable of giving life, of founding it, of making it imperishable. Moreover, qualifying as the supreme regulator, it is not subject to the norms of everyday life, and thus can break the barriers of time, introduce power, recall power, be power. Blood, therefore, as a life-death dialectical bond, introduces a sacred dimension in which rituality represents the symbolic transcription of the experience of life and death.

Among the various purposes assigned to the ritual profusion of blood – from ensuring the efficacy of the ritual to producing the idea of brotherhood – is also that of certifying the postulant’s requirements of courage in the act of becoming a man of honour. In this perspective, behind the symbolism of blood it is possible to grasp a very important assumption that the initiation rite exalts and that the “mafia” system ratifies as its own: the virility. A virility that, in the “mafia” culture described by Lombardi Satriani himself in *The silence, the memory, the gaze*, is assigned a very important value and which is received on the basis of two meanings: the first one – more restricted – which revolves around the concept of “masculinity” and which leads to the exclusion of homosexuals (or those who have wives and sisters who are not of mirrored respectability) from the assembly of men of honour; the second one – more extensive – which revolves around the concept of “hominity” and which refers to the ability to testify with one’s actions the validity of the rules and the indisputable effectiveness of the values. It is a man not to betray, to keep silent, to go into hiding, to tell lies in order to establish an antagonistic relationship with the State. In practice, the exercise of silence that the “mafioso” considers as a virtue is a matter for men.

In short, therefore, the use of initiatory scenarios and symbolisms in Camorra affiliation ceremonies, if on the one hand they aim to seal the passage from an ordinary man to a man of honour, or from an honoured contrast to a smooth “picciotto”<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand they respond to the need to transform the affiliates into an assembly of *similia* and *pares* bound by an oath for no derogable reason.

<sup>2</sup> The term *picciottu* (Italianized as *picciotto*) in Sicilian language corresponds to boy in Italian. Over time, its use has varied and it commonly indicates the lowest level of affiliation of some Italian mafia-type criminal organizations.

This transformation offers an interpretative way to the understanding of the space and time domain. If the value of symbolism takes on importance in life, it actually achieves its emphasis beyond life. This is the condition that ensures continuity of the identity of criminal families from generation to generation. In this sense, the urban space lends itself very well to being an instrument of continuity amplification.

The use of initiatory scenarios and symbolisms assumes, in the perspective of criminal ideology, the function of creating a strong identity where the distinction between individual and group is impossible to conceive and where collective (family) interest must prevail over individual interest.

Initiation represents a vital experience that fully belongs to the human condition and accompanies every path of rebirth or existential renewal; a total and all-encompassing experience that, based on the acquisition of specialised knowledge, the assumption of more or less traumatic and traumatising inner trials and the desire to transcend the past, is aimed at pursuing the radical transformation of the person's existential status.

Whether it is a young Masai, an Iacuta shaman, a Hindu Brahmin, a Jesuit congregation affiliate, whether it is a Calabrian 'Ndrangheta or a Camorra member, who decides to undergo these deconstruction/reconstruction processes of the identity comes to enjoy an existence different from the previous one, realising her own palingenesis. As if to say: it dies and is reborn. And in the urban space occupied by symbols this rebirth is made visible to the whole community to the point of attracting the aiding and abetting of part of the intellectual class and even of an administrative court which with a sentence prohibits the police bodies from removing the murals dedicated to a young man affiliated with the Camorra prematurely disappeared.

### 3. The Spanish Quarters

In some neighborhoods of Naples, communities are based on the solidarity linked to the physical interaction between their inhabitants, which are often arranged in so-called "Neapolitan Bassi" (with dwellings on the ground floor having one or two rooms and small bathrooms), designated as houses or small workshops. This aspect may appear overly intrusive to some, or arouse elements of interest to others, yet the media often tell stories of tourists who become so fascinated by the life of Naples' quarters that they end up moving there.

A typical example of a "real social street" is well represented within the Spanish Quarters.

The area was built up for the extended on the wishes of the Spanish Pedro da Toledo (1536-1553). The first constructions consisted of few palaces belonging to aristocratic families, and around them other residential buildings were constructed to house the Spanish military and other immigrants who had business at court. This group of dwellings was originally built for the Spaniards and was later occupied by families of craftsman, traders, people in service at royal Court and members of the working-class who were drawn to the city. Hence, it was named "The Quartieri Spagnoli" (Spanish Quarters). It is built on one side of the San Martino hill (Fig. 1), which is around 2km square in surface area with an octagonal grid of streets. From the beginning, over a hundred years, the area developed with consistently high population density. Down below stands Toledo street, which early become the most important street in the city. The social complexity and fragmentation of property was a feature of the Spanish Quarters until after the Second World War. The area suffered a calamity with the earthquake in 1980, which caused extensive damage to the architectural heritage which was already seriously decayed.

The Spanish Quarters area now is still a part of the Neapolitan urban centre. There are more than 170 blocks: several are composed of single apartment buildings with four or five stories above ground, but more frequently the blocks are divided into multiple one-to-two story buildings with narrow stairwells.

Altogether, within approximately 600 condominiums, there are almost 3000 nuclei with about 15,000 people. Many people in difficulty live in the 900 "bassi" on the ground floor of the buildings, which alternate access to another 150 single-family dwellings in the mezzanine floors.

The variety and vitality of the area is also determined by the presence of workshops, ordinary shops, and many other activities. Over the years, the reuse of the historical buildings has been very intense, both due to the promotion of renovation and maintenance of entire buildings, and due to a massive housing fragmentation, that has dissected both the layout and the height of many of the largest houses, including those in the park housing in the area. The high rate of micro-transformations and the intensity of use of these historical buildings is even indicated in the facades of buildings, which have a very varied range of balconies, windows, and fixtures (Fig. 2).

The nearly four thousand families in the "Quartieri Spagnoli" can be divided into three fundamental social groups, to which two new tribes have been added in recent years (Laino 2001).



**Figure 1.** San Martino hill above Spanish Quarters. Source: De Falco, S., 2020.



**Figure 2.** Typical street in Spanish Quarters. Source: De Falco, S., 2020.

The largest group is made up of the Edwardians, fundamentally “healthy” families; they often live in rented houses, are characterized by limited schooling, and live off their own work (which is often precarious and unprotected, or in the public domain needing only low qualifications). They participate in popular culture and, as seen in Eduardo De Filippo’s comedies, they are only episodically affected by deviant experiences. Vivianiane families, on the other hand, are much more visible, especially the women and children who occupy the streets and give rise to networks that are generally informal, often irregular, or completely illicit. In many of these families, frequently affected by the mechanisms of chronic social exclusion, the symptoms of otherness (such as truancy, a lack of work experience, precocious maternity, public welfare, detention experience, trauma, and domestic promiscuity) are recurrent. The third group is the least numerous and least visible: a low and middle class of workers, generally public employees, who live in the neighborhoods more as residents than as inhabitants, enduring the customs

(and sometimes, unfortunately, the abuses) of the other groups with difficulty.

While the children of the first two groups reluctantly emigrate after marrying, generally within degraded neighborhoods of the first and second peripheries, young people of the lower middle-class associate migration to other quarters as social promotion.

Obviously, there are many family networks that cross through least two of these groups. Increasingly expanding groups of immigrants, both legal and illegal, are now occupying as new tenants the territories previously used for prostitution or warehouses. After many years of sacrifice some of the more rooted nuclei, however, manage to rent small but more civilized houses. Quietly, in the past few years a new small group has been settling in. These are the new bourgeois residents who, thanks to the deterioration of the historic buildings, are able to buy and renovate apartments at an affordable price, choosing to endure some local diseconomies in exchange for a very useful urban centrality and a type of good life for those who love

the vitality of the ancient rather than the rationalist city parts.

In this context of historical families, honest workers and gentrification (Davidson, Lees 2010), unfortunately historically criminal families of the Camorra are also present. Regarding gentrification, there is no solid relationship between out-of-neighbourhood mobility and gentrification, as pointed out by Freeman et al. (2016) in a recent UK study.

In order to contextualize this district, following the work of Clark and River (2013) in the neighborhoods of some US cities, figure 3 shows the map of the districts of Naples with the Spanish Quarters highlighted, in relation to the differences in socio-economic disease according to the data collected by the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and summarised in the Social Disease Index (*Indice di Disagio Sociale* [IDS])<sup>3</sup>. The map shows that in Naples it is possible to recognise a clear prevalence of popular areas and areas at risk of degradation, where two thirds of the population are concentrated, alongside a large zone characterized by medium-high profiles extending into the hilly areas and the west coast. In particular, the main result that emerges from the territorial comparison of census data confirms that the area with a higher level of socio-economic well-being is concentrated in the hilly and central-western part of the city (Posillipo, Vomero, Chiaia, San Giuseppe, Arenella), while that of socio-economic deprivation affects the rest of the city, with higher IDS values in the northern, north-eastern and eastern suburbs of the Naples (Scampia, San Pietro a Patierno, Miano, Piscinola, San Giovanni a Teduccio, Secondigliano, Barra, Ponticelli) and lower values in the remaining districts. Demographically, the first area is characterized by a population with an older age structure, while the second by a relatively younger age structure.

The analysis is based on the hypothesis that social phenomena influence spatial ones as much as the latter influence social phenomena in a complex dynamic of socio-spatial interactions in which places are produced

<sup>3</sup> The Social Disease Index is derived from the weighted average of the deviations of the values of the district indicators from the respective national average values, detected by the ISTAT census. In particular, this Index results from the weighted average of the differences in the Unemployment rate values (ratio between the population aged 15 and over looking for a job and the workforce of the same age group, per cent), the Employment rate (ratio between the employed population aged 15 and over and the total population of the same age group, per cent), the Youth concentration rate (ratio between the resident population under the age of 25 on the total population, per cent) and of the Schooling rate (ratio between the population with at least a secondary school diploma and the total population aged 25 and over, per cent) from the respective national average values.

by inhabitants and, in turn, exert an effect on living conditions and the reproduction of poverty and social exclusion (Soja, Frixia 2007). Moreover, in Naples, the pervasive presence of organized crime leads to considering the manifestations of urban informality and the approaches of informal cities according to a dominant perspective linked to illegality and the instrumental use that is also made of public space (Pine 2015).

As evident from the figure 3, the peculiarity of the Spanish neighborhoods is that of being a complex and fragmented reality in which the above-mentioned categories of people coexist, but which is located within a central area with low socio-economic deprivation, such as the north and east areas of the city where conditions of high deprivation prevail. This peculiarity, however, creates a further complexity in the plots of analysis of phenomena, firstly social in the area and then spatial.

A distinctive feature of the Camorra criminal organisation in Naples is the heterogeneity of the families and criminal groups that are established in certain neighborhoods and that manage the illegal activities of those zones. Unlike other criminal organizations, such as the Sicilian mafia, the Camorra is not a unitary organization in the city of Naples and each crime family, as well as each neighborhoods, has different criminal socio-cultural characteristics (Barbagallo 2010; Beatrice 2009). Figure 4 clearly shows this heterogeneity of the Camorra criminal families according to the latest report drawn up by the Anti-Mafia Investigative Directorate of Naples. This map, as already highlighted by some authors (Sciarrone, Storti 2019; Fiore 2013; Di Lorenzo 2012), confirms that the metropolitan origin of the Camorra generates a natural propensity for social relationships with socio-criminal negotiations, with a strong diachronic adaptive capacity to different urban scenarios.

So, what is the role of criminal organizations on the territory? They must always maintain control over their area of influence, increase the numbers of members of the organization and diversify their illicit services, making use of external parties. In particular, the reference to the use of places inherent to criminal practices, and obtained through a strong iconographic symbolism, has a twofold significance. On the one hand, the criminal organization tends to preside over and occupy the space to show its dominant presence and paradoxically an availability to the local community. Where availability can be understood in this sense: through symbolism, the criminal organization tends to instil in the local neighbourhood community a traditional idea of security based on the assumption that there are enemies outside these territories ("besieged fortress syndrome") and that



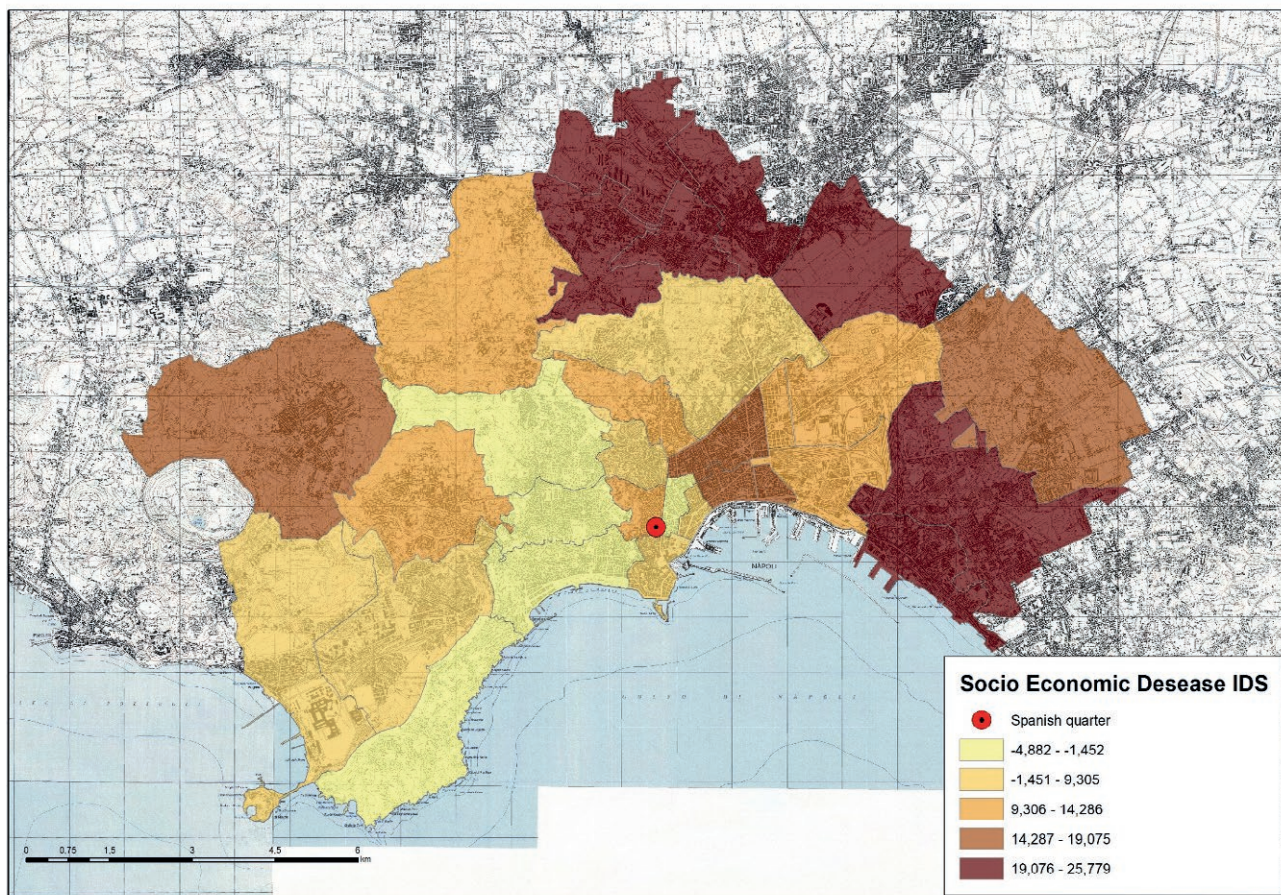


Figure 3. Socio-economic disease in Spanish Quarters. Source: elaboration of De Falco S. on ISTAT data, 2020.

these can be contained by seeking refuge in the organization itself. An assumption that collapses in relation to the fact that organized crime is located within the social fabric. The strongest manifestation of the link between the inner, individual life and the controlled external space is through the use of strong, heartfelt religious symbolism, which is physically materialised in a space densely occupied by altars and votive icons.

On the other hand, the Camorra resorts to celebratory icons of criminals to rise to hero profiles, seeking consensus and osmosis in the community in which it is established. Not all districts of Naples are characterized by this sense of community that the criminal organization seeks in order to have consent and freedom of action.

The purpose of criminal organizations is both to mark out the territory in order to impose their dominance and to deploy their power in front of citizens and local authorities (Sales 2009). In this sense, mention could be made of the numerous “stops”, often reported

by various newspapers from Campania, Puglia, Calabria and Sicily, which during certain patron saint’s days are made by the faithful with the statue of the Madonna or Saints in front of the houses of some Camorra bosses, which so become real places of reference and devotion.

The phenomenon of the symbolism of the Camorra impregnated in the physical space of the neighborhoods through murals of the young Camorra men who died, killed by the police or other criminal groups, is peculiar to the Spanish neighborhoods. Unlike the other neighborhoods of the city, in the Spanish neighborhoods the sense of community is very strong, the street life (Guiso et al. 2008), the sharing of the physical space of the quarters, as mentioned, due to the morphology of the local housing (“bassi”) who naturally consider the street as an extension, as a protuberance of the house (Fig. 5) and a demonstration of the daily shared life habit.

However, this characteristic of the value of physical space has the negative counterpart of lending itself to forms of exploitation by the Camorra.

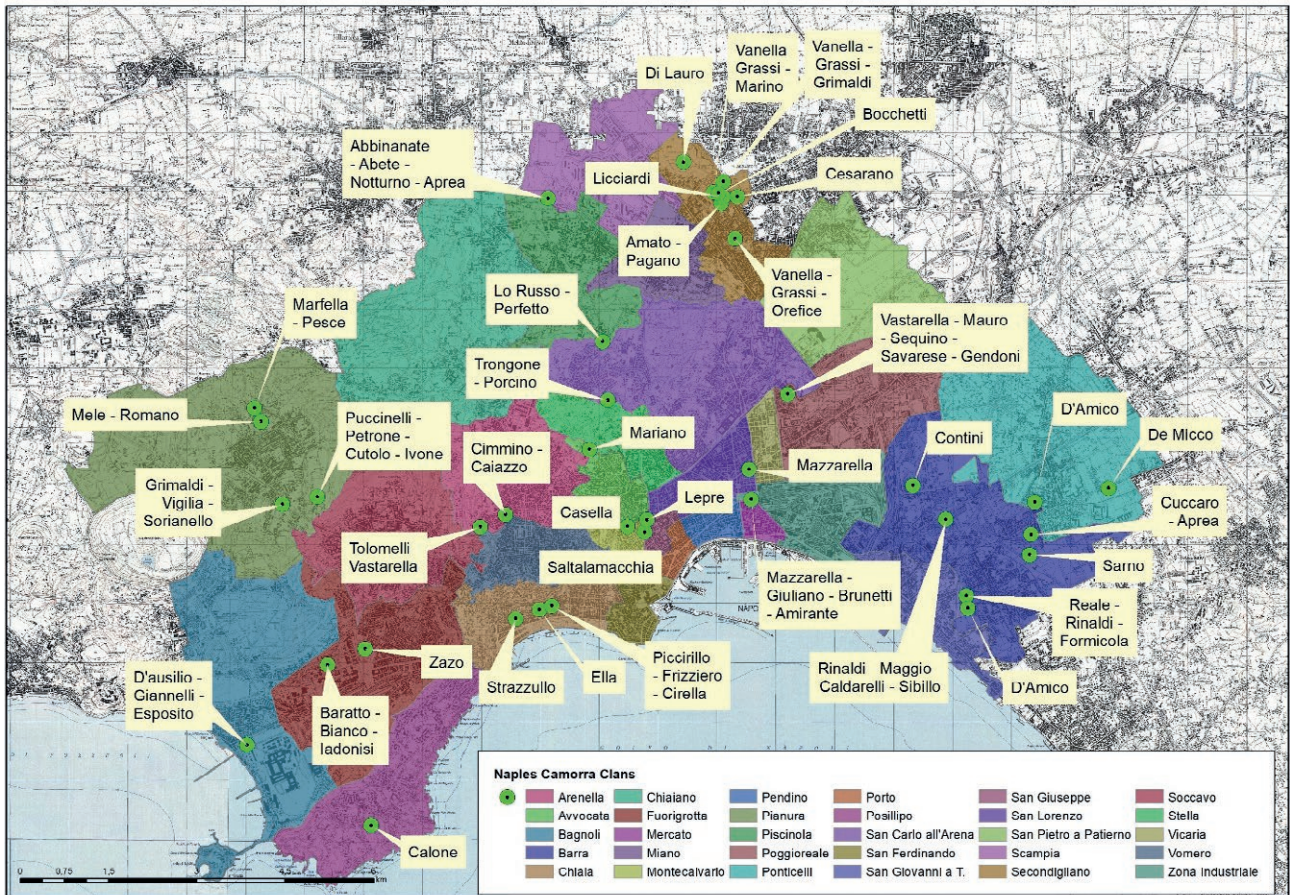


Figure 4. Geographic map of Camorra crime families by neighborhood. Source: elaboration of De Falco S. on DIA (Anti-Mafia Investigation Department Naples) data, 2020.

#### 4. The Current Case of the Iconography of Young Camorra in the Spanish Neighborhoods of Naples

In the socio-urban framework of the Spanish neighbourhoods described in the previous section, the theme of street art and the sub-theme of street art for instrumental purposes by the Camorra, which uses the urban space to celebrate its “heroes” fallen on the battlefield against the institutions, meet around current news cases.

It is not possible to address the specific theme without starting from the observation that, apart from instrumental use, street art divides. An example of this is precisely in the Spanish neighbourhoods the mural by Eleonora Pimentel Fonseca (Fig. 6) which depicts the heroine of the Neapolitan revolution of 1799 (people’s revolution led by the class of intellectuals against the Bourbon kings, then returned to power after the revolution). The mural was created on the facade of a building owned by the municipality, included among the “excellent works” in the census of Italian architecture of the

second half of the twentieth century promoted by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage, and after years of inactivity it became the subject of a recovery notice, published by the Department of Heritage and Youth.

The Department of Urban Creativity of the same Municipality also authorized the creation of the murals. Therefore, a conflict entirely internal to the institutions: the Department of Heritage initiated the redevelopment that safeguarded the uniqueness of the building, while that of Urban Creativity authorized the painting that distorted its original characteristics.

We come to the specific case that that had a strong media resonance and highlighted a deeply rooted theme already present within the Spanish neighbourhoods, such as the instrumental function of public space by criminal families.

On the night between 29<sup>th</sup> February and 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 Ugo Russo, a 15-year-old boy from the Spanish neighbourhoods of Naples, was killed by an off-duty *carabinieri* from whom he was trying to steal a watch. The



**Figure 5.** Typical “basso” (“lower”) in Spanish Quarters. Source: De Falco, S., 2020.



**Figure 6.** Eleonora Pimentel Fonseca murales in Spanish Quarters. Source: De Falco, S., 2020.

soldier, who shot a total of five times trying to hit even a friend of Ugo on the run, was immediately investigated for murder given the circumstances and the dynamics of his death, but total silence has since fallen. After more than eight months, there is not even the public result of the autopsy. What came out was the theme of the murals relating to many boys who died either because of the police or between clashes with other criminal gangs (some of them in figures 7, 8 and 9). This issue involved, with conflicting positions, the media, newspapers and TV, social media, the intellectual class of the city and also of Italy as a whole, and even the administrative court. The local newspapers took sides against these celebratory murals and on the media wave the authorities ordered their destruction, against which both the inhabitants of the Spanish neighbourhoods who organized marches and demonstrations and various intellectuals rose up. It is not clear how spontaneous the protest of the inhabitants is or how much it is pushed by the criminal families to which they belong or, finally, how much it is the result of a spontaneous adhesion but dictated by

logic of psychological and economic dependence on the illegal activities carried out by those individuals. The places of the murals were manned by the police.

Author’s impression when visiting the place where the murals is located is that the locals were really convinced in the justice of those celebratory works. While, in fact, listening to some visitors from other districts or other cities<sup>4</sup> I found conflicting opinions, on the part of the residents I found a total and strong agreement on the defence of murals. In the following, some ethnographic data regarding the place of murals. Research was conducted using the participatory observation method, including detailed field notes and semi-structured interviews during the final period of field research. Fieldwork lasted from 5 July to 20 July 2021, with about roughly 10 hours of participatory observation. Interviews were carried out near mural of Ugo Russo. The shortest interview lasted 7 minutes, while the longest lasted 1 hour. A group of interviewers, beside the authors, was comprised of two volunteers (PhD students), one female and one

<sup>4</sup> Several foreign tourists also came and see these murals.

male. A total of 80 people was interviewed. All participants in the research were guaranteed anonymity; each respondent has been provided with a pseudonym. The second step was to identify the types of visitors, by age (in three groups: under 30, between 30 and 60, and over 60), gender and residence (whether in the neighbourhood or outside). In the common sense of the inhabitants of the neighborhoods regardless of age, the conviction of graffiti justice was almost unanimous. However, among the foreigners there were differences linked to the stratification by age, sex and origin factors.

The scenery is dark. Different elements concur and overlap, confusing freedom, truth, justice, ideology, with oppression, falsehood, injustice and the absence of values.

On the one hand, the specific case of Ugo Russo subverts the critical approach of street art celebrating the heroes of crime, but evokes the need for a message, made possible by the public space through his mural, of truth and justice where even as a result of a wrong act, the robbery, there cannot be a summary judgment with the death penalty verdict given by the *carabiniere* who shot a 15-year-old boy while fleeing. Also certifying this evidence is the fact that the administrative court of the Campania region, accepting the appeal of the committee for Ugo Russo, suspended the demolition activity by the Municipality of his mural.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the use of celebratory murals by criminal families has been common practice in the neighbourhoods for years, not with the aim of demanding justice, but on the contrary to see their role as territorial control unit recognised.



**Figure 7.** Murals of Luigi Caiafa, killed by a policeman at age 17 during a robbery in October 2020. Source: *Il Mattino*.

The right to the city of Lefebvre, street art, urban space are all paradigms rich in meaning that in the case of the city of Naples, and in particular of some of its



**Figure 8.** Altar of Jenny Verrano, killed in the Spanish neighborhoods in 2017 by other young people affiliated with the Camorra. Source: *Il Mattino*.



**Figure 9.** Mural of Ugo Russo, killed by a policeman during a robbery in march 2020. Source: De Falco, S., 2022.

neighborhoods, including the Spanish ones, mix in an osmosis that obscures the furrow of a clear ethical path, recognizable and shareable by all.

## 5. Conclusions

In a scenario marked by the progressive disengagement of the State on a local scale and by urban policies that are often more closely focused on the interests of the dominant urban coalitions rather than on working towards the construction of a shared long-term vision, the practices of socialization and re-appropriation of places – as an alternative to public policies as active components of “another city” – propose a creative and inclusive city capable of combining daily life, artistic practice and the discovery of new community values. This happens in the Spanish neighborhoods of Naples. However, it can be noted that this also occurs in a negative sense through territorial and social exploitation by the Camorra, the criminal organisation that operates in marginal and complex contexts acts through “insurgent” and “tribal” practices (Cellamare, Scandurra 2016) using them as identity markers and instruments of government and control of the territory.

The research conducted, on a level of parallelism between inner/tribal rules and outer/spatial manifestations, enabled the contribution to achieve its goal, i.e. to investigate, in an exclusively ethnographic approach and not through an ethical examination, the value of street art in relation to social phenomena linked to crime. A current issue, much debated in the media, relating to a recent case concerning the city of Naples and in particular its Spanish neighborhoods, was the starting point for this analysis. Building on a reflection on the symbolic power of urban space, the work proposed a set of images relating to the specific case examined, proceeding in a “telescopic” way from the socio-economic and architectural context of the urban area investigated, down to the detail of the murals created. Far from being Manichaeic, the proposed vision is intended to highlight the complexity of the dynamics at play, acknowledging the difficulty for the reader of a possible mental alignment towards ethical and aesthetical guideline that can be fair and shared (Milani 2015).

Camorra territories within the Spanish Quarters, their use and their governance, are strongly characterised by customs, practices, meanings and a particular narrative. Made up of values charged with social and criminal negativity, they are also fully perceived by communities through physical images and symbols as the analysis murals has shown. The Camorra landscape is here produced by a system of community relations

achieved by a range of widespread illegal attitudes and behaviours, converging in actions of laceration of the civil fabric. The perception of this set of negative values is a fundamental component of the generation and perpetuation of this landscape, where individuals and communities have the perennial cogency and awareness of a vital “underlying landscape” based on disvalues (Bandiera 2022) in which they identify themselves.

What emerges is a geographical declination that we could identify as “hybrid” (Dematteis 2021) that aligns with the ontological approach (Tanca 2018): in fact, the reflections on the case presented highlight, in relation to the prefix geo-, the description of the objective and concrete facts of the ‘mafia territoriality’ in the Spanish quarters; in relation to the suffix -graphy they strongly highlight the iconic representations and the cultural codes (albeit negative and perverse) on which they structure the semantic field and its relationship with the real-visual one. A third way is added to them, that is, the one formed in the socio-practical analytical fabric of the analyses conducted according to a relational experience and contact with the streets, the houses, the narratives, the subjectivities behind and within the objects investigated, that is, the murals and their spatiality.

Despite some limitations of the study related to the ability to generalise the results obtained in this specific case, and thus further describe possible applications to practice, the contribution offers an interesting insight into the relationship between the processes of “negative” territoriality operated by criminal organisations and their power to translate symbols and images into widespread and “accepted” culture.

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