

# Palermo, Italy: The Coast Road

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## Abstract

This paper proposes a re-reading of the work of Roberto Collovà dedicated to Palermo and its coastline. It interprets, in a perspective paper, the arguments contained in his research as suggestions for the construction of landscape research to condition, through their appearance, a new way to see and interpret places and their potential.

Rereading his studies, his drawings and his observations suggests the construction of a method of recognition of the existence of a landscape, in this case of a greenway and its potential, within an existing urban fabric. The historical center, the fragments of urban spaces, and the fragments of green that can be read as hidden parks, gardens, and third landscapes: a sequence of places described, recognized and reconnected in a single story proposing a new urban geography.

The previously unrecognizable resources are recomposed in a design that brings out invisible opportunities that are proposed to draw the character of the city of Palermo in the coming decades. Along the coast line is the story of a possible linear park as a new structure of urban infrastructure and the development of a new urban ecology that is confronted with the themes of pollution and the deterioration accumulated over time in the history of the city.

The fate of cities is entrusted to urban planning, a discipline that decides the fate of cities, but perhaps by thinking differently about existing spaces, we can find a new potential city. Cities are also full of spaces that are clippings, remnants of activities, empty spaces in the city. Forcing the definition of park as something not necessarily only green, but as a system of green urban spaces linked together, allows urban spaces to connect and hold together different parts of the city. This is possible through the recognition of a new form that must be recognized and named for it to exist. The way of conceiving this urban greenway suggests ways and perspectives of reading the existing city aimed at constructing linear urban spaces that can renew its meaning and future prospects.

keywords: greenway, waterfront, urban renewal, ecology/environment/pollution, Palermo.

## Introduction - Why talk about the coast road

The case of the *coast road* of Palermo, described within a critical analysis and project research by Roberto Collovà [1], offers the opportunity of addressing many issues and topics that already relate to the design of a Greenway as a tool for urban and territorial renewal.

The main theme of the research described in the following article is to imagine and to find the resources and the right way to accomplish the city of the future, facing contemporary issues like pollution of widely

spread areas, involvement of people regarding common interests, and improvement of environmental quality.

The physical, economic and social value that is part of a global planning, just as "Greenway planning" (van den Toorn & Fekete 2016), which is able to manage multiple ecological, recreational, landscaping and historical/cultural purposes (Fabos & Ahern 1995), relates to Roberto Collovà's research. By investigating the problems and potentials of the city of Palermo, Collovà aims at inventing or maybe revealing a "new" urban figure.

This figure emerges from a new interpretation in which places are put into a totally different relationship. Even though these places have always been there, nobody had ever seen them nor interpreted them in this possible relation. Collovà builds a different narration of the city and proposes it as the plot of future urban transformations. So, the characteristics of a Greenway belongs to the *coast road*, not only because it is a linear project, even if, in this case with different thicknesses that are wedged in the structure of the historic city and inside the fragments of its empty spaces - backs of the buildings - its abandoned places and its resources that have never been noticed, but also because it shares its complexity and trust as a foundation tool of a better way of living and transforming the territory and the city.

The construction of a new way of looking and imagining a city of the future is the main condition for its existence, in order to trigger the processes that can lead to its accomplishment, according to a low cost, sensible and necessarily widely shared approach. Roberto Collovà's research has been addressed in several of his books and articles and has been exhibited at the Manifesta [2] exhibition (Collovà 2018) which this year was held right in the city of Palermo, in form of a piece of art, also introducing this further form of language, to communicate the interpretation of Palermo which he does. Also, this kind of description can become an active tool for renewal of the city if it will be collectively understood, accepted and shared.

### **Background and Literature Review – The city of Palermo - as seen by Roberto Collovà**

"... there is the old town, fascinating and rich in quality but clearly physically decadent ... Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, the extension of the city develops towards the North, through an urban planning based on city blocks... starting from the last century .... (Palermo) starts building on the layouts of the Esposizione Internazionale of 1982 ... since the post-war period a massive expansion has been taking place, still today, towards the North ... This part of town ... is the so-called "sacco di Palermo" [3]. *From the 1950's onward, this area became the destination of the citizens of Palermo who leave the historical center the suburbs and neighboring countries, considering this migration a sign of social promotion. In the 1960s, again in the northern part, was made the choice of the IACP (Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari - Social housing entities) to place in the agricultural plain between Mondello and Sferracavallo the so-called ZEN district, built according to the project by Vittorio Gregotti. Through these steps, more by inertia than by conscious decisions and analysis, develops and consolidates the built city, (Collovà 2015, p.12)*"

The above description given describes a few tracts in Palermo according to the stereotypes, the prejudices or the widespread common sense, more or less cultured, bringing up what Collovà calls "the other city"

or all that part of urban and non-urban elements, less recognized or recognizable, which can become the base for a project of the new Palermo. This is the seventeenth-century city that produced the so-called cross of streets, mistaken for an act of foundation but instead, achieved by gutting the historical structure of the town.

*"The other city is formed by innumerable convents, barracks, gardens, hospitals, palaces, impenetrable fences like great fortresses separated by wide interstices. It is formed by a network of sea and land villages, that are now merged into one continuous built-up area, and a residual network of country roads that connect them. It includes small farms, the first factories, other small and large buildings and what remains of the small city that every eighteenth-century villa constitutes ... "(Collovà 2015, pag.12)*

*"Nobody has imagined to seize the opportunity given by these delicate and solid installations of these urban centres able to aggregate other cities through their rules and their criteria of urban settlements." (Collovà 2015, pag.14)*

Together with this to date unused material, Collovà sees, in the physical context of the city, other opportunities that concern all those thoughtless transformations of the coast line that are due to what he considers a misuse of the land, which he calls *the catastrophe*. Some out-of-scale maritime works, piers, marinas for pleasure boating or fishing, caused, through the transport and sedimentation of solid materials, a relevant transformation of the coastline. But what has most affected the coastline, causing a real environmental catastrophe even in terms of pollution, was the transformation of the coast of Palermo into an open-air dump and, of such dimension and importance as to modify the original topography of the places.

Since the end of World War II, all the rubble of war destruction was thrown into the sea, and the practice of discharging the more-or-less toxic and dangerous waste at sea has been continued, causing real environmental damage, making large marine tracts unsuitable for bathing, even changing geography, modifying the position of the coast line, and moving the sea coast by many meters.

We cannot think of restoring the original coastline because it would imply very high costs; instead we can consider this "gigantic damage" as the opportunity to build a coast park:

*"gardens, terraces, squares, panoramic lookout points, are the most appropriate solution for the reconstruction of this new coast." (Collovà 2015, p.16).*

This opportunity is given by the acknowledgment of the characters of a possible greenway with all its ecological and environmental values that allow urban redevelopment and renewal.

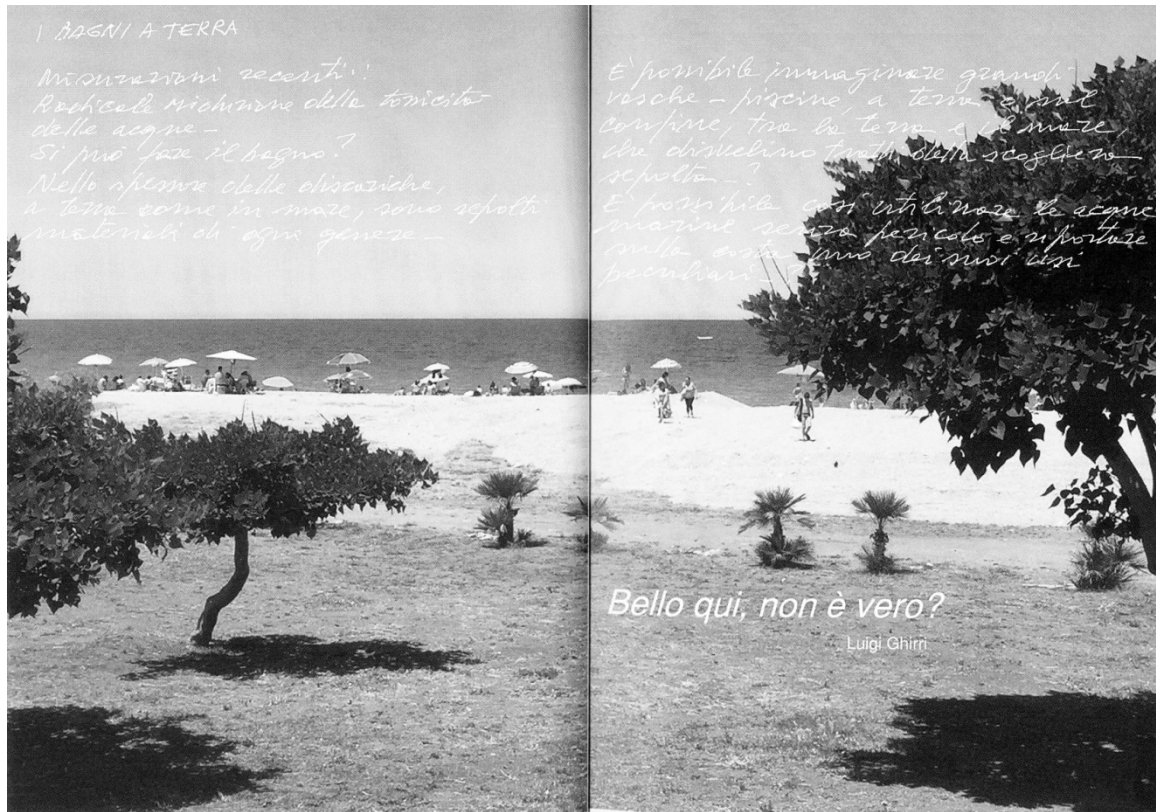


Figure 1. The coastline was moved towards the sea (Collovà 2018)



Figure 2. The coastline with its open air dump (Collovà 2018)

## **Methods and Objectives – Recognizing opportunities and creating connections**

The study of the research by Roberto Collovà, starting from this very particular context and the abundance of stratified meanings, opportunities to be seized and problems to be faced, wants to focus on topics, interpretations, suggestions, points of view and methods of work that can be reproduced in contexts and circumstances that are also very different and distant from each other.

The first issue concerns the proposal of a way of dealing with the city project. The idea of the construction of a city of the future, does not start from the intention of building above the existing city but rather that of building within the existing city. The project that Collovà supports does not try to superimpose on the city an unpublished narration that, as in many experiences of the past, is generally destined to be conceived in partial fragments. Collovà instead starts from the description of the existing city and from those characters and elements that already live in it, to name them and therefore recognize them and thus make them exist, recomposed in a possible urban figure, new and therefore made visible.

It's about highlighting a form that already exists and which no one has previously been able to see, with the intent of triggering from within the city a process of transformation. And here we come to the second issue, which is that of knowing how to recognize groups of elements that, once you put them together, can form significant units that support and give value to each other. The method used by Collovà is that of the meticulous description through the drawing, the photography, the written and drawn notes, the observation of the characteristics of the places and their stratified use which has accumulated over time by habits or even by neglect.

This is a personal vision, which could become the official vision of the city administration, if we succeeded in getting this method and this new point of view accepted. The goal is to open the discussion on the construction of a possible future of the city in general, and in this case of Palermo in particular, proposing to establish new relationships between existing parts of the city, held together by the structure of a greenway that becomes an element of urban foundation.

The way you observe is important. The subject of observation can have different economic values, it can be public or private, it can be a neglected place as well as a building of monumental historical value, it can be an open space as well as a building or a ruin, a garden or an uncultivated green area. This is not an observation that claims to recognize an aesthetic quality or a necessary preexisting value, instead it seeks to identify, recognize and name parts that acquire value especially from being connected, becoming an opportunity from being the sum of parts, fragments, resources previously absent-mindedly not considered.

Here we come to another important issue that is about connecting. New planning concepts are built by adding elements that are described and recognized, parts that were not seen nor noticed before, that reveal new potential because they are brought together in a structure, a combination of things or a system.

This way, the attribution of value, even economic, is formed by the combination of parts that, considered individually, could not have the same value.

Describing, recognizing, naming and therefore ,making things and opportunities exist. Relating, setting up, building reference structures starting from what already exists and therefore discovering planning concepts and suggesting images. The tools that are used to perform these operations of observation, detection and project are drawn and written notes, sketches, maps, photographs, annotations.



**Figure 3 – The urban map of the Hidden Parks with the coast road. (Collovà, 2012, pag. 137)**

I like to report here some notes written on sketches as examples of annotations of criteria that select the elements to be recognized as part of the system of the *coast road*.

*“ARCHAEOLOGICAL MAP OF THE SOUTHERN COAST  
WHAT REMAINS  
WHAT RESISTS OR CAN RESIST  
WHAT DOES NOT NEED TO BE QUESTIONED  
WHAT YOU CAN REALISTICALLY RESTART FROM  
WHAT YOU CAN LEARNED FROM TO CONTINUE THE CITY”*

And also:

*“SHAPE OF THE PARKS, SHAPE OF THE CITY  
COAST ROAD... HIDDEN PARKS  
HISTORICAL GARDENS AND WILD LAND  
BATTLEMENTS AND DITCHES, EMPTY AREAS THAT ARE BEING ABANDONED  
SEA DRAINED BY LANDFILL SITES AND BY MARITIME HYPERTROPHIC WORKS  
THE TOTALITY OF THESE SURFACES HAS A SHAPE  
LONG LIMBS CROSS THE CITY FROM THE SEA  
TOWARDS INLAND, THE COAST BEING ONE OF THEM.” (Collovà 2018)*

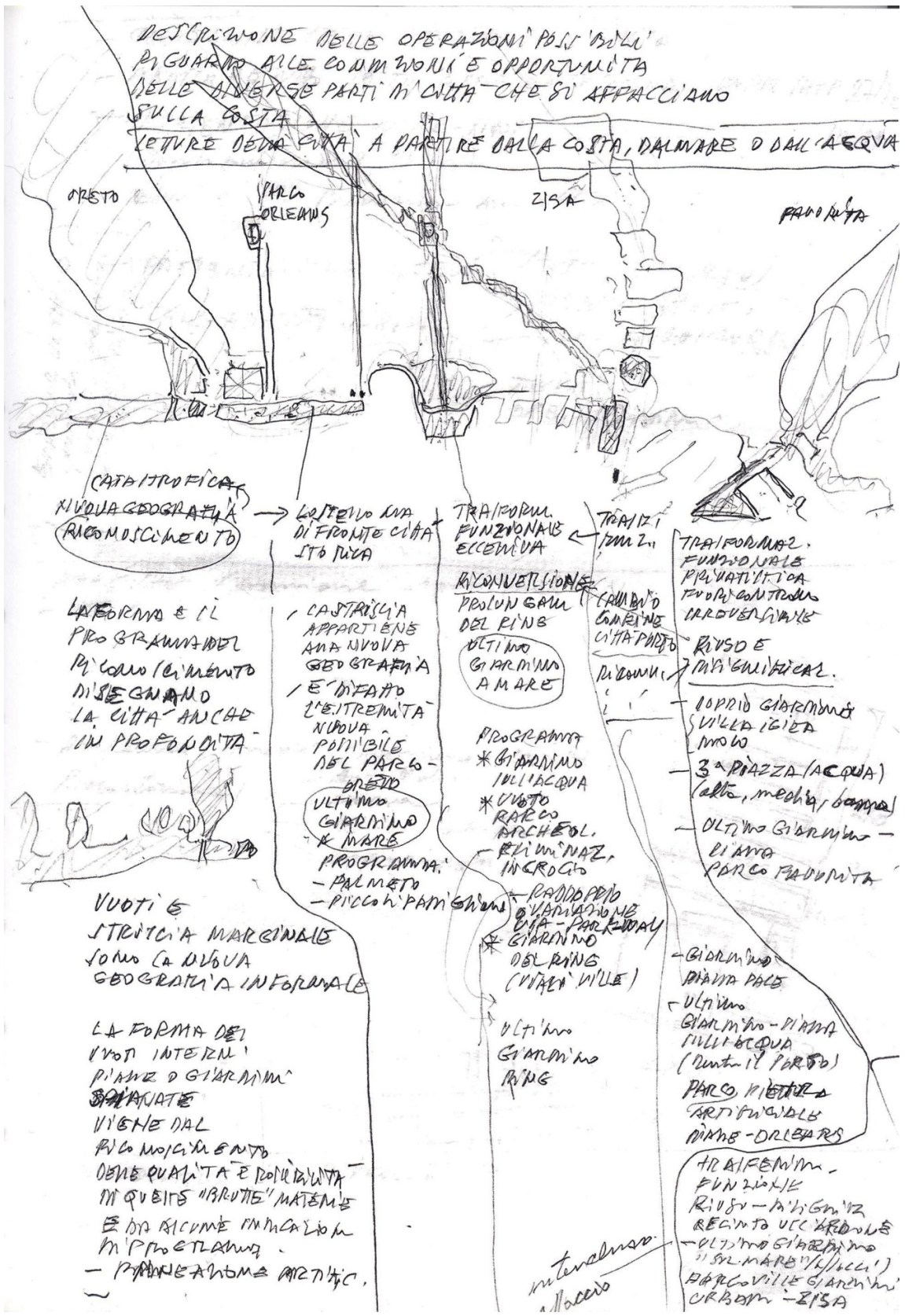


Figure 4. Notes on sketches. (Collovà 2012, pag. 88)

## Results - The hypothesis of a "master plan"

The resources recognized within a so-called *archeology of the modern* are valued as parts of new relationship systems. It is about *hidden parks* or *possible parks* that are at the same time the tool and the conceptual outcome of this research. The idea of founding the urban planning of renewal and development of the city on the theme of the park, opens the discussion to further topics.

According to Collovà, the park is a more vague and generic term than the term garden. That is, gardens are classified based on their historical and compositional characteristics, yet the term park is, instead, more open and indefinite and therefore it leads to possible interpretations. He suggests to focus on the term park as a definition of characteristics that hold different parts together and proposes to think of a park not only in terms of a set of natural elements, mainly vegetation, but to extend the term park also referring anything that suggests unity, that unifies and connects. The parks that Collovà describes are parks that do not exist yet, but they are those conceptual structures that support the possible future renewal of the city.

*"We do not see them because they do not have a physical or administrative connotation, we do not see them because no one has named them parks so far, nor have all the parts been put in relation ."(Collovà 2015, pag.14)*

The possible parks Collovà is looking at are: The Park of the Squares, the Park of the Villas, the Park of the Walls - the Ring, The Historical Park - Real Favorita, The River Park dell'Oreto, The Agricultural Park - Ciaculli and finally the Park of the Coast, all of which with an urgent need of reclamation and with landscape protection issues.

Thus, the story of a new imagined city corresponds to the description of a set of possible parks. Again, the theme of the need to refine the ability of the gaze (observe), of being capable of recognizing, the "act of seeing" (Wender 1992), the ability to name and attribute meaning and therefore value. Particularly, the Park of the Coast, due to its geographical location or due to its being a waterfront that is between the sea and the parks that are wedged in the mass of the built area, becomes a park whose value is of superior hierarchy. Indeed, it has the role of keeping all the hidden parks together even just for the reason that everyone is in a close relationship with it and flows into it.

The coast road is a part of this system of parks and connects them all on the sea line. Starting from Villabate it arrives at Mondello, although it is not always recognizable and sometimes it lacks form and continuity.

*"There is a panoramic lookout road that runs inside a coastal park and that by its nature and its position is in fact a green way, which can easily become the organizing structure of the reconversion and rehabilitation of the coast "(Collovà 2018, page 15)*

The coast road is not just a link between relevant points but rather identifies a strip of land close to the coast with different thickness and that corresponds to the Parco della Costa. In order to trigger those that Collovà defines "self-repair processes" of the city, the *coast road* must be able to include the city behind and to become a linear structure that unites and connects the system of parks that go deep into the urban body. The project of the waterfront with the coast road would coincide with the processing of a developing plan of the city as a strategy or an overview not just a project to beautify the seafront.



The waterfront, with its character of linear structure that holds together many possible green spaces, new and existing, public and private, with a high ecological, environmental and landscape value, presents itself as a possible greenway that could also organize new urban connections to low environmental impact. The greenway could sustain the construction of a transportation system made up of a coast tram track, a bike trail, a foot path, a slow train close to a metropolitan railway above ground, combined with the steamboat lines that would allow the tourists and locals to get to know the city coming from the sea.

Thinking of an overall urban plan does not suggest here to define an *a priori* urban form to be superimposed on the existing city, but to bring out a "somewhat archaeological" form, that is already there, through a careful and gradual selection of elements and putting them in relation. The form, by which term here we do mean figure but also an urban structure, can be of a temporary nature, but it will gradually express characters of necessity and recognition, thus triggering a "self-repairing process" on the territory. This comes to construct a "masterplan", open, flexible, inclusive but at the same time rigorous and able to prevent arbitrary and irreversible interventions.



**Figure 5 – Palermo with its coast road and the Hidden Parks: “the masterplan”. (C. 2015, pag. 19)**

### **Discussion and Conclusion – To have a new outlook to imagine a city of the future**

From the recognition of hidden parks and from the drawing of their map, the existence of a possible system emerges, of a new reference to the urban design, of a “structural situation”, wrote Collovà, “a post-modern geography, the outcome of natural conditions and human actions, almost always destructive, that exists and that is suggested to be used as raw material”. Collovà suggests to “elaborate the decay” assuming “the

current condition as an original condition” to describe and carefully analyze in order to be able to distinguish which parts to acquire as resources to maintain and transform, and which ones it is necessary to remove and eliminate.

The map of the hidden parks kept together by the coast road, a greenway that is itself a hidden or possible park, emerges starting from the recognition of the elements that each park keeps together, describing them and naming them as parts of itself according to specific characteristics of belonging. In this acknowledgement of potentials that valorize and transform decay and abandonment in opportunity, there is trust in the ability to activate processes of natural repair to the accumulated damage, repair of what he calls an environmental catastrophe.

*“... the parks’ plot is structured, not arbitrary and it has its own necessity, it can therefore play a delicate but precise role as a regulator and inductor of restoration, when connected with other actions, elements, and parts of the city”. (Collovà 2015, pag.16)*

It is in this strategy of acknowledgement and sense of belonging, in this identification of the pre-existent resources even within the same matter of which the environmental catastrophe is made, that the lesson and positive planning potential of Roberto Collovà can be found.

However, this risks paying the price of excessive but necessary trust in the individual and collective ability to act consistently with the plot of the figure of the Hidden Parks. It is within this vision that a series of possible actions are articulated, moved and oriented. They are both small and big, public and private, individual and group actions which can produce, as a sum of coherent interventions of different nature and dimension, real urban renovation, open and inclusive.

It is in the nature of the project itself, that aims to transform with extreme trust what already exists in something better, and follows, with physiological optimism, something that we wish existed as a better state of things. The sharing of a common interest within the plot of a sort of canvas identifiable with the figure of the Hidden Parks, brings economic and environmental advantages for whoever is involved, starting from the inhabitant themselves. Any intervention for the environmental improvement cannot take place without the full and involved human action.

We can't do without active participation of all human beings who have produced their own damage and that are part of that same nature that they have damaged. Men, who are at the same time the cause and possible remedy of the environmental catastrophe that they have caused, cannot avoid starting over from here: recognize both the damage and nature as part of themselves.

The *coast road* is therefore not only the proposition of physical requalification but also the plot for the definition of an idea, a concept, the plot to a tale that can keep together, in an open and inclusive way, actions that are different but have the same purpose: build a city of the future that is better, starting from the resources that already exist. This is the condition for its existence and for its chance for success. A greenway can help you build the city of the future, to provide new opportunities for its continuity feature, a recognizable structure that is able to hold together all the different and widespread resources present in the existing structure of the city and even in its problematic characters, as surely is the new coastline, moved towards the sea from the accumulation of the landfill, and that could itself become an opportunity to build a garden.

*“This kind of imaginable actions have characteristics that can be described as ecological, because they take into consideration the resources that are not used today, working almost exclusively on the surfacing and development of their relations, not only among areas, spaces, and buildings, but mostly among people, competences, and their interests.” (Collovà 2015, pag.16)*



**Figure 6. Along the cost**

## Notes

[1] Roberto Collovà is an architect, photographer, and designer. His works have been displayed at the Biennale di Venezia, at the French Academy, at the Triennale di Milano, at Rovereto's MART, at Milan's Salone del Mobile. He taught at the Architecture department in Palermo and the Academy of Mendrisio and, as a visiting professor, at the architecture schools of Barcelona, Las Palmas, Lisbon, Nancy and Venezia. He worked for a long time with Alvaro Siza, co-appointed for the projects of Salemi and the sports facility of the Bandita in Palermo, with Cecil Balmond of Ove Arup.

He won the IN-ARCH prize in 1991 for design and the Premio Gubbio in 1996 for the rescue of the Case di Stefano in Gibellina (with Marcella Aprile and Teresa La Rocca). Finalist of the Mies Van Der Rohe Award 1990 and the Gold Medal for Italian Architecture in 2003,

He won the first prize in the international competition for the Diagonal in Barcelona in 1989 (with J. Pier Pranas), in the competition "One street three squares for Gela" in 1993, and in the competition for the Masterplan of a resort town at Santa Cesarea Terme in 2007.

Commissioner in the jury of the Mies Van Der Rohe Award 2005, Advisor at the BSI Swiss Architectural Award 2008 and of the 2011/2012/2013/2014 editions of the Young Architects Program MaXXI/MoMa PSI, he writes for several Italian and foreign publishers and magazines. He lives and works in Palermo.

[2] Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, a nomadic contemporary art event that started at the beginning of the 1990s, is a site-specific cultural project that reinterprets the relations between culture and society through an uninterrupted dialogue with the social setting. oppure sphere?

[3] The phrase " Sack of Palermo" was an expression used to describe the building boom that occurred between the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century, which changed the architectural appearance of the city. During this period, some townships were incorporated by an insane and abnormal building expansion, with the destruction of numerous Art Nouveau architectural structures.

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