

## La città incompleta

Söderström, Ola

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contribution is how the author frames the formation of traditional institutions such as towns and county governments within the broader context of global economic and political pressures. Rather than being influenced solely by local markets and opportunities, the men and women of the Shenandoah Valley felt the same pressures for social, economic and political change that were sweeping the entire Atlantic world.

Today, as the rapid pace of globalization, trade deficits and job outsourcing dominates the nightly American news, *The planting of New Virginia* provides a useful reminder that such global connections have always existed, and were perhaps just as dynamic and disruptive then as they are now.

*Department of Geography, Geology and the Environment*  
*Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania*  
*Carleton University*

LANGDON SMITH

**La città incompleta.** By Giulia de Spuches, Vincenzo Guarrasi and Marco Picone. Palermo: Palumbo. 2002. ISBN 88 8020 487 4. €23.

Palermo is a peculiar city hosting a peculiar group of geographers, working within the Institute of Cultural Anthropology. *La città incompleta* (the incomplete city) is a collaborative piece of work produced by Giulia de Spuches, Vincenzo Guarrasi and Marco Picone. It is a textbook useful for classes in geography and architecture, based on research by the authors on Sicily and the city of Palermo.

*La città incompleta* is divided into 14 chapters. The first are mainly theoretical and conceptual, while the following ones are grounded on empirical material and develop particular issues like urban mapping, the peripheries of Palermo, or the legacy of the Italian National Exhibition 1891–92 in the urban form of the city. The book discusses a series of important contemporary issues in geography: mapping (in the broad sense used, for instance, by Denis Cosgrove), performative geographies, or time-space compression. It also bears the very peculiar mark of the Palermitan ‘school of geography’, made up by the intertwining of international discussions and home-brewed modes of thought related to interpretive anthropology and Russian semiotics of culture (Lotman and Uspenskij). Empirically, the book comes out of nearly three decades of research, often within national and international networks: on local territorial systems (with the Turin-based Giuseppe Dematteis), landscape planning in Sicily, urban peripheries, or GIS (with the critical companionship of the Bologna-based Franco Farinelli).

The result is both very stimulating and open to discussion. Stimulating because, despite the diversity of its theoretical references, it works as an organic whole, expressing the long and fruitful collaboration of its authors, rather than being an odd patchwork. It is also open to discussion, but in an interesting way. The book is as incomplete as the spaces it refers to. Sicily is, as most readers will know, an ever-changing and labile reality. Palermo, in particular, manifests a (sometimes

depressing and in other occasions beautiful) 'genius of unfulfilment': devastated houses can stay empty for generations, a marvellous opera house remains closed for 23 years (for obscure reasons) and places of cultural rebirth are unfinished, still used but already fading. Precariousness and instability are, for obvious reasons, part of the trademark of the city, but so is openness to a diversity of influences (in all senses of the word).

These features of the city also characterize *La città incompleta*. No wonder: because the book is inspired not only by the above-mentioned references but also by the idea of open, auto-poietic systems such as developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela.

It is also incomplete in the sense that it is a work in progress, a snapshot of the collective intelligence of this group of geographers taken at the beginning of the 21st century. They are now certainly somewhere else, thinking differently, working with other references, building new and voluntarily incomplete thought-houses. This movement is to be welcomed, I would argue, because some of the theoretical positions used are more limiting than creative *today*. The idea of auto-poietic systems in particular leads to an exceedingly abstract and actor-less conception of territorial processes. Under the heading of this biological metaphor, the city tends to become (I use the authors' words here) the 'nervous system' of the territorial body. How this nervous steering system really works (in Sassen's terms for instance), and to whose benefit, are questions that remain somewhat obscure in this book due to the reliance on such theoretical models. But, the references to theory being many and the empirical work substantial, the volume also contains careful analyses of single and strategically important actions (such as the Florio family and the Palermo exhibit at the end of the 19th century).

On the whole, then, *La città incompleta* makes very thought-provoking reading, demonstrating how a relatively marginal (but maritime!) geographical position can be creatively used. It will be of interest to all those who are curious about the diversity of contemporary human geography.