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There is a time for everything, and this is the time for living.

Palermo, beautiful and tormented, has known a time of silence.

Has known a time of humiliation.

Has known a time of violence. Has known a time of mourning and of rage.

Now is a time for justice.

— Leoluca Orlando

Leoluca Orlando, mayor of Palermo, speaks and writes eloquently of Sicily's capital city. No ordinary mayor, he writes poetry and philosophizes about the meaning of community, inspired by the old city's architecture. He believes Palermo can be wrested from Mafia control, its citizens freed from intimidation by renewing their sense of the city. Orlando has taken on the task of guiding the city into a return to normalcy.

After decades of emergencies and outrageous scandals, Palermo badly needs a respite if it is to flourish again. Palermo has been silent for years; fear kept people from the streets and general deterioration followed. Today one hears a renewed dialogue on the streets, between vendor and buyer, mother and child, friends and acquaintances. The stone, stucco and marble surfaces reverberate with voices — a real step on the road to normalcy.

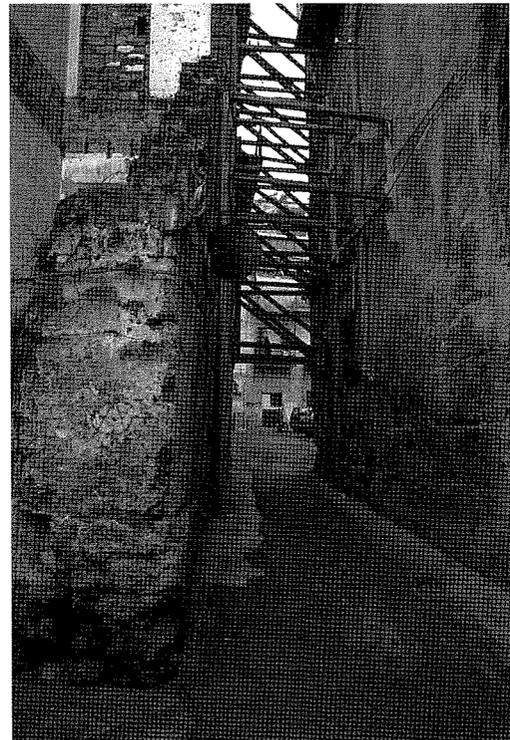
Palermo boasts a unique history and an exquisite Mediterranean setting. The Phoenicians, Arabs, Normans and various European royalty have all ruled the city. The *centro storico* is graced with a wealth of buildings that reflect the arts of its many conquerors, and the Palermitani have been known for their tolerance of diverse religions and cultures.

For centuries, wealthy citizens built a myriad of palaces, churches and roads that form the framework of the *centro storico*. But by the end of the nineteenth century Palermo had begun to grow out beyond its traditional center. Wide avenues led away from the city to areas of newly

constructed villas, which brought with them a change in the way people lived.

Previously, the rich, poor and middle class had shared buildings and courtyards. The landed aristocracy built their palaces in the city, settling on the main floor, leaving the other floors for a mix of everyone else. Every street displayed a wide range of incomes and backgrounds.

But the villas outside the city, built as homes for the new bourgeoisie, were never intended to house a cross section of people. Thus Palermo changed from a city in which all classes rubbed shoulders to



one in which a large group of people removed themselves from the mix, leaving the center for the poor and remnants of the aristocracy. While the mono-class neighborhood remains typical in the U.S. and many parts of Europe, Mayor Orlando sees no reason it should be the rule in Palermo.

Fifty years of neglect in Palermo's *centro storico*. Photos by Patricia Tusa Fels.



After World War II, a combination of events gave the upper hand to the Mafia. Ironically, the Fascists hated the Mafia and before the war Mussolini had succeeded in breaking its grip on Sicily. But after the Allies bombed Palermo and retook the island, the Mafia (enemy of Fascists and friend of the Americans) became entrenched in the new Italian government.

The Mafia saw money to be made in speculative building for the new suburbs, so it had no interest in repairing the war-damaged center. While the turn-of-the-century villas had brought some urbanization to the outskirts of the city, the building boom that started in the fifties destroyed Palermo's rural surroundings and brought an end to the dominance of the old center. Buildings were erected with little quality and no communal services, and they were intended only for middle-class buyers.

Meanwhile, millions of dollars that had been sent from the national government in Rome to restore the historic center were pocketed by the Mafia. Scaffolding was erected around major buildings and left to sit for ten, twenty, even thirty years. War damage was never repaired.

Palermo, the city of so many words, became silent. The architectural wealth of the center darkened and crumbled. Buildings stood empty, roofless, their windows bricked up. Streets seemed to hold only memories of violent deaths.

Finally, after fifty years, the scandals, massacres, corruption and unemployment became too much for the people of Palermo. A wave of reform hit all of Italy. Leaders, from the Prime Minister to local councilors, were shown to have been part of the criminal element. Elections brought to power a new generation of incorrupt

and educated citizens. Palermitani elected Orlando, an attorney, a lover of the city and the joys of urban life. He set out to banish the Mafia, its secretive ways and its anti-urban bias.

Just as a war-torn city feels a youthful giddiness when the fighting stops, so the citizens of Palermo returned to their streets with a sense of wonder. It is hard not to notice that the whispers of the last fifty years have been transformed into increasingly boisterous songs.

Today, Palermo's greyness is still much evident; stones that once must have glistened are covered with soot and grime. Building facades are obscured by layers of dirt, with a wealth of sculpted fruit, faces, crests, bodies and ornament left out of focus. Plants grow in crevices; ferns and vines reach out, up and down buildings. Many structures are nearly invisible, hidden behind scaffolding and netting; others have decayed to the point at which their roofs are gone, permitting one to glimpse the sky by looking through the shuttered, glassless windows.



Above left: A successful renovation next to a deserted palazzo. Above: Innovative restoration using bombed ruin with new construction.



Scaffolding where new work is underway.

Yet there are signs of returning life. Each of the center's four neighborhoods has a thriving street market, located on the winding, medieval streets of the oldest part of the center. In fact, the markets link up so that one can wander for miles from vegetable stalls to olive stands to hawkers of socks and underwear.

Walking the neighborhoods, one still finds workshops for wood, marble, metal and stucco;



The Spassimo neighborhood—an area that was heavily bombed during World War II and where renovation projects have just now begun.

recently there has been a reawakening of trade confederations. Public structures have been restored, painted, revitalized; the quality of work lavished on some projects is breathtaking. Massive roof beams have been saved, decorated ceilings cleaned, fine stone work revealed.

The most important work is that being done in private homes. A typical *palazzo* has twenty to thirty separate owners, many absentee. Sometimes only a small group of owners in a building have restored their apartments; sometimes an entire building has been renovated. But slowly the face on the street is lightening.

One of the mayor's first steps for a "return to normalcy" was an effort to reassert the importance of Palermo's *centro storico*, whose population had decreased to only 30,000 of Palermo's 700,000 residents. Palermo, as in much of Italy, has literally zero population growth; thus demand for housing can be met by rehabilitating existing structures rather than building new developments. In 1993 Palermo adopted a new urban plan that curtailed expansion into the countryside and established methods for restoring and reusing the center and allocated funds for the work.

The plan offered incentives to those who would restore and then inhabit apartments. The plan's creators hope to bring back the middle class into the center. The poor are already there and the rich still own apartments. If the wealthy see a vibrant center they will invest in restoring their property. If developers notice renewed interest in the center, they will redirect their energies to the great number of derelict buildings.

Much of the center's real estate is in private hands. But Palermo is a city where inaction is habitual, where a belief in cooperation is rare, where trust in government is nonexistent. Palermitani have become so used to nothing happening that they expect nothing to succeed. Moving back to the center entails much more than a change in scenery. It will require a deep attitudinal shift, a major change in the habits of the last half century.

Mayor Orlando believed that what was lacking in modern Palermo was "a conviction to live together in a community." He saw the building forms of the pre-industrial city — courtyards, common staircases, sidewalks leading to neighborhood piazzas — as forms of urban civility. Restored and re-inhabited buildings would celebrate the physical components that had sheltered that communal life in the past.

Palermo's plan of action is quite different from that which an American city in decline might take.

It has involved a more philosophical look at what a city is, what it means to live together, what is needed to create a place worthy of the name *citta*.

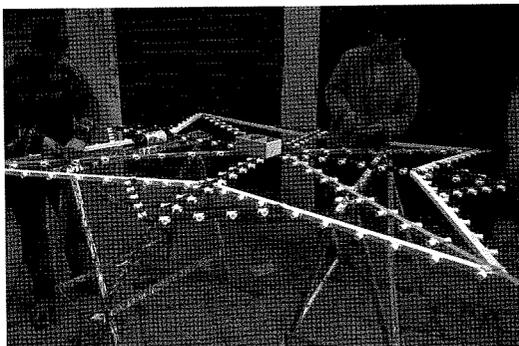
American politicians often speak of safety, civic pride and the attractiveness of their cities. But when an American mayor speaks of safety, he usually wants to hire more police. When he speaks of pride, he is selling a new skyscraper in the downtown.

Palermo's mayor is offering the renewed physical structure of the old city and the activities that follow as a model for safety and a source of pride. Since Palermo had an extremely serious crime problem, the city's renewal rests on the citizens believing in the safety of the center and its desirability as a place to live. The idea is that there will then follow an actual cessation of violence because of the active presence of citizens and the government's continual anti-Mafia activities. This process will take time; perhaps at least another decade before the benefits will be obvious.

Conservation, to Mayor Orlando, means saving the culture of the city itself, not just restoring brick and mortar. The old city is the best location for a renewed Palermo because it holds both the tradition of a communal life and the city's ongoing institutions: markets, university, theatres, civic buildings. Orlando believes pride in the city will translate into care for it. The people, with the help of Mayor Orlando, have rediscovered their voices.



Neglected jewels waiting for attention.



Neighborhood workshop creating traditional light displays.