

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN-BUILD AS A STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTRADA NICOLÒ ALONG THE SIMETO RIVER, SICILY, ITALY

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1 ABSTRACT

Through direct engagement in an Action Research process, we have documented a collaborative design-build exercise for the ecological regeneration of a riverine site in the Simeto basin, Sicily, IT. The site, Contrada Nicolò, presents numerous opportunities to convey connections between the river and the contiguous municipalities. Despite its ecological value, for years Nicolò has been no more than an illegal dumping ground. In contrast, a community-based group, whose characteristics are discussed in the paper, decided to act for revitalizing the site, encountering several challenges along the way. The authors - as engaged-scholars in the field of landscape architecture and ecological planning - have made the effort of supporting the grassroots' initiatives at Nicolò, acknowledging the sense of stewardship that some community members have developed for the site. Our common goal has been to show that ecological restoration can be conducted through a process of a wider community engagement, collaborative design-build and management, testing a variety of techniques on the ground. Our role, as engaged-scholars, has been crucial in catalyzing the process of collaborative design. At the same time, our community partners have been active co-constructors of the Action Research process in its whole cycle, from questions' framing (and reframing) to implementation and evaluation. Some pitfalls occurred, such as weaknesses and discontinuities in the process of community engagement itself. Notwithstanding, the process provides some key lessons that were worth sharing, presenting details and critical reflections and discussing one year of on-site work in depth.

1.1 Keywords

Ecological Restoration, Watershed Planning, Collaborative Design-Build, Action Research, Community-University Engagement