

# CONSERVATION— RECONSTRUCTION

SMALL HISTORIC CENTRES  
CONSERVATION IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

Rodica Crisan  
Donatella Fiorani  
Loughlin Kealy  
Stefano Francesco Musso  
Editors

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The workshop was attended by 70 participants representing: Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Montenegro, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United States of America, United Kingdom.

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## FROM 'GHOST TOWNS' TO 'PLACES OF MEMORY': A PROCESS OF RE-SIGNIFICATION

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### Castelvechio Calvisio, the emblem of 'ghost towns'

The visit to the town of Castelvechio Calvisio and the activities experienced during the workshop represented a precious opportunity for reflection on the issue of the abandonment of small rural settlements, emphasised by the earthquake of 2009 but definitely already widespread before that.

Even before the experience of the workshop – a sensation that was later confirmed by the visit to the site – it felt like a priority to ponder on a different level than the mere technical point of view, related for instance to more suitable ways to activate procedures, conduct analysis, set up adequate methodologies of consolidation, if not real proposals of intervention/reconstruction, of the landscape too.

Castelvechio Calvisio, in all respects, can be considered the emblem of a phenomenon of a wider range than its own specifically (the post-earthquake condition); that is, the depopulation of minor settlements, mostly but not exclusively situated on the Italian Apennines, today turned into 'ghost towns'<sup>1</sup> (Di Figlia 2012: 1-7) (Fig. 1).

The phenomenon of the abandonment of these settlements has to be evaluated in relation to a sequence of events related to human life, in close connection with cultural, economical and social factors that represent an individual and collective sensitivity, typical of the indissoluble bond between ways of life and establishment in a territory. These are places, such as Castelvechio Calvisio, that the secularisation of culture and contemporary society could no longer assimilate (Olmo 2010: 17-27).

This is a problem of great importance, that returned to centre stage after the earthquake that affected, in 2012, the Emilia Romagna region, and that cannot leave out of consideration a programmatic (other than financial) approach by the population, which has to be able to maintain the technical-architectural, urban, economical, social and identity-making aspects and to communicate with the individual specialisms.

### Reconstruction as a process of re-signification

The possibility of revitalising the 'ghost towns', that in some cases resulted in actual events, forefathers of certain trends (of which, though, it's necessary to evaluate the results after the 'test of time'), is often associated with the word 'reconstruction'. Whether the abandonment, even if of distant historical origins, occurs following natural events, or because of economic and social causes, the negligence causes physical damage, if not collapses.

"Rebuilding the identity" is the title of a series of projects for the buildings that were damaged in the earthquake in the Emilian seismic zone, sponsored by the Federation of the Professional Associations of Architects of Emilia Romagna; "The shapes of reconstruction" is the contribution to the debate on the same event that the National Association



of Historical-Artistic Centres published, in the form of an anthology (Storchi, Toppetti 2013). “Build to rebuild” is the core of the activity of the laboratory of projects that architect Mario Cuccinella, motivated by an inspirational will of participation and empathy following the earthquake of 2012, has organised and coordinated, mainly focusing on projects of construction of public places as aggregators of new sociability. When faced with tragedy and destruction, the community reacts yearning for an immediate physical reconstruction, ‘as it was where it was’, or combining innovation and conservation or, furthermore, highlighting the importance of the novelty no matter what, perpetuating passionate debates existing since the mid-20th century.

Even the naming of the workshop emblematically referred to the binomial conservation/reconstruction, to whom one of the working groups<sup>2</sup> gave a contribution mainly focusing on the subject of the possible integration of the empty places in the urban fabric, interpreting the word ‘gap’ according to different meanings, not exclusively on a physical level.

Observing the village of Castelvecchio Calvisio, in effect, the attention was focused on a level partly different from the necessity of reconstructing (and projecting too) new physical configurations, maybe in correspondence to recent or ancient ruins.

The acceptance of the emptiness resulting from a previous post-seismic collapse by the local community of Castelvecchio Calvisio is exemplary – the emptiness for which there was no need to rebuild in terms of volume, but rather create an open space, some kind of piazza.

The attention shifts, therefore, to the need for a re-signification that is at the base of any process of revitalisation.

Following a natural event, or other intrinsic factors of life conditions, no longer sustainable by the population or, furthermore, external factors of a different nature – for instance, related to territorial development policies typical of the 20th century – leave the town uninhabited, deprived of its primary content.

The widespread depopulation of rural villages, in addition to the physical abandonment of places, has in fact separated the ‘territory’ and ‘territoriality’ duo, intended as a configuration of spaces subject to forms of local development and defined according to the production, the trade markets, the ways of life. Those places which even after the war represented a meeting point of knowledge and beliefs, stratified signs, meanings and legends will never be able to reach the same abundance again, at least not within the same ways and conditions of life.

After separating the almost deterministic traditional connections of cause-and-effect between territoriality, tradition and identity, the search now concentrates on new meanings and ways of living, a resettlement, before a physical reconstruction, based on new

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FIG. 1. Map of Italian small towns completely abandoned (from Di Figlia 2005). Most of them are located in the Appennines (Tosco-Emiliano, Abruzzese, Campano, Calabro).

significances. The interpretation of the concept of testimony and a reflection on the possibility that these same places could pass on values so powerful that they can lead to their own conservation, appropriation and assimilation by new forms of community become predominant.

### **Lost identities and new forms of settlement**

The policies of revitalisation, both in 'site-specific' form, focusing on the specificity of the local products, and in a diffused way, with the creation of networks – towns of well-being, towns of excellence, towns of water<sup>3</sup> – try to build a suitable frame to the development of the places. For Castelvechio Calvisio the local resources to take into account, for instance, could be related to new forms of equestrian tourism, because the town seems to belong to a secondary branch of the bridle path network in the Appennino Abruzzese, offering overnight hospitality, catering and recovery for animals and specific assistance.

The resources on which the revitalisation of the 'ghost towns' rely, however, can be local (infrastructural, territorial, economical) or not (new forms of immigration, potential communities, artistic events...). The actions refer to public visions and policies, to economical incentives, to European financings, to private investments that can produce programmatic policies and even influence the urban instruments. All this outlines a very complex context, facing which any specific contribution to the problem can be as a result undersized, as an expression of scientific approaches ideally meticulous but inevitably limited. Also because of these factors, it was worth lingering on the process of re-signification of the towns, through a brief interpretation of some, among many, existing experiences, which can lead to unprecedented paths, including for the case study.

### **The 'ghost town' as testimony of a collective memory: towards processes of museumification**

Every single collective memory is distributed in a spatial context. Before the abandonment of the now ghost towns, the habits of their local communities resisted factors that tended to transform them. The people's design took shape in a material way of being and the force of tradition of the place originated, first of all, from its constructed matter, even in the form of artificial landscapes. Some interventions of revisitation (for instance in the form of a touristic-museum ramble) are moved by the will of recovering, through the power of the material environment, the collective memory of those places, strongly linked to the physical presence of the members of the group and to the social roots. "Only the image of space, because of its stability, gives us the illusion of not changing throughout time and of finding the past in the present again; but this is the way we can define memory; and only space is stable enough to be able to last without aging or losing any of its parts" (Halbwachs 1996: 162).

One of the most striking experiments of recovery of the collective memory, at least in Italy, is the one of *albergo diffuso*, the idea of which was born in Carnia, after the earthquake of 1976 and which exploded more recently with the readaptation of the town of Santo Stefano di Sessanio in the Appennino Abruzzese, renovated according to the principle of the 'how it was, where it was' (at least programmatically and with all the contradictions that it can entail).

Extended later on to a network of minor towns,<sup>4</sup> this idea revolves around the recovery with accommodation purposes of some historical towns in the mountains of central and southern Italy, on the basis of a conservative approach that includes:

- the exclusive use of local salvaged materials;
- the conservation of the original intended use of the single rooms within the general domestic organisation of the towns;
- the furnishings of rustic style of the Appennine mountains;
- the recreation of some aspects of the native material culture still alive in the memory of elderly people (homemade cooking, territorial subsistence, craftsmanship, etc.).

The protective approach leads us to the conservation, at least trend-wise, of the traces of life in the walls and plasterworks, in the stratifications of the buildings, elsewhere systematically removed.

### **The fascination of the ruins, a condition for artistic expression**

The International Hamlet of Artists of Bussana Vecchia (Sanremo, western Liguria) tells a story of ‘unauthorised’ but permanent occupation of the buildings that were not irretrievably damaged by the earthquake of 1887, with some sort of suggestion of the fascination of the ruins. This is a process started by Italian artists around 1960 of renovating, often personally, the houses abandoned following the seism, leaving the – even traumatic – signs of the passage of time and the natural events that occurred visible. The increase of touristic traffic and the subsequent consequence for the property value of these places have, on the one hand, started long legal arguments by the landlords and, on the other hand, forced the progressive abandonment of the town by the new founders, who couldn’t see the characteristic ‘impermanence’ that was at the base of the artistic quest. The constant attraction for tourists, increasing the income from property, triggered a different form of population, although temporary and limited to the holiday season, but also activities related to food service, involving the residents of the very near San Remo. Since this is a still existing problem, the town administration is predisposed towards finding a solution to the situation.

The experience of Bussana Vecchia opened the way to many other contaminations, scattered all over the national territory, between the conservation of ancient towns and the (permanent or temporary) inclusion of artistic installations, open to innovative and poetic exchanges among the past and metaphorical visions, of which movie sets, increasingly installed in this kind of location by international directors, are just a restricted expression.

### **Territoriality, local development and sustainability<sup>5</sup>**

Other approaches of territorial valorisation, in incompletely abandoned areas, are based on the definition and implementation of territorial development processes built starting from the local level and based on the sustainable valorisation of the material and immaterial resources, involving the social and cultural fields and the capability of self-organisation of the subjects involved (Dematteis, Governa 2005).

Many years ago, the municipality of Varese Ligure started moving along this logic, becoming at the end of 1999 the first commune in Italy to obtain a certification of the environmental management system, in conformity with the instructions of the community regulations<sup>6</sup>.

The certification states that the 2,500 inhabitants of the municipality live in a territory where the occupation is complete, the values of carbon monoxide non-existent, the agricul-

ture is based exclusively on organic criteria, and services are guaranteed and efficient. This result is the outcome of 20 years of experience, started as a way to control the depopulation of the 1970s and put into effect with a gradual process of recovery and re-use of the old physical buildings (starting from the restoration of the castle and recovery of the ancient Borgo Rotondo, the heart of the antique settlement) (Figs. 2-3). This recovery was made possible by the efforts of the administration and of the inhabitants themselves, who slowly took back their town and territory, both physically and culturally. The physical isolation of Varese Ligure (in the backcountry), together with the few still existing resources, turned into opportunities for sustainable local development (also evaluating the environmental performances of the communal administration's policies concerning, for instance, waste recycling, the cycle of water, of the supplies and the usage of energy resources and the quality of the air).

### **Emphasis of the “anthropology of difference” (Bettini 2011: 8)**

The ways to revitalise ‘ghost towns’ still go through field testing of new forms of re-population. The recovery of the abandoned settlement of Colletta di Castelbianco, in the backcountry of Albenga (SV), now represents a paradigmatic example, both for the intervention of an internationally renowned architect (Giancarlo De Carlo), and for the original idea of turning the town into a telematic one. Adopting the principle of union between ‘physical distance’ and ‘spiritual proximity’, De Carlo, appointed by the real estate company that acquired the whole town, realised the idea of ‘global village’ anticipated years before by Marshall McLuhan, according to whom we would witness a rapid development of an uninterrupted semi-rural environment, in which managers, assistants and employees would carry out their activities sitting at a computer desk, without the need to leave home.<sup>7</sup>

Fascinated by the complexity of the settlement developed on vertical layers, even with independent entrances, De Carlo played with the vaulted unit, introducing it in the form of new aggregations, both horizontally and vertically, with the creation of new openings (the distribution flexibility is one of his favourite subjects but – for example – difficult to implement in the village of Castelvecchio Calvisio because of its seismic vulnerability). In fact, in contrast with the proclaimed expectations, Colletta is nowadays becoming a simple vacation destination for longer or shorter periods, according to the timing and geographical provenance of the new owners (mostly coming from abroad), rather than a new stable community – not being able, in this case, to embody the role of tele-village that was planned for it.<sup>8</sup>

The eco-village Torri Superiore in Ventimiglia represents, instead, a considerable ‘source of sense’ for a new form of community. At the end of the 1980s, after being in a state of total abandonment for a long time, it has been the object of a specific initiative of recovery.

The Cultural Association of Torri Superiore was founded with the specific goal of re-using the old residences, mainly for housing purposes. Almost all the houses of Torri Superiore were gradually bought and divided between the single members of the association and the association itself, obtaining private apartments (between 28 and 80 square metres) and public spaces. At the moment, a little Italian-German community is permanently living in the partly restored town. The village is now open to eco-tourism for courses, workshops and projects for environmental education, and it also offers an accommodation facility for sojourns and holidays. This community lives thanks to an internal economy





FIG. 2. Aerial view of the town of Varese Ligure (province of La Spezia, Ligurian region).

FIG. 3. Varese Ligure, the Borgo Rotondo, around the medieval castle.





of a mixed kind: everyone is the owner of his own income, except a percentage that is paid to finance common meals, heating and electricity, and for the amortisation of some goods purchased for everyone. Organic agriculture is used in the two hectares of land owned by the association, and it satisfies the internal demand for oil and vegetables.

The resettlement of Albagnano (in the province of Verbania, near Lake Maggiore), internationally known as 'Albagnano Healing Meditation Centre', is completely different.

In the historically abandoned hamlet is a 'monastery' settled by the lama Gangchen, a Tibetan monk long committed to the teaching of Tantric Buddhism and traditional Tibetan medicine. The small rural town has therefore recovered and can nowadays offer permanent or temporary accommodation to the visitors interested in the activities of the spiritual and religious centre. The spiritual focal point, the 'Temple of the Sky above Earth', is based inside a building once used as a stable, but little has remained of the memory of the traditional building (lifted and modified) other than the circular shape, evidently chosen as the actual venue for meditation (Figs. 4-5-6).

What kind of relation is it legitimate to establish between testimony, tradition and new forms of community?

When a group is inserted in a part of space, it will transform this space in its own image, and at the same time it will adapt to the material things that put up resistance against the group itself. The image of the external environment and of the stable relations with the group becomes the main focus in the viewpoint of itself. The image of things participates in their inertia. It is not the insulated individual, but the individual as a member of a group – it's the group itself that, this way, lives submissively to the influence of the material nature, and participates to its equilibrium. The place receives the mark of the group, and this is reciprocal. (Halbwachs 1996: 136-137)

How can the single stones, and the complex system of spaces generated by their connection, receive new forms of community? And to what extent is it legitimate to modify those systems of spaces in the name of new necessities? Fundamentally, is it required to adapt the existing spaces to new social groups, or vice versa, to adapt the habits of these groups to already strongly characterised spaces?

The abundance of relations, physical or not, generated by the complexity of the urban fabric of Castelveccchio Calvisio, in its apparent simplicity, can constitute a formidable interpretive key to try and advance new answers to such questions.

### **The narration of a place: a story told in images**

Castelveccchio Calvisio is the emblem of a complex space that resisted, paradoxically also thanks to its abandonment, those economical, social and physical transformations that heavily altered the Italian territory throughout the 20th century. Therefore it is necessary to have intellectual tools that are capable of monitoring such complexity, and to question the real possibility of identifying compatible forms of resettlement, respectful but not necessarily and exclusively aiming for the firmness of the museumification of places.

Tradition, sure enough, is not only something that is handed down, but also something that is built and learned. The strength of a tradition doesn't originate much, not only from the fact that it comes from the past, but from the fact that it's still taught in the present days, and the stronger the present-day framework that supports the tradition, the more solid it grows (Bettini 2011: 50).



The 'great beauty' of the place induces the integration of the methods of scientific research with an 'artistic' kind of investigation, taking place through perception, expression and communication and not tending to give answers, but rather to generate questions (Fouqué 2010: 33), introducing a new narrative construction of the place, from which new suggestions will perhaps be able to arise. The analogies between the structure of the space built enclosed within the curvilinear perimeter of the hamlet and the 'tortoise shell' (Fig. 7), metaphor of protection, or the leaf in whose nervation the sap is flowing (Fig. 8), a metaphor of the articulation of community life in the collective spaces of the hamlet, evoke the poetics of space (Bachelard 1968) upon which every process of revitalisation of places is founded.

The 'hamlet as a shell' and the 'shell as a fortress' (Figs. 9-10). The enclosed form protects the community from external aggressions and from the frigid winter climate, arousing a sense of warmth and intimacy also in the collective spaces; at the same time, the openings on its edges capture the landscape and the horizon within the living environment, taking possession of them (Figs. 11-12).

The elementary cell of the urban structure protects its inhabitant with the solid and continuous walls, recalling the ancestral image of the cradle (Bachelard 1975: 129).

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FIG. 4. View of the small settlement of Albagnano (province of Verbania, Lago Maggiore, Piedmont region).

FIG. 5. Albagnano Healing Meditation Centre: the temple, installed in the old stables.

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FIG. 6. Albagnano Healing Meditation Centre: inner view of the temple.



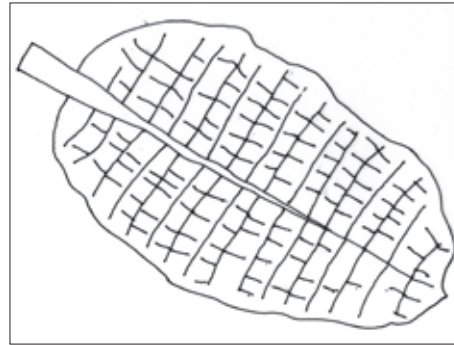
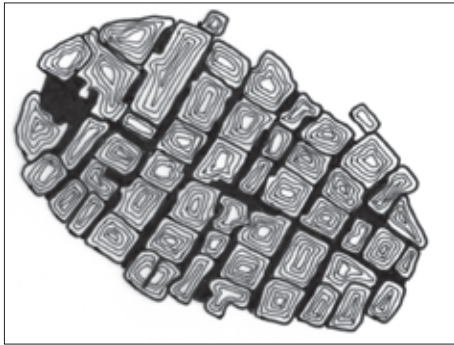


FIG. 7. From the elliptical to the carapace, metaphor of protection.

FIG. 8. From the elliptical to the leaf, metaphor of lifeline.

FIG. 9. Castelveccchio Calvisio: the village as a fortress. Perimeter walls incorporated into houses.

FIG. 10. The village as a fortress: Forte of San Leo (province of Rimini, Emilian region), detail of one of the two circular towers designed by Francesco di Giorgio Martini.



The cell as a home, and the concatenation of cells, according to the principles of horizontal and vertical aggregation (to the extent of overpassing the road), apparently disorganised but subtending to an implicit order, express the strength of the uniqueness of inhabiting, and, at the same time, the unity of the community (Bachelard 1975: 72).

The reconstruction plan developed for Castelveccchio Calvisio gives an account of the complexity and stratification, material and immaterial, which underpins the built environment and its relationship with the landscape, with the land and ways of life. Of particular interest, according to the proposed interpretations offered in this paper, will be the future interventions on those limited portions affected by collapses signed as 'restoration and

FIGS. 11-12. Appropriation of outdoor spaces.



conservation of type C' (volumetric reintegration), for which the plan also suggests the use of a competition of ideas. It may be an opportunity to 'assess' *ex ante* quality specifications, architectural and urban, balancing conservation/consolidation of fragments still present and proposed reintegration, hopefully neither mimetic nor summary (Technical Implementation Regulations, Art. C3 19).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the report on the *research Geografie dell'abbandono. La dismissione dei borghi in Italia*, publicarchitecture@polimi research group coordinator Gennaro Postiglione, Politecnico di Milano.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the author participated in the workshop in Group D.

<sup>3</sup> See the actions of local entities or authorities for valorisation as in the case of 'I Borghi più belli d'Italia' and 'Associazione Nazionale degli Alberghi Diffusi'.

<sup>4</sup> See the "Il patrimonio minore, da Santo Stefano di Sessanio ai Sassi di Matera: Frattura Vecchia, Martese, Montebello sul Sangro, Rocca Calascio, Rocchetta al Volturno, Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Sassi di Matera, Serra" project by Sexantio Srl and Daniele Kihlgren.

<sup>5</sup> The title of the paragraph directly refers to the publication of Dematteis and Governa 2005.

<sup>6</sup> See EU Directive n. 1836/93 and norms UNI EN ISO 14001.

<sup>7</sup> Citation from M. McLuhan and Q. Fiore, *The Medium is in the Message. An Inventory of Effects*. Harmondsworth 1967: 72, and was taken from Rykwert 2000: 197.

<sup>8</sup> See Mozzanica 2012. *Un'ipotesi di recupero per i comuni facenti capo all'Unione dei Comuni Lario e Monti*, Master's degree thesis, Polytechnic University of Milan.

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