

The Role of Heritage Communities in Local Development Processes through the reuse of Architectural Heritage. Some Examples in Italian Rural Areas

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Abstract

Over the last three decades, various initiatives promoted by the European Union concerning the involvement and empowerment of communities in recognising and creating cultural values have flourished. They include, for instance, the Faro Convention, programs for ecomuseums and community mapping, and have contributed to giving voice to bottom-up initiatives for enhancing not only so-called monumental architecture but also "ordinary" architecture and built and vernacular cultural heritage. In general, this approach has also contributed to focusing attention on the importance of local communities in local development processes. In Italy, the so-called inner areas are often characterised by ordinary and vernacular heritage related to rural or manufacturing activities. In these small villages, some local communities, also thanks to the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas, recognised reuse of part of the vernacular local built heritage as a strength for the community itself and the broader context. Some cases have demonstrated that valorisation of architectural heritage is possible without creating tourism-related facilities only (hotels, museums, etc.) but also creating services needed by "local" users that facilitate the everyday life of the place. In this perspective, attention should also be focused on heritage education and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, which should involve the entire community at different levels, starting from experiences already in place in similar contexts. In this sense, a community can be intended as a broad concept, a constantly evolving process that includes the resident citizens and a broader network related to a specific territory. Through analyses of case studies, this contribution aims to propose reflections on the role of heritage community experiences in empowering vernacular architectural heritage and its wider context.

Keywords: rural and inner areas; architectural heritage; community empowerment.

1. Communities and local heritage in inner areas: A relationship at risk

Since the 1990s, international bodies such as the European Union (EU) have promoted many initiatives and programmes to involve and promote communities in recognising local cultural

heritage and creating cultural values. One of the most important actions supported by the EU in this field is the Faro Convention, which, for the first time, introduced the concept of community heritage with legal value¹. Moreover, other international programmes have contributed to focusing attention on the importance of the role of

¹ Council of Europe, Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Treaty Series n 199, Faro,

27.10.2005. <https://rm.coe.int/1680083746> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

local communities in the safeguarding and valorisation of architectural and cultural heritage in general, such as the Leader approach², with the institution of GALs³, community mapping initiatives and the foundation of the ecomuseums network⁴. All these projects have led to a wider awareness of the relevance of communities' points of view in identifying, reactivating and protecting local heritage, which is not necessarily already included in the listed monuments. In general, they have contributed to giving voice to bottom-up initiatives, demonstrating their central role in the broader local development process.

These dynamics can be observed especially in inner areas and marginalised territories affected by a dearth of essential services and depopulation trends. In these contexts, often characterised by stratified rural and manufacturing activities, local architectural heritage is more likely to be part of the so-called vernacular heritage⁵. If we consider vernacular architecture as the results of long-time processes of production and reproduction of knowledge, culture, society, economy, history and locality (Torre, 2011), the inner areas are precious repositories of tangible and intangible vernacular heritage, and knowledge related to ancient activities which are in turn related to production in general (Oteri, Scamardi, 2020). In some Italian inner areas, communities, the vernacular heritage, and their relationships are exposed to various risks. A decreasing population and socio-economic rarefaction have led to the disappearance of those processes of production

and reproduction that contributed to creating the vernacular heritage itself. Furthermore, depopulation can hinder the transmission of knowledge related to local culture and activities. Vernacular heritage is also exposed to risks such as "museification" and turistification. When ritual is separated from practice and law, it becomes folklore (Torre, 2011). When such heritage acquires functions and uses which are too far from the everyday needs of the community, the risk is the embalming of these legacies, often referring to "historical traditions" that sometimes never existed (Oteri, 2019; Bettini, 2016; Hobswbawn 1999).

2. Laws, approaches, strategies: new paradigms for relaunching cultural heritage in Italian inner areas

Following, but perhaps anticipating the prevalent tendency at a European and international scale⁶, an interesting change in approaching the relaunch of marginal and depopulated areas has been recorded in Italy since 2012. The National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)⁷, which proposes a place-based approach to face depopulation in marginal areas, marks an important, even if slow, change in tackling this issue. Drawn up in collaboration between the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion and the European Commission⁸, the Strategy is mainly based on improvements in health, education, and accessibility, and the enhancement of important cultural capitals that inner areas preserve. The preservation and enhancement of vernacular heritage and, more in

² LEADER European Union initiative. <https://eufunds.gov.mt/en> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

³ GAL, Local Action Groups, composed of local public and private stakeholders (part of the LEADER approach).

⁴ "Ecomuseums are focused on the identity of a place, based on participation, and strive to better the involved community and its heritage via an agreement". <https://ecomuseums.com/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

⁵ ICOMOS, Charter on the built vernacular heritage, ratified by the ICOMOS 12th General Assembly, in Mexico, October 1999. https://www.icomos.org/charters/vernacular_e.pdf (last accessed 11.01.2022)

⁶ The recent Conclusions by the European Council on culture, high-quality architecture and built environment as key elements of the New European Bauhaus initiative (November 2021) highlight the necessity of protecting the built environment and the role of communities in such a commitment. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14534-2021-INIT/en/pdf> (last accessed 15/01/2022)

⁷ The first Italian policy for the inner areas. <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/> (last accessed 11/01/2022)

⁸ One hundred and ninety million euros were allocated between 2014 and 2016 to finance the Strategy.

general, the so-called “minor” heritage strongly connected to the traditional way of life of rural and mountain communities acquires great importance amongst the objectives of SNAI.

The idea is also to significantly turn the town-countryside divergence into a favourable relationship that involves economy, society, and culture⁹. In this idea of decentralising strategies and initiatives, local communities play an essential role as they have been considered keepers and upholders of the important legacies that marginal areas preserve. After some years since the beginning, it has been possible to assess the early results. From Northern to Southern Italy, the Strategy has revealed the unexpected vitality of local communities, mainly among young generations. At the same time, conflicts, some opposition from local institutions and bureaucratic constraints seem to hinder the carrying out of the Strategy¹⁰. For this reason, valorisation initiatives that were activated very often proved to be disconnected from community issues and in many cases, the actions finally funded by the Strategy were mainly devoted to valorising cultural and architectural heritage for creating tourism-related facilities, not for providing community-oriented services. However, through the initial participation and co-planning phases to define the program for reactivation of the areas, there were diverse occasions to reflect on local potentialities and identify them in many marginalised contexts, raising awareness on local heritage. In a certain way, they rediscovered their resilience, as some of the following examples

show. It is significant that most of the successful place-based initiatives activated in inner areas came from associations or private groups rather than from institutions and local administrations. Some independent groups, organised in associations or cooperatives¹¹ and private for-profit and non-profit foundations promoted programs and projects aimed at fostering local development processes in the inner areas. While usually the private foundations were used to fund single restoration projects, in the experiences that this contribution wants to illustrate some foundations supported broader local development processes which included not only restoration and/or reuse projects but also a management strategy and a socio-economic plan for reducing the marginalisation of these areas. The project Alpe Pedroria and Madrera, activated by the *Fondo Ambiente Italiano* (FAI) in a mountain area in Lombardy, is an example of this kind of local development process. The project aims at recovering the alpine pasture, encouraging new ways of grazing and a local cheese production chain, which required the restoration and reuse of abandoned environmental and architectural heritage. Indeed, the promoted initiatives seem to reveal a renewed interest in the potentialities of the territory.

3. Voices from the bottom: some experiences in the light of a desirable change¹²

In 2011, a private donor left a mountain area of 200 hectares in the *Orobic Valtellinesi* National Park in the province of Sondrio to FAI, *Fondo*

⁹ “In the last few years, the Strategy has mobilised about a hundred persons from local and central administrations, about a thousand mayors, tens of thousand people, and many universities, associations and companies, spreading a “culture of inner areas” that is truly important for the future of our country” (Lucatelli, Luisi 2018, p. 28. The translation is by the authors)

¹⁰ Some significant barriers have been recorded, mainly in relation to local community difficulties in accepting new protagonists and new stakeholders in their territories. In addition, a misinterpreted or rhetorical idea of participation seems to affect programs and initiatives. Lucatelli, Luisi 2018, p. 28.

¹¹ Associations, the third sector bodies recognised by the Italian legislation. See Codice del Terzo Settore. <http://shorturl.at/kDEH5> (last accessed 11/01/2022)

¹² Analyses of the here described experiences are part of the results of Caterina Valiante’s PhD thesis “Census of Practices of Preservation and Reuse of Architectural Heritage in Fragile Areas” - developed in the PhD program in Preservation of the Architectural Heritage at the Politecnico di Milano, Department of Excellence on Territorial Fragilities. The thesis is mapping and studying practices of reuse of built heritage in wider local development initiatives in Italian inner areas.

Ambiente Italiano foundation¹³. There, the FAI project ‘Alpe Pedroria and Madrera’¹⁴, part of the wider *Progetto Alpe* for inner mountain areas¹⁵ aims to reactivate and valorise this area by recovering the pasture, the local cheese production chain and the rural landscape and built heritage.



Fig. 1. Architectural heritage in Alpe Pedroria and Madrera (<https://fondoambiente.it/>).

This case study is located in the municipality of Talamona, in the *Valli del Bitto*¹⁶. These valleys, where the stream Bitto flows, were ancient trails and connections between Valtellina - particularly the town of Morbegno - and Bergamo, and old crossroads for trading between the Canton of Grigioni and the Republic of Venice. The area has been inhabited since ancient times, thanks to its strategic position and natural inclination to farming activities and the presence of diffused mineral veins. Legacies of this long-lasting presence are visible in the natural landscape as well as in the cultural and architectural heritage. The municipality of Talamona is currently facing a slight

demographic decrease, and it is categorised as a “small municipality” by the Italian legislation¹⁷.



Fig. 2. Map of Alpe Pedroria and Madrera. Authors' elaboration based on Google Earth Map (<https://earth.google.com>).

According to the National Strategy for Inner Areas, Talamona is classified as an inner area, even if it was not included in a specific pilot area of the first planning phase, 2014-2020¹⁸. Although the municipality is quite close to the major centre of Morbegno, essential services (education, health and mobility) are still lacking and hard to reach. From the economic point of view, the area has always based itself upon agricultural and farming activities, and today, the results of excellent production, strictly related to specific natural and territorial features, still remain. The most important product of the area is “*Bitto*” cheese (Corti, Ruffoni, 2009)¹⁹. In the areas of the *Orobic Valtellinesi* National Park, the alpine pastures have a particular exposure, humidity and temperature that has allowed a specialised farming and dairy production economy since the Middle Ages. Also, the *Valli del Bitto*'s

¹³ FAI – Fondo per l’Ambiente Italiano is a non-profit foundation established in 1975, using the National Trust as a model, with the aim of protecting and enhancing Italy’s historical, artistic and landscape heritage. <https://fondoambiente.it/il-fai/mission/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

¹⁴ The authors would like to thank the FAI officers (Fondo Ambiente Italiano) Isabella Spicuglia, Maria Galli and Giuliano Galli for their kind availability in providing part of the information reported in this contribution.

¹⁵ *Progetto Alpe*, a project fostered by FAI to protect and enhance inner areas located 600 metres above sea level. <https://fondoambiente.it/il-progetto-alpe-l-italia-sopra-600-metri/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

¹⁶ *Valle del Bitto di Albaredo* and *Valle del Bitto di Gerola*. <https://www.parcorobievault.com/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

¹⁷ 4638 inhabitants were registered in Talamona in 2020. <https://urly.it/3jqwf> (last accessed 12/01/2022)

¹⁸ Talamona is classified as “*D-intermedio* (intermediate)”. In Valtellina, SNAI selected the pilot area “*Alta Valtellina*”, see <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

¹⁹ See also <https://www.formaggiobitto.com/it/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

geopolitical situation permitted commercialisation of this product in different markets: Grigioni, the Republic of Venice and the State of Milan. Nowadays, the local producers are part of a consortium “*Consorzio Salvaguardia Bitto Storico*”, which in 2003 was recognised as a “*Presidio Slow Food*”²⁰. As will be illustrated below, this very local production is strictly related to the vernacular cultural and architectural heritage now present in the area of Alpe Pedroria and Madrera, historically a place of alpine pasture and farming activities connected to cheesemaking.



Fig. 3. Farming activities reintroduced by the FAI project in Alpe Pedroria and Madrera (<https://fondoambiente.it/>).

According to the FAI project²¹, the planned interventions included environmental maintenance of the entire area with the reintroduction of farming activities²², re-establishing ancient pastures, thereby hindering abandonment of the land and hydrogeological instability. The project also contributed to safeguarding the rural built heritage, with interventions for the preservation of several abandoned lodges. In the first phase, the trails were recovered, and safe access to the site was assured. In a second phase, securing interventions were provided to all the built heritage, starting from restoring the first two lodges in Alpe Pedroria.



Fig. 4. Construction site in “Baita Eterna” (<https://fondoambiente.it/>).

For these two structures, destined initially to shelter for animals, a preservation strategy was activated to remove the decay patterns, which mainly affected the mortars, and to undertake structural consolidation interventions on the stone masonry and the wooden roof. Later, further buildings were recovered by replacing the missing wooden roof (Baita Eterna), adding drainage systems, restoring the interiors, and constructing a new space for sanitary facilities (Stalla Grande in Alpe Pedroria). The restored lodges aim at supporting farming, with the creation of a house for the dairyman, for recreating the cheese production chain, setting up a didactic centre to carry out activities for involving students in raising awareness of local historical legacies, and hospitality of tourists. The third phase of the project concerned some typical fundamental structures for the historic production of the local “*bitto*” cheese. These two small drystone-masonry buildings, called “*calècc*”, were temporary places for the processing procedure directly after milking, an essential phase for this artisanal production. The FAI strategy is based on the idea of preserving the remaining masonry and plans to recreate the ancient light covering structure for educational purposes, setting up didactic activities with students and visitors through lectures, guided tours and workshops. Moreover, the project aims to safeguard and valorise the landscape,

²⁰ The Slow Food Presidia, see <https://www.fondazioni-slowfood.com/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

²¹ See <https://fondoambiente.it/luoghi/alpe-pedroria-e-alpe-madrera> <https://fondoambiente.it/news/alpe-pedroria-unidentita-da-valorizzare>, [https://fondoambiente.it/news/il-](https://fondoambiente.it/news/il-cantiere-alle-alpi-pedroria-e-madrera)

[cantiere-alle-alpi-pedroria-e-madrera](https://fondoambiente.it/news/il-cantiere-alle-alpi-pedroria-e-madrera) (last accessed 11.01.2022)

²² The project included the purchase of local cows and goats, which are needed for local “*Bitto*” cheese production. Their maintenance and care are entrusted to local farmers.

environmental and architectural features of the place to transmit traditional and material local knowledge.

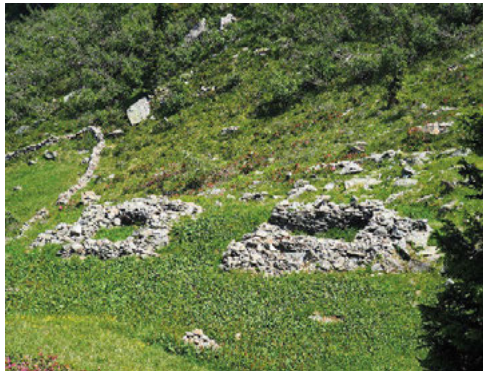


Fig. 5. The remaining structures, “calecc”, for cheese production in Alpe Pedroria and Madrera. Photo by Maria Galli, 2017 (<https://fondoambiente.it/>).

In general, this strategy has involved many different aspects of the local context: not only valorisation of vernacular heritage, but also environmental maintenance and safeguarding, enhancement of an economic activity which is strictly connected to the territory and still present, and the involvement of the local community, in particular for production and educational activities. A key aspect of these local development processes is the introduction of multiple functions, which can assure a more comprehensive strategy at different levels. In order to do so, the construction of a network of local entities is crucial (Carrosio, 2013). In the case of Alpe Pedroria and Madrera, this network is composed of the municipality of Talamona, the schools present in the territory, local associations, and also other private foundations such as *Fondazione Cariplo* and *Fondazione Fojanini*. Moreover, another aspect that can facilitate activation of these strategies is the type of governance of the promoter. In the case of FAI, the process for the allocation of funding is direct and immediate

compared to public funds. In addition, the foundation itself is the owner of the entire property.



Fig. 6. Educational activities in Alpe Pedroria and Madrera (<https://fondoambiente.it/>).

Indeed, administrative factors are crucial for realising these kinds of projects. However, direct involvement of the local community is fundamental for the implementation of the strategy and its management, durability and sustainability over time. While the first promoter of this strategy is a private foundation, the final result can still be recognised as a bottom-up local development practice. In Italy, other private foundations and independent organisations or voluntary groups, such as associations or cooperatives, activated similar initiatives to reuse vernacular architectural heritage in inner areas, especially related to rural heritage. The *Fondazione Cariplo*²³ promoted the project “Attivaree” that aims at creating local development processes for the regeneration of inner areas of Lombardy, Val Trompia, Val Sabbia and Oltrepò Pavese. In particular, in Val Trompia, the project involved many different levels of the local community in fostering actions to enhance local agricultural production, educational activities related to territorial features, slow tourism connected to sporting activities and digital tools for cultural and economic facilities. The preservation and reuse of local vernacular heritage, an ancient farm complex in Pezzaze²⁴, integrated agritourism with both agricultural production and educational activities for children, establishing a local producers and farmers

²³ Originally a bank foundation, it is a philanthropic foundation that assigns grants to realise social issue projects. <https://www.fondazione-cariplo.it/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

²⁴ *Rebecca Farm* in Pezzaze, Brescia. <https://www.rebecca-farm.it/agriturismo-rebecca/>

network. Also in this case, a private foundation fostered a local development process through the direct involvement of the local community, creating long-lasting networks among administrations, farmers, schools and other operators (Osti, Jachia, 2020). In an alpine area of Piedmont, the ancient mountain village of Ostana has been repopulated by new inhabitants, which reused the built heritage for residences or artisanal activities (De Rossi, 2018). In this case, the promoter of the initiatives is a voluntary organisation born from the initiative of the new inhabitants. Also here, the strategy is based on the insertion of multiple functions (services, environmental maintenance, education, economic activities, tourism) and the construction of a wide network of local actors. But this kind of practice is not only widespread in mountain areas. A similar case, in which a voluntary group promoted the reuse of vernacular heritage, can be found in Castiglione d'Otranto. The project *Casa delle AgriCulture Tullia e Gino* started as a cultural association and then became an agricultural cooperative²⁵. Its objective is to recover ancient agricultural production, involving the community through educational activities and workshops for children and cultural events for raising awareness about environmental sustainability and local products. Moreover, this organisation also provides services for the community, such as an organic mill for small local producers and a playroom for children in the unused spaces of the former primary school.

4. Conclusions

By observing the practices of reuse of vernacular heritage as part of local development processes, it is interesting to highlight their common features: the centrality of the community, the inclusion of multiple functions (in particular agricultural or farming activity) and the establishment of a network. These elements can facilitate a wider and more comprehensive approach to facing the issues of a marginalised context, tackling various

criticalities from different points of view and with the help of various competencies. Moreover, local experts can benefit from the implementation of such practices, being enriched through the experience. The importance of the informal heritage communities here described is also represented by a shared process of teaching and learning. In this perspective, another project promoted by the *Fondazione Cariplo, Distretto Culturale Valtellina*, could be considered a prime example. It aimed at recovering the drystone-wall terracing systems of the valley, which represent a fundamental element for the economic, cultural and landscape features of the place. But above all, it trained the communities to maintain and care for this essential technique necessary to guarantee hydrogeological stability and wine production (Barbetta, Cammelli, Della Torre, 2013).



Fig. 7. Drystone wall maintenance in Valtellina. Photo Ansa.it, 2016 (<https://shorturl.at/bjzE9>).

Throughout the mentioned experiences, it is possible to read the centrality of the educational aspects in different ways. A first component is indeed the direct formative and educational activities that these practices promoted, aimed at teaching people of different ages. A second one can be recognised in an indirect educational contribution, in favour of the many actors involved, which derives from the implementation and management of a complex process for local development. The presented experiences aim to

²⁵ Casa delle AgriCulture, Castiglione d'Otranto, Andrano (Lecce). <https://www.casadelleagriculturetulliaegino.com/> (last accessed 11.01.2022)

explain the potentialities that the practices of reuse of vernacular heritage in inner areas can offer when the adopted strategies consider a variety of functions and the community's involvement at different levels, leading to a learning process for the people involved. The mentioned cases showed positive feedback among the local communities thanks to the actual creation of valuable and essential services for the population. Nevertheless, difficulties related to an "inner area" context still remain. When led by a well-established, structured foundation, practices of reuse and community involvement can more easily overcome the economic and administrative issues related to a small municipality. But in the absence of such actors, practices activated by self-organised groups should be supported by national or regional programs to foster and encourage this kind of initiative that positively affects local heritage and community.

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