

## A taxonomy of vernacular heritage in the mid-Adriatic: Landscape relations and architectural characteristics of the farmhouses in Tronto Valley (Italy)

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**Topic:** T1.1. Study and cataloging of vernacular architecture

### Abstract

*The hilly area of Central Italy represents one of the most original characteristics of Italian agrarian system distinguished by a particular form and technique of land management, la Mezzadria (sharecropping), which was a contract stipulated between a landowner and the farmer, reflected in the construction of open space as well as artifacts. The structure of rural settlements typical of sharecropping is a mosaic of terrains with scattered farmhouses (case coloniche), connected by a dense road network. The architecture of these structures is always the same with only slight variations articulated by the form of the terrain and in relationship with their use and the road pathways, and is characterised by a rectangular plan with the rooms dispersed on two floors and an external staircase which is the prevalent distinguishing trait. Sharecropping rural heritage represents an important case study for the analysis and cataloguing of vernacular architecture since artifacts come from precise needs linked to the social and cultural life of the farming family. This paper investigates vernacular rural architecture in Central Italy, particularly in the mid-Adriatic in the southern Marche Region, by building up an investigative and categorization method: selecting precise geographical areas where the original farmhouses have first been identified by studying historical maps of the 19th century before moving on to in situ exploration. Photography has also been a useful instrument for constructing the taxonomy of rural ruins which today are in a state of total abandonment; showing the photographs next to each other allows us to more clearly identify and understand subtle differences and suggest a reuse of the buildings.*

**Keywords:** rural heritage; Mezzadria (sharecropping); cataloguing; re-use.

### 1. Introduction

The volume 'Architettura rurale italiana' by the architects Giuseppe Pagano and Guarniero Daniel published in 1936 for the 'Quaderni della Triennale' investigated the rural house in the entire Italian peninsula and it represented one of the most erudite references in existence, perhaps the only one, in vernacular rural heritage in the discipline of architecture. Including over two thousand photographs, it documented, with acute awareness, the aesthetic value of rural buildings in relation to their function and technical necessity. In confronting such an imposing and

widespread heritage, the authors spoke of an actual 'dictionary of constructive logic' that had evident ties with the ground, the climate, the economy, and technology therefore revealing itself as an important testimony to the history of civilization albeit little known (Pagano & Daniel, 1936). The profound ties to rural artifacts, to place and human activity nurtured the design process, entirely spontaneously, aimed at the development of specific solutions to satisfy the exigencies of each zone. In the Pagano and Daniel investigation, the hilly areas in Central Italy represented an important case study since in those zones it is possible to identify one of the most characteristic

motifs of the rural house: the external staircase that connects the ground floor, where the work spaces and stables are found, to the dwelling which is separated onto the first floor. The farmhouse in Central Italy was in fact the place where the farming family lived as well as the site where productive activities were carried out so dwelling and workplace were divided yet never separable (Anselmi, 1987).

Further research emphasized the rural landscape and its architecture as an expression of a society. In Central Italy the typical farmhouse and surrounding terrain were a unique system, testifying to a particular form of land management, the *Mezzadria* (sharecropping), which was a contract stipulated between a landowner, the grantor, and the tenant farmer, called the sharecropper, where both parties had committed themselves to share the crops and the profits of the farm which take place on that very site. Such researchers on the subject as Henry Desplanques, Emilio Sereni, Marco Moroni, and Sergio Anselmi expressed profound and ample considerations on the relationship between hill, society and constructions. The farmhouse was included as the founding element of humanised landscape, symbol of the garrison as the solution for keeping man on the land, working it (Desplanques, 1979). In relationship to the environment, the farmhouse was a ‘synthetic entity’ thanks to its dominant position which assumed a privileged role of control as well as being a unit connecting other units in a dense road network that crosses and overlaps giving form to the open space of the farmyard as a sort of ‘plaza’ (Anselmi, 2000), around which other smaller constructions gravitate such as the pigsty, the well, and hay sheds, tool and storage sheds. The farmyard was an element of mediation between the cultivated fields and the farmhouse, an expression of work and social life itself, the site for the relations which surround the house itself, often tracing the roundish form of the knolls.

Previous research on Central Italy’s rural farmhouse underlined the anthropic value of vernacular architecture. Particularly, the studies carried out by Pagano and Daniel stressed the architectural quality of plastic forms, and emphasized the strict interconnectivity between aesthetics and functionality. Studies on sharecropping on the other hand enhanced the system of relationships and construction of a territory and the society which inhabits and works the land there, made up of thousands of economically independent points which are however integrated with each other to form a highly complex organism.

This research focuses on architectural quality and relationships in the rural architecture of Central Italy and is centred on a very precise area of investigation, the mid-Adriatic, by constructing a study and cataloguing method always with reference to the geography particular to the area.

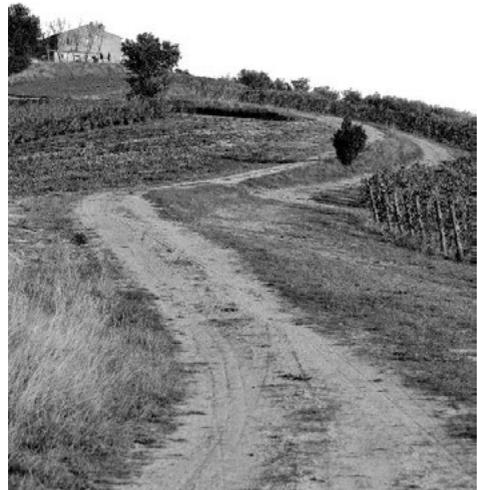


Fig. 1. Sharecropping rural landscape, Marche Region (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani, 2020).

Albeit sharecropping represents the landscape unity there are differences so the paper explores a reading of the subtle variances in the rural architecture found there and is not only finalised in new knowledge of the heritage but unites the findings in function of a possible recovery and reuse of these architectural artefacts.

## 2. Methodology

The territory of the mid-Adriatic is characterized by a ‘comb structure’<sup>1</sup> of hydrography, where rivers and valleys alternate, orthogonally positioned to the Adriatic coast, furrowing the hilly mass, shaped by the millenary agriculture activity and by the sharecropping process, recorded in these areas as early as the 15th century and definitively structured between the 18th and 19th centuries (Moroni, 2003).

The working method first of all builds a geographical reading, identifying precise portions of rural territory within the intervals between the river courses. Areas are indicative of sharecropping characteristics, but bearers of possible elements of variation or repetition that can be detected. The rivers and valleys run from West to East coinciding with the slope of the reliefs towards the Adriatic Sea. This allows the identification of three distinct rural segments, mountain-high hill, hill and coast useful for the observation of variations in relation to altitude and climate. The identification of the roads, which cross hills from South to North, connecting the valley infrastructures with the historic centers and the dense network of scattered farmhouses, can constitute a further condition for recognizing local specificities; in fact the districts branching off from the main road are filaments which connect the architectures following the ridges.

Having identified the areas and constructed a cross-geographic reading according to the West-East and North-South trend, the observation of the rural heritage focuses only on the most original artifacts which today have been reduced to a state of ruin. After the 1964 Law, which prohibited the application of sharecropping contracts, the countryside underwent an exodus with the progressive abandonment of the structures. A comparison between the historical maps of the Gregorian Land registry of the 1800s and a verification in situ allowed the identification of the

most interesting architectures. In the rural landscape the ruins are extremely fascinating objects, suspended in time, not manipulated by the most recent transformations having to do with agritourism or new country residences. They are expressions of their qualities, of essential and primitive forms, of materials, of relationships with the open space and the landscape and in them it is possible to distinguish the theme of the external staircase, but also the enlargements, the added volumes.

Finally, photography was chosen as a cataloguing tool for building a taxonomy of architecture. By varying the point of view with which the objects were looked at and placing the shots next to each other, constructed in the same way, interpretations were developed following the criterion of grouping.

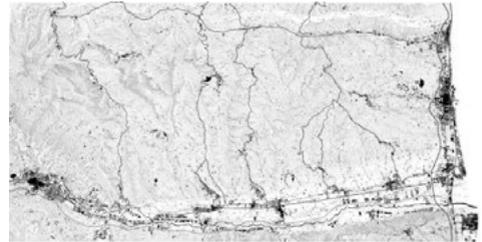


Fig. 2. The rural territory between Tesino and Tronto rivers and the roads which cross the hills (Source: Cipolletti, 2021).

## 3. The case of Tronto Valley

Of the territorial portions of the Mid-Adriatic, the hilly zone found between the Tronto and Tesino rivers, the southernmost part of the Marche Region, was the area with the highest percentage of farmhouses; the 1934 census registered over 100.000 (Moroni, 2012). The rolling hills zone is furrowed with various connecting roads covering the highgrounds, the most well-known being ‘la Mezzina’ in a barycentric position linking to the historical centre of Offida, and coinciding with the recently created touristic wine itinerary. The roads running across the hills are territorial scans coinciding with the degradation of altitude in the

<sup>1</sup> The Adriatic comb structure along river valleys and coast coincides with the phenomena of contemporary urban

transformation. A linear sprawl was recognized by most researchers as continuous city called the Adriatic city.

high ground near the sea which is characteristic of the Mid-Adriatic; to the west, the mountains and to the east, the coast.

Evidence of the more or less unchanged road structure of the hills, and the presence of the scatterings of rural architecture are to be found in the Gregorian land registry of the 19th century. The extremely synthetic maps are planimetrically elaborate and subdivided into fields and constructions of both the walled historical centre and the sparse rural settlement. The precious geometric-parcelled documents originating from the fiscal needs of the Pontifical State during the 1830s, were indispensable for an understanding of the disposition of this centuries-long stratified territory and the successive transformations taking place there. The 19th century represents in fact an extremely important period when sharecropping consolidated definitively with an increment in productivity as well as inhabitants, when the farms estates fractured and increased in number and the weave of the scattered settlements was clearly delineated along the hillcrests and the rural districts, in relationship to the compact urban tissue of the historical centres (Anselmi, 1978). So, the Gregorian Land registry fixed mapping the rural landscape of sharecropping before the abandonment and the important post-war transformations of urban sprawl in the valleys and along the coast.

Rural buildings were identified in the registry manuscripts either as 'house with farmyard' or 'farmhouse' or simply as 'house'. The difference was found in the economic relations, dimension and complexity of the open space farmyard since the buildings in this specific territorial portion were always of the same rectangular shape.

### **3.1 Architectural characteristics of the farmhouses in relation to the landscape.**

The farmhouses have a rectangular shape elongated with a succession of juxtaposed rooms organised on two levels and protected under one gable pitched roof. The dwelling and all work spaces were contained in one and the same construction; the stable, the cellar, and the farm equipment storage rooms well all found on the ground floor for maximum efficiency and accessibility to the cultivated terrain. The central kitchen with a large fireplace and the bedrooms were located on the first floor to be isolated from the damp ground while benefiting from the added warmth of animals in the stable below.

The stairway, primary and defining characteristic, in the rural portion of the Tronto Valley is always found on the outside without distinction in either the higher hilly regions or those nearer the sea<sup>2</sup>. It connects the two levels and was built directly against the building with a covered loggia. When the loggia was lost, the marks of its existence are visible on the wall. Meanwhile subtle differences are seen in the position of this architectural element though it is always juxtaposed to the farmhouse longitudinally and never orthogonally, more often than not on the longer side of the farmhouse rather than on the gabled short side. The motif resides in the relation in respect to the cardinal points and the open space of the farmyard, the stairway and the longitudinal façade which address in fact the social and work spaces, as the meeting place for the farmers and the members of the family.

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<sup>2</sup> Pagano and Daniel argued that the characteristics of the staircase changed with climate and geography conditions. This feature is not detectable in the case of the Tronto Valley, where the architectural element is always external. However the staircase remains an identity element, always it was used as the background for photos of the peasant family during ceremonies.



Fig. 3. Comparison of the staircase (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani, 2022).

In all the cases examined, the longitudinal façade principally faces the south or the southeast. In this way the structure, along its entire length would benefit from the sunlight and the sea breeze and this is why the presence of a façade with the access to the farmhouse, are most representative. Later variations which have been detected originate from round arched, segmented, or rectangular openings, but it is the presence of an oven under the staircase in front of the entrance to the stable that characterises some districts rather than others. This derives from the existence of microeconomics and particular crops such as hemp which necessitated specific treatments.



Fig. 4. Comparison of the staircase along the longitudinal façade (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani, 2022).



Furthermore farming and crops generated characteristic brickwork which fostered simple decorative motifs elicited by their different dispositions. In some districts the ventilation windows of haylofts or barns have vertical brickwork whilst in others pigeon or dove breeding structures are recognisable by brickwork with small, altering peep holes for the the birds to access, or rest, in the form of small rosettes or ledges, both elements which were adopted even in the most modest structures, derivative of precedent, and more costly rural tower-house.



Fig. 5. Comparison of brickworks (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani 2022).

### 3.2 Transformations of the rural heritage.

With the definitive abolishment of sharecropping, from 1964 the farmhouses were progressively abandoned leaving traditional farming practices. The advent of extensive viticulture and the subsequent birth of tourism in the rural hills produced widespread agritourism, wine cellars, holiday farms, restaurants, and B&Bs, all housed in these former farmhouses, now tourist attractions in relation to rural landscape. Buildings become ruins or they have been completely altered. The specific changes to the farmhouses were seen in two important and distinct historical moments; those changes made during the sharecropping period, and those made later when the main function of farming had ceased to exist and the new exigences related to tourism and leisure time were emerging.

An ulterior subject for investigation is related to the possibility to study the numerous farms left in ruins in view of their volumetric composition and subsequent modifications. The effects of time and the dilapidated state exult the disconnect of the added structures, the additions, annexes, the traces of which are found on the brick walls. In observing the buildings it is clear that the construction of modest architectural elements proceeded by simple volumetric built-on additions where the new elements would have been added onto the minimal unit of the main rectangular structure with the external stair found along the wall.

In some cases the built-on bodies are small annexes such as a stall or an oven. On the other hand there are more complex situations where the pre-existing building has been maintained and amplified in equal volumetric form and dimension. These circumstances are extensions which are downright duplications reinforcing the length of the rectangular buildings and the length of the façades. The presence in a building complex of more than one staircase was originate from successive expansions which were undergone due to the presence of more than one family working an extended farm which was later divided up.



Fig. 6. Transformations of farmhouses. The construction of extensions in different time is clearly visible in several examples. (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani, 2022).



Fig. 7. Transformations of farmhouses. The construction of extension followed height and volume of the origin building, emphasizing the longitudinality of the façade. (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani, 2022).

The alteration of the original volume over the years has produced suggestive and entirely spontaneous rhythms in the openings, which are however of great aesthetic value and appealing to contemporary perception. Rectangular windows alternate with recognisable elements in straight brickwork, carefully handled arched or more essential square openings next to small holes.

In only a few cases are the built-on elements of a façade, where the orientation is different to the original one, clearly discernible in the pattern of

the openings, altering the relation to the road and the view of the landscape. Depending upon the necessity, generally dictated by the work conditions and number of inhabitants, the farmhouse is therefore a highly adaptable organism.



Fig. 8. Transformations of farmhouses. The construction of a new added volume changed the façade in the relation with the road (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani, 2022).



Fig. 9. Transformations of farmhouses. The construction of small annex (Source: Cipolletti & Guaiani, 2022).

#### 4. Conclusions

The study of the rural farmhouse in the Mid-Adriatic area and in the Tronto Valley confirms how profound the ties between the earth and man, who works the land, were.

The need to control the land while holding a visual relationship with the farmhouse, the admixture of production and living functions, and the adaptation to the scarce local resources available for construction were all factors which lead to the diversification of one and the same building scheme. While being a simple project, the planning and architectural choices were linear and logical, contributing to render the rural farmhouse as ‘honest architecture’, nearer to contemporary taste in its relationship between utility, technology, form, and aesthetics as asserted by Pagano and Daniel in their research.

But it is in the transformation, the amplifications, and the additions that these farmhouses demonstrate important ulterior suggestions on how to comprehend a re-use project for these ruins. The variations made in fact do not immediately or totally cancel the precedent phases. These transformations are still internal to the culture of the earth and to the life of the peasant family, so the farmhouse is a living body which is modified or modifies itself, growing with the support of parasites, in juxtaposition with the main body. These are ‘additionings’ from which to intuit that, by grafting, amplification, extension, and doubling a dialogue can be opened up between new intervention and ruins.

The possibility to work in juxtaposition with the volume of the farmhouse using contemporary materials is suited to creating new possibilities in how to look at and experience vernacular rural architecture that permits the exaltation of the abstract and primitive forms of the ruins rather than a mere restoration or total recuperation project which would only annihilate both human presence and effects of time on these artifacts.

It is not by chance in fact that recent tourism has intensified the tourist experience around this heritage in ruins with the creation of

sharecropping architecture itineraries<sup>3</sup>. This experience opens up new opportunities in architectural design and re-use for the completion of food and wine offering and is very different to an overnight stay in a rehabilitated farmhouse.

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<sup>3</sup> Refers to 'Mezzadria stories', a research conducted by Gianluca Vagnarelli, who collects hundreds testimonies on sharecropping through interviews with farmers and he organizes visits to the ruins farmhouses owned by a prestigious wine cellar.