

The rural founding villages of the Italian Agrarian Reform in Basilicata (1950-1970): urban planning and 'modern' vernacular architecture to the test of contemporaneity. The case of Borgo Taccone (MT)

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Abstract

The contribution aims at providing an overview on urban planning and on 'modern' vernacular architecture of the rural founding villages built during the Agrarian Reform (1950-1970) in Italy, in the inland areas of Basilicata Region. In particular there are settlements not yet sufficiently known, in which the important of inventing the considerable built heritage must be the objective of a necessary, urgent safeguarding.

With the 'Agrarian Reform' (Law 841/1950), the Italian government carried out a redistribution to settlers of the lands of uncultivated or abandoned large estates. The purpose was to increase productivity in the reformed areas, as long as a better profitability of labor and an adequate 'social equity'. As a consequence, new villages were created that had to fulfil the task of reorganizing rural centers of socio-economic concentrations, able to reconstitute environments similar to the agglomerations from which the laborers, once employed in the latifundiums, came. Among the numerous centers built in Basilicata, Borgo Taccone is representative of this system of agrarian colonization of the Lucanian territory. The settlement, in which the modern construction techniques were broadly experimented, is the service center for farmers living in farmhouses in the surrounding funds and for this reason it was equipped with core services such as the church, the school, the post office, the clinic, cinema/theater, etc. After an initial period of demographic expansion, in the seventies the 'Borgo' began to depopulate and is now in a state of abandonment and decay. Despite this, this settlement, surrounded by agricultural land in a well-preserved landscape, still retains a strong formal character in both its urban and architectural layout. The contribution traces the physical, social and cultural transformation line that led this rich asset to the contemporary world, outlining a possible future cultural theoretical debate on its safeguard and sustainable enhancement.

Keywords: Rural founding villages; cataloguing; conservation; sustainability.

1. Introduction

The backdrop for the reflections and results of the research presented here concerns the future of the fragile architectures of the 'Modern' era in the rural villages and associated areas that were infrastructured by the settlement process of the Agrarian Reform in Italy (1950-1970).

There is a great deal of attention from both the national and international community on the 'Modern' heritage, which is not always easy to

recognise as a monument/document, often consisting of buildings, collective spaces, and entire settlements commonly in use (or disuse) which can only be conserved and managed through appropriate instruments and policies geared towards their protection. The history of the rural founding villages and newly-settled areas of the 1950^s-1970^s in Basilicata is a valuable starting point for a rereading of the failure to develop certain parts of the Italian South, as well as of the modifications and transformations that took place over time. Revisiting this issue serves to

promote a potential revival of these places, which are falling victim to depopulation, in our present era. The research actions include a reconstruction of the narratives, the history of these fragile areas, which still cast their shadows on the present day, and a careful look at a vast and homogeneous heritage in need of protection, consciously improving the conservation of the high-quality historical building stock, as well as directing any interventions towards a compatible, sustainable future reuse.

2. The rural villages of the Agrarian Reform in Basilicata

After the end of World War II, the construction of new rural founding villages in Italy was an opportunity for experimentation with Modernism from the perspective of urban planning and architecture. Although belated, the Modern Movement in the south of the country produced some of its most significant achievements during this period of reconstruction. Between 1950 and 1970, thanks to funding from the Marshall Plan (1947) and the consequent Agrarian Reform, the Italian government was able to make a huge political, economic and social commitment to redistribute the land of unproductive, uncultivated or abandoned latifundia - vast landed estates - to the tenant farmers (see the 'Regulations for the Expropriation, Reclamation, Transformation and Allocation of Land to Farmers', no. 841 of 21 October 1950).

The implementation of a new wave of settlement had some specific objectives, namely a certain 'social equity' for smallholders and farmhands, an attempt to achieve greater productivity in the reformed areas by improving the utilisation of farmland, and improved profitability of labour (King, 1973; Marciani, 1966; Nigrelli & Bonini 2017). The redistribution of agricultural land involved a reorganisation of the territories, with the foundation of new rural villages with an urban structure and high-quality architecture, their homogeneous and func-

tional designs modelled on traditional architecture, but reinterpreted according to the language of Modernism.

It should be borne in mind that architecturally speaking, in the south of Italy, and especially in Basilicata, the Modern Movement developed considerably later than it did elsewhere. Despite this, thanks to the work of a pool of well-known architects of the time operating in Basilicata in the aftermath of World War II - such notable figures as Ludovico Quaroni, Luigi Piccinato, Carlo Aymonino, Marcello Fabbri, Giancarlo De Carlo, Mario Fiorentino, Ettore Stella, Luigi Agati, Federico Gorio, Pier Maria Lugli, Michele Valori and Plinio Marconi - in the years of post-war reconstruction, this region would become an exemplary model of a renewed Italian society, paving the way for experiments in architecture and urban planning in these areas, with the construction of rural villages, scattered settlements, and social housing districts. This was an important time in history, seeing the undertaking of a complex physical and social transformation of the area based on the design of new models for settlements and housing, new building materials and techniques that innovated whilst keeping the past alive, bringing together modernity and local traditions. As such, the experiments of Modernism were not limited to urban areas alone, but also extended to the rural sphere with the design of architecture spread throughout the region (Dimichino, 2013). These new constructions were made possible by the contributions of technicians from the Land Reclamation and Agrarian Reform projects, as well as numerous well-established planners who developed new forms of settlement, in parallel with an overhaul of the infrastructure in the area required to increase productivity, with major civil engineering works undertaken to resolve issues with hydrogeological, irrigation and road systems.

The activities of the organisations responsible for implementing the Agrarian Reform, then, primarily concerned the expropriation of latifundia

and the allocation of farms, followed by the execution of large-scale land reclamation and irrigation works, as well as the establishment of a transport infrastructure network and, as a final stage, the construction of villages and farmhouses. As such, as a result of the Agrarian Reform in Basilicata, numerous rural settlements sprang up in the provinces of Matera and Potenza. Some of the most significant ones in the Matera area include: Borgo Taccone and S. Maria d'Irsi in Irsina, Macchia in Ferrandina, Calle in Tricarico, La Martella in Matera, Caprarico in Tursi, Scanzano in Scanzano Jonico, Serramarina and Metaponto in Bernalda, Pianelle in Montescaglioso, Gannano in Stigliano and Policoro in the town of the same name. The Potenza area, meanwhile, saw the establishment of: Masi and Piano del Conte in Avigliano, San Cataldo and Sant'Antonio Casalini in Bella, Gaudiano in Lavello, Boreano in Venosa and Leonessa in Melfi (Abate & Argento, 2015; Filadelfia, 2004; Percoco, 2010).

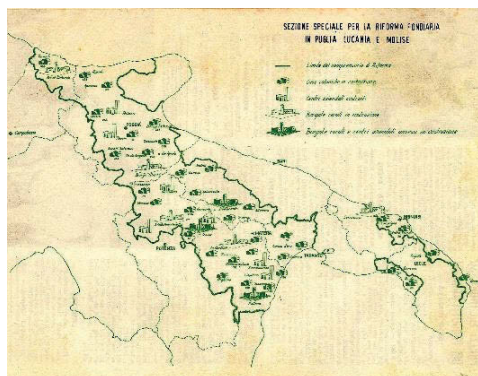


Fig. 1. Map showing the distribution of the rural villages of the Agrarian Reform in Puglia, Basilicata and Molise (Historical Archives ALSIA Basilicata)

The settlements built in these agricultural areas largely followed one of three models:

- scattered: with isolated houses built on the specific agricultural holding assigned to each individual family, who would rely on neighbouring settlements for essential services; alternatively, dedicated service centres were sometimes built to serve the farmhouses;

- centralised: rural residential villages equipped with some essential public services, as well as commercial and small-scale craft businesses;
- semi-centralised: mixed settlements combining elements of both of the above models.

The first model was initially the one preferred by the Reform Agency because it was better suited to a more streamlined organisation of the farms and the management of work and production, but it was far removed from the traditions of the local settlements, making communal life difficult. The second and third models, which garnered approval from urban planners and architects alike, allowed them to permanently populate the uninhabited areas of the latifundia by constructing new residential villages intended to become the driving forces behind a productive rural community. These new settlements therefore had to incorporate the buildings necessary for the civil and social organisation of their populations: they included a church with a rectory, public buildings (police station, post office, the offices of the municipal delegation, doctor's surgery with the doctor's house), educational buildings (nursery and primary school, along with accommodation for the teachers), buildings for recreational and leisure activities (theatre, social club, restaurant), shops for essential items, houses for craftsmen and rural houses for farmers (terraced, in groups or detached, with livestock farms attached to the homes) who owned farms within a 3km radius of the village (Canali, 2015; Carbonara, 1954; Conte, 2008; Prinzi, 1956; Pontrandolfi, 1999; Tordeillas, 2013).

With regard to the architecture of the villages of the Agrarian Reform, standard architectural designs were generally used, with the buildings often modified by the local workers at the execution phase to adjust the design concept to suit their construction knowledge, using a combination of new materials and those available in the regional area. However, this common design practice, adopted at the national level, also went hand in hand with the creations of contemporary professionals, including many prominent figures,

who were experimenting with new architectural languages. On this, Nallo Mazzocchi (1955) provides an overview of the design approach and architectural language that architects and engineers were to adopt when designing rural villages: they had to create 'non-standardised' works, but at the same time avoid any costly or misplaced monumentalism, providing each village with suitable formal characteristics whilst maintaining respect for the environment and local character. The architects were free to interpret the local language and adapt it to suit the new, modern functions of the buildings.

Under the Agrarian Reform in Basilicata, more than 75,000 hectares of land were expropriated, with a total of 11,557 farms distributed to the tenant farmers. These farms - fragments of land spanning no more than between three or four and seven hectares at most, allocated to fairly sizeable families - very soon proved to be too small to be economically justifiable (De Leo, 2008). The allocation of farmhouses and plots of land, the construction of rural founding villages to establish service centres for the tenant farmers, land reclamation and new infrastructure (irrigation, railways and roads) did not provide the desired results. The Reform was not considered an economic 'triumph'. Indeed, in some respects it actually proved to be a failure (Bonini, 2012; Villari, 1979). The isolation of the farms, the failure to construct infrastructure and irrigation works, and the mediocre quality of the land in many of the expropriated territories very soon led to the allocated farms being abandoned, with the consequent wave of emigration: in the 1960s and 1970s, people left Basilicata. This was an exodus that the Agrarian Reform - which unfortunately did little to change their living conditions - was unable to stop, ultimately leaving the region's farmhouses, rural villages and territories depopulated and destined to fade into obscurity.

3. The case study of Borgo Taccone

The research project, launched in 2020 and still underway, initially focused on efforts of familiarisation with Borgo Taccone, in the Town of

Irsina (MT), consisting of a settlement complex which saw experimentation with Modernist construction techniques. The village was built in the 1950s based on a design by Plinio Marconi (1893-1974), an engineer and architect (Di Biagi et al., 1992; Intini et al., 2021).

Borgo Taccone is, with good reason, representative of the system of agrarian colonisation: a village proportionate to its population, including the people from the surrounding countryside, who lived in farmhouses outside the village. The site was established as a rural settlement and service centre for the farmers living in the farmhouses on the surrounding estates, and as such it is equipped with a selection of 'basic services': a church with a parish centre, a primary school with a house for the teachers, a nursery, a sports ground, a post office, a police station, a doctor's surgery with public toilets, a cinema/theatre, houses for craftsmen and workers, a settlement centre consisting of silos, a weighing platform, the caretaker's home, workshops and warehouses, offices with their respective houses, sheds to shelter farming equipment, a complex of residential lots which was the site of rural houses and, finally, not far away, the Appulo Lucana railway station (Bari-Potenza line).



Fig. 2. View of the centre of Borgo Taccone (Source: Bortolotto)

The buildings in Borgo Taccone, all gathered around the central square, are small yet of remarkable architectural quality, expressed in simple but not uninspiring forms, and even feature prestigious finishes such as majolica tiles for the church and coloured terracotta at the entrance to the cinema. Their white surfaces, pure forms and skilful manipulations of light

and harmonious proportions make for a stark contrast with the obvious deterioration: crumbling plaster, reinforced concrete now with no concrete cover, unusable doors and windows, a handful of incongruous conversions, and now-obsolete technical facilities. In Borgo Taccone, the functional demands of the ‘colonising rurality’ (but also those of the propaganda of the Reform) are combined with aesthetic concerns; the local skills and customs adapt to suit the techniques, materials and finishes of Modernism; in short, a heritage that exists in continuity with tradition. According to Mauro Sàito, they combine “realism and vision, pragmatism and experimentation, an ability to engage with tradition, but also a strong drive towards the future of the 20th century in southern Italy” (Pagliuca & Sàito, 2019, p. 12). Indeed, as early as the start of the 20th century, during the interwar period (including under the autarchic regime) and the reconstruction phase, the practice of ‘making architecture’ was enriched with innovative materials and modern forms which, through the individual imagination of each designer, reinterpreted - in the area under consideration here - the facies of rurality and Mediterranean landscapes.

Thanks to historical research, it was possible to see in images the ways in which these urban planning and architectural projects were implemented, as well as how the village was lived in and subsequently abandoned. Indeed, after an initial period of demographic expansion, in the 1970^s the village and its farmhouses began to suffer the phenomenon of depopulation, and only a handful of families still live there currently. Borgo Taccone, despite its current state of neglect and deterioration, still retains a strong formal character in terms of both its urban and its architectural layout and is surrounded by farmland and arable land in a well-preserved cultural, rural and environmental landscape.

Borgo Taccone can be considered a truly typical example due to its modern vernacular architecture, its functional urban layout, and its relationship with the surrounding context thanks to the infrastructure brought by settlement. Its deterioration and abandonment highlight the critical issues and challenges affecting the other villages built in Basilicata during the same historical period in much the same way. These rural villages - a heritage that is still entirely ripe for ‘rediscovery, conservation and restoration’ - are now abandoned or undergoing depopulation.

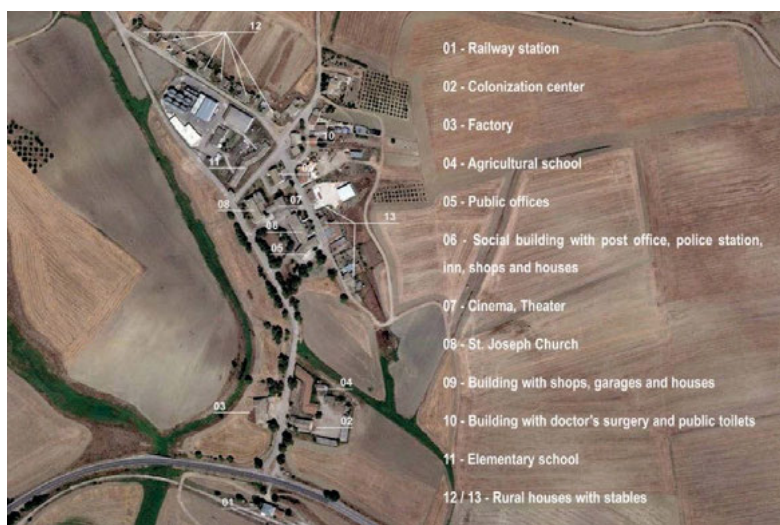


Fig. 3. Plan of Borgo Taccone with identification of the functions of the buildings (Source: elaboration of the authors on a satellite map)

The critical issue of the depopulation of these villages can, however, paradoxically be seen as a unique characteristic; indeed, throughout the entire period since their abandonment, these founding settlements have not suffered any particular detractive variables, nor have they presented any latent conflicts of interest with regard to the property market. It is worth noting that the entire building stock (aside from a handful of private properties) currently belongs to a single public body: the Agenzia Lucana di Sviluppo e di Innovazione in Agricoltura (ALSIA).

4. Modern urban planning and architecture of the rural villages: the research for Borgo Taccone

One of the goals of the research was to shed light on the importance of protecting, conserving and promoting the vast and still insufficiently recognised 20th-century architectural heritage of the rural founding villages, as well as their urban and architectural design, largely by implementing knowledge and safeguarding thereof. This objective is in line with the course of action initiated by the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo (MiBACT), specifically the Direzione Generale Creatività Contemporanea (DGCC), which has undertaken a census of this heritage. Unfortunately, it has become clear that there are only four files available pertaining to the area covered by the research project, one on Borgo La Martella in Matera and three on Borgo Taccone. Given the sheer extent of this vast heritage, a broader survey was undertaken - in an effort to produce an exhaustive census - of the building materials used, the design drawings found, and the main problems of deterioration affecting them; this proved essential as a means of gaining familiarity with them and preserving their historical memory. As such, when studying Borgo Taccone, it was interesting not only to allow the 'material data' speak for itself (traditional materials used in an innovative way, new

techniques used to assemble prefabricated reinforced concrete elements), but also to strive to outline the virtuous dialogue that developed between the knowledge of local workers and the new technologies introduced. To this end, it proved useful to consult the State Archives in Bari, which held not only the plans, sections and elevations for the buildings in Borgo Taccone, but also the bills of quantities, with the entries relating to the operations involved in their construction; as such, for the building works in question, it was possible to retrace the building site, estimated costs, and the construction of the structural, masonry and finishing works.

Moreover, in addition to the analysis of historical sources (including bibliographical, documentary, cartographic and iconographic sources), the short space of time separating us from the period of the Modern Movement also made it possible to draw upon unpublished oral information from the direct memory of people - still living - who worked on the buildings themselves or simply lived in the village, thus providing a new perspective from which to interpret the 'text' of the work being explored. Along with this oral testimony, for the rural villages established as a result of the Agrarian Reform, it was also possible to view propaganda relating to the law in the form of photos and videos, largely provided by the Istituto Luce Cinecittà. Ad hoc guidelines are being prepared that take into account the material and architectural characteristics of these rural villages, with the aim of providing a solid basis to guide any design choices as well as best practices for proper conservation works in order to ensure that they remain intact. Furthermore, this research may complement the work of Docomomo International, the "International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement", which began establishing national/regional chapters in 2002. The local point of reference is Docomomo Italy, Basilicata-Puglia chapter, which in 2019 published a catalogue, that breaks into thematic sections, with 100 examples of modern architecture widely acknowledged to be of high

quality, linking the originality of the works found in the two regions to the national cultural debate. It is these established 'itineraries' (with Borgo Taccone also included amongst the works mentioned) that we intend to pair with the 'route' of this specific research into the rural founding villages - which are not yet sufficiently well-known - in which the urgency of cataloguing the sizeable modern heritage that has arrived to the present day will provide fundamental support for the highly necessary and now incredibly pressing requests for protection.

5. Conclusions

The study of the villages of the Agrarian Reform in Basilicata, complete with the associated census and cataloguing of the architecture, has led to an improved knowledge of the vernacular architecture in Modernist forms, specifically the languages, materials and construction materials used. This has proved useful not only as a means of increasing awareness about its intrinsic value, but also in order to be able to initiate and promote requests for protection and orient the possible choices to be made in future conservation efforts. It is worth bearing in mind that arguing the reasons for the restoration of this architecture is no mean feat: there are countless apparently irremediable defects, limited experience of construction sites, and the value of these buildings is appreciated by but a few experts in the field. As such, the central challenge of this undertaking lies in comparing the Modern-era buildings of historical and documentary interest with the concrete problems of selection, legal protection, conservation, functional reclamation with compatible reuses and any possible necessary/admissible adjustments, all in light of the current regulations.

The housing stock built in Basilicata based on the architectural culture of the Modern Movement, both in its most iconic representations and in the more common ones of the wider heritage, is to be recognised as a 'work of contemporary architecture' according to the Italian Legislative Decree of 22 January 2004, no. 42, 'Code of Cultural and Landscape Heritage', that states: "the work of a

creator who is no longer living and produced more than seventy years ago, are subject to protective measures". This means that the numerous rural and social housing projects that make up the majority of the Modernist heritage in Basilicata built since the 1950^s - and more specifically the rural villages of the Reform - can be, or shortly will be, the subject of obligations and protection plans. This action will inevitably have to be followed by the restoration of these villages, which are largely in a state of serious decline or total abandonment. The lack of maintenance has consequently led to the steady deterioration of the material, which has in many cases resulted in a partial loss of the distinctive features of the architecture, with the risk of also destroying the cultural matrix with which the villages were originally designed. It is also important to consider that these architectures will also inevitably have to undergo transformations to make them suitable for the new needs of the contemporary world. With this in mind, any proper conservation work must urgently and unavoidably go hand in hand with repurposing projects that take into account these new requirements, but without compromising the core identity of this heritage. It is only on this basis that it will be possible for the community to reappropriate these places, reinhabiting them and experiencing them once again as inhabitants of the 21st century, though always with a strong awareness of the particular historical value of their context. It is precisely this intrinsic characteristic of the rural founding villages that must be preserved, promoting and respecting their value as a unique and irreproducible heritage. Bearing in mind that this heritage exists against a social, cultural and economic backdrop that is constantly evolving, it is crucial to not only protect and conserve it in and of itself, but also to establish management strategies capable of ensuring the possibility of sustainable development, always with an enduring respect for the continuity between past and future. It is therefore necessary to develop, in tandem with measures for the protection and conservation of the villages of the Agrarian Reform, policies

aimed at promoting and increasing their value which also involve the culture and tourism industries. From this perspective, the interaction of economic development between the agricultural and tourism sectors may well play an important role: agriculture is a significant traditional business, whilst cultural and food and wine tourism is an additional line of business which opens up the possibility of complementary relations between the two. In conjunction with the rural economy (agricultural and live-stock farms, as well as small-scale processing companies) and hospitality, so-called 'slow' cultural tourism could prove to be a winning partner in promoting the narratives of these places from the Agrarian Reform of the 1950^s, helping to defend the identity and authenticity of the 'genius loci', to redefine their role as the focal point of a territorial system that connects and enhances all its resources, to trigger a virtuous and productive cycle for local businesses, and to increase the overall quality of life in the area, with a view to sustainable development in the long term.

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