

## Perspectives for the small historical centres at risk of abandonment. A pilot project for the Granfonte district in Leonforte (Italy)

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### Abstract

*The town of Leonforte, in Sicily, is currently characterised by two antithetical phenomena: the abandonment of a significant part of the historic centre and an increasing urban sprawl in the peripheral areas. The paper illustrates the ongoing research on the historic district of Granfonte and the pilot project for a small block with two alternative scenarios: the restoration of the ruins and the recovery of residential use. The two proposals can be conceived as two phases of the same project, and as alternatives to the demolitions that nowadays seem to be the only answer to the daily challenge of living in this place.*

**Keywords:** vernacular architecture; abandonment; urban restoration; Leonforte (Sicily).

### 1. Introduction

Far from the metropolitan centres and outside the prevailing flows of mass tourism, interior areas have been affected for some time by a crisis, the most visible manifestations of which are a growing demographic decline and the emptying out of the old districts. Historic centres suffer to a greater extent from the effects of deterritorialization and increasing concentration of goods and services in a few urban areas (ANCSA, CRESME, 2017).

Following the economic transformations of these territories, old houses no longer correspond to modern housing standards and have therefore lost their use value. The functional obsolescence of the dwellings has often been intertwined with social and cultural factors, such as the rejection of a way of life based on the traditional peasant economy, often associated with a condition of misery and poverty (Pazzagli, 2021). The

physical displacement of the inhabitants is accompanied by their disaffection with the historic heritage, which alters the sense of belonging and attachment to a place (Teti, 2004), the collective memory, and the perception of the cultural values embedded in old towns.

The study of the Granfonte district in Leonforte (Fig. 1), a small Sicilian town in the province of Enna, offers an opportunity to reflect on the future of vernacular architecture and the changes and trends that threaten the historic centres of smaller towns in interior regions. Leonforte was founded in 1610, when the Branciforti family obtained a *licentia pupulandi* for Tavi's feudal territory. The prince developed an ambitious urban plan based on a regular layout. The northward expansion of the town, which had already begun in the 17th century, accelerated during the 20th century thanks to urban policies based on unrealistic assumptions about economic and demographic growth (Vitale et al., 2020). Today, despite the

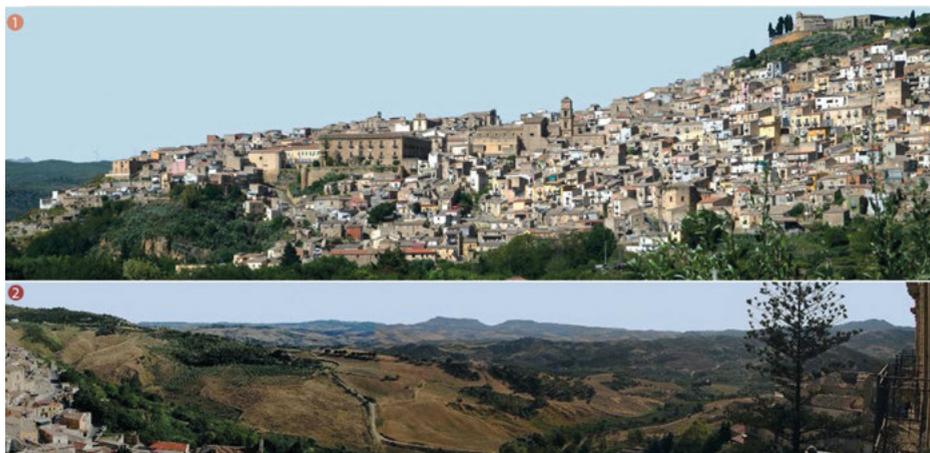


Fig. 1. The southern view of Granfonte and Favarotta districts (1); the view of the landscape from Palazzo Branciforti (2).

continued decline in its population, the urban sprawl is increasing, further emphasizing a condition of urban imbalance: the northern part of the town and the anonymous suburbs offer more services to citizens and are more densely populated; conversely, the old town is experiencing an ever-increasing process of abandonment and depopulation (Vitale & Versaci, 2020).

So far local authorities have failed to offer any strategic vision to manage the effects of the deep decay of the old district and urban planning has not seen the recognition of heritage as a factor in sustainable development. This technical and political response, effectively classified as a 'Do nothing' policy (Verwest, 2011), is also demonstrated by the persistent lack of tools and measures for governing transformations in the historic centre, which is exposed to a great range of threats. In order to adapt the vernacular architecture to new housing needs, over the past fifty years the old buildings have undergone many alterations of their formal and structural features and specific layout. Meanwhile, many abandoned dwellings lay in crumbling ruins which compromise the safe use of streets and public spaces and constantly increase the concerns of the few remaining inhabitants (Fig. 2). Indeed, neglected buildings are perceived as evidence of a lack of interest on the part of the local council,

whose main response to the growing discomfort has been allowing the demolition of entire buildings, without any strategy or even community involvement.

Our research addresses the issue of the challenging future of vernacular architecture, starting from a thorough knowledge of its distinguishing building characteristics. This research is intended to establish guidelines for securing and restoring traditional houses, with a view to encouraging residential use. This paper is a part of this ongoing research and focuses on a representative group of buildings, which is the subject of a pilot project for the preservation of Granfonte's fragile architecture and the recovery of local building traditions.

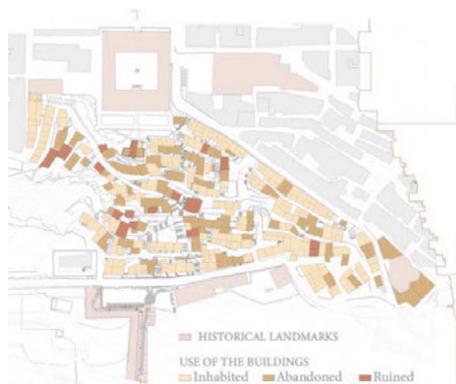


Fig. 2. The current condition of the built fabric.

## 2. A methodological example: the study of a group of houses

Rock-cut architecture is widespread in the Erean Mountains and particularly in the northern part of the province of Enna, where Leonforte lies. Even today, the presence of rock-hewn churches and oratories shows how building methods that adapt to the morphology of the territory and exploit the characteristics of the local stone persisted for centuries. Natural cavities on the hillsides, which originally served as shelters, over time have also been used as temples or tombs. Dwellings in the Granfonte district display echoes of this long-standing building tradition (Nigrelli, 2001). It could be claimed that the relationship with the rock and the use of natural and anthropic caves are the most noteworthy elements in the settlement.

The buildings were organised in such a way as to meet the need to follow the orography of the terrain and to take advantage of the steep natural slope. Crowned by the baronial palace that overlooks the valley, the district developed on the flank of Mount Cernigliere, in a position facing south-east and protected from the prevailing winds. The choice of settling on the hillside was also useful both in order to reduce the occupancy of the fertile soil in the valley and to protect dwellings from the disastrous floods that have historically affected the area. The configuration of the buildings followed an organic layout resulting from adaptation to the constraints imposed by the uneven topography. Nevertheless, in spite of the irregularity of the urban pattern, it is common to find buildings systematically sharing construction techniques, formal solutions, and long-term building types. Urban routes were conditioned by the drastic variations in the slope and the narrow streets which follow the contour lines are still today often connected by steep steps. Houses were built against the rock outcrop, very often without any attempt to reduce irregularities. The effective exploitation of the available resources has given the neighbourhood a unified appearance, reinforcing its coherence within the landscape.

The basic dwelling unit was a single-storey house (with a surface area of approximately 20-22 square metres), defined by two walls arranged

perpendicularly to the slope and closed by the façade wall. The qualities of the rock – an easily worked coarse-grained sandstone – permitted two methods of building houses: “by taking away”, in which the rock was excavated to enlarge the ground floor generally devoted to service functions such as a fireplace and oven; “by adding”, in which the stone, once removed, was used for the construction of the walls made of roughly hewn blocks. In two-storey dwellings, the position on the slope made two separate entrances possible, one each from the lower and the upper streets, though when the difference in level between the streets exceeded the interfloor height, access had to be guaranteed by an internal staircase or, more commonly, by an external one (*profferlo*). Notably, in these very small buildings, outdoor spaces often ensured the vertical connections, or added new ones. Moreover, in everyday life, they were considered an extension of the domestic space for the preparation of food or other daily activities.



Fig. 3. Aerial view of the block.

The group of houses under study is located in the upper part of the neighbourhood, just below the baronial palace, and was selected for the representative nature of its building type and formal and construction features (Fig. 3). It is currently

total abandoned and displays the most common issues of deterioration and disrepair which affect the surrounding buildings. The block is set on a steep slope and consists of three houses facing south-west which form the main front and a fourth one later built on the upper side.

The present cluster of buildings is the result of an evolution that can only be partially understood from the outside. The comparison of the historic land registry of 1878 with subsequent documentation allowed us to formulate some hypotheses on the development and transformation of the houses and to reconstruct the growth of the block. The analysis was based on the indispensable direct survey and the observation of surviving evidence of previous construction phases. An understanding of the original, natural slope which existed prior to any anthropic transformation appeared to be essential to an analysis of the relationship between the buildings and the site. It is now acknowledged that social reality – personal relationships, customs, forms of living and working – is embedded in the material culture of a place. An intertwining of the historical, archaeological, technological, and typological data helped to come to terms with the necessary preliminary knowledge and shed light on the development of the houses in relation to their cultural and historical context. Above all, it contributed to a greater understanding of their authenticity, their peculiarities, and the values which they embody and which should be preserved.

The block started with the house at the south-eastern end, which was most probably built as a single-storey building. Analysis of the masonry confirmed that the central dwelling was subsequently built against it and the constant thickness of the façade wall suggests that this was from the very beginning a two-storey building with a *prof-ferlo* on the southern front. The third house, at the north-west end, was the last to be built and was presumably another single-storey building, with a vault on the ground floor and a small staircase leading to the roof. At a later stage, the two end houses were raised until they exceeded the

central one in height and it is reasonable to assume that, on this occasion, they also underwent a significant transformation, including the demolition of the original vaults, which were replaced by the ceilings that are still visible today. Finally, a further building was erected as an in-fill addition at the rear of the central house. In fact, as shown in the 1878 land registry, it occupied a formerly open courtyard, and its construction may have involved a partial excavation of the terrain (Fig. 4).

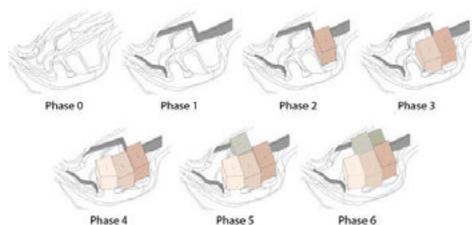


Fig. 4. Main construction phases of the block.

The three main buildings display the features of traditional local architecture (Fig. 5). They are built against the rocky hillside, the ground floor is partially excavated into it and, due to the steep slope, their upper fronts have no openings. The south-eastern dwelling offered the opportunity to identify a further constructional peculiarity: the building is built against one of several retaining walls, which are probably the result of the founder-prince's planned organisation of the urban environment, aimed at terracing the uneven slope for the subsequent division into plots to be built on. Being placed at the end of the block, the house has windows on the sidewall and external steps which provide access to the second floor.

The central dwelling keeps the typical plan of the neighbourhood, which may tell us much about the way of living and using the building. The ground floor is covered by a barrel vault which is made of pieces of stone set in mortar and is flanked by smaller counter-vaults placed at the haunches, which were also used for the storage of agricultural produce. The house also preserves an *alcove*, a noteworthy element of the local domestic architecture, which was separated from the main room by a wood-framed wall finished

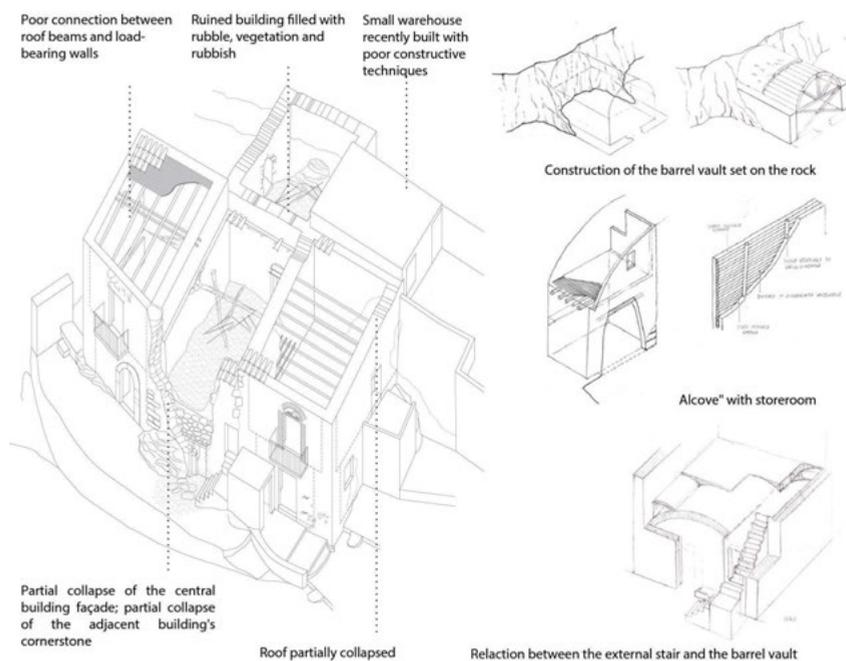


Fig. 5. Current state of the block and main features details.

with plaster laid on reeds. In the constant search for optimisation of the space, a fireplace was built under the stairs which led to the upper floor through a trapdoor. An external staircase was built on the right side of the façade, reaching the first floor along the haunches of the stone vault.

In the house at the northwest end, the connection with the slope is clearly visible. The ground floor, originally vaulted, has a small cave and a niche carved directly into the rock. Due to the demolition of the original vault, it is possible to observe the contact between the walls and the stone surface.

Long-lasting neglect has had a detrimental effect on these humble buildings. The lack of basic maintenance has resulted in increasing deterioration and rapidly worsened the condition of all the buildings though the central house suffers from a more advanced state of physical decay as the roof and the upper part of the façade have crumbled and collapsed. Due to major structural problems and issues of instability, the whole area represents a very serious risk to the safety of neighbours or passersby. However, this neglect has

prevented the buildings from undergoing any heavy renovation work as well as inappropriate or careless interventions. Despite the worrying state of disrepair, the buildings preserve many of their original features, making it possible to study the particular elements that illustrate the traditional building culture. Moreover, the block being studied has a strategic position, linking the upper monumental area (site of the baronial palace and the mother church) to the lower, built-up area of the Granfonte district. It is, therefore, a suitable area in which to consider the rehabilitation of public spaces as a means of improving the urban quality of the neighbourhood.

### 3. Two projects, one goal

Our proposal aims to provide an alternative direction to the stalled situation in the area. The strategy is intended as a pilot project for the abandoned historic city. The idea is suitable for possible future development in other areas of the district but it is also transferable and applicable to similar historic environments. The project experiments with a flexible and sustainable approach

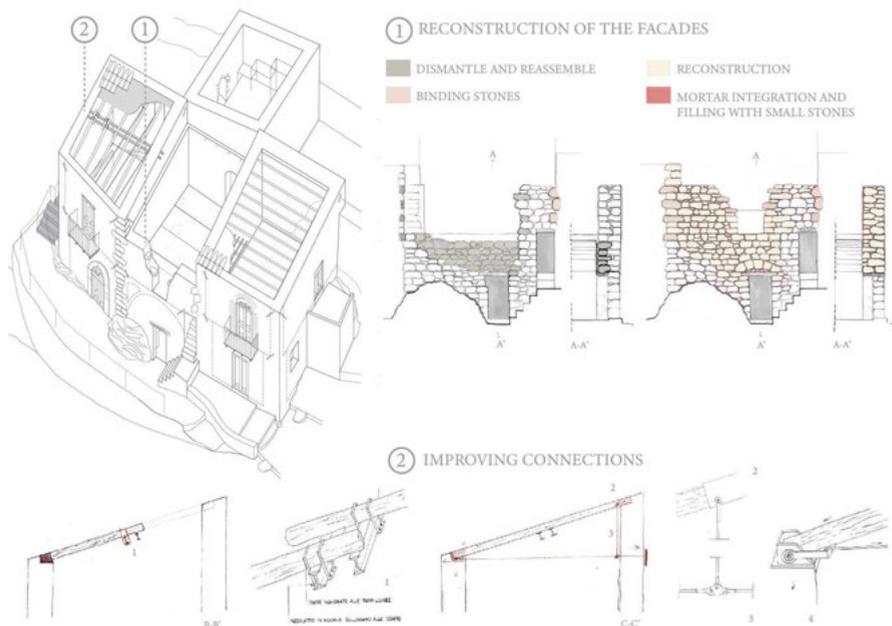


Fig. 6. The restoration of ruins.

that conceives of the project as a process. Two scenarios are envisaged: on the one hand, the management of the ruins and the design of the safety measures necessary for their preservation; on the other hand, the reintroduction of residential use. The two proposals can be conceived as two phases of the same project, and above all as alternatives to the radical demolitions that nowadays seem to be the only answer to the daily challenge of living in this place.

The first scenario has to contend with the current lack of demand for new housing. Faced with the pervasiveness of the phenomenon of abandonment and the concentration of ruins in certain areas, it may be necessary to include the hypothesis of a selective recovery (Curci & Zanfi, 2018). However, in the context of a dynamic town and a district which is still partially inhabited, the acceptance of a definitive abandonment of some urban portions would not make the provision of safety measures unnecessary. Therefore, the first proposal is to consolidate the ruins and to insert them in a new path, in continuity with the Belvedere of Palazzo Branciforti, making them places of rest and contemplation (Fig. 6). Preventive safety measures are planned

(removal of rubble, supports) and the shoring up of openings fits in with the formal language of the elements (Sebastián Franco, 2020). Some minimal interventions follow, which are designed to ensure the partial use of one of the buildings. Indeed, while for the two units on the ends only consolidation is planned, for the central one the proposal is oriented towards a partial reconstruction in order to invoke the original configuration: the second floor becomes an open space, without roofing, and the partially reconstructed second-floor window will allow a view of the landscape. The connection stones along the edge of the reconstruction denote the flexibility of the project as they offer the opportunity to complete the reconstruction at a later stage.

The second scenario aims to examine the prospects of habitability of the houses in the district. The proposal aims to reconcile the search for higher housing standards with the adoption, where possible, of interventions which are minimal, compatible and reversible (Fig. 7). This has required a twofold approach: the identification of elements to be preserved (material and construction characteristics, and the building layouts) and the proposal of more transformative interventions where the constraints are weaker.

Our proposal recommends preserving the building shape and arrangement, the lot size, the layout of the façade, and the position of the openings. The caves and vaults belong to the construction history of the area and must be preserved in their entirety. On the other hand, some changes in the interior layout seemed indispensable in order to obtain two residences for young couples. The house at the south-eastern end is preserved as a single unit while a partial reunification of the central dwelling with the one at the north-western end is proposed, a mode of transformation which has been historically confirmed and observed in other cases.

The fourth house in the rear is maintained as a *hortus conclusus* for this new double dwelling. As we mentioned, the mixture of public and private space represents a particular feature of these vernacular architectures (Atroschenko & Grundy, 1991). The design of the houses maintains the redundancy of vertical connections and recovers the principle – so widespread in the local tradition – of the hybrid use of the urban space as an extension of domestic space. In accordance with the essential character of the traditional houses and the wise optimization of their living space, the arrangement and furnishings

aim to give multifunctionality and flexibility to the rooms, preserving their spatial configuration. The presence of multipurpose storage units, small service volumes, and mezzanines responds to residential requirements with space-saving features which minimize clutter.

#### 4. Conclusions

The work has highlighted not only the architectural and urban qualities of the neighbourhood but also the critical issues and risks arising from the relentless loss of residential attractiveness. Moreover, the latter is also linked to the community's refusal to fully recognize the value of the historic centre. The correlation between conditions of abandonment, unregulated anthropic transformations and persistent demolitions shows how the inability to govern this part of the city is generating serious imbalances and conflicting situations, which in turn threaten to destroy large portions of the built environment. Furthermore, the municipality of Leonforte has recently joined the project in which houses are sold for one euro – an initiative embraced positively by many Sicilian municipalities. Nonetheless, what results will this incentive produce without an overall

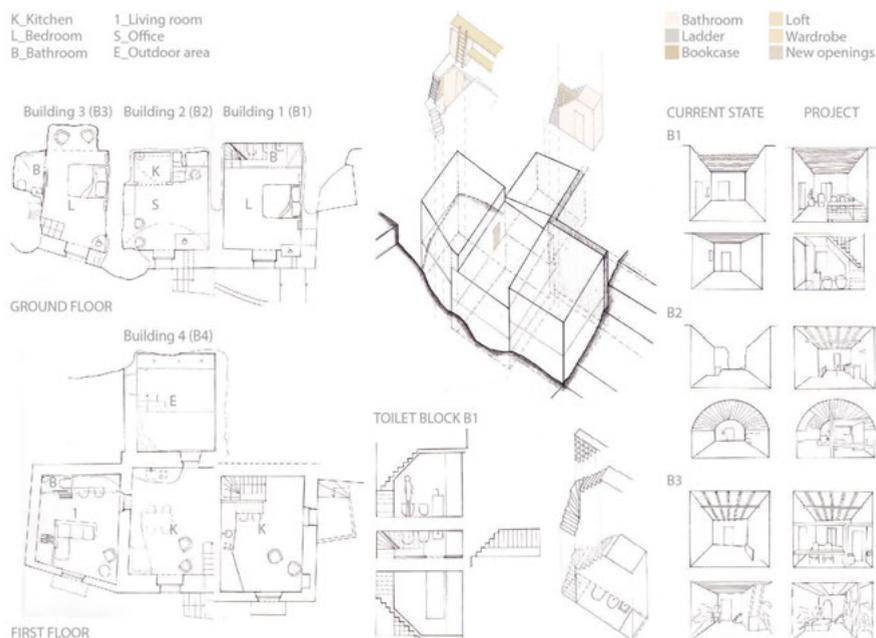


Fig. 7. Restoration of the residential use.

vision of the problems of the city and the territory, and without any project combining knowledge, conservation, and management of the historic town?

The case of Leonforte confirms that appropriate policies of urban rebalancing are needed to bring the inhabitants back to these forgotten parts of the city. From this perspective, the field of preservation and restoration can undoubtedly provide a proactive contribution, by facilitating the recognition of the value of historic buildings beyond the logic of economics and function (Della Torre, 2020). Recent studies and some virtuous initiatives confirm that the preservation of historic buildings as well as the restoration of urban ruins can play a key role in the process of reactivation and revitalization of interior regions, as long as they are embedded in a program of territorial development (Ortiz, 2018).

Looking toward possible future scenarios, it is worth emphasizing, once again, the role of the project. Working on different scales, new design proposals must result from a deep understanding of the built environment and the recognition of the qualities and peculiarities of different sites. The urban restoration is therefore part of the system of tools for governing the territory and the town and it has the specific task of identifying the criteria for compatible transformations that derive from the balancing of different situations. Meeting the needs of the place and the inhabitants requires differentiated interventions which can include, on the one hand, a more rigorous preservation (for example where a prolonged abandonment has allowed the survival of higher levels of authenticity) while exploring, on the other hand, the possibilities of a reinterpretation of the typological functioning. Anyway, it will be necessary to recognise that a transformation testifies to an effort to adapt the fabric to the evolution of the way of living and has become part of the culture of the place (Zampilli et al., 2020). In conclusion, to date, the policies implemented for the redevelopment of historic centres in Sicily have produced insufficient effects. Overcoming this long-standing problem, according to the authors, must involve the pursuit of a twofold goal. Administrations need to be challenged to adopt a tool for the

governance of the historic city. Finally, a revision of the tools currently available (partial and inflexible though they are) would be useful and is necessary to achieve an integrated management of conservation.

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