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From Ruin to Resource: The Role of Heritage and Structural Rehabilitation in the Economic and Territorial Regeneration of Rural Areas

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Abstract

Rural depopulation and the abandonment of historic settlements are pressing challenges for contemporary spatial planning, particularly in regions with a rich architectural and cultural heritage. This article examines the ruins of Moya, in Cuenca (Spain), as a case study to develop an integrated rural revitalisation strategy. The research combines historical building analysis, assessment of structural deterioration, and planning for economic reactivation to create a comprehensive framework for transforming abandoned sites into a viable cultural resource. The proposed model favours temporary and flexible occupation over permanent repopulation, promoting forms of use that respect and preserve the site's historical identity. The approach builds on principles of activating monumental heritage, integrating the vernacular fabric, and organising the site into distinct functional areas. Moya is thus presented not only as an example of abandonment, but also as a replicable prototype for intervention in other declining rural environments, where heritage can serve as a strategic resource for sustainable development and territorial cohesion. The main objectives are to develop and test an integrated strategy for rural regeneration that goes beyond physical restoration, combining adaptive reuse, heritage conservation, and educational and cultural programmes to stimulate the local economy and reinforce territorial identity. The approach is evaluated through the case of Moya and contrasted with other national and international experiences to assess its replicability.

Keywords: rural revitalization; architecture heritage; adaptive reuse; heritage regeneration; territorial cohesion; Moya

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the conservation of architectural heritage in rural areas has gained relevance due to territorial, social, and economic transformations affecting the European countryside. In this context, many historical settlements have been abandoned, despite representing an important cultural, urban, and architectural legacy that should be preserved [1]. This heritage, composed of religious and civil buildings, vernacular structures, and traditional urban layouts, not only represents an aesthetic inheritance but also a repository of technical knowledge, collective memory, and local identity [2].

However, the preservation of this heritage is severely challenged by demographic decline and the functional deterioration of many rural centres. Since the mid-20th century, processes such as industrialization, agricultural mechanization, and the centralization of services in urban areas have led to a sustained exodus towards cities [3,4]. This dynamic has not only interrupted residential continuity but also weakened the social structures that traditionally guaranteed the maintenance and transmission of local ways of life and building practices. Additional challenges have reinforced the functional exclusion of vast rural areas from the contemporary territorial system, such as geographical inaccessibility, the collapse of public services, natural disasters, and the absence of sustainable public policies [5]. Meanwhile a gradual cultural shift has reinforced the centrality of urban life as the dominant model, marginalizing rural areas [6], both materially and symbolically.

The phenomenon of depopulation is not exclusive to Spain [7]. Interior regions of Italy, Portugal [8] and even large rural areas in China [9] are experiencing similar dynamics of demographic regression, loss of services, economic decline and deterioration of built heritage. In this global context, a technical and interdisciplinary response is essential to promote the regeneration of these territories through an integrated, resilient and culturally respectful perspective [10].

Statistics compiled by the National Statistics Institute (INE) in Spain [11] on demographic and depopulation trends across the territory justify our selection of analysis areas. As in other developed countries, large cities in Spain concentrate significant population densities, leading to depopulation in non-urban areas and small towns, with populations under 500 inhabitants being the most affected. According to the INE data for 2024, regions such as Madrid (6.8 million inhabitants), Catalonia (7.8 million), and the Valencian Community (5.1 million) have the largest population concentrations, while others like La Rioja (319,000), Cantabria (585,000), and Extremadura (1.05 million) report significantly lower figures. However, since Spanish communities have varying land areas, this global quantitative data may not always provide an accurate picture. To address this issue, the European Union's quantitative value for territorial depopulation is used as an indicator, set at 12.5 inhabitants per square kilometre. This threshold is considered when analysing municipalities in Spain. Consequently, it can be stated that 48.8% of Spanish municipalities fall below this threshold, putting them at risk of depopulation. On the other hand, the European Union defines populations with a severe risk of depopulation as those with fewer than eight inhabitants per square kilometre, and in Spain, 38.1% of municipalities are in this situation.

In this scenario, Castilla-La Mancha is emerging as one of the autonomous communities most severely affected by structural depopulation [12]. With an average population of just 25.7 inhabitants per square kilometre, which is well below the national average of 94.2 inhabitants per square kilometre, it also contains a significant proportion of municipalities facing a critical demographic situation. According to the Depopulation Map drawn up by the Commissioner for the Demographic Challenge (2023), 100% of the municipalities in Guadalajara and 66.1% of those in Cuenca are classified as being at extreme risk of depopulation [13]. This situation of neglection has a direct impact on the deterioration of rural architectural heritage, particularly in settlements where the built fabric has been exposed to deterioration due to lack of maintenance, use or investment. In many of these municipalities, the loss of institutional capacity and the disappearance of essential public services have accelerated the abandonment of historic buildings such as churches, convents, hospitals, and vernacular dwellings, which, in the absence of a recovery strategy, face the imminent risk of disappearing forever [14].

For all these reasons, this study focuses on the abandoned municipality of Moya (Cuenca) as a representative example of the cumulative effects of depopulation, structural

vulnerability and heritage neglect. Moya is notable for several key attributes: a remarkable historical and architectural ensemble [15], a strategic location and a high degree of dereliction. Its analysis allows for critical reflection on the possibilities for architectural, functional and symbolic recovery of declining rural settlements. Through this case study, this research seeks to contribute to the debate on the revitalisation of built heritage in depopulated areas, proposing technical, territorial and cultural criteria that can be extrapolated to other similar contexts at the national and international level.

Within this framework, a literature review on strategies for revitalizing abandoned villages is conducted. Drawing on the insights from this review, the subsequent analysis is organised into three distinct categories, each addressed in separate sections: educational and cultural revitalization, functional and economic activation of heritage, and interventions oriented towards collective memory and symbolic value. The growing attention given to strategies for revitalizing abandoned villages has led to an increasingly extensive and diverse set of studies, documenting experiences on different scales and with a wide variety of approaches [16]. These studies, pilot projects and public or community-led interventions share a common vision: the need to move beyond purely conservationist approaches to address the recovery of built heritage within the framework of comprehensive territorial regeneration processes.

Rather than focusing solely on architectural rehabilitation, the most relevant initiatives integrate social, economic, environmental and symbolic components, with the aim of restoring functionality, value and meaning to degraded rural environments. Through an analysis of various case studies, this article argues that the recovery of abandoned rural settlements requires a comprehensive approach that integrates the protection of built heritage with the activation of sustainable functional dynamics, promoting inclusive management models that respect the intangible values of the territory [8].

A key factor in successful revitalization strategies is the ability to generate meaningful links between the recovered spaces and the communities that inhabit, visit or manage them. The activation of processes related to belonging, local identity, and emotional attachment is equally important as the material functionality of the interventions. For this reason, rural heritage enhancement projects tend to articulate a long-term vision that goes beyond mere physical restoration, integrating principles of sustainability, circularity and social innovation in defining new uses for both the territory and its built structures [10].

Nevertheless, certain cases illustrate other challenges that are difficult to solve in these processes. In the case of Castellar de la Frontera [17], the historic fortress-village experiences tensions between heritage conservation and residential adaptation within its defensive structures. Also, in the case of Fraguas [18], an informal repopulation initiative was terminated due to legal disputes over land use in a protected area. In contrast, other cases demonstrate that success is achievable. When coherent planning aligns with active community participation and an enabling legal framework, the revitalization of abandoned villages becomes viable. Under these conditions, projects can deliver sustainable outcomes and measurable socio-economic and cultural gains. The following sections will examine specific case studies in greater detail, outlining how some initiatives have reactivated local economies, reinforced social cohesion, and restored cultural vitality, while also highlighting the challenges encountered in the process.

1.1. Strategy Educational and Cultural Revitalisation

In the context of educational and cultural revitalization, the Programme for the Recovery and Educational Use of Abandoned Villages (PRUEPA) [19] in Spain has been successful in preserving valuable architectural structures and reviving community life. The program has also fostered a new relationship between young people and the rural

environment, demonstrating that education can serve as an effective tool for preserving and reinterpreting endangered territories. As a result, it has established itself as a benchmark in public heritage management, demonstrating that education can serve as an effective tool for preserving and reinterpreting endangered territories in a contemporary context. The impact of this strategy is reflected in the functional recovery of spaces, the reinforcement of the educational value of rural areas, and the creation of a new collective narrative in which heritage is understood as both a didactic and social resource. These villages have transitioned from being symbols of abandonment to becoming benchmarks for good practices in territorial revitalisation from a public, educational and community perspective [20].

The Juminkeko Foundation and UNESCO [10] have supported the restoration of vernacular architecture and the promotion of cultural tourism in Viena Karelia, Finland [21]. This initiative has not only revitalized the local economy but also addressed the erosion of identity caused by forced displacement and political marginalization [8].

1.2. Strategy Functional and Economic Revitalization of Heritage

Sustainable tourism routes, especially cycling ones, are becoming an effective tool for revitalising these villages [22]. By repurposing disused infrastructure and cultural routes, slow mobility corridors are created to connect rural centres and promote environmentally friendly experiential tourism. This model supports the development of local economies by revitalising small businesses while contributing to the conservation of architectural and landscape heritage. Additionally, it reinforces territorial identity, encourages community participation and fosters new links between visitors and residents. Overall, sustainable routes represent an integrative strategy that promotes both physical regeneration and social and cultural resilience in neglected areas.

Castelvecchio Calvisio, Italy, is an example of successful revitalization through public–private partnership. The reuse of historic buildings has been directed towards initiatives such as restaurants, cultural spaces, and activities associated with the Slow Food movement, taking advantage of local resources and the region's gastronomic identity. This approach has generated employment, strengthened the local economy, and promoted responsible tourism. The interventions have been based on compatible conservation principles, used traditional materials and reversible solutions, and respected the morphology of the urban complex.

Castelvecchio thus represents a model for the economic revitalisation of abandoned heritage, achieving a balance between conservation and contemporary use without compromising its historical legacy. This case exemplifies a hybrid form of revitalisation based on public–private cooperation. Severely affected by the 2009 earthquake, the village has undergone multiple interventions focused on heritage restoration, cultural tourism and temporary residency for artists and new inhabitants. Although still under development, the project aims to balance conservation with everyday life and sustainable economic practices [5].

Another relevant example in the Italian context is Lou Pourtoun, a small alpine village in Ostana, whose revitalisation has been carried out through a structured, community-based initiative, supported by local institutions and regional development frameworks. The project involved the creation of a cultural and multifunctional centre that reinterprets traditional Alpine architecture to accommodate new social and educational uses. Developed in collaboration with the Polytechnic University of Turin, the intervention promoted the return of young residents, the preservation of the Occitan language and heritage, and the implementation of a model of sustainable rural innovation [8].

Bussana Vecchia, located in the Ligurian region of Italy, is another noteworthy case that stands as one of the earliest examples of spontaneous revitalisation driven by creative communities. Following its abandonment after the 1887 earthquake, the village was reoccupied in the 1960s by a group of artists led by Mario Giani, who transformed the ruins

into an International Community of Artists [23]. This informal reappropriation fostered a process of reconstruction based on self-management and the use of art as a tool for territorial reactivation. However, growing tourist interest, legal uncertainty, and speculative pressures progressively undermined the original spirit of the initiative, leading to conflicts and gentrification.

A radically different approach can be found in Colletta di Castelbianco (Liguria) [24], where revitalisation was initiated by a private company that acquired the entire village and commissioned architect Giancarlo De Carlo to transform it into a 'telematic citadel'. The project combined historical restoration with advanced digital infrastructure, aiming to attract remote creative professionals. Despite its architectural success and initial recognition, the village struggled to establish a permanent community and eventually became a short-stay tourist destination rather than a stable repopulation project.

The case of São Gregório, located in the Serra d'Ossa in the Portuguese Alentejo, involved a complete restoration for tourism purposes. Acquired in the 1990s by the Guimarães family, the village was rehabilitated to restore its 15th-century appearance and reopened in 2001 as a themed rural accommodation complex. Entirely privately funded, the intervention offers a historically inspired hospitality experience but does not reintegrate long-term residential or community dynamics [8].

1.3. Strategy Heritage with Memory and Symbolic Intervention

Unlike the previous cases, all of which focused on the revival of abandoned villages through residential, cultural, technological or economic revitalisation strategies, Belchite (Zaragoza) has adopted a completely different approach. Instead of seeking repopulation or the restoration of productive activities, this intervention has preserved the village in its post-war state of ruin as a space for memory. Destroyed during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and intentionally left unreconstructed, Belchite was later declared a historic site and transformed into a memorial landscape.

The ruins have been preserved and signposted, and today the site functions as an open-air museum, visited primarily for educational and symbolic purposes. In this context, Belchite does not seek to repopulate the town or restore its economic activity, but rather to serve as a material testimony to the violent upheavals of the 20th century, framed within broader discourses of historical justice, trauma and memory tourism [25].

Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of different strategies for revitalizing abandoned villages. Based on the analysis of reviewed case studies, this article offers a critical reflection on the role of architectural heritage within contexts of abandonment, understanding it not only as a vestige of the past but also as a strategic resource for social, economic, and territorial transformation. Moving beyond the traditional view of conservation as an isolated act, this study advocates for a comprehensive approach that integrates the protection of built heritage with the activation of sustainable functional dynamics.

In conclusion, this study addresses the revitalization of Moya, an abandoned rural settlement in the province of Cuenca, distinguished by its remarkable architectural and historical heritage. The research takes as its starting point the analysis of national and international reference cases that have successfully implemented rural regeneration strategies. The proposed intervention is based on the premise that the recovery of such settlements requires a holistic approach that combines the protection of built heritage with the activation of sustainable functional dynamics. Beyond physical restoration, the strategy integrates adaptive reuse, heritage conservation, and educational and cultural programs aimed at stimulating the local economy, reinforcing territorial identity, and reversing depopulation processes. Through inclusive management models that respect the intangible values of the territory, the aim is to generate employment, attract new inhabitants, and

re-establish the connections between architecture, landscape, and society. The objectives of the research are: (i) to establish a methodological framework that integrates fieldwork, typological analysis, functional planning, and a flexible intervention model; and (ii) to assess its potential replicability through a comparative analysis of reference cases, thereby providing a transferable model for the sustainable revitalization of abandoned villages and the long-term preservation of cultural heritage.

Table 1. Comparison of different strategies for revitalising abandoned villages.

Town	Country	Revitalization Strategy	Outcome
Bussana Vecchia [23]	Italy	Cultural and residential	Partial revitalization, legal conflicts and gentrification
Lou Pourtou (Ostana) [8]	Italy	Cultural, educational and community	Sustainable reactivation, attraction of young people
São Gregório [8]	Portugal	Rural tourism	Tourist attraction with medieval aesthetics
Granadilla [17,19]	Spain	Educational and heritage	Temporary rural school, active learning
Umbralejo [17,19]	Spain	Environmental and rural education	Environmental recovery and traditional know-how
Búbal [17,19]	Spain	Education on historic memory	Pedagogical model for integral recovery
Rioni-Fossi [26]	Italy	Repopulation, tourism and museumization	Heritage preservation: seasonal tourist uses
Castelvecchio Calvisio [5]	Italy	Repopulation and heritage	Under development, progressive recovery
Colletta di Castelbianco [24]	Italy	Attraction of remote professionals	Heritage preservation: seasonal tourist uses
Andorra Borgo Castello [27]	Italy	Repopulation and Tourism	Sustainable reactivation, attraction of young people
Viena Karelia [21]	Finland	Preservation of intangible heritage and repopulation	Architectural restoration and identity revitalization
Belchite [20,25]	Spain	Historical memory tourism	Ruins turned into museums, without residential reoccupation
Castellar de la Frontera [17]	Spain	Tourism and heritage	Tourist housing and heritage restoration
Fraguas [18]	Spain	Occupation by a collective for housing	Self-managed rehabilitation of housing and common spaces by the users

These objectives are guided by the following research questions:

- How can adaptive reuse, heritage conservation, and educational and cultural programs work together to regenerate depopulated rural settlements?
- To what extent can the methodology tested in Moya be applied to other abandoned heritage sites with different socio-economic and cultural conditions?

2. Materials and Methods

This research adopts a comprehensive methodological approach aimed at addressing the inherent complexity of intervention processes in abandoned rural areas. Far from limiting itself to architectural or heritage analysis, the methodological proposal also considers the social, territorial, and economic dimensions that condition the viability of any eventual revitalization [23]. The procedure, structured in three successive phases and summarised in Figure 1, provides a framework capable of integrating these multidimensional factors.

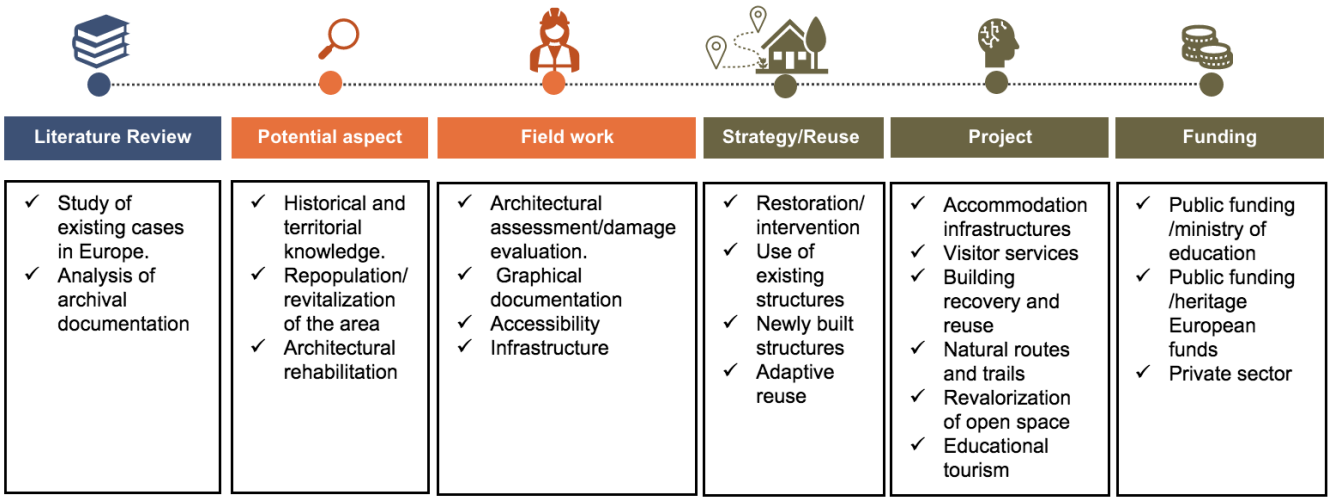

Figure 1. Methodology phase outline.

The first phase comprises a documentary and bibliographic analysis of similar case studies, complemented by a review of historical literature, aiming to contextualize the study area both territorially and architecturally, while identifying potential aspects, such as repopulation opportunities, the architectural value of the built environment, and the relationship with the landscape and existing infrastructure [28]. In the second phase, fieldwork is conducted to assess the current condition of the construction and conservation status of the built fabric. This phase includes the collection of graphic documentation though surveys, photographs, drone videos, and mapping, as well as an analysis of accessibility and available infrastructure [1]. This information has enabled us to structure a comprehensive reuse project that includes the restoration of buildings, the provision of services, the enhancement of open spaces, the creation of nature trails, and the implementation of educational tourism programs. The final phase is dedicated to defining strategic intervention actions, emphasizing the reuse of existing structures and achieving a balance between conservation and new construction [29].

Additionally, this phase involves structuring a financing model that integrates public, European, and private funds, ensuring the project's technical, economic, and social sustainability. This methodology enables a comprehensive approach to rural revitalization by integrating technical, heritage, and social criteria within a coherent, replicable framework [27].

3. Case Study: Moya (Cuenca)

The case study selected for this research reflects the desire to apply the proposed methodology in a real context that combines critical depopulation conditions with significant heritage value and clear potential for functional revitalisation. The historic centre of Moya, located in the province of Cuenca, Castilla-La Mancha, represents a paradigmatic example of an abandoned rural settlement with an important architectural and urban heritage. Figure 2 illustrates the location of Moya, with Figure 2a showing a map of the Iberian Peninsula of Spain that denotes the territorial organization into 47 provinces in the peninsula, highlighting the most populated provinces surrounding Cuenca. In Figure 2b, provinces of Castilla-La Mancha are represented, showing the principal cities and the location of Moya, clearly situating it in the southeastern part of the province, approximately 60 km east of the city of Cuenca, emphasizing its relative isolation and vulnerability to depopulation amidst a landscape characterised by undulating hills and mountains. Figure 2c depicts Moya and its immediate surroundings, including the historical settlements of Santo Domingo de Moya, an outlying village with religious and residential functions, and Los Huertos, an

agricultural hamlet linked to the fertile plain that sustained the town's subsistence. Their inclusion reflects the territorial articulation of Moya through its dependent hamlets and productive landscape. Finally, Figure 2d provides an aerial view of Moya, clearly displaying the road access, wall, and river. From a heritage perspective, the complex preserves a historical and artistic ensemble representative of different phases of medieval and modern urban development in the Iberian Peninsula. Its restoration would enable not only the safeguarding of material heritage but also its activation as a driver of territorial development. In addition, its strategic location, within a 90-min radius of urban centres such as Madrid, Valencia, Teruel and Albacete, guarantees good accessibility and connectivity with potential educational and tourist audiences [11]. This geographical proximity, combined with the high density of school-age population in nearby towns, reinforces the viability of a mixed model that combines educational uses, focused on heritage and environmental education, with sustainable tourism based on cultural experiences [30]. Furthermore, the site is part of a region characterized by remarkable cultural and landscape wealth, which favours its integration into existing cultural networks and heritage routes.

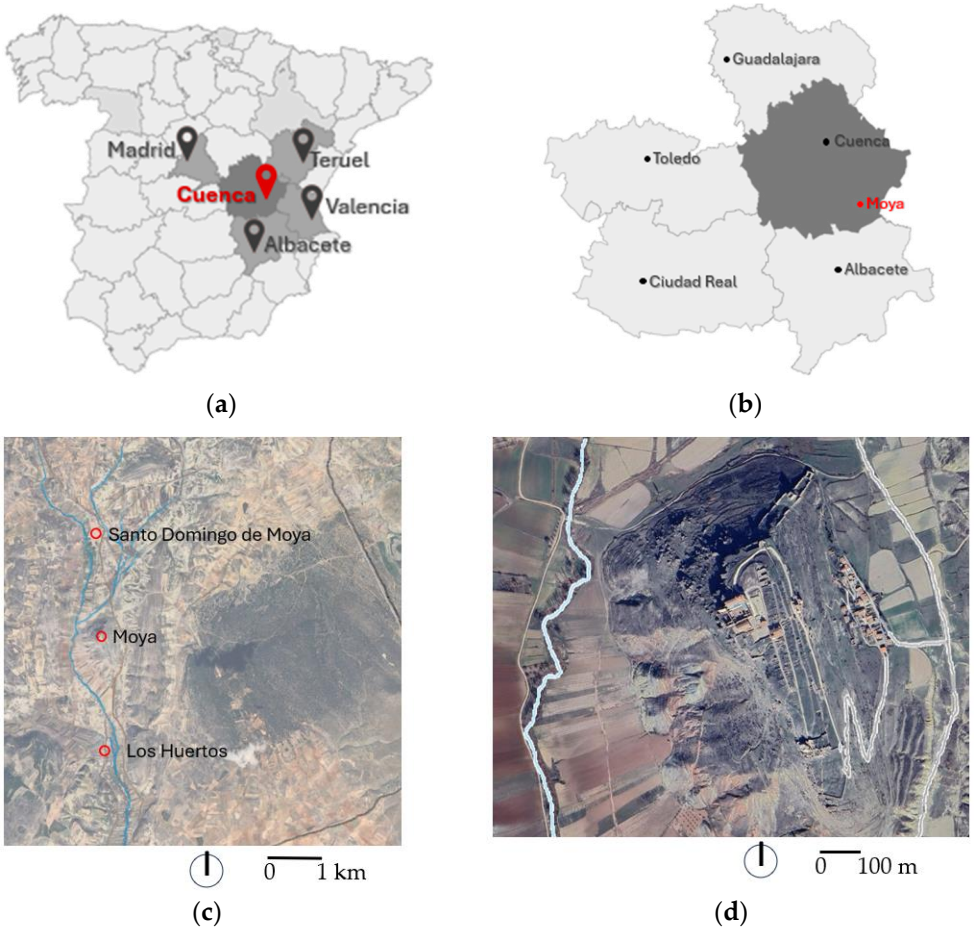

Figure 2. Map of Moya's location: (**a**) in peninsular Spain, (**b**) in Autonomous Region Castilla-La Mancha, (**c**) Moya and surroundings and (**d**) aerial view of Moya.

Despite the advanced state of deterioration and continuous population decline, the site offers favourable conditions for strategic intervention. Its designation as a Site of Cultural Interest provides a solid legal framework for its protection, and its landscape and territorial value reinforce its role as a hub in future rural revitalization networks [31].

Collectively, these factors make Moya an ideal environment for testing an intervention model that extends beyond architectural restoration to incorporate principles of sustainabil-

ity, economic recovery and educational outreach, establishing the foundations for coherent, respectful and forward-looking regeneration.

3.1. Territorial and Historical Context

Moya is located in the province of Cuenca, Spain. It is situated on a steep hill at an altitude of 1100 m, surrounded by extensive valleys and overlooking ancient passages. Moya constitutes a site of extraordinary historical, architectural, and urban value. Abandoned in the mid-20th century, it was declared a Historic Site in 1982 [32].

For years, the deterioration of Moya's buildings has been met with passive indifference. Moya was a town of notable importance in its time, as shown in Figure 3, formed by a double defensive wall containing seven gates, a castle, six churches, a convent, a hospital, and a town hall situated in the main square.

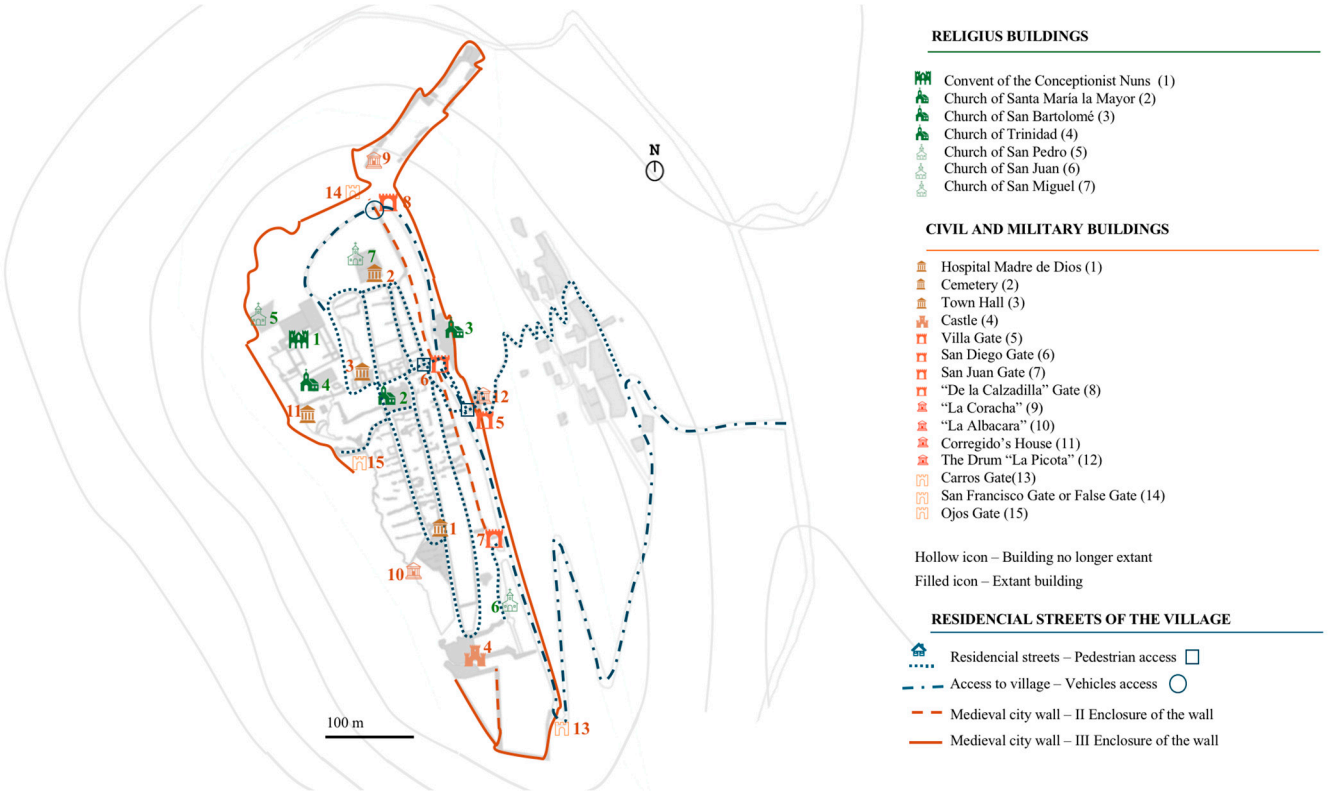

Figure 3. Map of constructions and vestiges in Moya.

Its origins date back to the Middle Bronze Age and the Iron Age, with evidence of Muslim occupation until the 12th century, when it was reconquered by Alfonso VIII in 1183. During the Middle Ages, Moya served as a key frontier settlement between the Christian and Muslim kingdoms, encouraging its repopulation under the Order of Santiago and its development as a fortified city.

Between the 13th and 15th centuries, Moya was the subject of political disputes between the Crown and various noble houses. Eventually, the Catholic Monarchs granted the Marquisate of Moya to Don Andrés de Cabrera and Doña Beatriz de Bobadilla. The town experienced a period of prosperity during the 16th and 17th centuries, marked by the founding of a Franciscan convent and the establishment in 1639 of the first pilgrimage of Santa María de Tejeda, a tradition that continues to this day.

In the 19th century, Moya played a significant role in the resistance against Napoleonic forces and was subsequently affected by the Carlist Wars. However, its decline was accelerated by liberal reforms and disentailment processes, particularly the one led by Mendizábal.

This reform resulted in the loss of jurisdiction over the surrounding villages. The town's political and demographic relevance gradually diminished, ultimately leading to depopulation and abandonment in the 20th century. The deterioration of its architectural heritage was further accelerated by the extraction of construction materials [33].

Today, Moya temporarily recovers part of its former vitality during major religious festivals such as the Septenarios [34], the Feast of the Christ of the Fall, and Our Lady of Tejeda. This rich historical and architectural heritage underscores the urgency and importance of efforts aimed at its preservation and revitalisation.

Building on this historical background, Moya can be understood as having served primarily as an administrative and defensive hub, exerting political and military control over a network of surrounding villages within the former Marquisate. Its fortified structure and strategic position ensured territorial governance, military protection, and a symbolic role as a centre of regional authority. The town's decline was initiated in the 18th century and accelerated by the Napoleonic invasion, the Carlist Wars, and ecclesiastical disentailment. This resulted in the loss of its jurisdictional functions and the progressive dispersal of its population. By the mid-20th century, Moya was definitively abandoned as a place of permanent residence.

Since the 1980s, the legally established Asociación de Amigos de Moya (Friends of Moya Association) has worked to prevent complete ruin by promoting conservation interventions in several monumental buildings. However, these actions—carried out in a punctual manner and without assigning functional uses to the restored properties beyond their mere preservation—have not been sufficient to stimulate the socio-economic revitalization of the area.

Moya is situated in the La Serranía Baja region, a mountainous area in eastern Cuenca province, known for its rich biodiversity. At presents, the region encompasses 33 municipalities and has a low population density, which may affect the availability of services. Nevertheless, nearby towns provide essential services such as healthcare, education, and commerce, ensuring the well-being of residents. Public transportation connects Moya to these localities via a bus stop in the eastern part of town, El Arrabal. This area is primarily used for seasonal and vacation homes, which may influence local community dynamics and economic development. While this accessibility mitigates some structural limitations, the historic walled centre remains abandoned and functionally disconnected from its surroundings. In this context, any rehabilitation effort must be firmly rooted in the territorial reality, taking advantage of existing service networks and transport links. In addition, it is essential to assign coherent and sustainable uses to the recovered buildings. This would reactivate Moya's historic role and ensure that the revitalization contributes meaningfully to the long-term social, economic, and cultural regeneration of the area.

Within this historical and socio-cultural framework, a closer examination of the town's spatial organization and architectural remains provides deeper insight into its current condition and heritage significance.

The spatial organization and architectural remains of the historic town of Moya offer valuable insights into its original urban configuration. What follows is a descriptive account of the main elements that define its current layout and overbuilt environment.

At the foot of the walled town of Moya lies El Arrabal, a peripheral settlement historically associated with the main urban nucleus. This area, composed of modest residential dwellings, is currently used only during the summer months. Entry into the fortified enclosure is made through the main gate, located on the western flank of the town.

Ascending the path from this point, one first encounters the Church of San Bartolomé. Continuing uphill leads to the central square, which is framed by three key structures: the Church of Santa María la Mayor, the former town hall, and the small Church of La Trinidad.

Behind the latter stands the former Conceptionist Convent, while the cemetery is located slightly downhill from it.

Returning to the square and heading north along any of the adjacent streets—now marked by the ruins of once-inhabited houses—one reaches the remains of the old hospital, followed by the castle, which serves as the terminal point of the fortified perimeter. Additional entry gates to the town can still be identified along the defensive walls, offering further insight into the original access and circulation systems.

From an accessibility perspective, Moya can be reached both on foot and by motor vehicle, with the main road allowing vehicular access directly to the central square. Although the historic core occupies an elevated hilltop position, this does not constitute a significant barrier for visitors. On the contrary, its topographical setting offers a strategic vantage point and privileged panoramic views over the surrounding landscape, reinforcing its historical defensive function while enhancing its contemporary appeal for cultural and tourism-oriented uses.

Depicted in Figure 4 is a set of four photographic records: Figure 4a and 4b illustrate, respectively, the castle and the Church of Santa María la Mayor as they appeared in the mid-20th century, prior to the complete abandonment of the settlement; Figure 4c,d present current views of these same structures, in which the castle shows evidence of consolidation and partial reconstruction, while the church has retained its structural integrity and remains in occasional use.

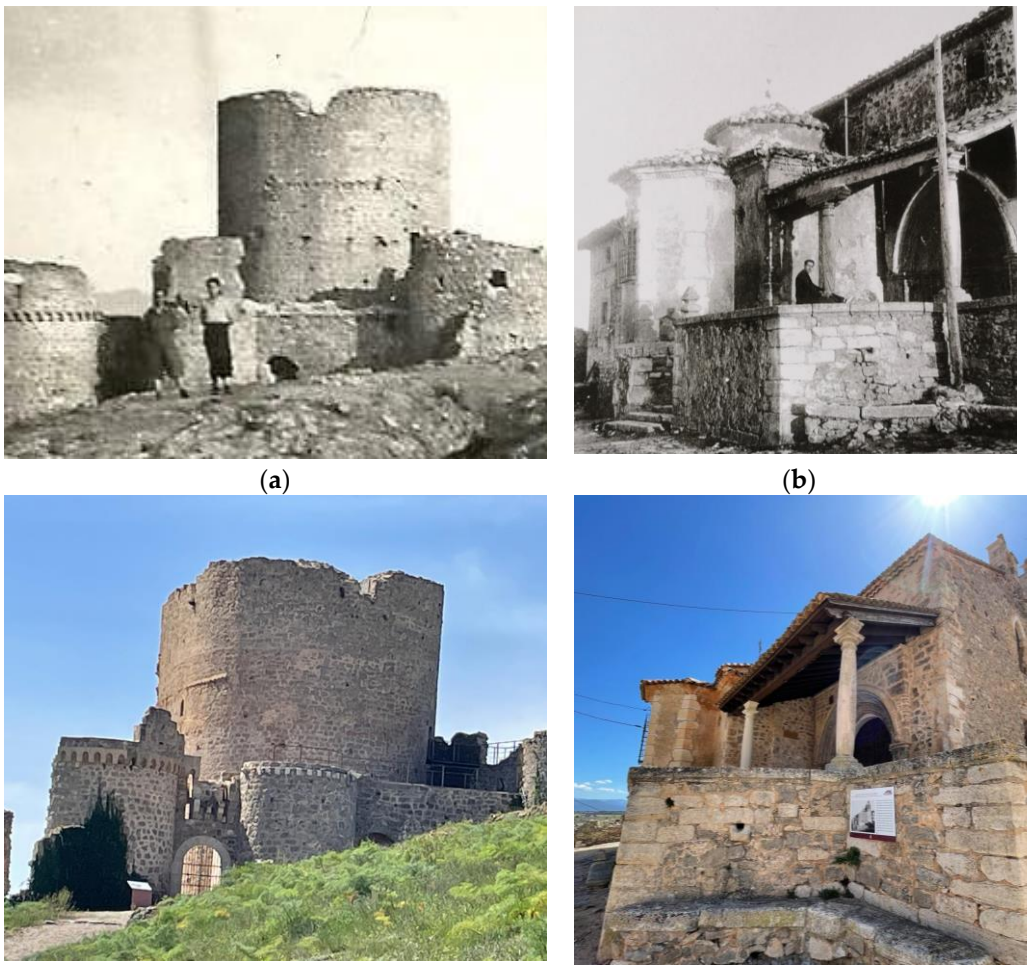

Figure 4. Moya's Castle (**a**,**b**) Santa María la Mayor Church before depopulation (courtesy of Asociación Amigos de Moya); as it stands today (**c**,**d**) (author's photo 2025).

3.2. State of Conservation

The site under examination constitutes a historic settlement of significant architectural and cultural value, currently in a state of partial abandonment. Although its overall deterioration has been ongoing for decades, a series of targeted interventions have, to date, succeeded in preserving some of the most prominent standing structures. These conservation efforts have varied in scope and methodology, focusing primarily on monumental architecture, while largely neglecting the vernacular residential fabric.

Today, Moya is a ghost town immersed in a partially preserved landscape. Access to the interior is limited to a single entrance, which is only open on certain dates. From there, one accesses the Plaza Mayor, where the best-preserved buildings are located: the church of Santa María la Mayor, still used for religious celebrations; the church of La Trinidad, formerly in ruins and now converted into a hotel thanks to the Tourist Infrastructure Improvement Plan (PLAMIT) [35,36] of the Cuenca Provincial Council; and the old town hall building, restored by a workshop school, which has recovered its original form although it lacks functional use at present.

Despite these advances, the square itself also reflects the persistent signs of abandonment, especially in the residential buildings that surround it, many of which preserve only their perimeter walls. This situation is a direct consequence of the spoliation of materials suffered after the abandonment of the nucleus in the mid-20th century.

Figure 5 documents a series of noteworthy interventions carried out beyond the historic core. The former Conceptionist convent and its adjoining church have recently undergone architectural restoration, aimed at recovering the formal volume and reestablishing the spatial and visual presence of the complex within the urban fabric. In the Church of San Bartolomé, work has been carried out to consolidate the walls, reconstruct the bell gable and partially enclose the interior. The Church of La Trinidad, in turn, has been rehabilitated and converted into a rural hotel, integrating its heritage value into a new touristic function. At the northern end of the town, at the end of Calle Santa María and adjacent to the remains of the old hospital, the castle is located, of which the keep and part of the original wall are preserved. In this area, interventions have been oriented towards its structural consolidation, accessibility improvement, and preventive maintenance.

Figure 5. Photographs showing the current state of conservation of Moya's buildings (author's photo 2025).

Despite these efforts, the interventions have been selective, directed exclusively at monumental structures. The vernacular architecture, primarily residential buildings that constitute the historical urban fabric, remains largely forgotten. Although less monumental, this type of architecture is essential to the integrity and authenticity of the historic landscape. Its progressive deterioration represents a significant loss of the cultural, material and spatial continuity within the ensemble.

3.3. Proposed Use and Functional Program

Considering the territorial context of the province of Cuenca and the socio-economic dynamics of Castilla-La Mancha, marked by structural rural depopulation, limited infrastructure, and the presence of extensive underutilized architectural heritage, a hybrid model is proposed for Moya's revitalization. This approach combines low-impact educational, cultural, and tourist uses, inspired by successful experiences in other depopulated villages such as Granadilla, Umbralejo and Búbal, within the framework of the Programme for the Recovery and Educational Use of Abandoned Villages (PRUEPA) [19], promoted by the Ministry of Education since the 1980s. These experiences have demonstrated the viability of converting old, depopulated villages into spaces for training, heritage awareness and experiential learning, involving students, volunteers and professionals through temporary stays.

In the case of Moya, this model is projected as an opportunity to develop a functional programme to preserve its valuable architectural heritage and will help to boost the local economy through cultural rural tourism initiatives. The high quality of its monumental architecture, the surrounding landscape and its proximity to major urban centres reinforce its suitability for mixed uses of an educational, tourist and community nature. This combination of functions would enable a process of progressive and sustainable regeneration. It would mitigate the risks associated with speculative processes while strengthening local identity and fostering integration into regional heritage promotion networks.

A key component of the proposed strategy is the active participation of local and regional stakeholders. This includes collaboration with the Asociación de Amigos de Moya, nearby municipalities, educational institutions, and cultural organizations. Their involvement is envisioned in multiple stages: defining priorities for heritage recovery, co-designing cultural and educational activities, and participating in maintenance and monitoring tasks. The engagement would help to embed the intervention within the community, reinforce local identity, and ensure long-term sustainability beyond the initial implementation phase.

The enclave, characterised by its dominant topography and a built complex that includes a double wall, a castle, six churches, a convent, a hospital and an extensive network of vernacular dwellings, represents a paradigmatic case of abandonment with high potential for cultural and socio-economic regeneration. Despite its state of degradation and depopulation, the complex maintains remarkable structural integrity, particularly in its monumental elements, which have been subject to consolidation interventions. In contrast, the traditional housing stock has been systematically neglected, despite its relevance for understanding the urban morphology and authenticity of the built landscape.

Based on a comprehensive diagnostic assessment, summarised in Figure 6 and structured into four analytical categories (values, vulnerabilities, opportunities, and threats), a revitalisation strategy is proposed, underpinned by scientific evidence and guided by sustainability principles. Figure 6 displays a circular diagram divided into four primary quadrants, each corresponding to one of the mentioned categories and further subdivided into four segments. The Values quadrant encompasses the principal assets of Moya, including its extensive historical heritage formally recognised as an Asset of Cultural Interest;

its integration within broader cultural route networks; and its privileged natural and landscape context. Conversely, the Vulnerabilities quadrant identifies key weaknesses such as the advanced deterioration of buildings, limited accessibility, absence of essential services, and ongoing population decline, issues that the proposed strategy aims to mitigate. The Opportunities quadrant highlights the potential for educational and cultural initiatives capable of preserving and disseminating the town's history and traditions; the economic development expected to result from the revitalisation process, with positive impacts extending beyond Moya; the recovery and adaptive reuse of lost historic spaces in alignment with the project's objectives; and the attraction of sustainable tourism. Finally, the Threats quadrant portrays potential risks, including the persistence of architectural barriers, restricted road access in the immediate vicinity, the possibility of tourism being limited to seasonal patterns, and the potential loss of heritage should the intervention lack careful planning and execution.

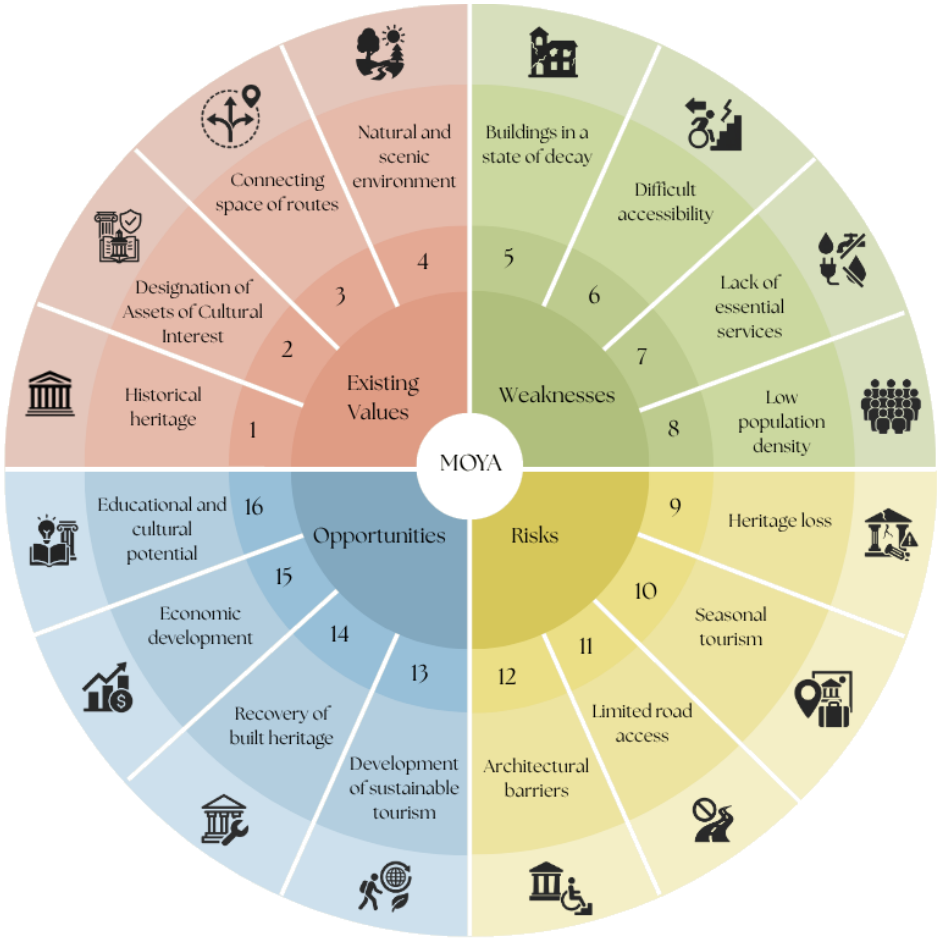

Figure 6. Strategic analysis of the site: diagnosis of existing values, weaknesses, risks, and opportunities (author's drawing).

This strategy combines heritage conservation with the functional reactivation of the site, incorporating lessons learned from similar European and international cases [13,27,37].

The proposed functional program aims to develop a sustainable and inclusive strategy that balances preservation with new uses, promoting economic growth while respecting the town's historical identity. The program is structured around three main lines of action: (1) architectural conservation and rehabilitation, based on typological and stratigraphic analysis; (2) the integration of the vernacular fabric into the heritage recovery narrative; and (3) the incorporation of new economic activities compatible with the historical identity of

the place. In contrast to an isolated view of heritage as a static or monumental element, this approach promotes its activation as a dynamic resource, integrating the broader historical and environmental context in which it is embedded [5,38].

In this sense, the functional strategy is organised around a two-pronged approach: first, promoting training and heritage awareness activities under the PRUEPA programme, with a clear educational focus linked to the rural environment, sustainability and local culture; and second, developing rural tourism with a cultural focus, conceived as a driver of economic and social revitalisation. This combination structurally conditions the allocation of uses within the complex, guiding spatial planning according to criteria of accessibility, state of conservation, architectural relevance and potential for collective use, all without compromising the heritage values of the site.

The goal is to restore Moya as a living heritage site, capable of regenerating collective memory and promoting new forms of sustainable occupation that contribute to reversing the dynamics of depopulation and economic stagnation affecting the territory.

4. Results

The results of this study are based on a compressive critical review of national and international cases that address the recovery of abandoned historic settlements, and on the systematic and contextual application of those insights to the specific case of Moya (Cuenca, Spain). The comparison with examples such as Poggioreale (Sicily), Castelvecchio Calvisio (Central Apennines), and various villages in Spain has led to the identification of several key principles that inform the strategic design.

In the case of Moya, these principles are embodied in a proposal that goes beyond mere architectural preservation, proposing a holistic reinterpretation of the urban complex as a living space, structured around complementary educational [39] and tourist [40] uses. The planned intervention not only protects the heritage and landscape but also proposes a new sustainable life cycle for the settlement based on sustainability, territorial cohesion, and experiential learning [41].

To guide the operational implementation of this proposal, a dynamic and adaptive typological-functional framework has been developed, conceived as a flexible planning support instrument. This matrix links the construction, historical and spatial characteristics of the buildings with the requirements associated with the new proposed uses [42], such as educational, cultural, residential or logistical. Far from imposing a rigid programme, this framework allows for the establishment of compatibilities between architectural typologies—monumental, monastic, defensive, and vernacular—and contemporary functions, respecting the historical logic of the complex and incorporating adaptations according to emerging needs.

A preliminary functional organisation of the site has been defined, structured into three main areas of action:

1. An educational and cultural area, linked to the development of training activities within the framework of the PRUEPA Plan [19].
2. An area dedicated to rural and cultural tourism, aimed at generating sustainable and responsible economic flows and external visibility.
3. A logistics and services area, designed to ensure the technical operability and future scalability of the complex.

This zoning responds to rigorous and inclusive criteria such as accessibility, state of conservation, architectural relevance and potential for collective use. Through this logic, interventions are prioritised according to their impact on heritage, their functional viability and their potential for social and economic transformation.

The spatial outcome of this strategy is expressed in an intervention map, which defines the areas of action according to the type of action planned, namely, structural consolidation, functional rehabilitation, typological reinterpretation or activation of public space. Likewise, landscape areas to be recovered are defined and specific interventions are proposed for the most significant architectural elements. In the vernacular fabric, low-impact and reversible actions are proposed to reinforce urban continuity and local identity, together with improvements in accessibility and pedestrian connectivity throughout the area. All actions are organised in phases, allowing for gradual implementation that can be adapted to the available resources and the evolution of the governance model.

This layout is further detailed in Figure 7, which specifies the facilities and infrastructure required to implement the proposed functional programme. The shared infrastructure includes three parking areas, strategically located to manage different visitor profiles: a large facility at the base of the hill for day visitors, buses, and motorhomes; a mid-slope parking area below the castle for private vehicles; and an upper-level parking area near the cemetery, serving overnight guests and visitors with reduced mobility. Additional common services comprise a visitor centre, a small first-aid unit, public restrooms, and administrative offices for site management.

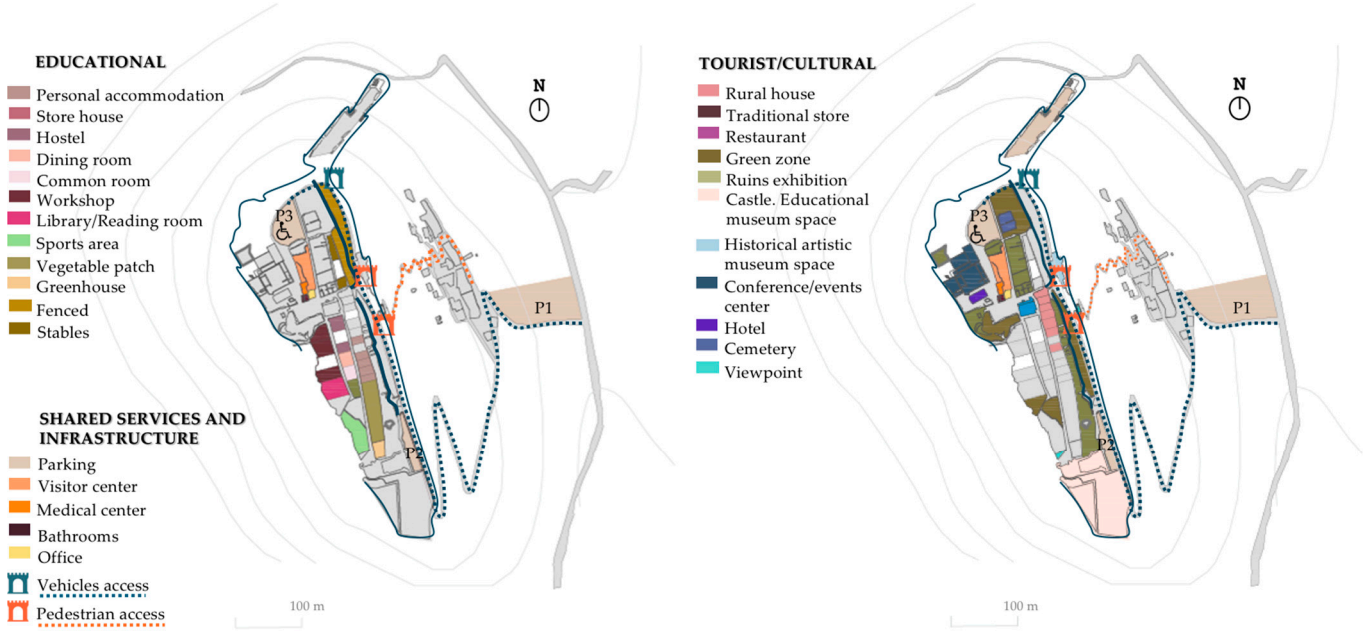

Figure 7. Map of proposed intervention (author's drawing).

The educational area is equipped with personal accommodation, a student hostel, a dining room, meeting spaces, workshops, storage facilities, and a library. Outdoor learning facilities include a sports field, an educational vegetable garden, a greenhouse, and an animal husbandry area. The tourism area incorporates rural guesthouses, a hotel, a restaurant, and a shop offering local products. Cultural facilities, shared between the two programmes, feature an open-air museum of vernacular ruins, an ethnological museum within the castle, a historic–artistic exhibition in one of the churches, and a large events venue in the monastery and its church. Together, these facilities are designed to operate in a phased and adaptable manner, consistent with the strategic framework defined for Moya.

5. Discussion

The revitalization strategy proposed for Moya combines heritage conservation with functional reactivation through educational uses and cultural tourism. This dual approach

aligns with principles observed in other European and Spanish cases but incorporates specific features adapted to its territorial and socio-economic context.

Educational programmes, such as those implemented in Granadilla, Umbralejo, and Búbal, have proven effective in preserving heritage while generating temporary, low-impact occupation. Within the PRUEPA framework, these initiatives promote environmental awareness, heritage education, and intergenerational exchange [19]. Moya adopts this educational dimension but integrates it with touristic activities to diversify income streams and reinforce economic resilience.

Community-based revitalization models, such as Lou Pourtoun in Ostana (Italy), show that local participation in defining uses and managing facilities is essential for long-term sustainability [8]. The Moya proposal incorporates this principle through the involvement of local associations, municipalities, and cultural organisations in planning and maintenance. However, it is important to note that the main challenge in this region is depopulation driven by the lack of economic activity. For this reason, the strategy prioritises economic revitalization as the core objective, since attempting to restore Moya as a permanently inhabited settlement would not be viable.

Privately funded cases, such as Colletta di Castelbianco (Italy) [24] or São Gregório (Portugal) [8], have achieved high-quality restoration but often prioritise tourism over community life. The Moya strategy, in contrast, is based on the combination of two complementary activities: the educational programme, concentrated in school periods, and the tourism programme, focused on holiday periods, to maximise economic utilisation throughout the year.

Symbolic conservation, as exemplified by Belchite (Spain), preserves ruins as places of memory without reintroducing functional uses. Although this model has high educational and commemorative value, it does not directly contribute to local economic regeneration [25]. Moya moves away from this approach by combining heritage interpretation with active use. Ensuring heritage conservation is linked to an economic activity implies that neither its recovery nor its subsequent maintenance becomes a financial burden for the community.

Other adaptive reuse cases, such as Bussana Vecchia (Italy), demonstrate the potential of creative communities to reoccupy abandoned settlements, but also the risks of gentrification and legal disputes. The Moya proposal mitigates these risks through phased interventions, public ownership, and reversible, low-impact actions [23].

Methodologically, the Moya model is based on linking architectural typologies with compatible uses. This structure allows its application in contexts with different conservation levels, governance models, and socio-economic profiles. The phased implementation plan reinforces adaptability, enabling progressive activation and regular evaluation.

Some limitations remain. Sustainable maintenance systems are essential to prevent further deterioration. Governance must coordinate local associations, public administrations, and private partners. Addressing these aspects will be decisive in ensuring long-term social, cultural, and economic outcomes.

6. Conclusions

The revitalisation of the historic centre of Moya offers a critical perspective on the complexities of intervening in abandoned rural settlements. Contextual analysis and the definition of an operational strategy based on low-impact, sustainable educational, cultural, and tourist uses, indicate that recovery should not aim for permanent repopulation. Instead, it should follow a model of partial and flexible occupation that respects the existing architecture.

The advanced deterioration of much of the built fabric, together with the conditions of depopulation in the area and reduced economic activity, combined with structural limitations related to infrastructure and climatic conditions, constrain the feasibility of conventional residential uses. However, this limitation does not preclude g new forms of sustainable activation focused on knowledge transmission, direct engagement with heritage and the contemporary reinterpretation of the site's memory. In this approach, heritage conservation goes beyond material preservation to integrate intangible values such as construction practices, social dynamics, and ways of life that have historically shaped the territory.

Future interventions should therefore commit to two objectives: the physical consolidation of the most significant vernacular and monumental structures, and the creation of educational and cultural mechanisms that enable visitors to understand pre-abandoned life. Restoring the original meaning and social functions of these spaces would support the activation of the site and the construction of a living, meaningful collective memory.

This approach, aligned with programmes such as the PRUEPA Plan and informed by other experiences in abandoned sites, positions rural heritage as cultural infrastructure. It is conceived as a driver of social, educational, and economic dynamics, without compromising historical integrity. Moya's proposal is thus presented as a replicable and scalable model for other European territories affected by depopulation and heritage deterioration. While the model includes transferable strategies, its success will ultimately depend on contextualization and adaptation to the specific socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions of each site. Ensuring active community participation will be essential for the long-term viability of the proposal. It can strengthen local identity, foster shared responsibility for heritage, and support the continuous adaptation of uses to evolving needs.

The proposed intervention is aligned with the long-term objectives of sustainable rural regeneration, reinforcement of territorial identity, and viability of heritage assets. These objectives are directly supported by the strategy analysis developed in this study. Key values include the high architectural quality of the monumental heritage and its integration within a culturally rich landscape. The main weakness is the advanced deterioration of the vernacular fabric. The most significant risk is the potential loss of authenticity through inappropriate interventions. Opportunities include the site's legal protection as a Site of Cultural Interest and its proximity to major urban centres, which favour educational and cultural tourism. By addressing weaknesses and risks, and capitalising on values and opportunities, the phased strategy aims to deliver durable economic, social, and cultural benefits beyond the initial implementation stage.

Several lines of future research can expand and refine the proposed model as described in the following:

- Assessment of the impact of temporary occupations in heritage environments, especially within the framework of programmes such as PRUEPA.
- Development of rural sustainability indicators applied to heritage recovery processes with a functional approach.
- Study of multiscale and participatory governance models that integrate local communities, public administrations, and educational and cultural entities.
- Exploration of innovative techniques for light and reversible rehabilitation, compatible with the values of vernacular architecture.
- Qualitative and cartographic documentation of the place's memory, as a tool to revalue emotional and cultural ties with abandoned territory.

In summary, the case of Moya illustrates how rural heritage, when addressed through an interdisciplinary and context-sensitive approach, can serve as an active resource for

contemporary regeneration, enabling the construction of viable futures grounded in the traces of the past.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadística
PRUEPA	Programa para la Recuperación y el Uso Educativo de Pueblos Abandonados
PLAMIT	Plan de Mejora de Infraestructuras Turísticas
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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