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El proyecto urbano de los centros históricos menores italianos en postpandemia. Hipótesis en el centro histórico de Priverno, Italia / *Urban design in small Italian historical centres in the post-pandemic era. Hypothesis in the historic centre of Priverno, Italy*

La crisis de la pandemia ha abierto una nueva definición de la relación entre las personas y el espacio físico que ocupan, requiriendo una reconsideración de los conceptos de relaciones interpersonales, cercanía y distancia. Las consecuencias del distanciamiento físico trajeron nuevas perspectivas de jerarquización territorial, destacando el papel de los centros históricos menores.

El distanciamiento social acentuó los problemas de desigualdad entre las ciudades y los pueblos marginales. Sin embargo, esta situación también podría considerarse como una oportunidad de "redención" para las zonas urbanas menos accesibles, como punto de partida para interrogarnos sobre los nuevos hábitos de vivir los espacios abiertos.

Este artículo analiza las posibilidades de reducción de la despoblación en los centros históricos de los pequeños pueblos italianos, centrándose en el proyecto de los espacios abiertos. Aspectos clave de este razonamiento son la pequeña dimensión y la red de las intervenciones urbanas y arquitectónicas ("pocket projects") en la trama urbana histórica (casco histórico de Priverno como caso de estudio). El espacio abierto también se considera en relación con los habitantes, por lo que la configuración a sistema de los "pocket projects" puede representar un nivel diferente de la red física de relaciones sociales en el casco histórico.

The pandemic crisis has opened a new definition of the relationship between people and urban space, requiring a reconsideration of interpersonal connections and closeness and distance concepts. Consequences of physical distancing brought new perspectives of territorial hierarchisation, highlighting minor historical centre's role.

Social distancing accentuated inequalities issues between cities and marginal villages. However, this situation could also be considered a chance of "redemption" for less accessible urban areas as a start point for interrogating us about new habits of living space, especially open public spaces. This paper discusses reducing depopulation in the historic centres of little Italian villages, focusing on the open spaces design. Key aspects of this reasoning are the small dimension and the network of urban and architectural interventions, here called "pocket projects", in the historical urban texture (historic centre Priverno as a case study). Open space is also considered in relation to the inhabitants. Its use depends mainly on its quality and ability to encourage people to enjoy being there. The allocation of the pocket projects can represent a different level of the physical network of social relations in the historic centre.
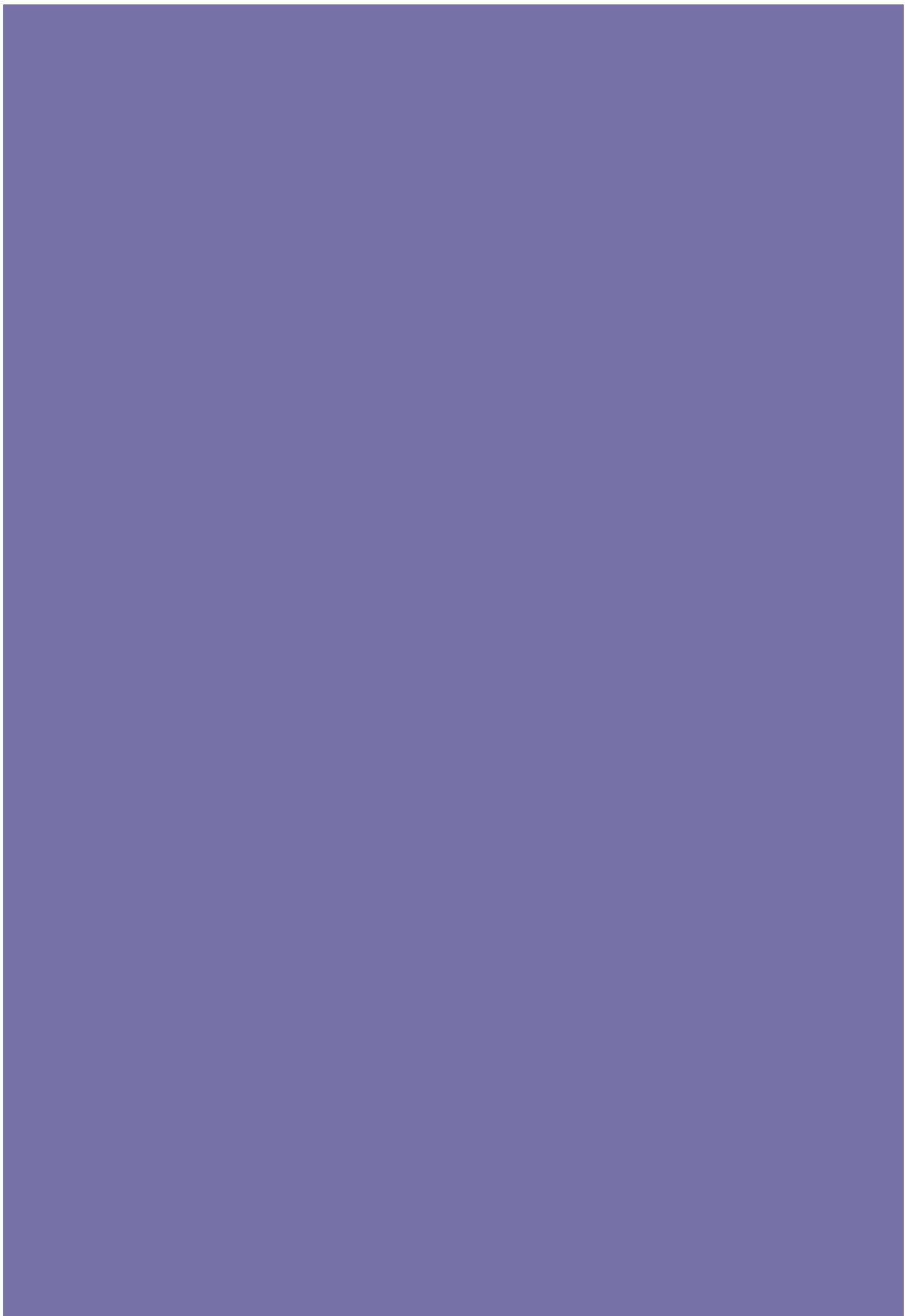
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Urban design in small Italian historical centres in the post-pandemic era.
Hypothesis in the historic centre of Priverno, Italy

Introduction

Unable for a long time to compete with the opportunities offered by metropolitan realities, small municipalities and their historic nuclei are at the centre of renewed attention in the post-pandemic. The health emergency crisis has rekindled an intense discussion around smaller towns' rehabilitation, which has led to new considerations on the resources and advantages that small towns have over larger cities. The metropolises have stimulated and accelerated the growth of society, drying up the marginal, fragile territories, which over time have not been able to compete with the opportunities offered by cities.

In the first months of 2020, during the first lockdown, the awareness of city limits and the uncertainties of tomorrow led those who have had the opportunity to move to the most distant and isolated places far from the chaos, where spaces for a living are larger and more breathing. Even those who had once chosen to live in big cities (a more lively context with more significant social interaction opportunities) preferred isolation. During the most dramatic moment of the emergency, conditions in the small settlements were very different from those in the large centre: low population density, fewer infections, a social distance habit[1]. The pandemic crisis was a moment of rupture concerning territorial development and brought out existing critical situations in the metropolises. According to an article in the British Journal of Sociology dealing with the relationship between city life and mental health, there is sometimes a connection between the vast and dispersed spaces of metropolises and the daily frenzy and poorer mental health of people living there (Fitzgerald, Rose, & Singh, 2016).

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1. The concentration of many people in the same place is closely linked to a greater possibility of contracting the virus, making the inhabitants of the cities more fragile from this point of view than those who were in small municipalities in the times of greatest spread of the infection. «Density is really an enemy in a situation like this. With large population centres, where people are interacting with more people all the time, that's where it's going to spread the fastest» (Dr. Steven Goodman, epidemiologo della Stanford University). Mentioned in Brian M. Rosenthal (2020, Marzo), *Density is New York City's Big "Enemy" in the Coronavirus Fight*. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/nyregion/coronavirus-nyc-crowds-density.html

Most of the services and activities are concentrated in big cities. There-fore, small municipal realities have job opportunities, connections, and primary services out of their range. However, at the same time, due to numerous residents, cities have longer waits for the use of vital services in times of crisis, such as public health. Therefore, starting from this con-cept, AISRe (Italian Association of Regional Sciences) president Roberta Capello suggests that «in this sense, it seems that the pandemic allowed us to find a way out of the historical unsustainability of large cities, with their traffic congestion and their pollution, making us move towards new, more sustainable settlement choices from an environmental point of view» (Capello, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to rethink our lifestyle due to the limits our cities have mercilessly shown during and after the health crisis.

From reality to virtual and back: the nostalgia for the space for relationships
During the pandemic, we found ourselves living locked up in the domestic environment. At that moment, the idea of a city based on shared and asso-ciated life disappeared, or somewhat has moved to a different dimension. The virtual mode, forcibly introduced or implemented within the social life of all of us, represented the effort to stay in touch despite the physical distance: this represented the will to spend time together, even if only through a screen.

The confinement had a decisive impact on the living space. Even if the restrictions have subsequently decreased, the changes and innovations that the quarantine generated remain valid also because they stimulated a re-interpretation of the open space value. In fact, after the confinement, many people felt the urge to "return" to public spaces, to the urban voids, to the spaces of relationship. As Antonello Russo points out, citing Nolli's map of Rome, the most human and civil dimension of living" stands pre-cisely in the connection between the urban voids that allow – and encour-age - informal encounters between people (Russo, 2020).

It has become essential to seek the complexity of the city dimension in the social, spatial, and relational spheres, going beyond the boundaries of a single house to be able to look at the whole of the housing fabric, inserting or integrating different uses, both indoors and outdoors (Cassaro & Magli-acani, 2020). Experimenting with new residential models, which also involve public and shared space, could be an important - if not obligatory - design choice in minor historical centres. It is crucial to provide common areas, meeting places - such as those dedicated to the sport, work, study, leisure areas - and essential services for residents, of which often the small historical centres are lacking, to activate a shared sense of "belonging" to places. Therefore, providing for collective functions, representing the seed for socially productive activities and new creative ideas, would also characterise the little villages for high housing quality and makes them attractive to those who live there.

Consequences of the pandemic on territory and on urban space

The introduction on a large scale of remote working in Italy[2] highlighted the time fraction that is usually spent commuting on most days of the week and has raised the question of how avoidable this is, suddenly bringing to light some dynamics already underway in society. After reviewing our priorities, confinement has allowed some of us to find time for ourselves and recover much space for moments that were previously cut out only within few hours of the week. Many workers had the opportunity to rediscover the consequences of the restrictions and enjoy having more time for themselves. This has led[3] to the "Great Resignation"[4], the phenomenon described by da Anthony Klotz, Management professor from Mays Business School, Texas A&M University.

This situation undoubtedly translates into an unprecedented possibility for marginal places: before, opening a big company's office in minor historical centres was unlikely. However, today, when the office is relocated online, they are considered attractive precisely due to being far from expensive capitals. Plus, they are usually near landscapes of heritage and naturalistic interest, giving an opportunity to "recharge" during work breaks.

Many people have taken the opportunity of flexibility through remote working. For example, the Italian social promotion project "South Working"[5] encourages agile working from any location, especially in Southern Italy or in marginalised areas. Also, in Spain - whose inland areas and small villages are at risk of isolation - various measures are in place to attract new inhabitants. For example, the *Red Nacional de Pueblos*

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2. «The switch to remote working affected 21.3% of companies with at least 3 employees immediately after the outbreak of the pandemic; the percentage dropped to 11.3% in the period from June to November. The share of remote working workers in the companies that have activated it rises from 5% in the period prior to Covid-19, to 47% in the March-April lockdown months, to settle at around 30% from May onwards. (Istat, 2021, p. 4). Translation from original: «Il ricorso allo smart working ha interessato subito dopo l'esplosione della pandemia il 21,3% delle imprese con almeno 3 addetti; la percentuale è calata all'11,3% nel periodo giugno-novembre. La quota di lavoratori in smart working nelle imprese che lo hanno attivato sale dal 5% del periodo precedente il Covid-19, al 47% dei mesi di lockdown di marzo-aprile, per assestarsi intorno al 30% da maggio in avanti».

3. An article published in January 2022 on the Italian newspaper Il Sole24ore reported the data of a survey by Aidp (Italian Association for Personnel Management), promoted on a sample of 500 companies. «It is expecially young people belonging to the age group between 26 and 35, together with employees from Northern Italy, who are involved in voluntary resignations, which in 2021 reached historically high values». Among the reasons, there would also be the aspiration to a better relationship between private life and work (47% of the sample) and 20% indicated the "search for a new meaning in life" as the main cause of resignation. Article of the Sole24Ore, *Tra i giovani corsa a dimettersi in cerca di un posto migliore* by Giorgio Pogliotti, published on January 19, 2022.

4. Great resignation is a term that describes the very high number of dropouts in work immediately after the end of the most acute phase of the pandemic, from March 2021. This phenomenon initially occurred in the United States and then spread to most of the world. For more information: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-10/quit-your-job-how-to-resign-after-covid-pandemic

5. For more information: https://www.southworking.org/

Acogedores[6] program aims to welcome agile workers and digital nomads, involving small villages with less than 5,000 inhabitants. This situation has positive consequences, such as improving economic, social and territorial cohesion, allowing overtime to redeem the depopulated areas by re-inhabiting them. Moreover, this restarts the demand for essential services, which marginal territories are sadly lacking (Bianchi & Vecchione, 2021).

Repercussions on the territory and the architectural space are evident even on a small scale. The rethinking of architectonic space mainly concerned the characteristics of our houses, suddenly too small, too dark, too "internal", where the absence of an exterior, a garden or a balcony seemed to many people an insurmountable problem. Luis Fernández-Galiano (Fernández-Galiano, 2020) pointed out how remote working and distance learning would affect our routines and how this, consequently, will lead us to think differently and design the homes of tomorrow. It will be necessary to adapt the buildings to new activities by designing co-working spaces and areas dedicated to free time.

The past epidemics (plague, cholera, tuberculosis) stimulated us to modify urban models based on safer conditions, improving urban planning rules, albeit at a high cost (Veronese, 2020). It was precisely the need to make the urban space healthier by widening the roads, designing systems of green areas and implementing sewer and road infrastructures. For this reason, it is realistic to think that the effects of this pandemic will lead - over time - to open new perspectives regarding the design of open space. Nevertheless, Fernández-Galiano (Fernández-Galiano, 2020) recalls that the architectural morphology could show resistance to change, at least initially, given the many constraints that hinder the modification of the urban layout in the short term.

Furthermore, this limit - which may exist for significant urban interventions - could be reduced and re-adapted for minor adjustments or punctual interventions, such as adaptations of unsolved spaces, completions of missing pieces, and the so-called "urban acupuncture"[7]. Or, as we want to define them now, small intermediate projects, as this essay aims to demonstrate.

Minor Italian historical centres: from "abandonment" to "opportunity"

Why is a place abandoned? To answer this question, it is necessary first to define what the term "abandonment" means when applied to a territory. First of all, when we speak of abandonment, we refer to a condition whereby someone or something has been left to itself for an indefinitely long time, breaking a bond (Dezio, et al., 2019). "Abandoning" can be

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6. The *Red Nacional de Pueblos Acogedores* is a social innovation initiative promoted by El Hueco, a social innovation company who aims to support the creation of other social enterprises that could contribute to solving the problems of sparsely populated rural Spanish areas. More information at: https://pueblosacogedores.com/

7. The concept of "urban acupuncture" was theorized by Jamie Lerner, former mayor of Cuturiba, in the book *Urban Acupuncture*, published by Island Press, Washington, 2004.

considered the opposite of "taking care" of something or someone, where "care" is understood in its most ancient form (in Latin, coera), used in love and attachment, concern, and responsibility. The profound connection with the territory is lost when left to its destiny. This is clearly the situation regarding the depopulation of the historic centres of Italian cities, with various municipalities that see their nuclei emptied of the resident population (ANCSA, CRESME, 2017). This trend began as early as the rural exodus of the 1950s, characterised by the growth of industry, local economy crisis and problems related to seismic and hydrogeological risk (Dezio, et al., 2019).

Leaving a village to its fate also means not taking care of the community, which loses memory of that place and loses various artisan activities that have gone on for centuries before abandonment. From the point of view of Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) –in analysing the phenomenon of the exodus from marginal territories on a global scale-, in many Western countries, national policies aimed at promoting the concept of vivacity and dynamism in cities, in strong contrast with the small villages realities. Consequently, they supported the idea of possible improvements in living conditions if moving to the city, thus legitimising the abandonment of marginal and fragile urban settlements.

It caused a strong resentment in those who had no choice but to stay in small towns. It also produces a discomfort that has its roots in economic degradation and the lack of opportunities that are often closely linked to a territory's spatial context and social status. Territorial inequalities can significantly affect people's lives, sometimes even more than income inequalities. Taking care of territorial fragility is to take care of a territory's human, landscape, cultural and environmental resources (Balducci, 2019).

Those who came from a small town with few inhabitants and little opportunities for social and economic growth often ask themselves a question that will affect all subsequent choices in their life: to leave or to stay? Leaving one's place of origin can be liberating because it can mean being able to fulfil oneself both personally and professionally. However, it can be painful if the place one comes from is also where one feels at home, where one's values find correspondence in one's cultural and social roots. The stories that a town tells in its streets, squares and buildings are written over time by the inhabitants and handed down from generation to generation. Knowing the stories of a place also means bringing to light its values. Those values are collected in the urban fabric, in the museums, in the landscape, in the typical gastronomy, in popular music and traditional dances, and in the artisan works. It is an intertwining of knowledge and stories that are continuously handed down and revisited.

To comprehend these reasons, we can think of the concept of "restanza", the "remaining", as the anthropologist Vito Teti understands it: «remaining does not have to do with conservation, but requires the ability to relate past and present, to redeem lost and livable streets, discarded by modernity, making them alive and current again» (Teti, 2019).

Concerning the dynamics of innovation within local policies, an interesting attitude - inspired by Albert Hirschman's "possibilism" and taken

Fig. 01. The historical centre of Priverno, a minor Italian municipality, during the "Svicolando" festival in 2019. This festival celebrates the community of the historical centre and its values. Photo taken by the author.

up several times by Alessandro Balducci (Balducci, 2020) - consists in abandoning standardised models to look for hidden interpretations and resources. This attitude could lead to a reduction in the distance between those who live in fragile areas and those who instead live in central realities concerning services. As Hirschman suggests (Hirschman, 1958), when we look for hidden rationalities, we can arrive at a new reading, which can find creative and surprising solutions to situations of resignation.

Strategies that can transform weaknesses into resources and recognise possible changes in highly complex contexts, even trespassing between different disciplines to seek out new and different interpretations, could seem counterintuitive at first glance. If a place is abandoned, it is also true that this same place becomes available for new possibilities and new experiments.

This vision of the small village as an opportunity can be a starting point for focusing on their future as symbols of rebirth (Teti, 2017). Indeed, a key point of this debate concerns social and cultural innovations. They can promote the socio-cultural reactivation of places with the involvement of the inhabitants, such as happened with *Abitare Utopie*[8], a cultural regeneration project born in 2020 in the village of Gombola, part of the Municipality of Polinago (1644 inhabitants) in the province of Modena.

The actions to restrain the demographic decline in little Italian villages
Regardless of the pandemic situation, the search for solutions to depopulation had already begun, even locally. In fact, in recent years, we have begun to perceive this theme's richness and realise the importance of revitalising the smaller historical centres. This awareness has also

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8. *Abitare Utopie* is a cultural regeneration project, closely connected with the territory of Gombola. It was developed in collaboration with the theater company *Teatro dei Venti* and it is based in the Podesteria Hostel in Gombola. It aims to develop an effective social cohesion within the community through a diffused artistic practice, over a long period, crossing three places with different social fragilities and problems. Available at: https://www.teatrodeiventi.it/abitare-utopie/

materialised in the National Strategy for Internal Areas[9] (SNAI), with the planning of interventions on that part of the Italian territory far from the primary services that could help to counteract their progressive abandonment. The idea behind SNAI is to consider inland areas an opportunity for the Country precisely because of their criticality. They are, in fact, areas for experimenting with new models of sustainable development from different points of view, such as social, cultural, economic, and environmental ones (Damiano, 2019).

Another demonstration of the attention placed on Italian minor historic centres by the institutions is represented by the Realacci Law[10]. This law introduced some simplifications regarding the recovery of abandoned historical centres, with proposals concerning tourism development, abandoned buildings converting into *alberghi diffusi*[11] (widespread hotels) and the implementation of interventions favouring productive activities and residents. It established measures for the diffusion of broadband in the territory and the more rational and efficient provision of services for citizens.

Among the most recent revitalisation policies of small villages, we must mention Next Generation Europe, the strategy adopted by the European Union to get out of the pandemic. In this context, visions have been proposed for places and heritages in danger of disappearing, thus saving them from the fate of loss and restoring them to the vitality which they lack today. In particular, *Piano Nazionale Borghi*[12] aims to support Italian small villages' cultural and creative activities, supporting them in enhancing the typical products, knowledge, and artisan techniques.

A significant part of the funds is intended to create new cultural and tourist itineraries, a matter that could be dangerous if not treated with the proper attention. The reasoning proposed by the journalist and sociologist Marco D'Eramo (D'Eramo, 2017) regarding the choices pursued by the administrations that imply an intention for transforming the place into a tourist place is interesting to get an idea of what a negligent attitude towards tourism matter can entail. According to D'Eramo, it is possible to
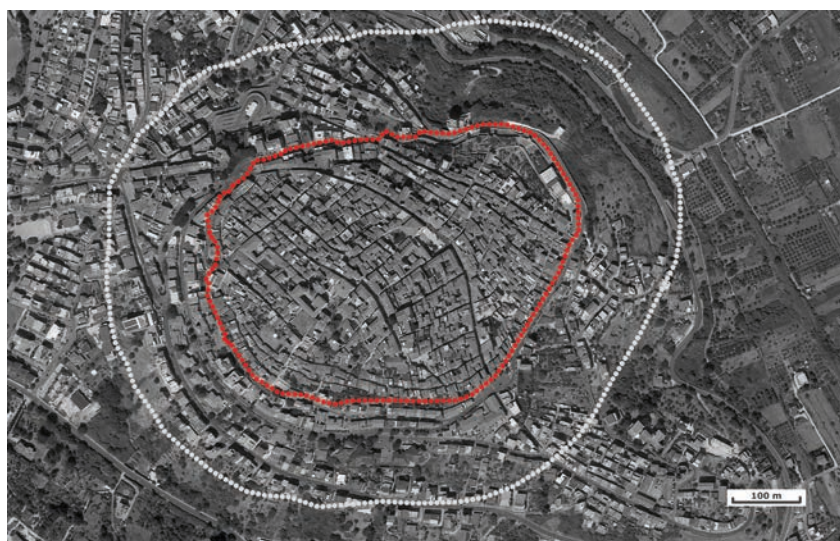
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9. The "Strategia Nazionale per le Aree interne" is one of the strategic lines of intervention of the European Structural and Investment Funds of the 2014-2020 programming cycle. This strategy represents a support to sustainable territorial competitiveness in order to restrain the demographic decline that characterizes certain areas of the Italian country, defined as those areas furthest away from the primary and advanced essential service poles of urban centres. For more information: https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/

10. Also said *Legge Piccoli comuni* or *Legge Salva borghi*, Realacci Law is Italian law 6 october 2017, n. 158, "Misure per il sostegno e la valorizzazione dei piccoli comuni, nonché disposizioni per la riqualificazione e il recupero dei centri storici dei medesimi Comuni" ("Measures for the support and enhancement of small municipalities, as well as provisions for the redevelopment and recovery of the historic centers of the same municipalities") (Official Gazette of the Italian Republic n. 256 02/11/2017).

11. For more information: VILLANI, Teresa; DALL'ARA, Giancarlo. 2015. L'Albergo Diffuso come modello di ospitalità originale e di sviluppo sostenibile dei borghi. *Techne. Journal of Technology for Architecture and Environment*. Vol. 10, p. 169-178. Available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/228569053.pdf

12. Available at: https://media.beniculturali.it/mibac/files/boards/388a5474724a15a-f0ace7a40ab3301de/SG/Avviso%20Borghi%20Linea%20B_201221_Completo-signed-signed.pdf Official site: https://cultura.gov.it/borghi

recognise the techniques used to transform a city into a tourist city that have been tested and perfected, to the point of being almost standardised, as evidenced by the tendency to introduce "typical, characteristic, regional" street furniture. In this way, the "unrepeatable uniqueness" of historical towns seems nothing more than a "copy of a copy" of each other to compete on the number of tourists to attract.

The transformation of villages into "theme parks" is not a solution but leads to another type of degradation: the loss of cultural identity and attention to tourists even before the inhabitants. This is what happened, for example, in Civita di Bagnoregio: «where once life was ferocious and grumpy, and hasty humans made their way into the world and trampled and shoved, now sandwich shops flourish, stalls everywhere the same of typical products, muslin, batik, cotton, sarongs and bracelets. What was once a story full of shouts, noises, and fury, is now all enclosed in a travel agency prospectus»[13] (Attili, 2020, p. 298). Instead, it is necessary to think about the elaboration of possible strategies that move away from the desire to use space in terms of economic exploitation. The ultimate goal should be satisfying the needs of the resident population, including all the cultural identities. Indeed, tourism is a critical element of the local economy, but it cannot be the only economy on which a place is based. Instead, it is essential to dedicate oneself to the establishment of ethical tourism (Nocifora, De Salvo, & Calzati, 2011), investing in slow growth of knowledge and respect, which makes tourists aware of the sites they discover.

Pocket projects: small interventions in the historical urban context
Covid-19 was not the first virus to hit our cities, nor will it be the last. The questions raised about the use of space during physical distancing, both of closed and open areas, guide us towards reasoning that brings the issues of habitability and sharing to the centre.

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13. Translation from original: «dove un tempo ferveva la vita, e umani scorbutici e frettolosi si facevano largo nel mondo e si calpestavano e spintonavano, ora fioriscono paninoteche, bancarelle ovunque uguali di prodotti tipici, di mussoline, batik, cotonine, parei e braccialetti. Quella che era una vicenda piena di grida, strepiti e furori, ora è tutto racchiuso in un prospetto di agenzia di viaggio».

Re-attributing meaning to the open spaces cannot be translated into the simple modification of the intended uses, especially considering the issue of new production structures linked, for example, to culture, research, communication, and training. The design of interstitial urban voids can aspire to operate even above the small scale, communicating with a more extensive system, going beyond the neighbourhood, and relating to further small unresolved areas in the urban space, to which the project has restored meaning.

How can the strategy of "re-meaning" small open spaces change the territory? Urban quality and the consequent improvement in the quality of living are crucial for attracting innovative activities and making the villages competitive in terms of habitability. As Orazio Carpenzano (Carpenzano, 2018) reminds us, it is to keep in mind the importance of conservation, which can be defined as «the relationship between uniqueness, the identity of the project and those rules that imply principles of responsibility, careful readings of the relationship between space and people's rights»[14] (Carpenzano, 2018, p. 10).

Finding ourselves operating in an environment with pre-existing structures, integral parts of the city's culture and the community that inhabits it, it is indispensable to design with respect, keeping the architectural project under control to avoid distorting the heritage.

Therefore, we should think about the importance of inserting discreetly and minimally, of defining a dimension of the project that is not invasive but respects the pre-existing fabric as much as possible. The size of the minimum project could be identified with what Koolhaas defines as "small" size in his famous book (Koolhaas, 1995), declining this term to the urban fabric as an intervention so small that it does not modify urban texture.

Among the possible design approaches, in this text, we want to pay attention to those architectonic interventions that consider void and emptiness as identity values, supporting the inhabitants to re-appropriate open spaces.

Looking for a definition that condenses the meaning of "small functional public space", an interesting expression to describe this type of space is "pocket park". Pocket parks can be created in interstitial, random, small areas with uncertain morphology. Due to their size and the nature of their formation (not planned in the original urban design project but created based on the citizens' initiative), they have a range of local influence. They are at the service of the neighbourhood's needs (Blake, 2013) and can be of various kinds, from play spaces for children to resting places. They can be the setting for temporary events or host small commercial premises (markets or small temporary buildings). They have a versatile and flexible nature and could constitute a system of many small spaces, widespread in the historic urban fabric, involving residents and restoring

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14. Translation from original: «il rapporto tra l'unicità, l'identità del progetto e quelle regole che implicano principi di responsabilità, letture attente ai rapporti tra spazio e diritti delle persone».

Fig. 03. Mapping of residual spaces in the Priverno historical centre area and its 150 meters buffer area. Graphic elaboration by the author.
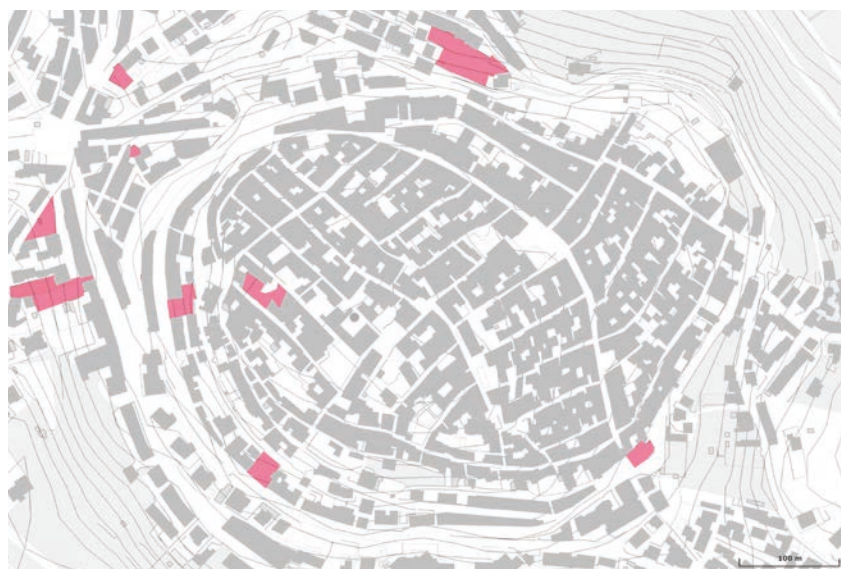
identity to areas that do not have it, forming an infrastructure of sociality. Therefore, in this paper, the adjective "pocket" will refer to this kind of small intervention. Perhaps one of the most significant examples of urban transformation based on small widespread interventions is the "Barcelona model"[15], especially those carried out from 1982 to 1986. These projects were made in different city points, with very effective minimal signs and various artists' involvement. The public space design was no longer dealt with as the design of a single space but as a complex intervention, which considers different projects united by a joint design vision.

Since, as mentioned, the involvement of the inhabitants is necessary for the success of this type of project, this cannot but be site-specific, so it must take its cue from the vocations of the place and the individual areas (Laurìa, Romagnoli, Vessella, & Bravi, 2020). As a case study, some areas of possible experimentation in the historic centre of the Italian Municipality of Priverno[16] (Province of Latina) have been mapped[17] through on-site investigations and meetings with the administration.

Design in-between
As Giovanni Zucchi (Zucchi, 2018) reminds us, in the Taoist text "Tao Te Ching" philosopher and writer Lao Tzu represents the void as the essential utility of the objects described, highlighting the full-void dichotomy. In architecture, we can become aware of the void in the same way: by

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15. Among the realised projects, the squares of Gràcia and the small projects in the Ciutat Vella are perhaps the best-known interventions of the transformative phase of Barcelona in the 1980s.

16. The urban regeneration strategy of the Municipality of Priverno started from the "Collaboration Agreement between the Department of Civil and Environmental Building Engineering and the Municipality of Priverno to develop study and research activities concerning the architectural, urban and environmental system of the historic centre of the Municipality of Priverno", a technical-scientific collaboration between the administration of Priverno and the Department of Civil And Environmental Building Engineering of the Sapienza University of Rome.

17. The mapped areas represent interstitial voids that it was believed that they could be, due to their morphology and their position within the historic centre, interesting areas of experimentation.

Fig. 04. Comparison between Nolli's Pianta Grande di Roma (1748) (detail. Available at: https://dlib.biblhertz.it/Dg140-3481#page/1/mode/2up) and the figure-ground map of Priverno (detail. Drawing by the author). The Nolli map is representative of the planimetric analysis of the solids and voids. Intending to put Church properties in the foreground, Nolli drew plans first floors plans of the churches (Baudoin, 2015). He depicted the other buildings in black, leaving them in the background, and represented every street and square as a continuous white void. This visually separated black (built) from white (not built), simplifying the reading of the network of voids of the city and highlighting the open space.

recognising the shape of the full, we can identify the emptiness as its negative space and vice versa. Literature extensively treated the concept of the architectonical void. In this paper, we want to focus on the urban context by questioning the possible declinations of the theme of open space, looking above all at the residual spaces of the minor historic centre.

Empty space can contain different things at different times, producing infinite possibilities. People's actions filled it with meaning. It can be invented and then reinvented. Peter Smithson often dwelt on the spatial quality of "emptiness": «empty space is the same thing as an empty stage. It is prepared from time to time with what is necessary»[18] (Spellman & Unglaub, 2005, p. 64). In one of the conversations with his students reported in the text already cited, he suggests committing to regaining the idea of emptiness, making room for it.

In urban design, the void represents an organisational element, an instrument of measurement and dynamic equilibrium: it is the space between the buildings, a place where the parts can relate. Due to its indefinite, open and procedural character, public space is in a permanent state of "emergency", of possibility. It lends itself to continuous collective reclamation and re-signification processes: people produce open spaces by connecting them, disconnecting them, and crossing them. People play, laugh, cry, and interact in these same spaces; in other words, they are spaces of life and places of affection (Watson, 2006). It can be the space of freedom, encounter, and expression of a community's identity.

The "negative" space also represents the intermediate space, the "in-between" space. During the 1940s, the term "in-between" began to be used in philosophy, eventually applied within the urban and architectural debate. In the text "Between Man and Man" (Buber, 1947), Martin Buber talks about the idea that reality resides in the relationship between a

18. Translation from original: «uno spazio vuoto è la stessa cosa di un palcoscenico vuoto. Lo si allestisce di volta in volta con quello che è necessario».

Fig. 05. One of the mapped interstitial spaces. It is particularly interesting because it has several characteristics that make it ideal for experimentation, such as the critical difference in altitude, the presence of historical walls, the strategic position on the border between intramoenia and extramoenia, and the location near the city market that takes place weekly. Photo taken by the author.

human being and another human being and tries to apply this concept to contemporary society, identifying dialogue as the founding element of a community.

The space in-between was also at the centre of the urban project by Aldo van Eyck of the Playgrounds. The re-signification of the interstitial areas of Amsterdam - left empty by post-war bombings - as small play areas for children, favouring a bottom-up approach rather than imposing one from above, was able to express the relational potential of the fragments of emptiness in the city.

As Piero Ostilio Rossi (Rossi, 2015) reminds us, «in contemporary architecture, the conceptual principle of the in-between has been widely recovered as the theoretical basis of design action»[19]. Moreover, according to Gianpaola Spirito (Spirito, 2015), the "in-between" is the project's operational and strategic possibility for contemporary architecture and urban planning, and it could be the answer to a project contaminated with the surrounding environment, configuring itself in a void that, rather than separating, unites. This design method also reflects some aspects of contemporary society, which lives in a system with different degrees of space sharing, oscillating between private, public, semi-private and semi-public.

Conclusion

The system of rehabilitated interstitial areas can represent an urban regeneration strategy. Due to its flexibility, this model considers the continuous change in our society, the need for solidarity, contact, and comparison between different generations. A key aspect of the pocket projects is that they can also constitute a network of several interventions of minimal size, leading to a system of pleasant open spaces (Romagnoli, 2016;

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19. Translation from original: «nell'architettura contemporanea il principio concettuale dell'*in-between* è stato diffusamente recuperato come base teorica dell'agire progettuale».

Laurìa, Romagnoli, Vessella, & E. Bravi, 2020). This could encourage residents to care more about their neighbourhood and empower them to make decisions that positively influence the community. In other words, the pocket projects system could facilitate sociality and strengthen relations between local authorities and the population.

The debate on the revitalisation of small towns remains open: once the moment of crisis has passed, the lively urban scenario of the city, with its wealth of cultural and recreational activities and the quality and quantity of services, could return to prevail in the detriment of calmer life than the villages. Furthermore, the difficult moment of the pandemic has generated important thinking on further changes that could take place in the long term concerning this issue. Will small towns be isolated again?

This discussion does not go to the detriment of the cities but tries to rebalance the differences that exist between the metropolises and the smaller realities, allowing small municipalities not to lose other resources, both human and economical, but to actively participate in the recovery of the Country after the pandemic crisis.

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